

AmericasBarometer  
*Barómetro de las Américas*

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# Support for Democracy in Canada

A REPORT FROM THE 2021  
AMERICASBAROMETER SURVEY

**FINAL REPORT**

SEPTEMBER 2021

**Environics  
Institute**  
For Survey Research

Fondation  
**McConnell**  
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The 2021 AmericasBarometer survey in Canada was conducted in collaboration with The Environics Institute for Survey Research.

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The Environics Institute for Survey Research conducts relevant and original public opinion and social research related to issues of public policy and social change. It is through such research that organizations and individuals can better understand Canada today, how it has been changing, and where it may be heading.

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# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic placed tremendous strain on Canada's public institutions. Pressures mounted on health care systems, to treat patients and prevent others from getting sick; on schools, colleges and universities, to find safe ways to continue instruction; and on government agencies at all levels, to act swiftly to impose the measures needed to restrict the spread of the virus, and to deliver emergency supports to Canadian workers and businesses.

How has this experience affected how citizens view their democratic system of government? To the extent that governments are seen to have acted quickly, adequately and in the public's best interest, the pandemic may have strengthened public trust in democratic institutions and actors. Yet, it is equally plausible that frustrations with recurring waves of the pandemic or with prolonged shutdowns of the economy may have had the opposite effect, leading some to conclude that democratic governments have proven unable to cope with an emergency of this scale. Whether the pandemic has strengthened or weakened public support for democracy therefore remains an open question.

COVID-19 is only one of several recent experiences with the potential to shift, for better or for worse, public perceptions of democracy in Canada. The run-up to and fallout from the 2020 U.S. presidential election, culminating in the storming of the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021 by militants unwilling to accept the election outcome, may well have had spill-over effects on opinions north of the border. The spread of misinformation or disinformation through social media may also be taking a toll. Regardless of whether this takes the form of the haphazard overwhelming of facts with nonsense, or the more malicious and deliberate attempt to influence public opinion and behaviour, the outcome – a softening of support for democracy – may well prove to be the same.

Against the background of these events, this report examines the current state of public trust in democratic institutions and actors in Canada, and how this may have changed over time. This report focuses on public support for democratic government as a whole, rather than the popularity of the individual parties and leaders that currently hold office – although the two cannot be completely disentangled. Over the past 18 months, citizens in different parts of the country and with different political allegiances have expressed a range of views as to whether the federal government, or their provincial or municipal governments, have done a good enough job in responding to the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Some governments have gained in popular support, while others have seen their support decline. The purpose of this study is to look beyond these ups and downs in popularity of specific governments or political leaders, and to assess public support for liberal democratic principles and institutions more generally.

## About the AmericasBarometer 2021 survey in Canada

The findings are drawn from the Canadian portion of the AmericasBarometer survey, which since 2010 have been conducted online, roughly every two years. The AmericasBarometer is led by the Latin American Public opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University.<sup>2</sup> It consists of a periodic comparative survey of democratic values and behaviours that covers countries in North, Central and South America, as well as a significant number of countries in the Caribbean (the 2021 survey covers 22 countries). Since 2012, these surveys have been conducted in Canada by the Environics Institute for Survey Research.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see: Environics Institute for Survey Research, *All in this Together? Canadians' Views on Masks, Vaccines and Lockdowns during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (April 2021); available at <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/all-in-this-together-canadians-views-on-masks-vaccines-and-lockdowns-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/about-americasbarometer.php>.

The AmericasBarometer 2021 survey in Canada was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and LAPOP at Vanderbilt University.

The survey was conducted online with a representative sample of 2,201 Canadians (aged 18 and over) between July 2 and July 7, 2021. The sample was weighted by region, age and gender to match the country's population, based on the 2016 Census. Results from 2021 are compared with those from previous AmericasBarometer online surveys beginning in 2010.<sup>3</sup> Information about how the survey question response scales are treated in this report is provided in the Appendix.

The Institute would like to acknowledge the financial support of its research partners, as well as the contribution of the staff at LAPOP at Vanderbilt University to the development of the questionnaire and the coordination of the project across the hemisphere. Thanks also to Nathaniel Stone at the Marketing Research and Business Intelligence program at Algonquin College for his contributions to the questionnaire, to the team at Elemental Data Collection for managing the data collection, to Steve Otto and Cathy McKim for their work in designing and producing this report, and to the *Centre D'Analyse Politique – Constitution et Fédéralisme* which provided additional financial support.

Finally, we express our sincere thanks to the 2,201 Canadians from all backgrounds who took the time to participate in the study.

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<sup>3</sup> AmericasBarometer data from 2010 were supplied by the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University, which takes no responsibility for any interpretation of the data.

# Executive Summary

Canadians are generally satisfied with the country's democracy and political system, and are becoming more likely to trust its key political institutions and actors. While part of the most recent increases in trust may have been prompted by the government response to the pandemic, they also represent a continuation of a broader trend that existed prior to the arrival of COVID-19 in Canada in early 2020.

A negative trend is evident, however, in the case of two measures related to national pride and national unity, pointing to the ongoing challenges that the country faces in terms of finding appropriate accommodations between its different nations, cultures and regions.

## Support for democracy in Canada

Three in four Canadians express satisfaction with democracy in Canada and the same proportion agrees that democracy is better than any other form of government. And when presented with three competing statements about democracy, three in four Canadians agree most with the most positive one, namely that "democracy is preferable to any other form of government." Opinions on these three questions have changed very little, if at all, over the past decade.

Compared to those on the right, those who place themselves on the left of the political spectrum are a little more satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada, and a little more likely to agree that democracy is preferable to any other form of government.

## Support for the political system

Three in four Canadians are satisfied with the way the political system works in Canada. The level of satisfaction has risen since the previous survey in 2019. Large majorities of Canadians also express support for, or pride in, the country's political system and respect for its political institutions. Opinions on these questions have either remained stable or, in some cases, have become more positive over the past

decade. It is notable that Quebecers are no less likely than other Canadians to express strong feelings of support for, or pride in, Canada's political system or respect for its political institutions.

The fact that most Canadians are satisfied with the way their political system works does not mean they do not think it needs improvement. In fact, Canadians have a range of views, with one in two saying the system needs minor changes at most, and an equal proportion saying it needs at least some major changes. Canadians are less likely than citizens of France and the United States, but more likely than those of Germany, to say their political system needs at least some major changes.

## Trust in political institutions

While it is commonplace in Canada to assume that trust in political actors and institutions is steadily eroding, this is not the case. Most Canadians have at least some trust in the institutions of government, and levels of trust have been gradually improving over the past decade.

Nine in ten Canadians have either a high or medium level of trust in elections in this country, as well as in the Supreme Court of Canada and the RCMP. While comparatively few have high levels of trust in the other main institutions of government (parliament, the prime minister and political parties), most Canadians have at least a medium level of trust in these institutions. Only one in ten Canadians have low trust in parliament, and about one in five have low trust in the prime minister and political parties.

The biggest change over time is the rising proportion trusting parliament. High trust in parliament is now twice as high as it was in 2014, when Stephen Harper led a Conservative government; low trust is now twice as low as it was in 2014. But trust in political parties, the prime minister and municipal governments have also improved. These gains have occurred among those who place themselves on the left, centre and right of the political spectrum.

Prior to the pandemic, trust in democratic institutions in Canada was generally stable or was rising gradually. While it would appear reasonable to conclude that part of the most recent increases in trust have been prompted by the response to the pandemic, these increases nonetheless represent a modest acceleration of the pre-existing trend, and certainly not a reversal of fortunes.

## The integrity of elections

The proportion of Canadians that has a strong degree of trust in elections in this country has more than doubled since 2014. Despite this, some Canadians have concerns about the integrity of the electoral process. Most Canadians think the counting of the votes in elections is generally fair, but doubts are more likely when it comes to the secrecy of the ballot, or to the influence of the wealthy or foreign governments on election outcomes. A majority thinks that it happens at least sometimes that the rich buy the election results in Canada, or that foreign governments influence our election results (though fewer than one in five think these things always happen). Canadians on the right of the political spectrum are more likely to express these concerns about elections than are those on the left.

