

# Political Polarization in CANADA and the U.S.

**Final Report**

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This study was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research:

**ENVIRONICS INSTITUTE FOR SURVEY RESEARCH**

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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# Executive summary

This report explores the issue of political polarization in Canada and the United States through an analysis of public opinion data about democracy collected over the past decade. Ideally, in a democratic society, partisans on the left and right, while holding different policy preferences, will share similar degrees of support for the political institutions and processes through which those preferences are pursued. The data show that, in practice, this is not always the case.

The situations in Canada and the U.S. are markedly different. The U.S. is highly polarized, with support for democratic institutions and actors among those on the left or right generally rising or falling depending on which political party is in power. This polarization was evident during the Obama presidency, but has intensified under Trump, as measures such as satisfaction with democracy, support for or pride in the political system, and especially trust in the president,

have declined sharply among left-leaning Americans while jumping no less sharply among those on the right.

In Canada, in contrast, left-right polarization is much less pronounced and has generally declined, rather than increased, over the past decade. There has been a convergence between the left and right in satisfaction with democracy, support for or pride in the political system, and respect for political institutions. This is because views have improved significantly among those on the left, without deteriorating to the same degree among those on the right.

The analysis shows that it is important to approach Canada as its own case, and not assume that its experiences mirror those of other Western democracies that are straining under the influence of populism and the rise of a more polarized political discourse.

# Introduction:

## Political polarization

There are many complaints about the quality of contemporary politics. Some believe that parties and politicians are too scripted and tightly managed by backroom staff. Others find political debates too superficial and lament the lack of vision or long-term thinking. Still others observe that the political arena has now become hyper-partisan, with opponents holding to extreme positions that afford little opportunity for consensus or compromise.

This last concern points to the issue of political polarization. In the post-war period, Western democracies have typically presented voters with a choice between political parties on the left and right of the political spectrum, such as the Labour Party and the Conservatives in the U.K., or the Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. Some countries, like Canada, offer a less binary choice, with important parties straddling the ideological middle ground. While these left-centre-right differences have fuelled political contests for decades, many hold that the extent of polarization has increased in recent years: that the overlapping areas in the political Venn diagram have been shrinking as each party's own circle pulls further away from the others. This polarization not only makes political debate less civil, but brings with it risks of inertia (though political stalemate) and, worse, of widening social divisions through the malicious scapegoating of opponents in an attempt to mobilize one's own supporters.

This report will explore the issue of political polarization through the analysis of public opinion data collected over the past decade in Canada and the United States. It will compare the current state of political polarization, as well as recent trends in the two countries. The focus will be first on the distribution of the populations in both countries across the ideological spectrum, and then on the similarities and differences in how supporters on the left and right in each country view their respective political systems. Ideally, in a democratic society, partisans on the left and right, while holding different policy preferences, will share similar degrees of support for the political institutions and processes within which those preferences are pursued. Conversely, signs of a widening gap in support for the political system between those on the left and right can be taken as evidence of a society that is becoming more polarized.

Notably, each country underwent a significant political shift in the middle of the decade, with Canada moving from right to left with the defeat of the Conservative Party and the election of a Liberal government; and the U.S. moving from left to right with the end of President Obama's second term and the election of Donald Trump. The public opinion data therefore allow for an analysis of the impact that a left-right (or right-left) shift in government has on how partisans at either end of the political spectrum view their political system. (Note that the 2019 survey in Canada took place in July, prior to the October 2019 federal election).

## Data source: The AmericasBarometer

The data analyzed in this report are drawn from the Canadian and U.S. portions of the *AmericasBarometer* surveys. The *AmericasBarometer* is a recurring study conducted approximately every two years, covering 23 countries spanning the Western Hemisphere. In Canada, the surveys of approximately 1,500 adults were conducted online five times over the past decade: in 2010, 2012, 2014, 2017 and 2019. Since 2012, the Canadian surveys were conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research.<sup>1</sup> Data from the U.S. surveys of approximately 1,500 American adults were obtained from the *Latin American Public Opinion Project*.

The *AmericasBarometer* surveys include a variety of questions related to confidence in the political system. These questions ask about satisfaction with, pride in, support for, respect for, trust in and approval of different political institutions or actors. Many of these questions ask respondents to express the extent of their agreement or trust on a 7-point scale. In these cases, this report will look at expressions of strong agreement or strong trust, which combine responses of six and seven on the scale, or low agreement or low trust, which combine responses of one and two.

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<sup>1</sup> The AmericasBarometer data for 2010 were supplied by the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University, which takes no responsibility for any interpretation of the data.

# Findings

## Political leaning: left, middle and right

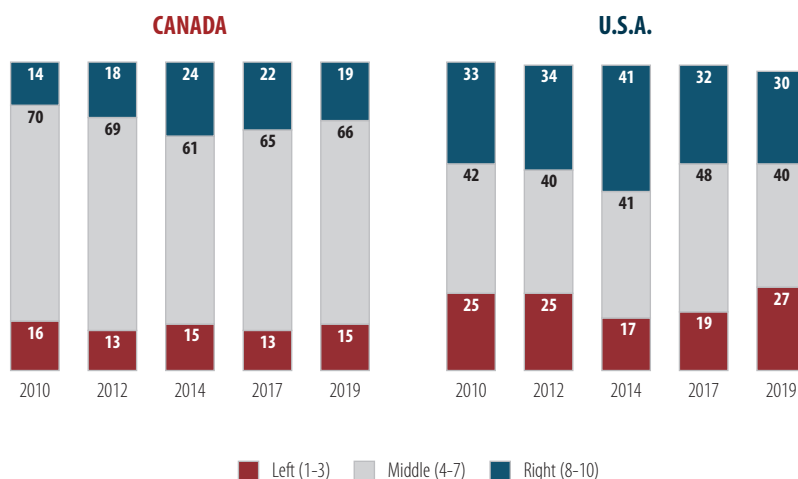
Canadians are more likely than Americans to place themselves in the middle of the political spectrum, and less likely to place themselves on either the left or the right. Moreover, there is a stronger relationship in the U.S. between left-right leaning and party support. Over eight in ten Americans on the left intend to vote Democrat, and the same proportion of those on the right intend to vote Republican. In Canada, only one in four left-leaning voters intend to support the NDP, and fewer than one in two of those on the right intend to vote Conservative.

In terms of their political leanings, Canadians do not look very polarized. When asked in 2019 to place themselves on a **left-right political scale**, two-thirds (66%) of Canadians avoid either pole and opt for the middle ground. One in five

(19%) place themselves on the right end of the scale and 15 percent place themselves on the left. This distribution has stayed relatively stable over the past decade, although the proportion placing themselves on the right grew slightly between 2010 and 2014 before ebbing back down.

By comparison, more Americans place themselves on either end of the left-right scale, and fewer place themselves in the middle: 30 percent of Americans are on the right end of the scale, 40 percent are in the middle and 27 percent are on the left. The pattern over time is similar to Canada's, with little significant change since 2010, but with a slight increase in the proportion on the right between 2010 and 2014 that subsequently ebbed back.

