



AmericasBarometer
Canadian Survey

2023 SERIES

03

Support for Democracy in Canada

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Support for democracy in Canada:

A Report from the 2023 AmericasBarometer Survey in Canada

A: Introduction

The topic of public support for democracy as a form of government traditionally has been the focus of attention in countries in the process of transitioning to democracy, such as those in Eastern Europe or Central and South America. More recently, however, the question has arisen of whether this support might be weakening in some established democracies. This stems most notably from the shock of the Trump presidency in the United States, and particularly by the refusal of many of Donald Trump's supporters to accept his defeat in the 2020 election, culminating in the storming of the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021. But concerns have also arisen in the wake of electoral gains by extremist political parties in several European countries; of persistent worries that younger generations of citizens are losing confidence in democratic institutions; and of revelations of efforts by foreign governments to interfere in Western democratic politics. Many also wonder if the advent of social media – particularly its polarizing tenor and its susceptibility to subterfuge – is also having a destabilizing effect on public support for the norms of democratic politics.

In this context, this report focuses on the extent of public support for democracy in Canada, and examines whether this support has been weakening over time. The analysis is based on the results of the Canadian portion of the AmericasBarometer surveys, which track opinions on a consistent set of questions about democracy and its alternatives.

Overall, these surveys do show that Canadians' satisfaction with the way democracy works in their country, and their preference for democracy as a system of government, have both declined since the middle of the last decade. This decline coincides with a worsening outlook on the country's economy, particularly among supporters of the official opposition, and in regions of the country outside of Quebec. It may therefore be a function of the regular ups and downs of the economic cycle. The key question that remains is whether satisfaction with democracy will rebound once there is an improvement in the economic environment.

Key findings:

- Most Canadians are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country, but in recent years the level of satisfaction has been declining. Satisfaction is currently lower than at any time since this current series of surveys began in 2010.
- Over the past six years, the proportion of Canadians who strongly agree that democracy is better than any other form of government has gradually declined.
- Most Canadians are satisfied with the way their political system works. The level of satisfaction rose somewhat in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The overall decline in satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada, and in strong agreement that democracy is better than any other form of government, cannot be explained by a change in the views of younger adults.
- Some of the overall decline in support for democracy is due to the very recent emergence of a gender gap, with women currently expressing less support.
- At the beginning of the 2010s, residents of the Prairie provinces were the most likely to be satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada, and Quebecers were the least satisfied – but these relative positions have since reversed.
- Support for democracy in Canada differs significantly between those who think the economy is doing well and those who think it is doing badly. After the 2015 federal election, it has also varied among the supporters of the different federal political parties.
- The proportion of Conservative supporters who give the economy a poor rating has doubled in just the past four years. This growing economic pessimism among Conservative Party supporters has coincided with their declining satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada.
- A little over one in two say there should be at least major changes to the political system in Canada. Support for major changes varies based on factors such as views on the economy, political partisanship and satisfaction with democracy.

About this survey

These results are from the Canadian portion of the 2023 AmericasBarometer, a biennial 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 2023 survey covers 25 countries). The project is led by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University.

The 2023 AmericasBarometer in Canada survey was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with LAPOP at Vanderbilt University. It was conducted online with a representative sample of 2,500 Canadians (aged 18 and over) between July 20 and August 4, 2023.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Environics Institute would like to thank Justin Savoie for his contribution to this report, particularly in conducting additional analysis to test the strength of the relationships between satisfaction with democracy and other factors, including views on the economy and political partisanship.

B: Support for democracy: an overview

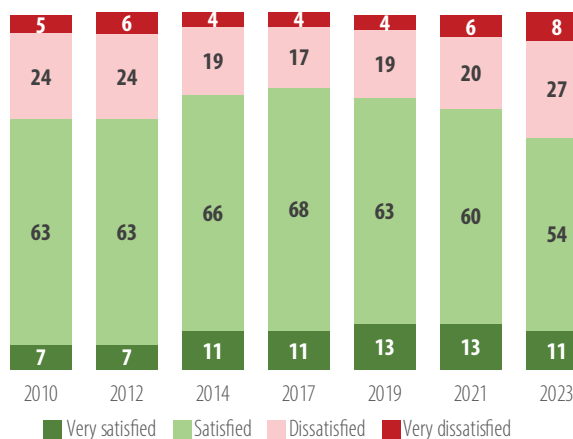
There has been a noticeable decline in satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada, and in strong agreement that democracy is better than any other form of government.