## The voice of citizens

Four in five Canadians say that people in their community are either very or somewhat trustworthy. This proportion has remained relatively stable over the past decade.

One in two Canadians agree that those who govern their country are interested in what people like them think; three in ten disagree, and another two in ten take a neutral position. Agreement that those who govern are interested in what people think is now much higher than at the start of the last decade, while disagreement is only about half as large as it was in 2010.

Over this period, the proportion of those on the right that agrees that those who govern their country are interested in what people like them think has remained steady. The proportion of those in the centre that agrees, however, has almost doubled, while the proportion on the left that agrees has tripled. Most of this change occurred between the 2014 and 2017 surveys – that is, following the 2015 federal election and the change of federal government from Conservative to Liberal.

A majority of Canadians support giving citizens an even greater voice in decision-making through direct democracy. Three in five say that, in deciding what laws to make, the best option for Canada is for citizens to vote directly to decide each issue, while a minority (two in five) prefer that issues be decided by elected representatives of the people. Perhaps surprisingly, there is no significant variation in opinion on this question across regions of the country, and there is only a very modest difference in opinion between those on the left and right of the political spectrum.

Canadians are also supportive of the idea of creating citizens' assemblies where citizens debate issues and make recommendations about national laws. The option of giving more power, not to citizens, but to experts, is less popular – although a significant minority of Canadians would support that too.

## Being Canadian

While the survey shows that the trends regarding support for, and trust in, the key elements of Canada's system of government are generally either stable or more positive, a negative trend is evident in the case of two other measures – ones related, not to democracy, but to national identity.

Most people in the country say they are proud of being a Canadian, but the proportion that has a lot of pride has fallen, and is currently the lowest recorded since this series of online surveys began in 2010. Strong feelings of pride in being a Canadian have declined in every region of the country, but the drops since 2019 are largest in Ontario and the West. The decline is also more pronounced among those under the age of 60, those born in Canada, and those on the left of the political spectrum. While the decline in strong feelings of pride began in some regions several years ago, the most recent decline is likely a reaction to the discovery of mass burial sites at some of Canada's former Indian residential schools, which featured prominently in the news just prior to when the survey took place in July 2021.

Along with feelings of pride, the sense of national unity has also been declining – though, in this case, the trend is clearly a longer-term one. The proportion of Canadians that strongly agrees that “despite our differences, we Canadians have many things that unite us as a country” has been gradually falling since 2014. While this decline is evident in all regions of the country outside of Quebec, it is more

pronounced in the West. While the sense of pride in being a Canadian has declined more for those on the political left than on the right, the opposite is true for the sense of national unity – those on the right are becoming less likely to feel that the country is united.

These changes notwithstanding, it is worth emphasizing that majorities of Canadians continue to express pride in their country, and believe there are many things bringing them together.

## **A focus on youth**

In many cases, attitudes about democracy in Canada vary by age, with younger Canadians being less strongly supportive. They are less likely than older Canadians to strongly agree that “democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.” They are also somewhat less likely to prefer the most positive of the three statements about democracy, namely that “democracy is preferable to any other form of government.” Younger Canadians are less likely than their older counterparts to express a lot of support for, or pride in, our political system or to voice

respect for our political institutions. They are also less certain about the integrity of elections in Canada.

In view of these results, it is not surprising that support for either complete reform or major changes to Canada’s political system is higher than average among those in the youngest age group (age 18-29). These younger Canadians are also twice as likely as those age 60 and older to support entrusting a group of experts, rather than elected representatives, with political decision-making.

While these differences are important, they should not be misinterpreted. Younger Canadians tend to express views on Canadian democracy that are less strongly favourable, but few are unfavourable. It is mainly a difference in strength of opinion, along with a greater openness to reform. These differences between age groups are also not new, and do not appear to be widening over time. It is notable, however, that in some cases positive views of Canada’s democracy and democratic institutions among younger adults improved following the 2015 federal election (between the 2014 and 2017 surveys), but have since ebbed back closer to previous levels.

# Support for democracy in Canada

Three in four Canadians express satisfaction with democracy in Canada and the same proportion agrees that democracy is better than any other form of government. Opinions have changed very little, if at all, over the past decade.

Support for democracy in Canada is high and has held steady over the past decade.

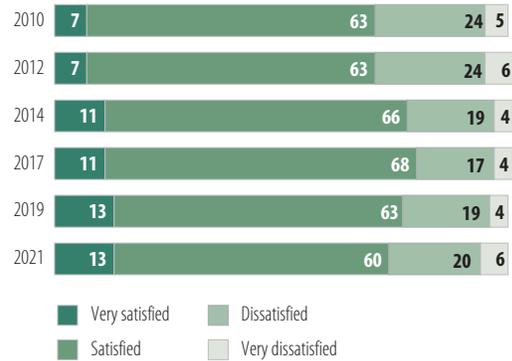
## Satisfaction with the way democracy works

- Three in four (73%) Canadians are either very satisfied (13%) or satisfied (60%) with **the way democracy works in Canada**, compared to one in four (26%) who are dissatisfied (20%) or very dissatisfied (6%).
- The level of satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada has changed very little over the past decade. It is currently slightly lower than its peak (79%) in 2017, but slightly higher than it was at the start of 2010s (70%).

## Democracy better than other forms of government

- Three in four Canadians (73%) agree that “democracy may have problems, but it is **better than any other form of government**,” including 53 percent who strongly agree. Only 11 percent disagree (another 16% give a neutral response).
- Opinions on this question have also changed very little over the past decade; in fact, responses in 2021 are virtually identical to those in 2010, though agreement has edged down slightly since its peak in 2014 (80%).

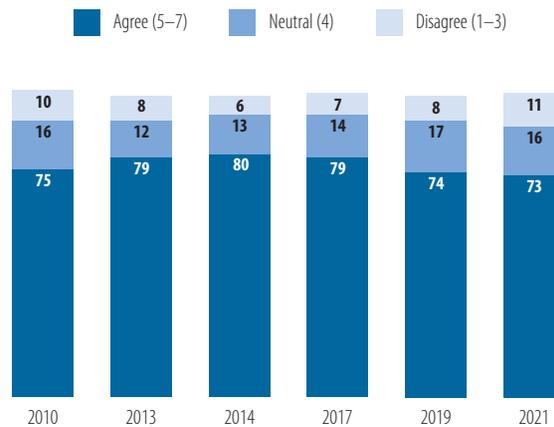
## Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada 2010 - 2021



Q.36

In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Canada?

## Is democracy better than any other form of government? 2010 - 2021



Agree/disagree (7-point scale):

Q.34d

Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government

## Does democracy matter?

- When presented with three competing statements about democracy, three in four (73%) Canadians agree with the most positive one, namely that “**democracy is preferable to any other form of government.**” This compares to 16 percent who agree that “for people like me it doesn’t matter whether a government is democratic or non-democratic,” and 11 percent who agree that “under some circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one.” Over the past decade, there has been no erosion in the proportion that agrees that democracy is preferable to any other form of government.

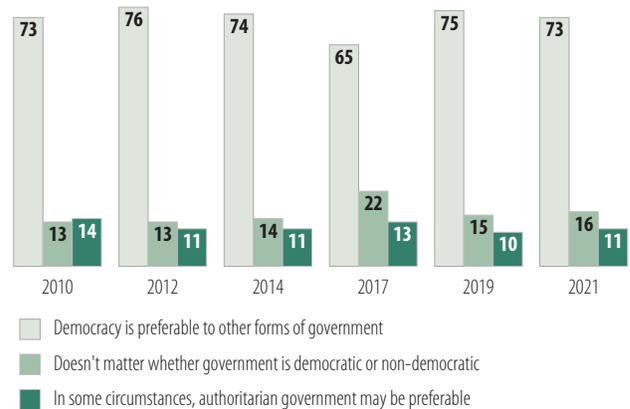
## Differences in opinion among population groups

While support for democracy in Canada is strong overall, it does vary among population groups. Three factors are important: age; education and income; and political leaning.