Political leaning: left, middle and right  
% 2010–19



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

*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? (10-point scale)*

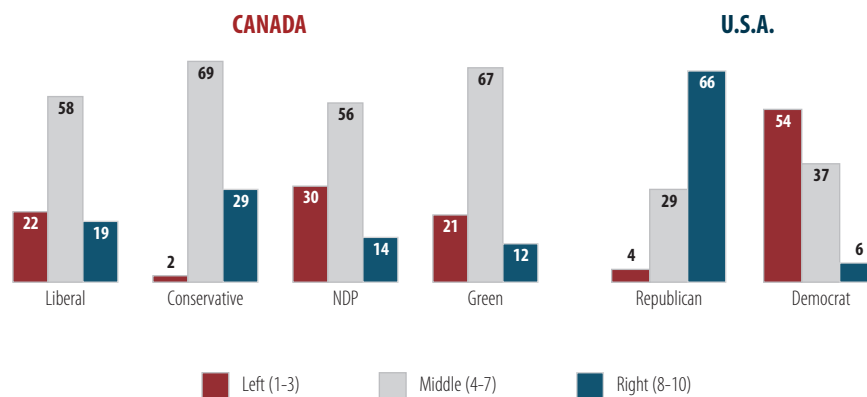


Canada, therefore, is less polarized than the U.S. in the sense that fewer Canadians identify with either the left or right end of the political spectrum. The extent of the difference between the two neighbouring countries, however, comes into even sharper focus when we look at the relationship between left-right political leaning and party support.

Not surprisingly, a majority (54%) of Americans intending to vote Democrat place themselves on the left of the

political spectrum, while an even larger majority of Republican supporters (66%) place themselves on the right. In Canada, however, a majority of those intending to vote for each of the four most popular national parties – the Liberals, the Conservatives, the NDP and the Greens – place themselves in the middle. Strikingly, only 30 percent of NDP supporters place themselves on the left end of the spectrum, and only 29 percent of Conservative supporters place themselves on the right.

Political leaning (left - right), by voting intention  
% 2019



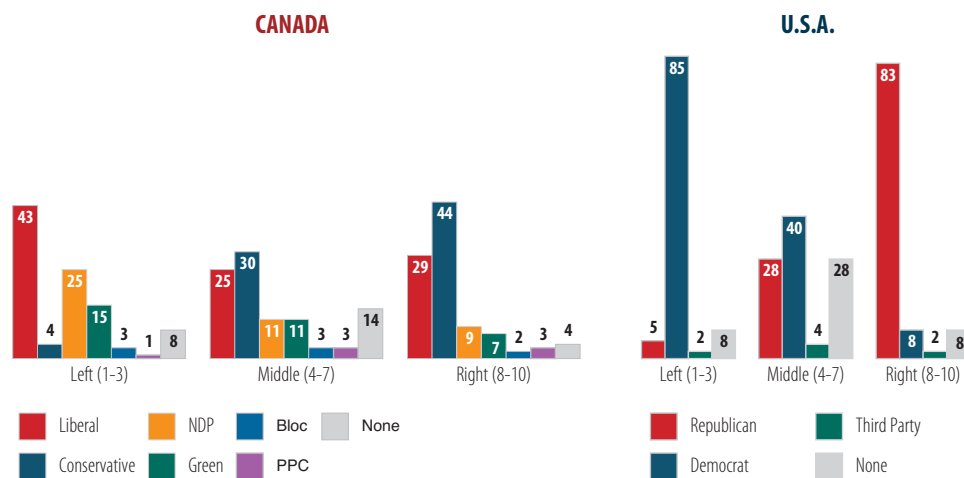
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

*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? (10-point scale)*

The point can be made in a different way, by looking at how those on the left, in the middle and on the right intend to vote. In the U.S., over eight in ten of those of the left intend to vote Democrat, and the same proportion of those on the right intend to vote Republican. In Canada, which has a multi-party system, only 25 percent of left-leaning voters intend to support the NDP (although over eight in ten support a party other than the Conservatives). Perhaps more importantly, only 44 percent of those on the right intend to vote Conservative.

In short, a majority of Americans identify with either the left or the right, and those left- and right-leaning voters each support their respective left-wing and right-wing parties. In Canada, the majority is in the middle, and each political party appeals to voters with a mix of political leanings. By these measures, the U.S. polity is much more polarized than the Canadian one.

### Voting intention, by political leaning (left - right) % 2019



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

*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? (10-point scale)*

## Support for the political system

In Canada, there is now no significant difference between those on the left and those on the right in their level of satisfaction with the way democracy works. In the U.S., in contrast, there has been a marked divergence in levels of satisfaction with the way democracy works, with satisfaction dropping among those on the left and increasing among those on the right. Similar patterns are evident in each country in the case of questions related to support for the political system, respect for political institutions and pride in living under each country's political system.

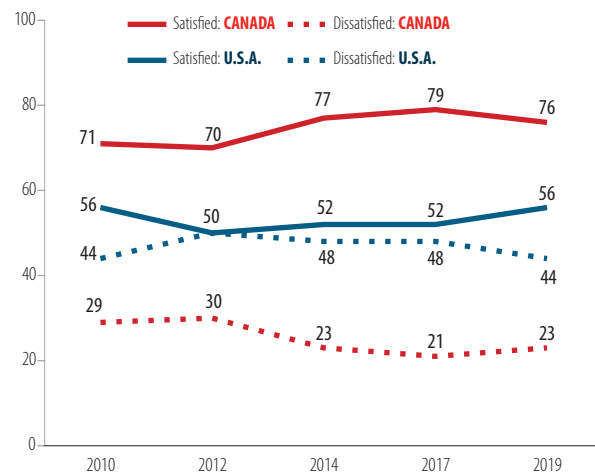
It is often stated that electorates in many countries are losing confidence in their democracies.<sup>2</sup> Over the past decade, however, overall satisfaction with democracy in both Canada and the United States has held steady. Canadians (76%) are more likely than Americans (56%) to be **very satisfied or satisfied with the way democracy works** in their respective countries – but the respective levels of satisfaction are either the same (in the U.S.) or slightly higher (in Canada) than in 2010.

National averages can be misleading, however, if they mask divergent trends among different parts of the population – if one group becomes more satisfied and another becomes less so, the net result may be one of no overall change. This is the case in both countries.

In Canada, the divergent trend has been documented in another report; it lies at the regional level.<sup>3</sup> Since 2019, British Columbians, and especially Quebecers, have become more satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada, and Albertans much less so. In 2010, the difference between the level of satisfaction in Alberta and Quebec was plus 27 percentage points in favour of Alberta; in 2019 it was minus 12.

## Satisfaction with democracy

% 2010–2019



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

*Would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?*

<sup>2</sup> For a recent example, see: R.S. Foa, A. Klassen, M. Slade, A. Rand and R. Williams, *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020* (Cambridge: Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2020); <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/DemocracyReport2020.pdf>.

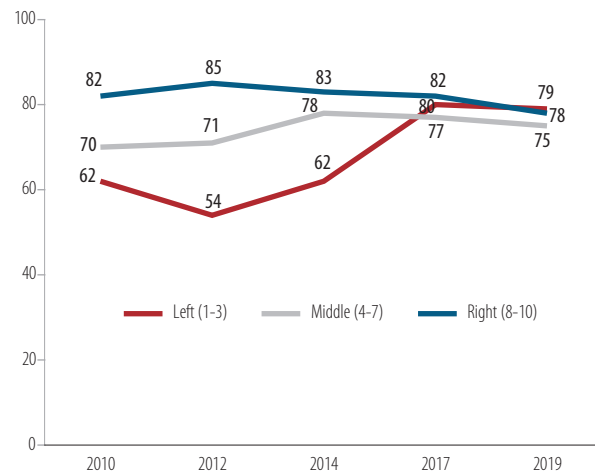
<sup>3</sup> Environics Institute for Survey Research, *Public Support for Canada's Political System: Regional Trends* (Toronto: Environics Institute for Survey Research, 2020); <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/public-support-for-canada-s-political-system-regional-trends>.