SATISFACTION WITH THE WAY DEMOCRACY WORKS IN CANADA

Most Canadians are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country, but in recent years the level of satisfaction has been declining.

- In 2023, two in three (65%) say they are very satisfied or satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada.
- The overall level of satisfaction increased in the middle part of the last decade, but has declined since then, and is currently lower than at any time since this current series of surveys began in 2010.¹ The current level of satisfaction is 14 percentage points lower than the peak of 79 percent reached in 2017; satisfaction also fell by eight points in the most recent period (between 2021 and 2023). However, satisfaction is only five points lower today than it was in 2012.
- Relatively few Canadians hold strong opinions on either side of the question. Only 11 percent are very satisfied with the way democracy works in their country, and only eight percent are very dissatisfied.

Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada 2010–2023



Q.PN4

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

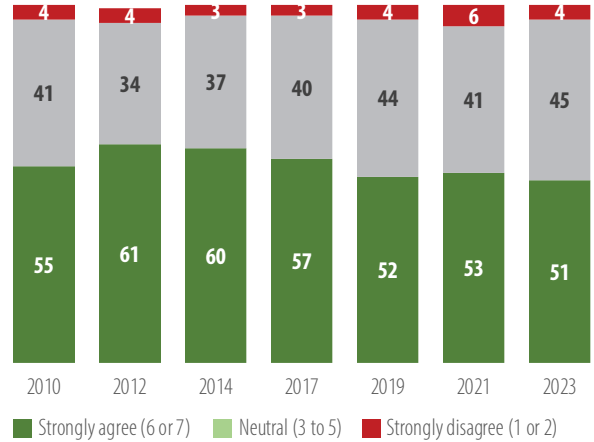
¹ AmericasBarometer surveys were conducted in Canada prior to 2010, but using a different survey method (telephone). Since 2010, the surveys have been conducted online.

IS DEMOCRACY BETTER THAN ANY OTHER FORM OF GOVERNMENT?

Over the past six years, the proportion of Canadians who strongly agree that democracy is better than any other form of government has gradually declined.

- In 2023, one in two (51%) strongly agree that “democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.” This proportion is 10 percentage points lower than that found in 2012.
- While the proportion that strongly *agrees* has edged downward, the proportion that strongly *disagrees* is unchanged, and very low. In 2023, only four percent of Canadians strongly disagree with the statement.
- As the proportion that strongly agrees has declined, the proportion taking a more neutral position (answering in the middle range of the agree-disagree scale) has increased, from 34 percent in 2012 to 45 percent in 2023.

Agree or disagree: Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government
2010–2023



Q.ING4

Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?

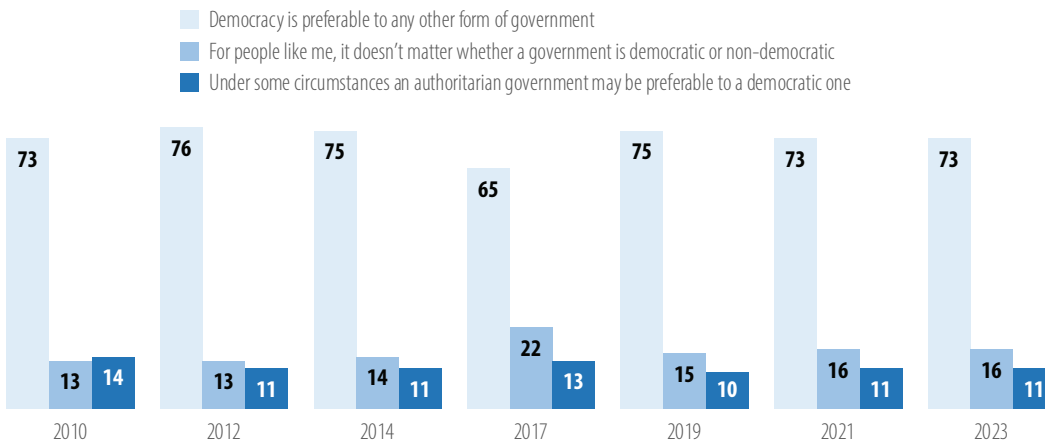
DEMOCRACY IN COMPARISON WITH OTHER SYSTEMS

The decline in strong agreement that democracy is better than other forms of government does not reoccur when the question is asked in a format that explicitly mentions other alternatives.