### Age

- At least seven in ten in all age groups are satisfied with the way democracy works.
- However, younger Canadians are less likely to **strongly agree**<sup>4</sup> that “democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.” Strong agreement rises from 39 percent among those age 18 to 29, to 74 percent among those age 60 and over. While relatively few in any age group **strongly disagree**, younger Canadians are more likely to express a neutral position: 49 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds express a more neutral view, compared to 24 percent of those age 60 and over.
- At least two in three in each age group also agree with the most positive of the three statements about democracy, namely that “democracy is preferable to any other form of government.” However, younger Canadians are somewhat less likely to prefer this statement. One in three of those age 18 to 29 agree either that “it doesn’t matter whether a government is democratic or non-democratic” (21%), or that “under some circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one” (12%). This is roughly twice the proportion of those age 60 and older who prefer one of these two less positive statements about democracy.

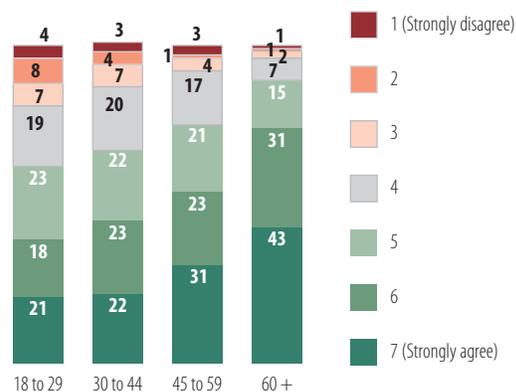
## Views on democracy 2010 - 2021



Q.37

Which of the following statements do you agree with the most: (1) For people like me it doesn't matter whether a government is democratic or non-democratic; (2) Democracy is preferable to any other form of government; (3) Under some circumstances an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one?

## Is democracy better than any other form of government? 2021 By age



Q.34d

Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government

<sup>4</sup> For a guide on how the various scales are used in this report, please see the Appendix: A note on survey question response scales on page 25.

## Education and income

Educational attainment and income are both measures of status and security in society. Most adults in Canada have completed some form of education or training past high school, and most describe their household income as either “good enough” or “just enough” rather than “not enough.” But while those with lower levels of education or income may be fewer in number, it is important to note that they also form the group that is less supportive of the country’s democratic system.

### ***Compared to those with a college diploma or university degree, those who did not continue their education past high school are:***

- somewhat less likely to be satisfied with democracy (70%, compared to 75%);
- less likely to strongly agree that “democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government” (43%, compared to 57%);
- more likely to agree with the statement that “for people like me, it doesn’t matter whether a government is democratic or non-democratic” (26%, compared to 12%).

### ***Compared to those who describe their household income as being good enough to allow them to save, those who describe their incomes as “not enough” are:***

- much less likely to be satisfied with democracy (60%, compared to 81%);
- less likely to strongly agree that “democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government” (39%, compared to 66%);
- more likely to agree with the statement that “under some circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one” (16%, compared to 8%).

These differences are not new; they are evident throughout this series of online surveys that began in 2010.

## Political leaning

Views on politics often vary between those at different ends of the ideological spectrum – that is, between those who consider themselves to be on the right and those who consider themselves to be on the left.<sup>5</sup> This is the case in Canada, to some extent, with views on democracy.

- Those who place themselves on the right of the political spectrum are somewhat less likely to be satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada, compared to those on the left (65%, compared to 75%).
- Majorities on both the left (68%) and the right (61%) strongly agree that “democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.” In this case, strong agreement is lower among those in the centre (48%). Those in the centre are more likely to express a more neutral position.
- Those on the left (87%) are more likely than those on the right (66%) to agree that “democracy is preferable to any other form of government.” One in three of those on the right agree either that “it doesn’t matter whether a government is democratic or non-democratic” (21%, compared to 6% for those on the left), or that “under some circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one” (13%, compared to 6%).

One other factor is worth noting, but in this case because of the absence of any difference of opinion. Those born in Canada and those who arrived as immigrants have similar, positive views of the country’s democratic system.

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<sup>5</sup> Survey participants were asked the following question: “the following scale goes from left to right, where “1” means LEFT and “10” means RIGHT. Nowadays, when we speak of political leanings, we talk of those on the left and those on the right. In other words, some people sympathize more with the left and others with the right. According to the meaning that the terms “left” and “right” have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale?” In this report, those who place themselves between 1 and 3 on the scale are considered “left” (16% of the population), with the “centre” (67%) corresponding to a score of 4 to 7, and “right” (17%) to a score of 8 to 10.

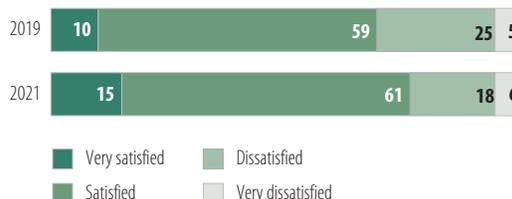
# Support for the political system

Large majorities of Canadians express support for, or pride in, the country's political system and respect for its political institutions, with opinions either remaining stable or, in some cases, improving over the past decade. At the same time, most Canadians say the political system needs at least some change.

The survey includes a number of questions about Canada's overall political system and institutions, including whether they are worthy of support and respect, and whether they need to be changed.

- Three in four (76%) Canadians are either very satisfied (15%) or satisfied (61%) with **the way the political system works in Canada**, compared to 24 percent who are dissatisfied (18%) or very dissatisfied (6%). Satisfaction has risen (by 7 points, from 69%) since 2019, while dissatisfaction has edged downward (by 6 points, from 30%). Views on this question do not vary significantly across regions or among different population groups.
- Over nine in ten (94%) Canadians say that one **should support the political system** of Canada either a lot (43%) or somewhat (51%). A similar proportion (91%) says that they **feel proud of living under the political system** of Canada (41% feel this pride a lot, and 50% feel it somewhat). Strong feelings of support for the political system have remained stable since 2010, while strong feelings of pride in the system have increased slightly.
- Nearly nine in ten (87%) also express **respect for the political institutions** of Canada, with 31 percent expressing a lot of respect, and 56 percent expressing some respect. About one in ten (12%) say they have little respect for Canada's political institutions. The proportion saying they have a lot of respect for the political institutions of Canada has grown considerably since 2010, from 18 percent to 31 percent.

## Satisfaction with the way the political system works 2019 - 2021



Q.38a

In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way the political system works in Canada?

## Canada's political system: support, pride and respect 2010 - 2021

	ONE SHOULD SUPPORT POLITICAL SYSTEM			PROUD OF LIVING UNDER POLITICAL SYSTEM			RESPECT FOR POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS		
	A lot	Some	Little	A lot	Some	Little	A lot	Some	Little
2010	40	51	9	35	52	12	18	62	20
2012	41	50	8	39	50	11	23	62	15
2014	37	55	8	37	53	11	20	62	18
2017	41	51	7	39	52	9	22	65	13
2019	41	51	8	39	52	10	25	61	14
2021	43	51	6	41	50	9	31	56	12

A lot = 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; some = 3-5; little = 1 or 2.

Q.30b, e, f

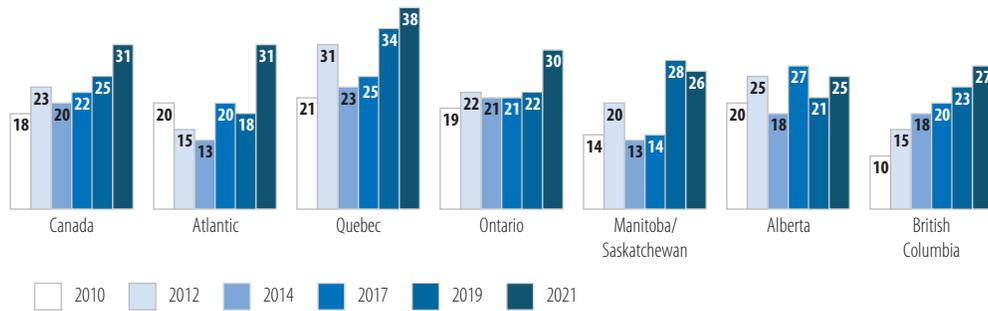
To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of Canada? To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of Canada? To what extent do you respect the political institutions of Canada?