When it comes to political leanings, however, Canadians have actually become much less polarized over the past decade. Since 2010, there has been a very slight decline in satisfaction with democracy among those on the right, a very slight increase among those in the middle, and a dramatic increase among those on the left. Among those on the left, satisfaction grew from a low of 54 percent in 2012 to reach 79 percent in 2019 – a 25-point increase. The overall pattern is one of **convergence** (less polarization) – there is now no significant difference in the level of satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada between those on the left and those on the right.

The pattern in the U.S. could not be more different: there has been a **divergence** in levels of satisfaction. Since 2012 (the start of President Obama's second term), satisfaction with the way democracy works in the U.S. has dropped by 15 points among those on the left, and increased by 26 points among those on the right – two trends which counteract each other when subsumed under the national average. Two further details are worth noting. First, among Americans on the left, satisfaction with democracy began to decline prior to the 2016 election. Second, among those on the right, satisfaction increased following the 2016 election (between the 2014 and 2017 surveys), and has continued to increase (between the 2017 to 2019 surveys), despite the controversies associated with President Trump's conduct.

## Satisfied with democracy, by political leaning (left - right)

% 2010–2019 **Canada**

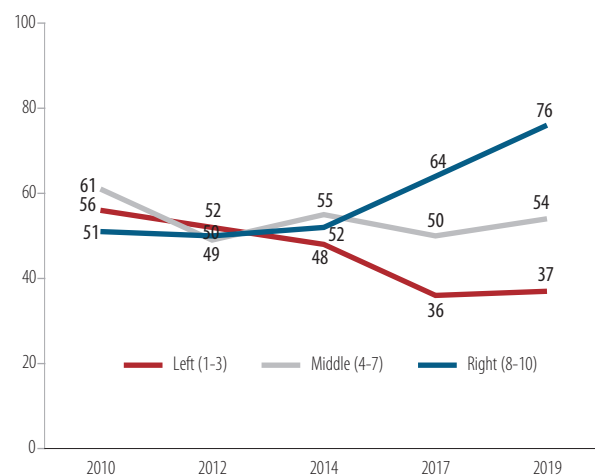


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

*Would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?*

## Satisfied with democracy, by political leaning (left - right)

% 2010–2019 **U.S.A.**



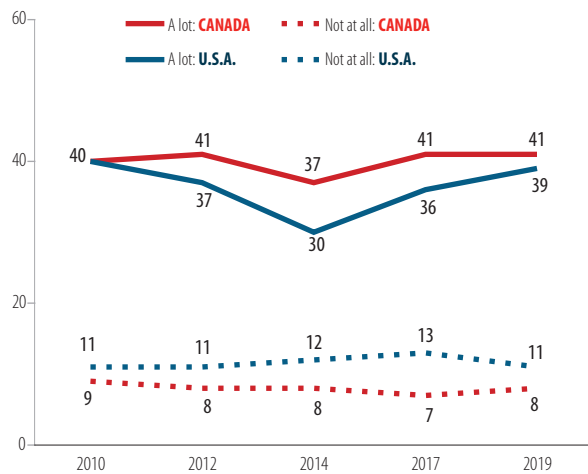
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

*Would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?*

Very similar patterns are evident in the case of questions related to support for the political system, respect for political institutions and pride in living under each country's political system.

- In both Canada and the U.S., the proportions expressing strong support for the political system have remained more or less stable (in each country, strong support dipped a little in the middle of the decade before rebounding). In Canada, however, the 20-point gap that separated those in the left and right of the political spectrum was erased after the change of government, as those on left became much more supportive (there was no change among those in the middle). In the U.S., the small difference between those on the left and right during the Obama period grew dramatically during the Trump period, as support for the political system among those on the right jumped by 29 points (moving from 33% in 2014 to 62% in 2019). In short, there was *convergence* in views in Canada, and a *divergence* in the U.S.

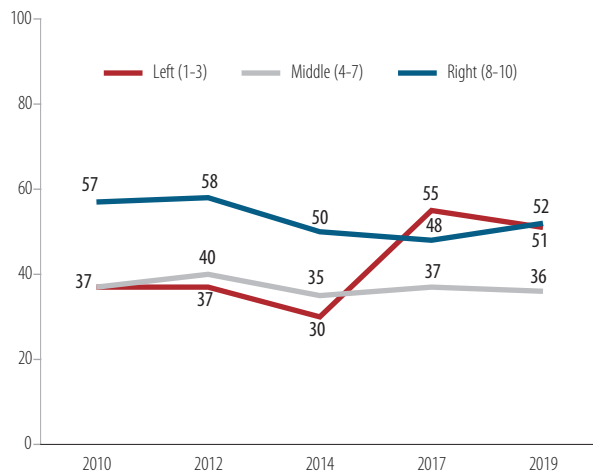
## Feel one should support the political system % 2010–2019



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of [country]?

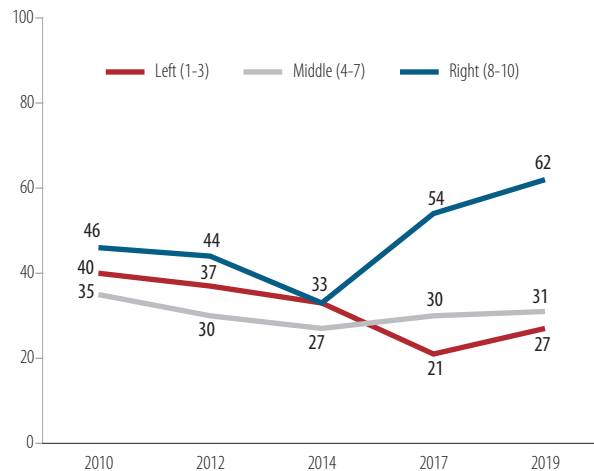
## Feel one should support the political system % 2010–2019 **Canada**



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of [country]?

## Feel one should support the political system % 2010–2019 **U.S.A.**



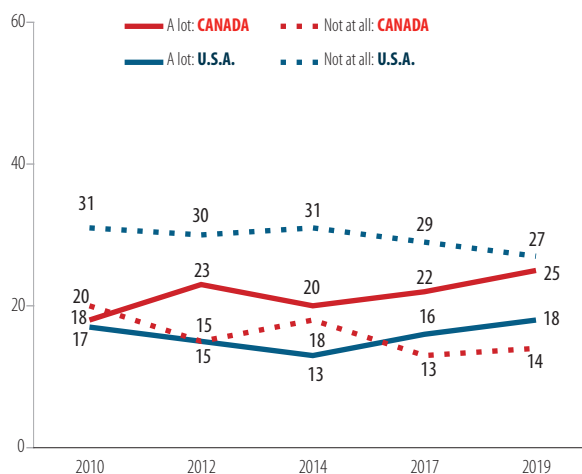
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of [country]?