- When asked to choose among three statements about democracy, more than seven in ten Canadians select the most positive one. In 2023, 73 percent agree most with the notion that “democracy is preferable to any other form of government.” This level of support has stayed more or less unchanged since 2010 (though there was a dip in 2017).

- Only 16 percent instead agree most that “for people like me, it doesn’t matter whether a government is democratic or non-democratic.”
- Only 11 percent agree most that “under some circumstances an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one.” Again, the proportion that believes that an authoritarian government might sometimes be preferable has not changed significantly since 2010.

Which of the following statements do you agree with the most:
2010 – 2023



Q.DEM2

Which of the following statements do you agree with the most?

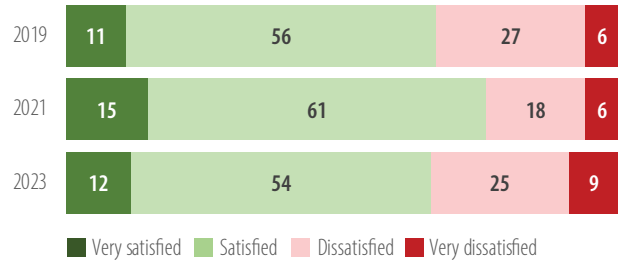
SATISFACTION WITH THE WAY THE POLITICAL SYSTEM WORKS IN CANADA

Most Canadians are satisfied with the way their political system works. The level of satisfaction rose somewhat in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Two in three Canadians (66%) are either very satisfied or satisfied with the way the political system works in their country; one in three (34%) are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.
- The current level of satisfaction is similar to that recorded in 2019. However, satisfaction increased slightly in 2021, to 76 percent, before declining again. The 2021 survey took place in the summer of that year, at a time when many people were receiving their first or second dose of the vaccine against COVID-19, but before the peak of the so-called Delta wave of the disease.

Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way the political system works in Canada?

2019–2023



Q.ECUPNS_1

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

SUMMARY OF TRENDS

Responses to the four questions about Canada’s democracy and political system are not all trending in the same direction. There is no change since 2010 in support for democracy when it is compared directly to other options (including an authoritarian government). Over a shorter period of time, satisfaction with the political system in Canada is also stable. But there is a more worrying decline in satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada, and in strong agreement that democracy is better than any other form of government.

The following section will explore whether this decline in support for democracy is more pronounced among some population groups than others.

C: Changes in support for democracy among different population groups

Part of the change in support for democracy over time in Canada might be explained by a shift toward a more negative assessment of the country's economic situation. People who think the economy is doing badly are less likely to be satisfied with democracy, and the proportion with this negative assessment of the economy is growing.

AGE

Satisfaction with the way either democracy or the political system work in Canada does not vary much by age, with the exception that older Canadians (age 60 and older) tend to be slightly more satisfied. Younger adults (age 18 to 29) are *not* significantly less satisfied than their middle-aged counterparts.

The pattern is a little different when it comes to comparing democracy to other systems. Strong agreement that democracy is better than any other form of government increases sharply with age, from a low of 32 percent among those age 18 to 29, to a high of 66 percent among those age