- The proportion expressing a lot of support for, or pride in, the political system or a lot of respect for political institutions rises with age. Younger Canadians are less likely than their older counterparts to express **a lot** of support, pride or respect, but more likely to express **some**. Very few in any age group express **little** support, pride or respect.

- Strong feelings of support for, or pride in, Canada’s political system or respect for its political institutions do not vary extensively by region – although Western Canadians (26%) are slightly less likely than those outside the region (33%) to say they have a lot of respect for the political institutions of Canada. It is notable that Quebecers are no less likely than other Canadians to express strong feelings of support for, or pride in, Canada’s political system or respect for its political institutions.

### Respect for the political institutions of Canada

2010 – 2021 A lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale), by region



Q.30b

To what extent do you respect the political institutions of Canada?

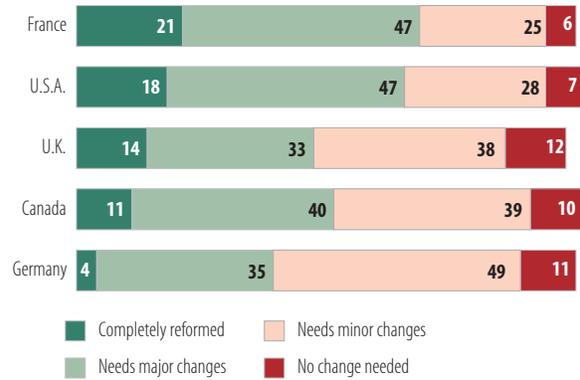
## Democratic reform

The fact that most Canadians are satisfied with the way their political system works does not mean they do not think it needs improvement. In fact, Canadians have a range of views, with one in two saying the system needs at least some major changes, and an equal proportion saying it needs minor changes, and an equal proportion saying it needs minor changes at most.

- Specially, 11 percent say the political system in Canada needs to be completely reformed, 40 percent say it needs major changes, 39 percent say it needs minor changes, and 10 percent say no change is needed. It is notable that most Canadians choose one of the “middle” options (major or minor change), while relatively few opt for either no change or complete change.
- This same question was asked in four other countries by the Pew Research Center in the Fall of 2020.<sup>6</sup> Compared to Canadians, citizens of France (68%) and the United States (65%) are more likely to say their political system needs at least some major changes. Opinions in the United Kingdom are similar to those in Canada, while Germans are the least likely (39%) to say that their political system needs at least some major changes.
- Not surprisingly, Canadians who are dissatisfied with the way their political system works are almost twice as likely as those who are satisfied to say that the system needs at least some major changes (79% and 43%, respectively). But even among those who are satisfied, more than two in five call for major changes if not complete reform, and only 12 percent say that no change is needed.
- Support for either complete reform or major change to Canada’s political system is higher than average among those on the political right (65%), those age 18 to 29 (61%), those without a post-secondary education (57%), and those who describe their household income as “not enough” (56%). Conversely, support for either no change or only minor change is higher among those on the left (56%), those age 60 or older (61%), those with a post-secondary education (51%), and those who describe their household income as “good enough” (55%).

## Reform of the political system

Results from outside Canada are from the Pew Research Center  
Fall 2020 Global Attitudes Survey



CAN14A.

And, which of the following statements comes closest to your view about the political system in Canada?

- (1) It needs to be completely reformed
- (2) It needs major changes
- (3) It needs minor changes
- (4) It doesn't need to be changed

<sup>6</sup> See: “Many in U.S., Western Europe Say Their Political System Needs Major Reform,” (Pew Research Center, March 31, 2021); <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/03/31/many-in-us-western-europe-say-their-political-system-needs-major-reform/>.

# Trust in political institutions

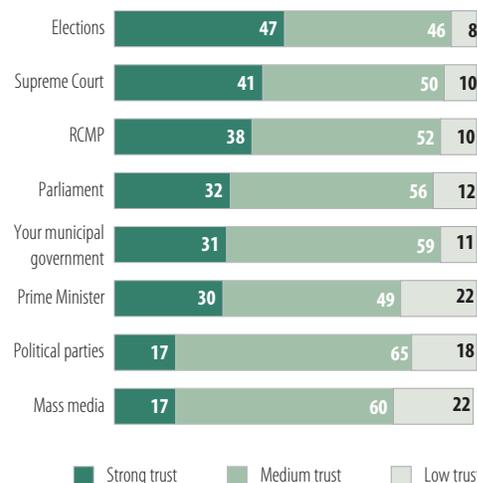
Most Canadians have at least some trust in the institutions of government, and trust in these institutions has been gradually improving over the past decade. While part of the most recent increases in trust may have been prompted by the government response to the pandemic, they also represent a continuation of a broader trend that existed prior to the arrival of COVID-19.

It is commonplace in Canada to assume that trust in political actors and institutions is steadily eroding.<sup>7</sup> But this is not the case. Trust in many of Canada’s key political actors and institutions has been gradually improving over the past decade.

Canadians were asked how much they trust various democratic institutions and actors.

- Canadians currently have higher trust in elections than in other aspects of their democratic system. Nine in ten Canadians (93%) have either a high (47%) or medium level (46%) of trust in **elections in this country**; only eight percent have low trust in elections.
- Canadians express higher levels of trust in institutions related to the justice system than to those related more directly to government. Nine in ten Canadians, for instance, have either a high or medium level of trust in the **Supreme Court of Canada** and the **RCMP**. High levels of trust are greater for the supreme court (41%) and the RCMP (38%) than for **parliament** (32%), **municipal government** (31%), the **prime minister** (30%) or **political parties** (17%).

## Trust in institutions of government 2021



Strong trust = 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; medium trust = 3-5; low trust = 1 or 2.

Q.30

To what extent do you trust...

<sup>7</sup> For recent examples, see: National Post Staff, "In a Year of the Plague, a Crisis of Trust Just When Canada Needs it Most," *The National Post* (January 7, 2021) [https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/covid-19-in-a-year-of-the-plague-a-crisis-of-trust-just-when-canada-needs-it-most]; David Moscrop, "Trust Issues: What We Risk Losing if the Pandemic Destroys Our Faith in Institutions," *The Globe and Mail* (March 13, 2021) [https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-trust-issues-what-we-risk-losing-if-the-pandemic-destroys-our-faith-in/]; The Hub Staff, "Public Trust is Way Down, but there's Still Reason for Hope," *The Hub* (April 13, 2021); [https://thehub.ca/in-the-know/2021-04-13/a-better-future-is-available/]; Warren Kinsella, "Trust in Government Has Collapsed During the Pandemic," *The Toronto Sun* (May 8, 2021) [https://torontosun.com/opinion/columnists/kinsella-trust-in-government-has-collapsed-during-the-pandemic].