- Relatively few Canadians or Americans express **a lot** of respect for their political institutions. In both countries, however, these proportions have gradually increased. In Canada, the proportion rose from 18 percent in 2010 to 25 percent in 2019. The increase occurred among those both on the left and right, but the increase among those on the left (19 points) following the 2015 federal election is more marked. In the U.S., the opposite is the case, with the post-election increase being more marked among those on the right (17 points). Again, however, these changes constitute a **convergence** in Canada, as views among those on the left and right have become more similar, and a slight **divergence** in the U.S.

## Respect for political institutions

% 2010–2019

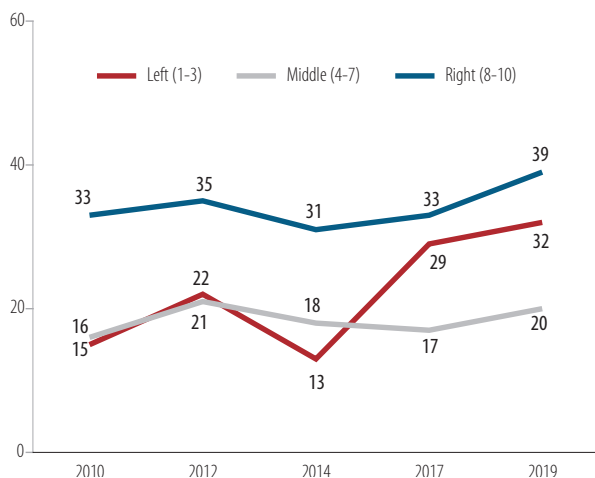


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you respect the political institutions of [country]?

## A lot of respect for political institutions

% 2010–2019 **Canada**

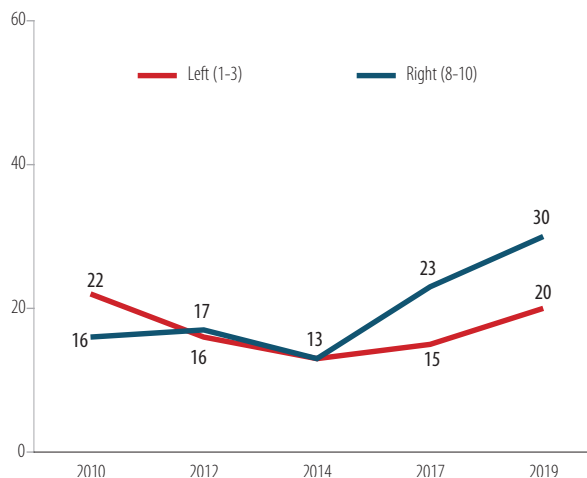


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you respect the political institutions of [country]?

## A lot of respect for political institutions

% 2010–2019 **U.S.A.**



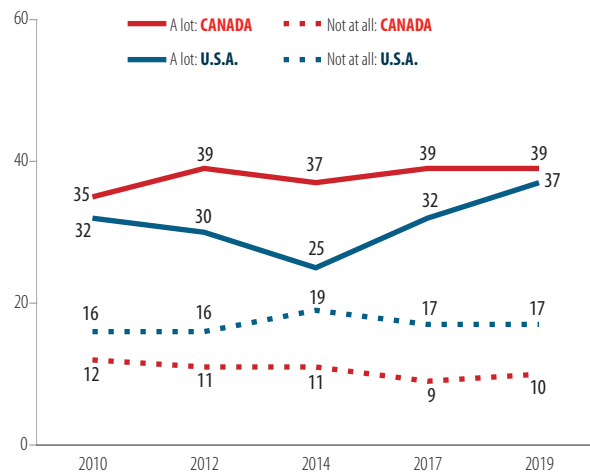
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you respect the political institutions of [country]?

- Given the controversies surrounding the first years of President Trump's tenure, some might be surprised to see that the proportion of Americans saying they **do not** respect their political institutions at all has been declining. They might be equally surprised to see that the proportion saying they feel a lot of **pride in living under the political system** of the U.S. has been increasing. The latter trend, however, is driven entirely by a doubling of the proportion of right-leaning Americans feeling a lot of pride in their political system, from 29 percent in 2014 to 62 percent in 2019. About two in five Canadians feel a lot of pride living under their political system, a proportion that has not changed much over the decade. But whereas right-leaning Canadians were previously much more likely to feel this way than their left-leaning counterparts (a 26-point difference in 2012), this is no longer the case. While the proportion feeling strong pride doubled among those on the right in the U.S., it doubled among those on the left in Canada. Again, the net result is the **closing of the gap** between the left and right in Canada, and the **widening of the gap** in the U.S.

## Feel proud living under the political system

% 2010–2019

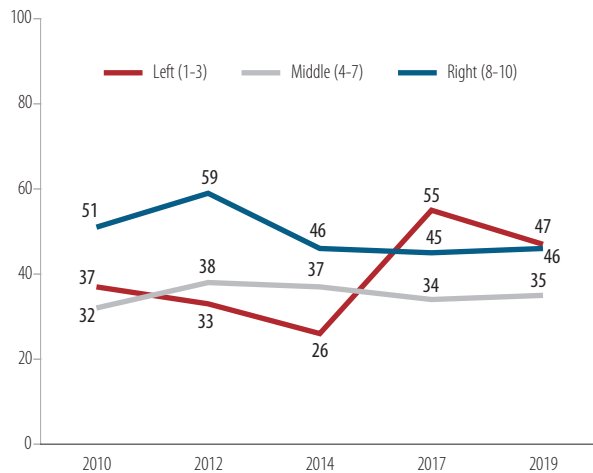


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of [country]?

## Feel proud living under the political systems

% 2010–2019 **Canada**

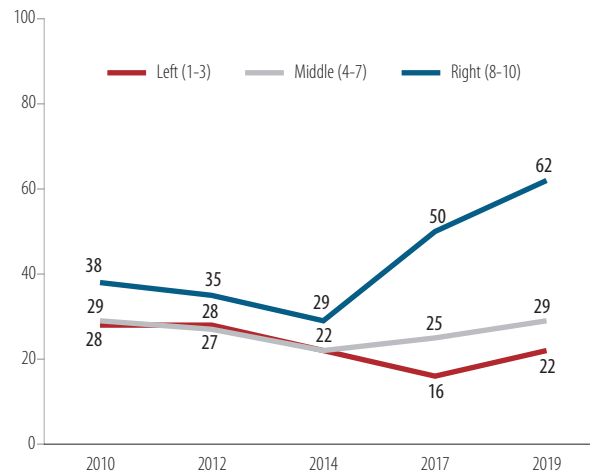


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of [country]?

## Feel proud living under the political system

% 2010–2019 **U.S.A.**



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of [country]?