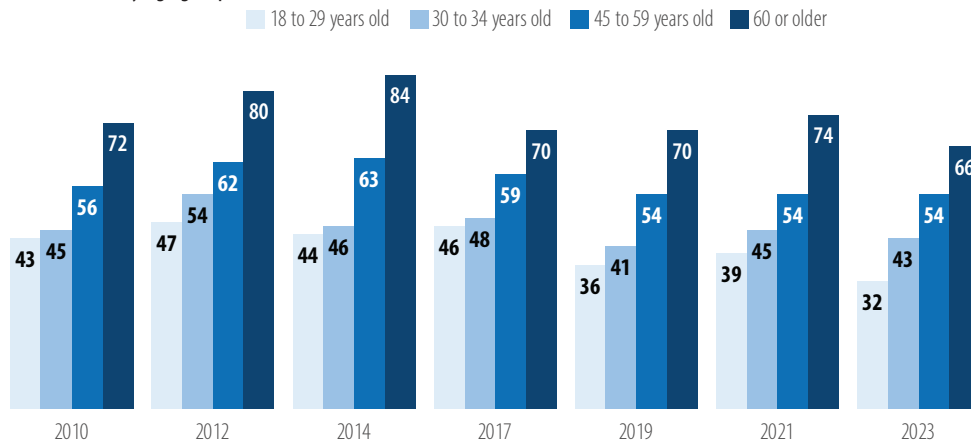
60 and older. There is also a more modest age difference on the question directly comparing democracy to other systems: a total of 38 percent of those age 18 to 29 either say that it doesn't matter to them whether their government is democratic or not, or that an authoritarian government might be preferable under some circumstances, compared to 16 percent among those age 60 and older.

But the age differences on these two questions are not new. Nor is the gap in opinions between younger and older Canadians clearly widening. Moreover, Canadians in all age groups recently have become somewhat less satisfied with democracy.

These findings suggest that the overall decline in satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada, and in strong agreement that democracy is better than any other form of government, cannot be explained by a change in the views of younger adults.

Strongly agree (6 or 7): Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government

2010–2023 by age group



Q.ING4

Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? (Using a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 7 means "strongly agree.")

GENDER

Women currently appear somewhat less satisfied with or supportive of democracy in Canada, compared to men. Moreover, this gender gap is new.

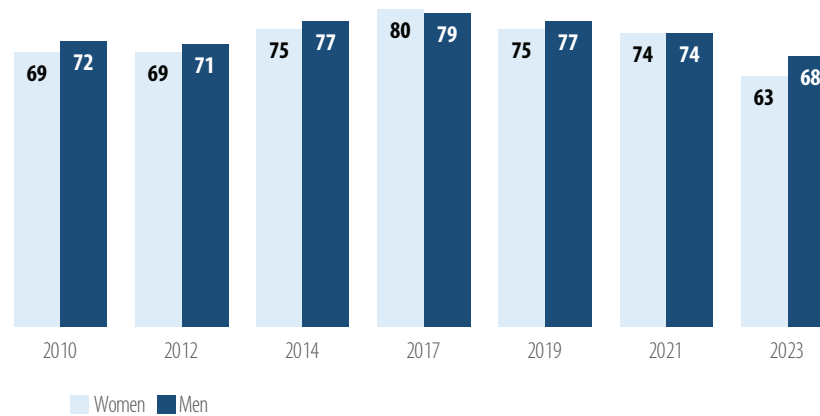
In terms of satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada, for instance, the decline since 2017 has been greater among women (a drop of 17 percentage points) than among men (down 11 points), but most of this is due to a greater decline among women in the most recent period, between 2021 and 2023. Similarly, strong agreement that democracy

is better than other forms of government has declined by 15 points among women since 2012, compared to a five-point drop among men – with most of this greater change for women again occurring more recently, between 2021 and 2023.

It appears, then, that some of the overall decline in support for democracy is due to the very recent emergence of a gender gap, with women currently expressing less support. As this gender gap is new, it is not clear whether it will last, or whether it is a temporary feature of opinions of 2023.

Satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada

2010–2023 Very satisfied/satisfied, by gender



Q.PN4

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

REGION

Satisfaction with both the way democracy works in Canada, and with the country’s political system, varies by region. In both cases, satisfaction is highest in the three largest provinces – Quebec, Ontario and BC – and lowest in the Atlantic and Prairie provinces.