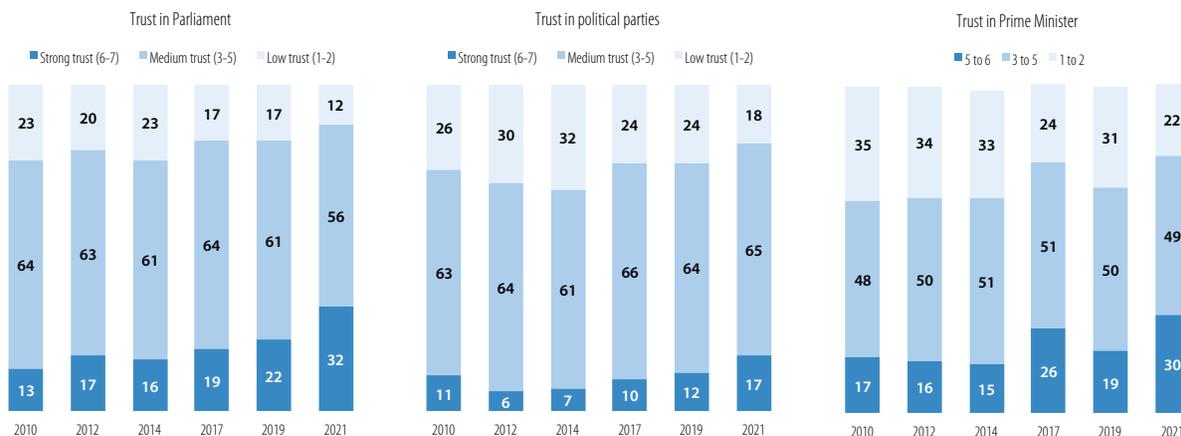
- While comparatively few have high levels of trust in the main institutions of government, most Canadians have at least a medium level of trust: 88 percent have either high or medium trust in parliament – with the figures for the prime minister and political parties being 79 percent and 82 percent, respectively. One in ten Canadians (12%) have low trust in parliament, and about one in five have low trust in the prime minister (22%) and political parties (18%).
- Similarly, nine in ten (90%) have either high (31%) or medium (59%) trust in their municipal government, while only 11 percent have low trust.
- Canadians are least trustful of the mass media; nonetheless, in this case, a large majority has at least a medium level of trust: three in four (77%) have either a high (17%) or medium level (60%) of trust in **the mass media**, compared to 22 percent who have low trust.

As mentioned, trust in many of Canada’s key political actors and institutions has been gradually improving over the past decade. The biggest recent change is in the proportion trusting parliament, but the trend is evident in other cases as well.<sup>8</sup>

- The proportion having high or medium trust in parliament has risen by 11 points since 2010; the proportion expressing high trust has risen by 19 points, including a 10-point increase since the previous survey in 2019. High trust in parliament is now twice as high as it was in 2014; low trust is now almost twice as low as it was then.
- In the case of political parties, there has been an eight-point increase in the proportion having high or medium trust since 2010, and a 14-point increase since a low of 68 percent was recorded in 2014. While the proportion with high trust in political parties currently is only 17 percent, it has increased by a modest five points since the previous survey in 2019, and has tripled since 2012.
- The proportion with high or medium trust in the prime minister is up 14 points since 2010, including a 10-point jump since the previous survey in 2019. The proportion with high trust is up 13 points since 2010, while the proportion with low trust has declined by the same amount.

### Trust in Parliament and political parties

2010 - 2021



Strong trust = 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; medium trust = 3-5; low trust = 1 or 2.

Q.30i, k

To what extent do you trust...

<sup>8</sup> The trend regarding trust in elections will be discussed in the following section of the report.

- The proportion with high or medium trust in their municipal government has increased by eight points since 2010; the proportion with high trust has doubled over that period, from 16 to 31 percent.
- Levels of high or medium trust in the mass media have held steady over the past decade (though there has been a modest 5-point decline since the high of 82% was reached in 2017). However, high trust in the mass media has doubled (from 8% to 17%) since 2010.
- Levels of high or medium trust in the supreme court have also held steady over the past decade, at around 90 percent; however, high trust in the supreme court has been gradually increasing, and is now nine points higher than it was in 2010. Levels of trust in the RCMP are largely unchanged.

The gains in trust for these different institutions, both since the previous survey in 2019 and over the longer term, have occurred across the country and among all major demographic groups (e.g., among both men and women, all age groups, both those born in Canada and immigrants).<sup>9</sup> These gains have also occurred among those who place themselves on the left, centre and right of the political spectrum.

## The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Are these increases in trust a reaction to how governments in Canada responded to the COVID-19 pandemic? Did the actions that governments took to contain the spread of the virus, support Canadians financially during the initial lockdown periods, and distribute vaccines, generate an unusual increase in trust? The answer appears to be yes, but only to a certain extent.

Prior to the pandemic, trust in democratic institutions in Canada was generally stable or gradually increasing. To the extent that trust has increased since 2019, this represents a modest acceleration of the pre-existing trend, and not a reversal of fortunes. While the most recent increases in strong trust in institutions such as parliament or municipal government are generally larger than previously seen in this series of surveys, they are consistent with the general pattern over the decade.<sup>10</sup> It would appear reasonable, then, to conclude that part of the most recent increases in trust have been prompted by the response to the pandemic. But it would be an exaggeration to claim that the changes are entirely due to this response.

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<sup>9</sup> The one partial exception concerns the trust that Albertans place in the prime minister. Among Albertans, trust in the prime minister is higher in 2021 than in 2019, but lower than it was at other times in the past decade.

<sup>10</sup> A partial exception to this pattern might be trust in the prime minister: strong trust declined by nine points between 2017 and 2019, but increased by 12 points between 2019 and 2021. This turn-around may indeed be due to the federal government's actions in the response to the pandemic, though it may also be partly due to the usual ups and downs of political popularity.

# The integrity of elections

A growing proportion of Canadians has a strong degree of trust in elections in this country. While most think the counting of the votes in elections is generally fair, there are some concerns about the influence of the wealthy or of foreign governments on election outcomes.

As noted, most Canadians have at least some trust in elections in their country, and the level of trust in elections is higher than that for other institutions such as parliament or the supreme court. It is also the case that the proportion that has a strong degree of trust in elections in Canada is increasing – it fact, it has more than doubled since 2014.

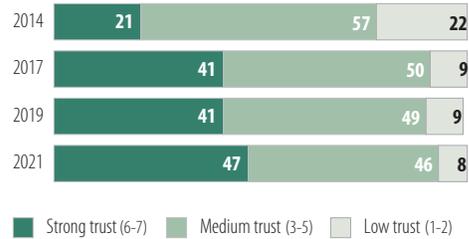
- Specifically, the proportion of Canadians with a high level of trust in elections jumped from 21 to 41 percent between 2014 and 2017 (on either side of the 2015 federal election), and has now risen further to 47 percent. The proportion with low trust fell from 22 to nine percent in 2017; it remains close to that level, at eight percent, in 2021.
- Strong trust in elections is up both among those on the left and right of the political spectrum, though the extent of the increase since 2014 is somewhat more pronounced among those on the left.

Despite these relatively high levels of trust in elections, the 2021 survey suggests that some Canadians have concerns about the integrity of the electoral process.

- Most Canadians think that the counting of the votes in elections is generally fair. Almost two in three (64%) say that votes in Canadian elections are always **counted correctly and fairly**, and another 31 percent think this happens at least sometimes. Only three percent say this never happens.
- Doubts are more likely when it comes to the secrecy of the ballot. Almost one in two (46%) say that politicians **can never find out for whom someone voted**, but 35 percent can imagine that this sometimes happens, and 18 percent believe it always happens.

## Trust in elections

2014 - 2021



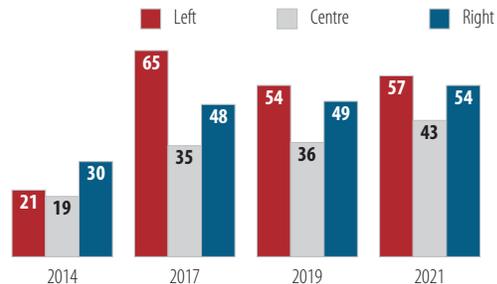
Strong trust = 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; medium trust = 3-5; low trust = 1 or 2.

Q.30q

To what extent do you trust elections in this country?

## Trust in elections

2014 - 2021 Strong trust (6-7), by political leaning



Strong trust = 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale

Q.30q

To what extent do you trust elections in this country?