## Trust in elections, parties and the media

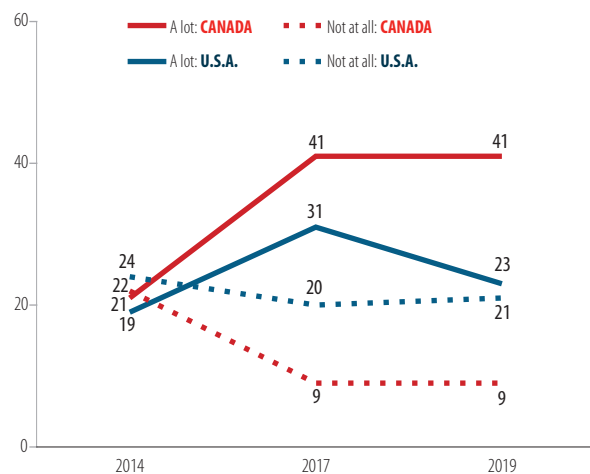
In Canada, levels of trust in elections, in political parties and in the mass media have risen among both those on the left and the right, even as the federal government shifted from Conservative to Liberal. In the U.S., those on the right were more likely to gain trust in elections after 2016, but less likely to gain trust in the media.

In both Canada and the U.S., the proportions of citizens that have a lot of trust in certain political institutions and actors, such as political parties, are relatively low – but not declining. In fact, in some cases, trust is gradually increasing. The questions pertaining to trust in elections, political parties and the mass media are particularly interesting, however, because, contrary to the patterns seen in the previous section, they tend to show some divergence in Canada between the views of those on the left and right, rather than convergence.

- The proportion of Canadians with a lot of **trust in their elections** doubled between 2014 and 2017 (notably, before and after the 2015 federal election), from 21 to 41 percent. The increase was much more dramatic among those on the left (up 44 points), though there was also an 18-point increase among those on the right (among those in the middle of the political spectrum, the increase was 16 points). This is one instance where the pattern in Canada is one of initial divergence between left and right than of convergence – though the divergence abated as the proportion on the left expressing a lot of trust in elections

### Trust in elections

% 2014–2019



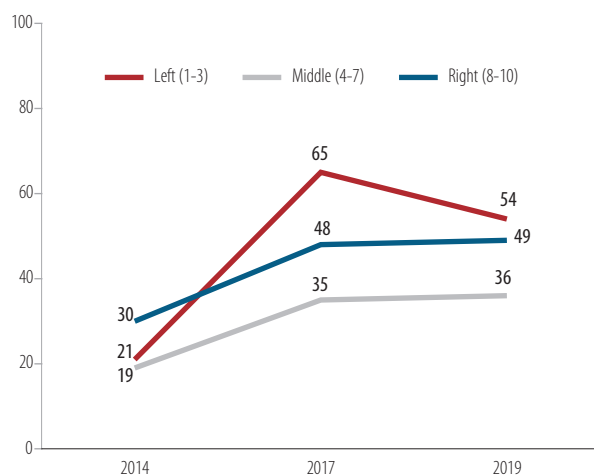
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you trust elections in this country?

dropped off after 2017. In the U.S., trust in elections also increased between 2014 and 2017 (on either side of 2016 election), though the level of trust fell back somewhat after 2017. Among Americans on the left, trust in elections has been gradually declining since 2014. Among those on the right, the level of trust in elections more than doubled following the election of Trump, before dropping back somewhat between 2017 and 2019 – possibly in the wake of the U.S. mid-term elections in 2018.

### A lot of trust in elections

% 2014–2019 **Canada**

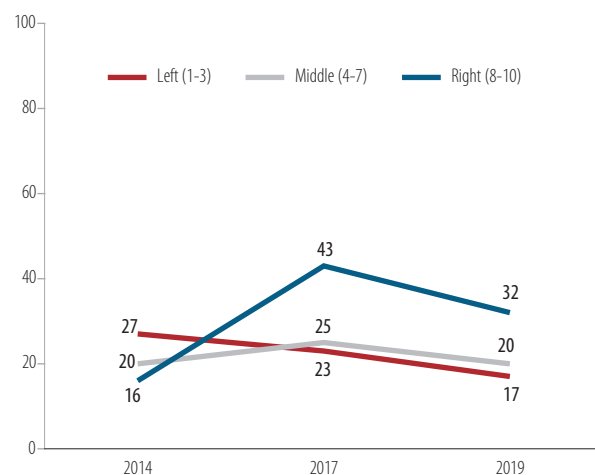


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you trust elections in this country?

### A lot of trust in elections

% 2014–2019 **U.S.A.**



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

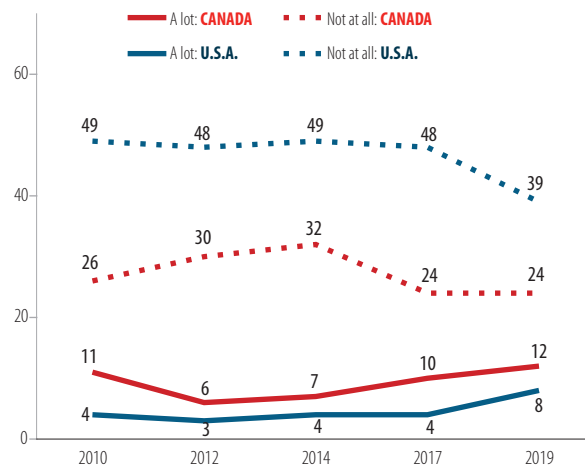
To what extent do you trust elections in this country?



- The proportions of both Canadians (12%) and Americans (8%) that have a lot of **trust in political parties** are very low. Nonetheless, in each country, this proportion has risen somewhat since 2012, while the proportion with very low trust in parties has fallen. Unusually in this case, however, in both countries, trust has risen among those on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. The changes have been very gradual in the U.S., but more pronounced in Canada. The change among left-leaning Canadians following the 2015 federal election is perhaps to be expected. More puzzling is the doubling of high trust in political parties (from 14% in 2014 to 28% in 2019) among right-leaning Canadians. It is possible that this trend reflects some developments at the provincial rather than the federal level, including the recent return to power of Conservative parties to government in Alberta and Ontario.

## Trust in political parties

% 2010–2019

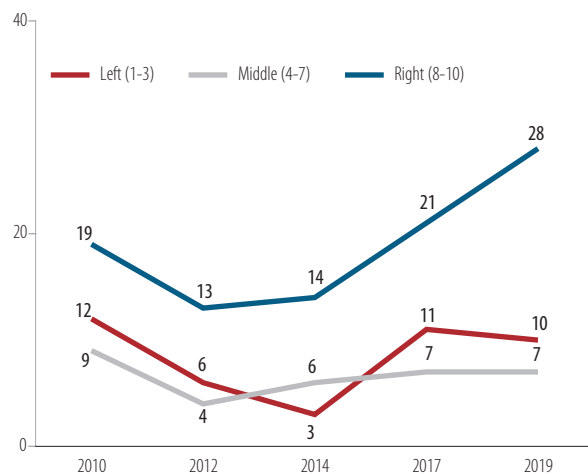


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you trust political parties in this country?

## A lot of trust in political parties

% 2010–2019 **Canada**

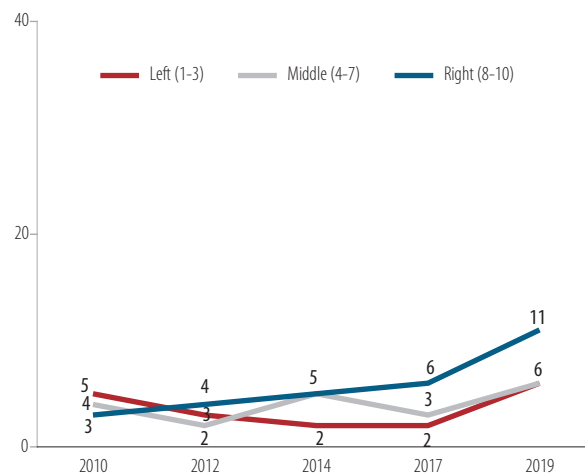


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you trust political parties in this country?