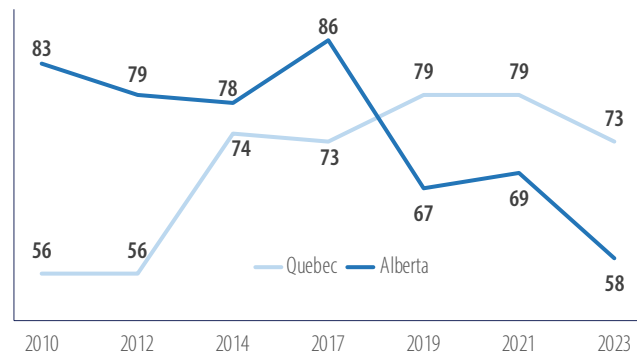
For instance, there is currently a 15 percent-point difference between Quebecers (73%) and Albertans (58%) with the level of satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada, and a 13-point difference in the level of satisfaction with the political system in Canada (72%, compared to 59%).

This pattern, however, has changed significantly over time.² At the beginning of the 2010s, residents of the Prairie provinces were the most likely to be satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada, and Quebecers were the least satisfied; the relative positions have since reversed. In the case of Alberta specifically, for instance, satisfaction dropped by 25 percentage points between 2010 and 2023 (from 83% to 58%); conversely, in Quebec, satisfaction rose by 17 points (from 56% to 73%).

The pattern in Atlantic Canada, meanwhile, is distinct: the level of satisfaction first rose significantly from 2010 to 2017 before falling sharply from 2017 to 2023.

In the case of opinions about whether democracy is better than other forms of government, however, the pattern is more consistent across regions. There is currently little

Satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada
2010–2023 Very satisfied/satisfied, Quebec and Alberta



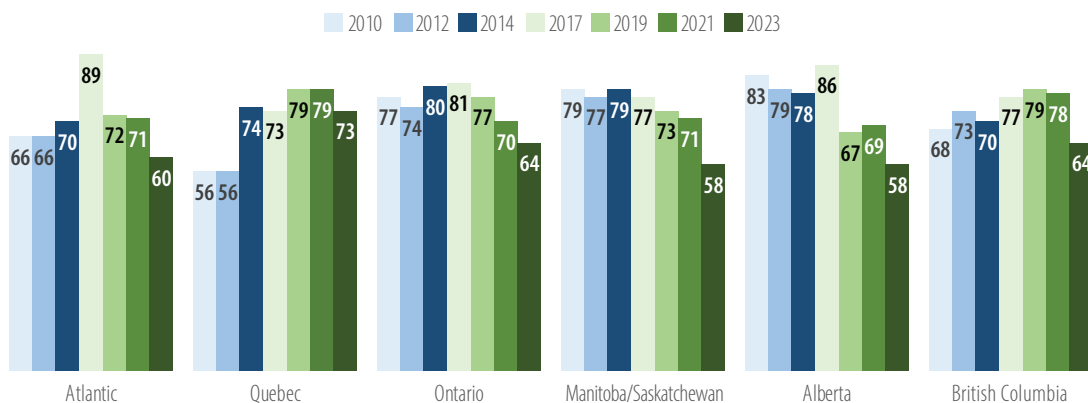
Q.PN4

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

regional difference in the extent of strong agreement expressed. And, in each part of the country, strong agreement was highest in the middle of the previous decade (between 2012 and 2017), but has declined since then.

There is also less regional difference in the proportions selecting the most positive statement about democracy (that “democracy is preferable to any other form of government”) when asked to select from the three different statements – with the partial exception that the proportion selecting this statement is currently somewhat lower in Atlantic Canada.

Satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada
2010–2023 Very satisfied/satisfied, by region



Q.PN4

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

² Since the question about satisfaction with the political system was not asked prior to 2019, we cannot use this question to discuss changes over the longer period beginning in 2010.

ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

Support for democracy in Canada differs significantly between those who think the economy doing well, and those who think it is doing badly.

For instance, in 2023:

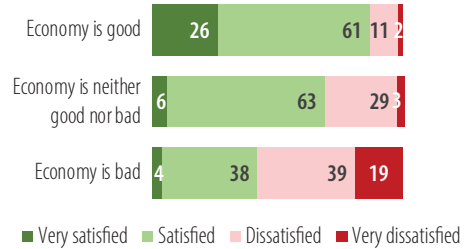
- 87% of those who describe the country’s economic situation as very good or good are satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada, compared with only 42% of those who describe the economy as bad or very bad;
- 88% of those who describe the country’s economic situation as very good or good are satisfied with the way the political system works in Canada, compared with only 42% of those who describe the economy as bad or very bad.