- There are also some concerns about the influence of the wealthy on election outcomes. While only 16 percent believe that **the rich always buy election results** in Canada, 46 percent say that this sometimes happens; this is greater than the two in five (37%) who think this never happens in Canada.
- An even greater area of concern is the influence of foreign governments. Again, relatively few (18%) say that **foreign governments always influence the election results** in Canada. But, in this case, a majority (56%) say this sometimes happens, and only one in four (25%) say this never happens.

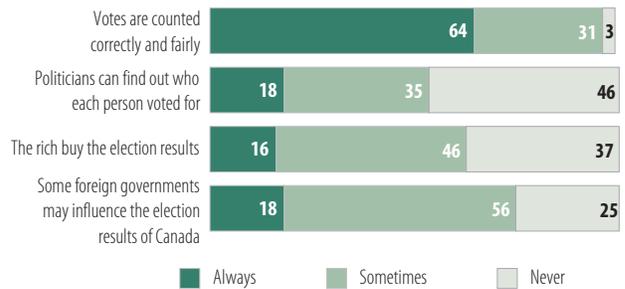
There are some variations in opinion on these questions within the population. In general, younger Canadians are less certain about the integrity of elections in Canada than their older counterparts. For instance, those between the ages of 18 and 29 (30%) are less likely than those age 60 and older (48%) to say that the rich **never** buy the election results in Canada; they are also less likely to say that politicians can **never** find out for whom someone voted (31% compared to 58%).

Differences in opinion by region are relatively modest; however, Ontarians are consistently a bit less certain about the integrity of elections in Canada than other Canadians. Quebecers, whose provincial government was among the first to place limits on donations to political parties, are the most likely to say that the rich **never** buy the election results in Canada (43%), though almost as many in Atlantic Canada hold the same view (41%).

Finally, despite the fact that those on the left and right currently express similar degrees of trust in elections in Canada, those on the right express more doubts about other aspects of elections. They are more likely than those on the left to say that the rich **always** buy the election results in Canada; that politicians can **always** find out for whom someone voted; and that some foreign governments **always** influence the election results in Canada.

## Would you say the following can happen during elections in Canada?

2021

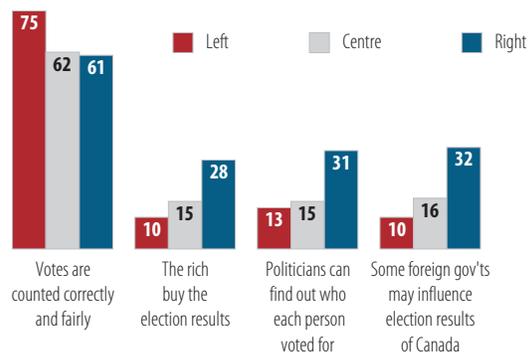


COUNTFAIR

Here are some things that can happen during elections. Would you say they happen always, sometimes or never in Canada?

## Would you say the following can happen during elections in Canada?

2021 Always happens, by political leaning



COUNTFAIR

Here are some things that can happen during elections. Would you say they happen always, sometimes or never in Canada?

# The voice of citizens

Majorities of Canadians support mechanisms to provide a greater voice for citizens in decision-making, such as direct democracy or the creation of citizens' assemblies. The option of giving more voice, not to citizens, but to experts, is less popular, but also attracts the support of a significant minority.

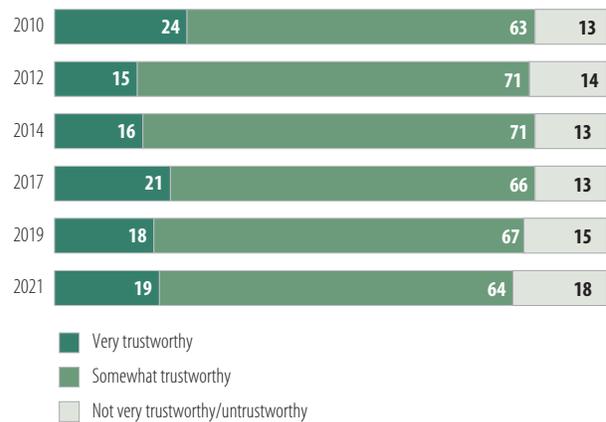
## Trust in other people

To contain the spread of COVID-19, Canadians have had to rely on their fellow citizens as much as on their governments; success depended on the willingness of individuals to follow public health guidelines and, more recently, to get vaccinated. It is thus reassuring that most express some degree of trust in people in their community.

- Eighty-three percent say that people in their community are either very (19%) or somewhat (64%) trustworthy, compared to 15 percent who say they are not very trustworthy and only three percent who say they are untrustworthy. The proportion seeing people in their community as being very trustworthy is highest in Atlantic Canada (29%), a pattern that is evident in several of the previous surveys as well.
- The proportion saying that people in their community are either very or somewhat trustworthy has remained relatively stable over the past decade (it has edged downward only very slightly, by 4 points, since 2017).

## Trust in people in your community

2010 - 2021



Q.11

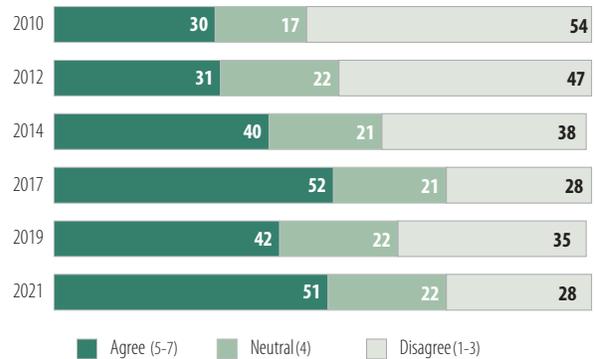
And speaking of the people from around where you live, would you say that people in this community are very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy or untrustworthy...?

## The voice of citizens

- One in two (51%) Canadians agree that those who govern their country are interested in what people like them think, including 24 percent who strongly agree. Only 28 percent disagree (including 17% who strongly disagree), while 22 percent take a neutral position.
- Agreement that “those who govern their country are interested in what people like you think” is lower in the Prairie provinces (44%) than in the rest of the country (52%). It is also lower among those on the left of the political spectrum (49%) compared to those on the right (58%).
- The proportion agreeing matches the previous high in 2017, and is much higher than was the case at the start of the decade, when agreement stood at 30 percent. The proportion disagreeing with the notion that the government is interested in what they think, at 28 percent, is only about half as large as it was in 2010.
- Over this period, the proportion of those on the right that agrees has remained steady, at around 60 percent. The proportion of those in the centre that agrees, however, has almost doubled (from 27% in 2010 to 49% in 2021), while the proportion on the left that agrees has tripled (from 16% in 2010 to 49% in 2021). In the case of those in the centre and on the left, however, the biggest changes occurred between the 2014 and 2017 surveys – that is, following the 2015 federal election and the change of federal government from Conservative to Liberal. The proportion of those on the left agreeing that “those who govern their country are interested in what people like you think” is actually lower today than it was in 2017.

## Are those who govern interested in what people like you think?

2010 - 2021

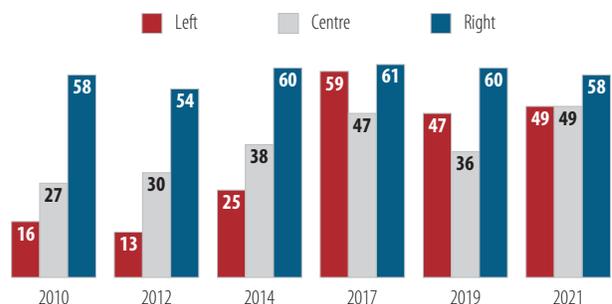


Q.34f

Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

## Are those who govern interested in what people like you think?

2010 - 2021 Agree (5-7 on a 7-point scale)



Q.34f

Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

## Citizens, experts and representatives

One way for citizens to gain more influence on political decision-making is to allow for more direct democracy through mechanisms such as referendums. Advocacy for more direct democracy is part of the populist political tradition in Canada that dates as far back as the Progressive movement of the 1920s, and which later gave rise to the Reform Party and its successors.