## A lot of trust in political parties

% 2010–2019 **U.S.A.**



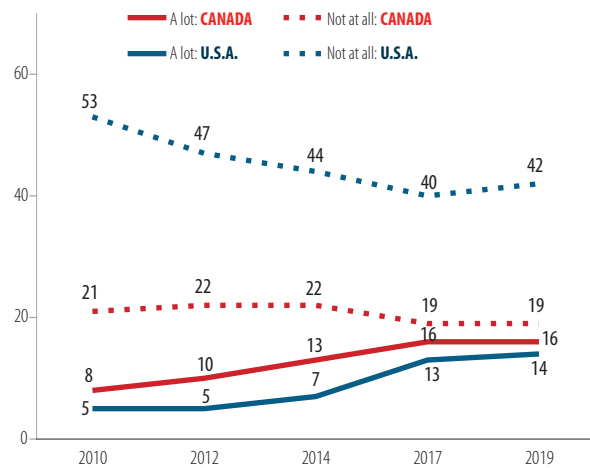
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you trust political parties in this country?

- Overall, the situation regarding **trust in the mass media** is similar to that of trust in political parties: levels of high trust are very low in both countries, but gradually increasing. In the U.S., the increase is much more pronounced among those on the left: the proportion of left-leaning Americans with a lot of trust in the mass media tripled since the election of Donald Trump, from seven percent in 2010 to 23 percent in 2019. This possibly reflects growing support for the media among this constituency, in the wake of many outlets' adversarial relationship with the president during this period. In Canada, trust in the mass media initially rose among both those on the left and the right, more or less in tandem, until the most recent survey: in 2019, trust fell back slightly among those in the left, while continuing to rise among those on the right. This could reflect the more critical news coverage the Liberal government received in the months leading up to the 2019 survey, particularly as it related to its handling of the prosecution of a corruption case against a leading Canadian civil engineering firm.

## Trust in mass media

% 2010–2019

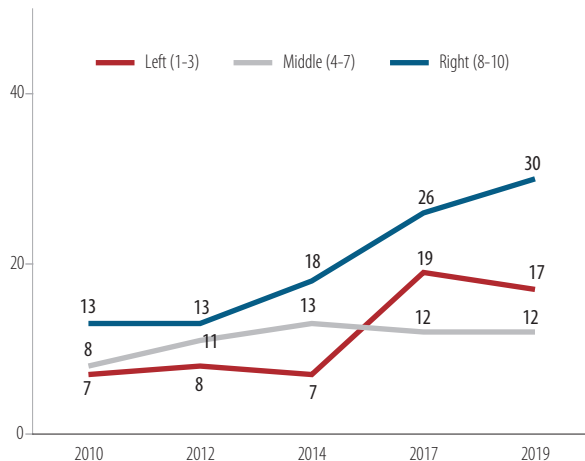


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you trust the mass media?

## A lot of trust in mass media

% 2010–2019 **Canada**

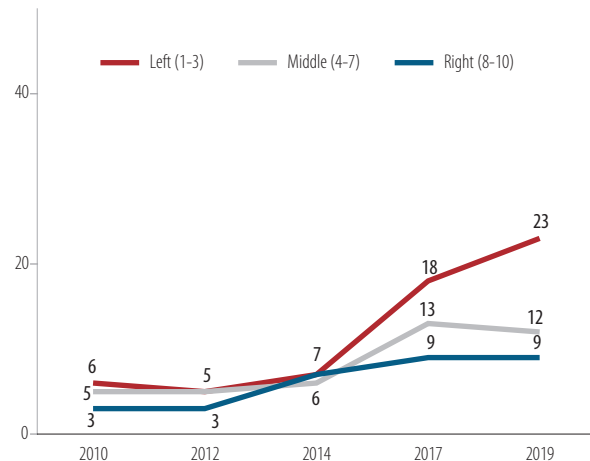


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you trust the mass media?

## A lot of trust in mass media

% 2010–2019 **U.S.A.**



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you trust the mass media?

## Trust in the legislature and the executive

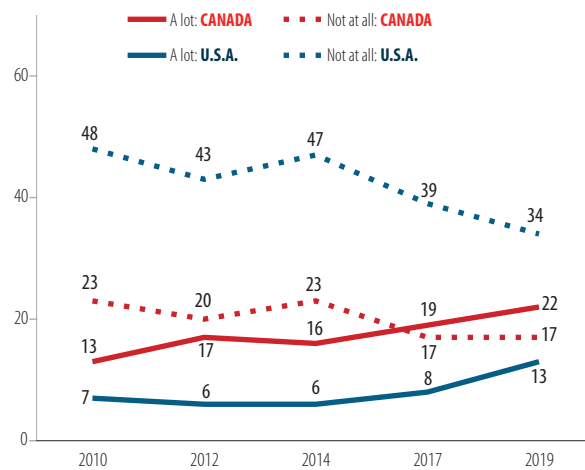
In both Canada and the U.S., the proportions of citizens that have a lot of trust in the legislature are increasing very gradually, especially among those on the left. In the case of trust in the executive, there has been a convergence in Canada, as there is now no significant difference between the proportion on the left and right that have a lot of trust in the prime minister. The pattern in the U.S. – in terms of trust in the president – could neither be more different nor more illustrative of that country's deep political polarization.

In both Canada and the U.S., the proportions of citizens that have a lot of **trust in the legislature (Parliament or Congress)** are relatively low. Levels of trust, however, are not declining, but increasing very gradually. In both countries, the recent increase in trust is more prominent among those on the left – which speaks to the difference in the two systems of government (parliamentary and presidential).

- In Canada, the proportion of those on the left that have a lot of trust in Parliament increased significantly before and after the 2015 election which returned the Liberal party to power (from 6% in 2014 to 29% in 2017). As with several of the other measures noted earlier, this change occurred without being matched by an erosion of trust among those on the right. Again, the net result is one of **convergence** rather than divergence or polarization.

## Trust in the legislature (Parliament/Congress)

% 2010–2019

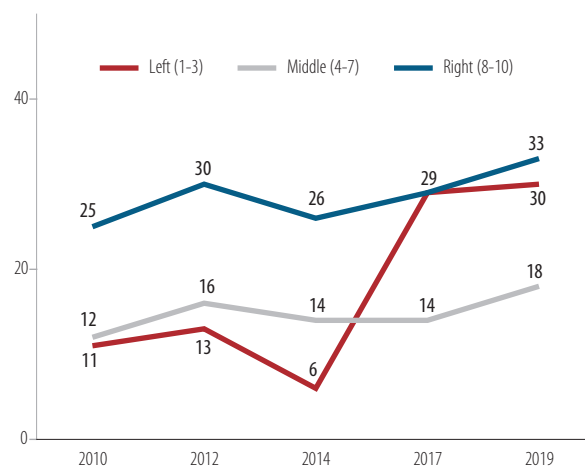


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you trust the Parliament / U.S. Congress?