This means that, among those who describe the country’s economic situation as bad or very bad, a majority (58%) are dissatisfied with both the way democracy works and the way the political system works.

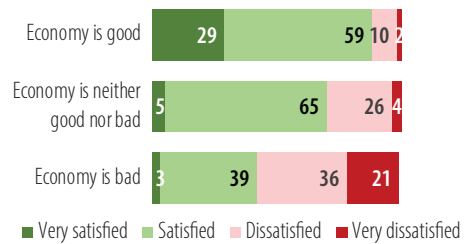
These differences in views between those who have a positive or negative economic outlook are not new. What is new, however, is that the proportion with a positive economic outlook has decreased since 2019 (a drop of 15 percentage points), while the proportion with a negative outlook has grown (up 18 points). This means that part of the change in support for democracy over time in Canada might be explained by this shift in the assessment of the country’s economic situation. People who think the economy is doing badly are less likely to be satisfied with democracy, and the proportion with this negative assessment of the economy is growing.

Satisfaction with the way democracy and the political system work in Canada 2023, by opinions about the country’s economic situation

SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY



SATISFACTION WITH THE POLITICAL SYSTEM



Q.PN4

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

Q.ECUPN5_1

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

POLITICAL PARTISANSHIP

Support for democracy in Canada also varies among the supporters of the different federal political parties. But this variation is somewhat new – emerging and widening after 2014 (that is, after the 2015 election and the change in federal government from Conservative to Liberal).³

In 2014, there was only a small gap between Conservative and Liberal party supporters in the level of satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada: Conservative Party supporters (89%) were seven percentage points more likely to express satisfaction than Liberal Party supporters (82%). By 2019, a 17-point gap had emerged in the other direction, as satisfaction had dropped by 17 points among Conservative Party supporters but risen by seven points among Liberal Party supporters. By 2023, satisfaction among Conservative Party supporters had fallen further, widening the gap in satisfaction between the two groups to 34 points.

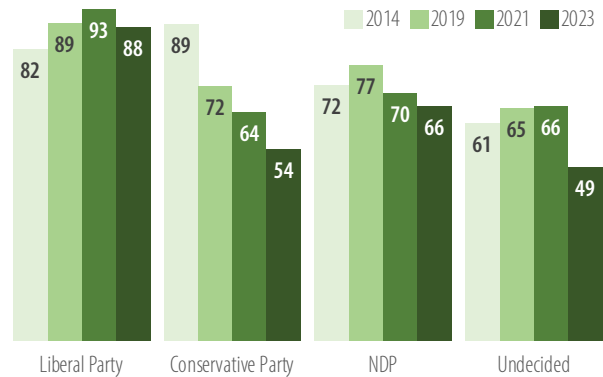
A similar pattern appears in the case of agreement that democracy is better than any other form of government. In 2014, Conservative Party supporters (70%) were slightly more likely to strongly agree with this statement than Liberal Party supporters (67%). By 2019, Conservative Party supporters were 10 percentage point less likely to agree; in 2023, they are 19 points less likely to agree.

NDP supporters have also become less satisfied with democracy in Canada over this period, though the decline is somewhat less pronounced than it is among Conservative Party supporters.

Part of the decline in support for democracy in Canada, therefore, can be explained in terms of growing dissatisfaction, specifically among those who oppose the current federal government.

This is also evident when comparing the opinions of those who are and are not satisfied with the performance of the current prime minister. The first observation is that satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada, and agreement that democracy is better than any other form of government, are both much higher among those who say the current prime minister is doing a good job, compared to those who say he is doing a bad job. In recent years, these gaps have widened.