### Direct democracy

Most Canadians would support the greater use of direct democracy.

- 57 percent of Canadians say that, in deciding what laws to make, the best option for Canada is for citizens to vote directly to decide each issue. Conversely, 43 percent would prefer that issues be decided by elected representatives of the people.
- Despite the fact that populist political movements in Canada have historically been strongest in the West, there is no significant variation in opinion on this question across regions: 56 percent of those in Western Canada prefer that citizens vote directly to decide each issue, as do the same proportion (57%) of those living east of Manitoba.
- Equally surprising, there is only a very modest difference between those on the left and right of the political spectrum: 54 percent of those on the right prefer that citizens vote directly to decide each issue, as do 48 percent of those on the left. Essentially, both those on the left and those on the right are fairly evenly divided on this question. It is those who place themselves in the centre who are most likely to favour direct democracy (60%).
- Those who are dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Canada are more likely to favour citizens voting directly (68%) than are those who are satisfied (53%). Those who are satisfied are more or less evenly split on this question. Thus, many of those who are satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada nonetheless support a more direct role for citizens in decision-making.
- Women (61%) are somewhat more supportive than men (52%) of citizens voting directly to make laws. Those age 60 and over are somewhat less supportive than their younger counterparts.

## The role of experts in decision-making

A quite different option for reforming the democratic process would be to give more power, not to citizens, but to experts. This option is less popular than that of allowing for more direct democratic decision-making, though a significant minority of Canadians would support it.

- 42 percent of Canadians say that, in deciding what laws to make, the best option for Canada is for a group of experts to decide. In this case, a majority (58%) would prefer that issues be decided by elected representatives of the people.
- Once again, there is very little difference in opinion on this question across regions. There is also only a modest difference between those on the left and right of the political spectrum, with 50 percent of those on the right who would prefer that issues be decided by a group of experts, compared to 42 percent of those on the left.
- The difference in views between men and women is much smaller in the case of this question compared to the one about direct democracy, but the difference between age groups is much larger. Canadians age 18 to 29 (57%) are twice as likely to support relying on experts than are those age 60 and older (29%).

One way to illustrate the broad range of views on these two questions is to look at the answers to both in combination. This shows that the current system (representative democracy) is neither consistently supported nor consistently rejected. One in four Canadians (24%) prefer elected representatives in *both* cases (that is, they would rather representatives make laws than citizens voting directly, and they would rather representatives make laws than a group of experts). But only one in four (23%) prefer elected representatives in *neither* case (that is, they would rather citizens vote directly to decide laws, and they would rather rely on a group of experts). One in two (53%) prefer elected representatives in one case but not the other.

## In deciding what laws to make, what do you think is best for Canada?

(Answers to two questions combined; total adds to 100%)

	Choose citizens over representatives	Choose representatives over citizens
Choose representatives over experts	34%	24%
Choose experts over representatives	23%	19%

WVS12.

*In deciding what laws to make, what do you think is best for Canada: should elected representatives of the people decide, or should citizens vote directly to decide each issue?*

WVS13.

*In deciding what laws to make, what do you think is best for Canada: should a group of experts decide or representatives elected by the people decide?*

## Citizens' assemblies

There are ways to provide for more voice for citizens in political decision-making without going as far as direct democracy. Citizens' assemblies, for instance, can provide opportunities for a group of citizens to weigh evidence and deliberate at length about complex issues before issuing recommendations. Canadians are relatively open to the prospect of using such a mechanism.

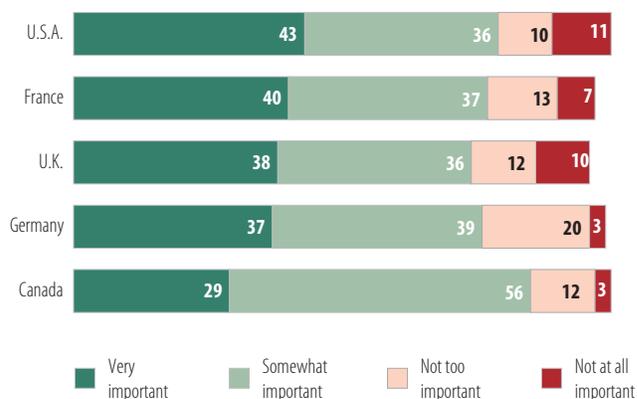
- While only 29 percent say it is very important for the federal government to create citizen assemblies where citizens debate issues and make recommendations about national laws, 56 percent say it is somewhat important. Thus more than eight in ten attached some degree of importance to the creation of citizens' assemblies, compared to 15 percent who say it is not too or not at all important.
- This same question was asked in four other countries by Pew Research in the Fall of 2020.<sup>11</sup> A comparison of the results shows that Canadians are the least likely to say that the creation of citizens' assemblies is very important – suggesting that Canadians feel less strongly about this mechanism than do American, French, British or German citizens. But Canadians are just as likely as their counterparts in these other countries to say that the creation of citizens' assemblies is at least somewhat important.

There is very little difference in opinion on this question across regions or major demographic groups. There is also little difference in views between those on the left (37% say it is very important) and right (36%) of the political spectrum; though strong support is somewhat lower (25%) for those in the centre.

Notably, support for citizens' assemblies does not appear to be driven by dissatisfaction with democracy. Majorities of both those who are satisfied and those who are dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Canada say the creation of citizens' assemblies is at least somewhat important, as do majorities of those who both agree and disagree that those who govern the country care what people like them think.

## Importance of creating citizens' assemblies

Results from outside Canada are from the Pew Research Center  
Fall 2020 Global Attitudes Survey



CANQ21B

Thinking about Canada today, how important would you say it is for the federal government to create citizen assemblies where citizens debate issues and make recommendations about national laws?

<sup>11</sup> See: "Many in U.S., Western Europe Say Their Political System Needs Major Reform," (Pew Research Center, March 31, 2021); <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/03/31/many-in-us-western-europe-say-their-political-system-needs-major-reform/>.

# Being Canadian

Most people in the country say they are proud of being a Canadian, but the proportion that has a lot of pride has fallen since 2019. The sense of national unity has also been declining – though, in this case, the trend is clearly a longer-term one.

This report has shown that the trends regarding support for, and trust in, the key elements of Canada’s system of government are generally either stable or positive. But a negative trend is evident in the case of two other measures – ones related, not to democracy, but to national identity.

## Pride in being a Canadian

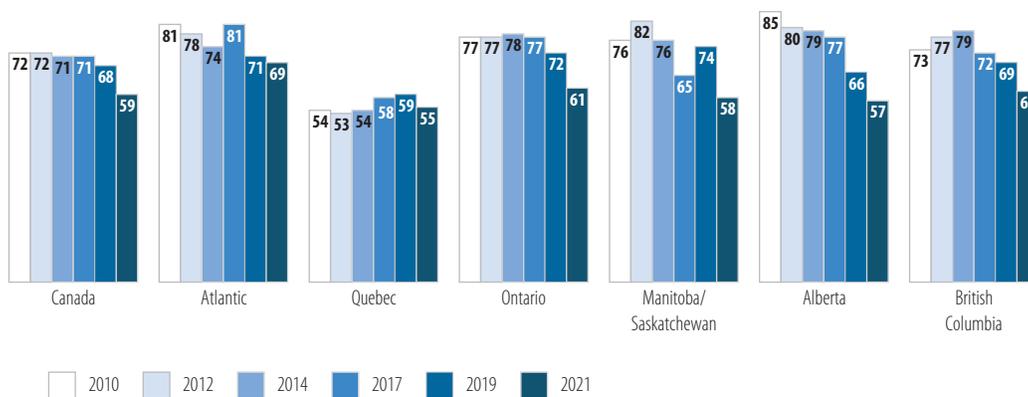
Most people in the country say they are proud of being a Canadian: 59 percent say they have a lot of pride, 36 percent have some pride, and only five percent have little pride. However, the proportion that has a lot of pride has fallen by nine points since the previous survey in 2019, and is currently the lowest recorded since this series of online surveys began in 2010.