## A lot of trust in Parliament

% 2010–2019 **Canada**



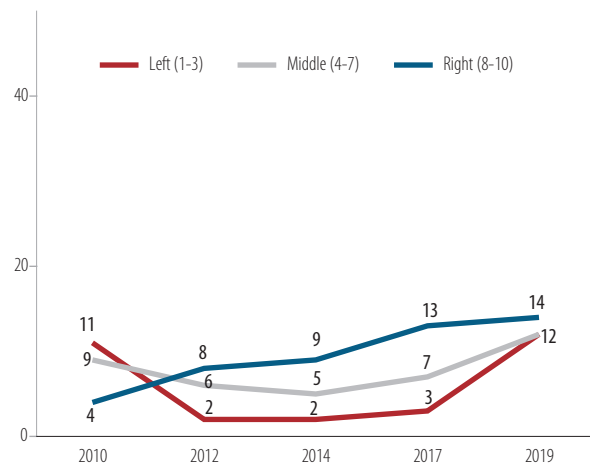
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you trust the Parliament / U.S. Congress?

- In the United States, there has been a gradual increase in trust in Congress among those on the right, and a sharper increase more recently among those on the left. This speaks to both the fact that the party in power in the White House does not necessarily align with those in either the House of Representatives or the Senate; and the effect of the last mid-term elections, which enabled the Democrats to regain control of the House of Representatives. Curiously, the net result of the recent changes in the U.S. is also one of convergence – in this case, those on the left and the right have similar levels of (relatively low) trust in Congress, though it is possible that those on the left are focusing on the House, while those on the right are focusing on the Senate.

## A lot of trust in Congress

% 2010–2019 **U.S.A.**



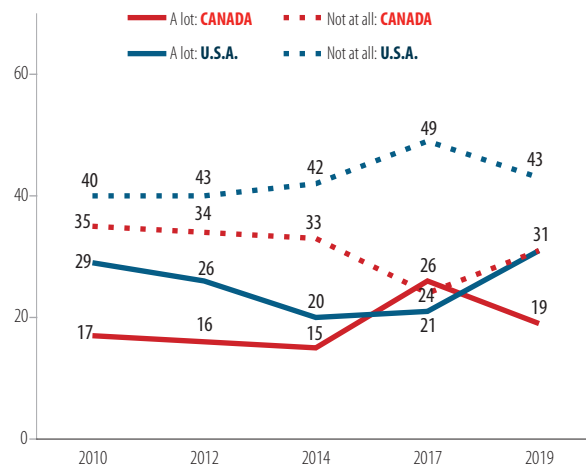
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

*To what extent do you trust the Parliament / U.S. Congress?*

In the case of the head of the executive – in the form of the prime minister or the president – the patterns are somewhat different. In terms of the overall trend, the two countries offer mirror images: in Canada, the proportion with **a lot of trust in the prime minister** rose in mid-decade and then fell; whereas in the U.S., the proportion with **a lot of trust in the president** fell in mid-decade and then rose. These different trends were driven by what is now a familiar pattern of shifts on the left and right in each of the two countries.

- In Canada, the proportion of those on the left with a lot of trust in the prime minister jumped from five percent at the end of Stephen Harper's period in power to 45 percent at the start of Justin Trudeau's tenure. Subsequently, the proportion fell back somewhat, landing at 30 percent in 2019. The proportion of those on the right with a lot of trust in the prime minister has declined; but, interestingly, the start of this decline predates the change of government in 2015. Most important, right-leaning Canadians are currently much more likely to have a lot of trust in the prime minister than did left-leaning Canadians under the previous government. The net result, as is the case on many of the measures reviewed earlier, is *convergence*: there is now no significant difference between the proportions of left-leaning and right-leaning Canadians that have a lot of trust in the prime minister.

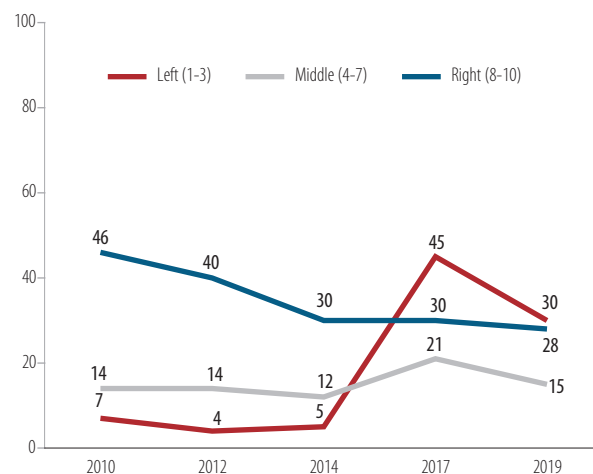
## Trust in the executive (President/Prime Minister) % 2010–2019



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you trust the Prime Minister / the President?

## Trust in the Prime Minister % 2010–2019 Canada

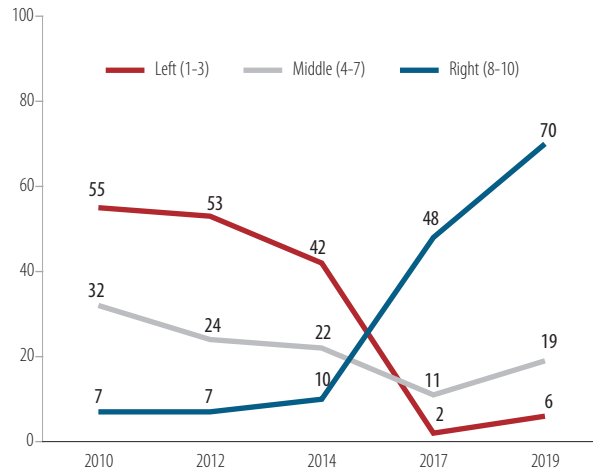


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent do you trust the Prime Minister / the President?

- The pattern in the U.S. could neither be more different nor more illustrative of that country's deep political polarization. The proportion of those on the left with a lot of trust in the president crashed from 55 percent during President Obama's first term, to only two percent right after the election of President Trump. Conversely, the proportion of those on the right with a lot of trust in the president ballooned from fewer than 10 percent during President Obama's first term, to 70 percent in 2019, under President Trump. The change of government in the U.S. produces a reversal of views about the president among left- and right-leaning Americans, much like the reversal of magnetic polarity causes the needle on a compass to spin around to point in the opposite direction. On this question, Americans were polarized before the 2016 election (with a 32 percentage-point gap in 2014 between the proportion on each side with a lot of trust in the president), and even more polarized afterwards (with a striking 64-point gap in 2019).

### Trust in the President % 2010–2019 U.S.A.



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

*To what extent do you trust the Prime Minister / the President?*

## National pride

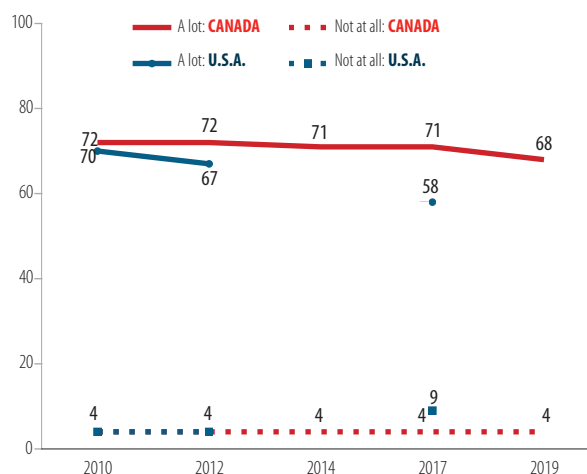
In Canada, majorities on both the left and the right express a lot of pride in being Canadian, but the level dipped among those on the right and rose among those on the left after the 2015 federal election. Patriotism, however, is a much more politicized issue the U.S.; and an attribute that is more strongly associated with only one side of the political spectrum – the right.