Strong feelings of pride in being a Canadian have declined in every region of the country, but the drops since 2019 are largest in Ontario (from 72% to 61%) and the West (from 69% to 58%). In Quebec, pride in being Canadian is lower, and fell by only four points since the last survey in 2019 (from 59% to 55%). In Atlantic Canada, there has been almost no change since 2019 (a drop of only 2 points), but there was a much bigger 10-point drop between 2017 and 2019.

Looking beyond region, the decline since 2019 in the sense of pride in being a Canadian is more evident among some population groups than others. It is much more pronounced among those under the age of 60, while there has been almost no change for those age 60 and older. It has declined by 10 points among those born in Canada, but by only two points among immigrants. And it has declined more among those on the left of the political spectrum (down 14 points) or in the centre (down 10 points) than among those on the right (down 2 points).

### Proud of being a Canadian

2010 - 2021 A lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale), by region



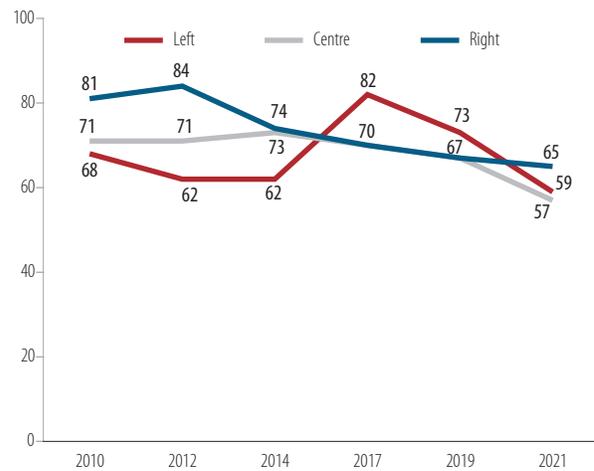
Q.30o  
To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian?

In view of these results, the most likely explanation for the most recent decline in the proportion expressing a lot of pride in being a Canadian is that it is a reaction to the discoveries of hundreds of graves of children on the sites of several former Indian residential schools, which featured prominently in news just prior to when the survey took place in July 2021. Through media coverage of these discoveries, many Canadians gained a greater understanding of the extent of harm done by residential schools to Indigenous children, families and communities. This, in turn, led many Canadian individuals and communities to change their plans for the July 1 Canada Day holiday, shifting focus from celebration to reflection. The AmericasBarometer survey began the following day, on July 2.

It is possible, then, that the survey results show that there was indeed a dampening of the strength of Canadian pride following these revelations, especially among those living in Ontario and Western Canada, those under the age of 60, those born in Canada and those on the political left. At the same time, this is unlikely to be the only factor, as declines in pride were evident in some regions of the country (Atlantic Canada, the Prairies and B.C.) and among some groups (for example, those between the ages of 18 and 29, or those on the left) prior to the most recent survey.

## Proud of being Canadian

2010 - 2021 A lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale), by political leaning



Q.30o

To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian?

## National unity

Along with feelings of pride, the sense of national unity among Canadians has also been declining – though, in this case, the trend is clearly a longer-term one. The proportion of Canadians that strongly agrees that “despite our differences, we Canadians have many things that unite us as a country” declined by only two points between 2019 and 2021. But this continues a gradual decline that followed the 2014 survey. Since 2014, the proportion strongly agreeing with this statement has declined by 12 points, from 64 percent to 52 percent.

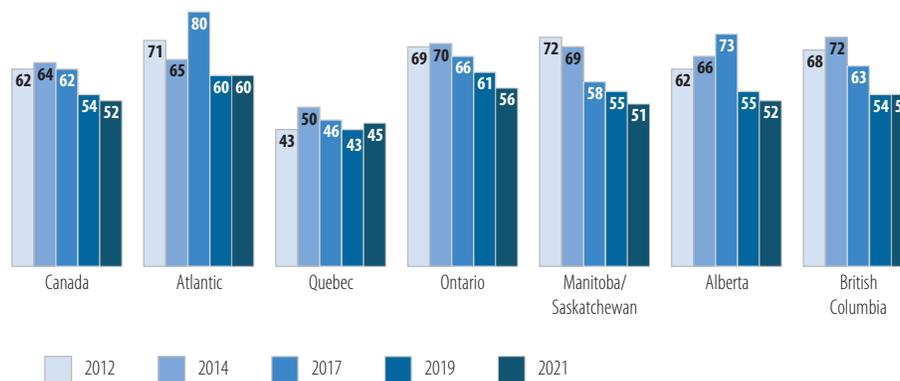
While this decline is evident in all regions of the country, it is more pronounced in the West: in that region, strong agreement has fallen from 69 percent in 2014 to 52 percent in 2021.

While the sense of pride in being a Canadian has declined more for those on the political left than on the right, the opposite is true for the sense of national unity. Since 2012, the proportion of those on the left that strongly agrees that “despite our differences, we Canadians have many things that unite us as a country” has remained unchanged, at 58 percent. Over the same period, there has been a 20-point drop among those on the right, from 77 percent to 57 percent.<sup>12</sup>

While the change in the most recent period (since 2019) is very minor, this in itself is notable, as it suggests that the pandemic experience did not prompt a rebound in feelings of unity. Many remarked during the pandemic that “we are all in this together,” yet fewer Canadians than at any time since this series of online surveys began in 2010 agree that “despite our differences, we Canadians have many things that unite us as a country.”

It is worth emphasizing that majorities of Canadians continue to express pride in their country, and believe there are many things bringing them together. While the strength of feeling in both cases may have dampened, very few (no more than 5% in each case) express little pride, or strongly disagree with the statement about unity. But the changes in responses to both questions in recent years point to the ongoing challenges that Canada faces in terms of finding appropriate accommodations between its different nations, cultures and regions.

Despite our differences, we Canadians have many things that unite us as a country  
2012 – 2021 A lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale), by region



Q.34e

Despite our differences, we Canadians have many things that unite us as a country.

<sup>12</sup> There has also been a 13-point drop over this period among those in the centre. While the proportion of those on the left agreeing that there are many things that unite us is the same in 2021 and in 2012, the proportion did rise to 80 percent in 2017, before subsequently dropping back.

# Appendix:

## A note on survey question response scales

Many questions in the AmericasBarometer surveys use 7-point scales, marking out the differences between agreement or disagreement, or a lot of trust or no trust at all. Below is a guide to how these scales are used in this report.

### A) Scales of “strongly agree” vs. “strongly disagree”

Several questions asked for expressions of agreement or disagreement using the following scale:

*Here are some statements. Please tell us your opinion using a scale from 1, which means “strongly disagree” to 7, which means “strongly agree”. You can use any number between 1 and 7.*

- Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.
- Despite our differences, we Canadians have many things that unite us as a country.
- Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think.

In these cases, responses are grouped in one or two ways:

Strongly agree = 6 or 7 on the scale; neutral = 3 to 5; strongly disagree = 1 or 2.

**Or:**

Agree = 5 to 7 on the scale; neutral = 4; disagree = 1 to 3.

### B) Scale of “a lot” vs. “not at all”

Several questions asked for expressions of strength of opinion using the following scale:

*Please answer the following questions using a number on a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means not at all and 7 means a lot. If your opinion is between not at all and a lot, you would choose an intermediate score.*

- To what extent do you respect the political institutions of Canada?
- To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of Canada?
- To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of Canada?
- To what extent do you trust your municipal government?
- To what extent do you trust the mass media?
- To what extent do you trust elections in this country?
- To what extent do you trust the Parliament?
- To what extent do you trust the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police)?
- To what extent do you trust political parties?
- To what extent do you trust the Prime Minister of Canada?
- To what extent do you trust the Supreme Court?
- To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian?

In these cases, responses are grouped as follows:

A lot = 6 or 7 on the scale; some = 3 to 5; little = 1 or 2.

# AmericasBarometer

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