Americans are renowned for their patriotism. But over the decade, the proportion of Americans that say they have a lot of **pride in being an American** has dropped significantly, from 70 percent in 2010 to 58 percent in 2017 (this question is not asked in every wave of the AmericasBarometer survey in the U.S.). While the proportion in Canada that have a lot of **pride in being a Canadian** has dipped slightly in recent years – especially in Western Canada<sup>4</sup> – it is now considerably higher than the proportion in the U.S. that feel this way about being an American.

The respective trends among those on the left and right also play out very differently in the two countries. In Canada, the pattern is perhaps as expected: majorities on both the left and right express a lot of pride in being Canadian, but the level dipped among those on the right and rose among those on the left after the 2015 federal election led to a change of government. Interestingly, however, the level of pride among those on the right began to drop prior to 2015 – in fact, it dropped more significantly under the Harper government than under the Trudeau government. Among those on the left, the proportion expressing a lot of pride in being Canadian rose significantly after the 2015 election, but subsequently ebbed back down as initial enthusiasm with the new Liberal government waned. Once again, the net result of these different swings is one of **convergence**: the left and right are now less divided on this question than they were at the start of the decade.

## National pride

% 2010–2019

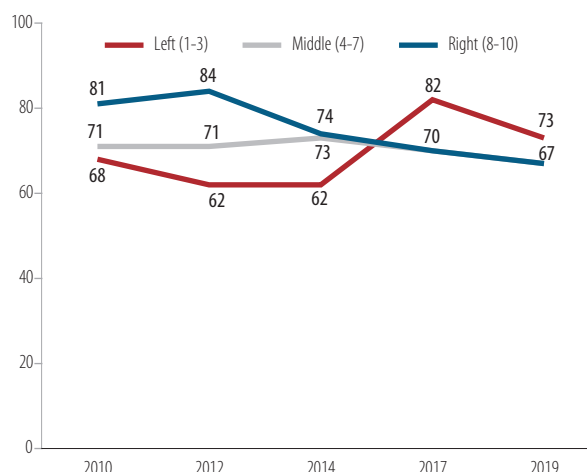


Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian / an American?

## National pride

% 2010–2019 **Canada**



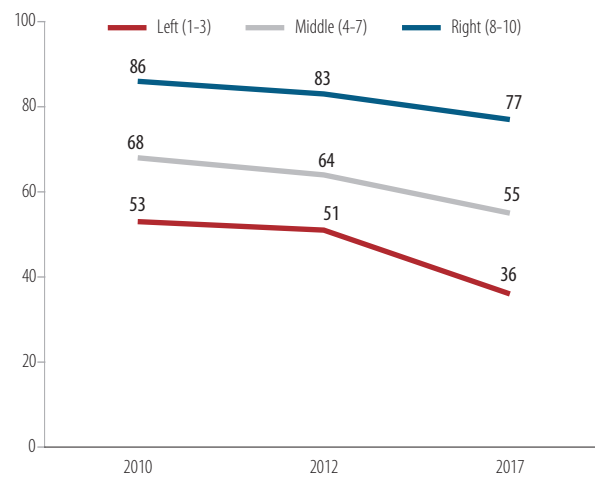
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian / an American?

<sup>4</sup> Environics Institute, *Public Support for Canada's Political System: Regional Trends*; <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/public-support-for-canada-s-political-system-regional-trends>.

The patterns in the U.S. could not be more different. First and foremost, it is striking that those on the right are significantly more likely to express a lot of pride in being American than are those on the left – something which held true in the Obama years, as well as during the Trump years. This in itself suggests that patriotism is a much more politicized issue the U.S.; and an attribute that is more strongly associated with the right side of the political spectrum. Second, the proportion that feel a lot of pride in being an American has declined among both those on the left and the right over the course of the past decade, but the drop has been more pronounced among those on the left – especially following the 2016 election. The net result is that, in the U.S., the gap between those on the left and right on this question has widened.

## National pride % 2010–2017 U.S.A.



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

*To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian / an American?*



## Comparing Canada and the United States

This report represents the latest in a series of Environics Institute analyses of the similarities and differences between social and political values in Canada and the United States.

Summaries of previous research are available on the **Insights** page of the Environics Institute website, and include:

### **The authoritarian reflex: Will it manifest in Canada?**

*by Michael Adams, Ron Inglehart and David Jamieson*  
(June 15, 2019)

### **Does father know best?**

**Canadian views – thankfully – continue to evolve**  
*by Michael Adams* (October 8, 2018)

### **Sanctuary Cities: Why it's harder for Trumpism to take root in Canadian cities**

*by Michael Adams and Doug Norris* (January 20, 2018)

### **Trump, Trudeau and patriarchy**

*by Michael Adams* (May 27, 2017)

More complete presentations of this research are provided in Michael Adams' **books** on the subject, notably *Could It Happen Here? Canada in The Age of Trump and Brexit*, and *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada, and the Myth of Converging Values*.

# Discussion

How polarized are attitudes to our democratic system, and is the extent of polarization increasing? On this issue, Canada and the United States cannot be lumped together.

First, the two main political parties in the U.S., the Democrats and the Republicans, largely appeal to separate ideological constituencies – respectively, those on the left and the right. In contrast, each of the four largest national political parties in Canada appeals mainly to voters who place themselves in the political centre. While politicians in Canada may appear poles apart when they clash in Parliament or on the media, the extent of this division is not mirrored among the broader public.

More importantly, the two countries are vastly different when it comes to questions related to support for the political system or trust in political actors. The U.S. is highly polarized, with support among those on the left and right generally rising or falling depending on which party is in power. Notably, this polarization was not ushered in with the election of Donald Trump – it was evident during the Obama presidency as well. However, polarization has intensified under Trump, as measures such as satisfaction with democracy, support for or pride in the political system, and especially trust in the president have declined sharply among left-leaning Americans, while jumping no less sharply among those on the right.

In Canada, left-right polarization has generally declined over the past decade; for instance, gaps between the left and the right in satisfaction with democracy, support for or pride in the political system, and respect for political institutions were wider during the years in which the Conservatives were in power than they have been since the Liberals returned to power in 2015. This is because views improved significantly among those on the left, without deteriorating to the same degree among those on the right. This is especially evident on the question of trust in the prime minister. In 2010, those on the right were 39 percentage points more likely than those on the left to have a lot of trust in the prime minister; by 2019, the gap separating those on the left and those on the right had fallen to two points.

This does not mean that Canada is devoid of political divisions. There are, for instance, significant regional differences in support for the way democracy in Canada is working, not to mention cleavages on a wide range of issues among groups with different backgrounds in terms of age, income and education. What this report shows, however, is that it is important to approach Canada as its own case, and not as one of any number of Western democracies that are straining under the influence of populism and the rise of a more polarized political discourse. For Canadians, political developments south of the border are both shocking and mesmerizing. But they are not a reflection of trends at home.