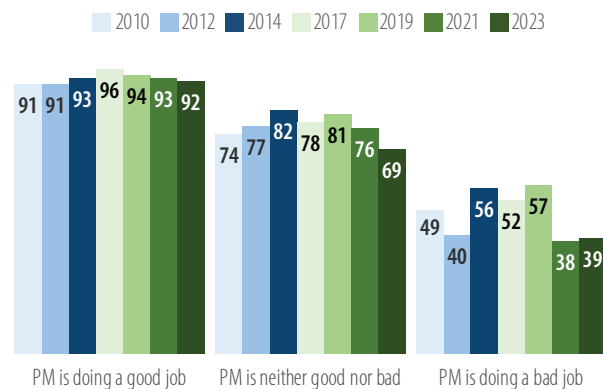
Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada 2014–2023 Very satisfied/satisfied, by federal vote intention



Q.PN4

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

Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada 2010–2023 Very satisfied/satisfied, by opinions about the performance of the prime minister



Q.PN4

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

- In 2014, there was a 37-percentage point difference in satisfaction with democracy in Canada between those who said the prime minister is doing a good job, and those who said he was doing a bad job. By 2023, that gap had widened to 53 points.
- In the case of strong agreement that democracy is better than any other form of government, the difference between the two groups widened from four points in 2014 to 28 points in 2023.

³ The AmericasBarometer includes a question about federal vote intention in the 2014, 2019, 2021 and 2023 surveys.

D: Explaining the decline in satisfaction with democracy in Canada

Growing economic pessimism among Albertans and Conservative Party supporters, in particular, has coincided with their declining satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada.

Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada has declined by 14 percentage points, from 79 percent in 2017 to 65 percent in 2023. How can this change best be explained?

As mentioned, the level of satisfaction varies by age, gender, region, economic outlook and political partisanship. But not all of these relationships can account for the decline. Compared to those under the age of 60, for instance, older Canadians have been more satisfied with democracy throughout the period covered by this series of surveys. And at the time of the most recent survey (July 2023), the current prime minister was not any less popular than the previous prime minister had been prior to the 2015 election.

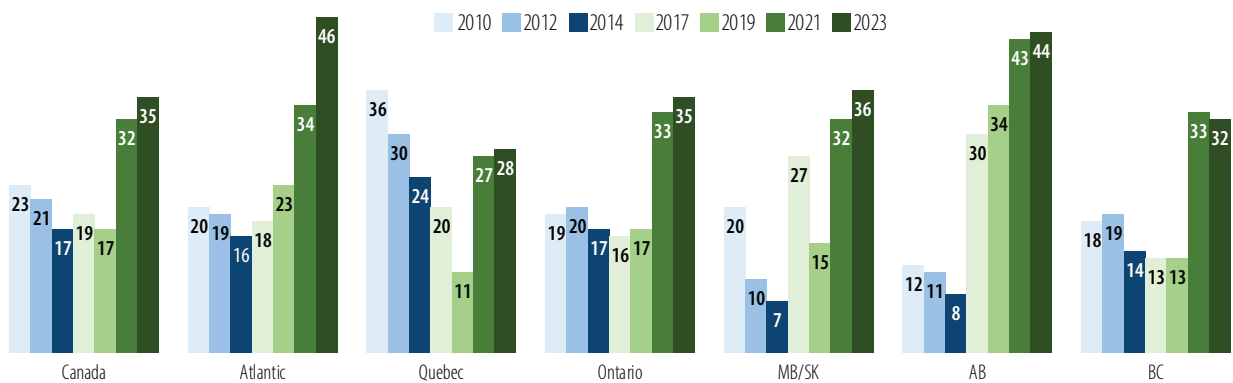
What has changed over this period is the assessment of the economy. The proportion of Canadians who say the

country's economic situation is bad or very bad doubled between 2019 (17%) and 2023 (35%). Satisfaction with democracy is related to economic outlook; widening economic pessimism therefore leads to lower satisfaction with the way democracy works.

Views about the economy may also be driving declining satisfaction with democracy in some regions of the country, among opponents of the government, and even among women. The contrasting trends in Quebec and Alberta with satisfaction with the way democracy works (rising in Quebec and falling in Alberta) is matched by the same trend in economic outlook. In 2010, Quebecers were much more likely than other Canadians to say the economic situation was bad, and much less likely to be satisfied with democracy; now it is Albertans who are among those most likely to hold these related views. The more recent sharp decrease in satisfaction with democracy in Atlantic Canada also coincides with a sharp increase in economic pessimism in that region.

How would you describe the country's economic situation?

2010–2023 Bad or very bad, by region



Q.SOT1

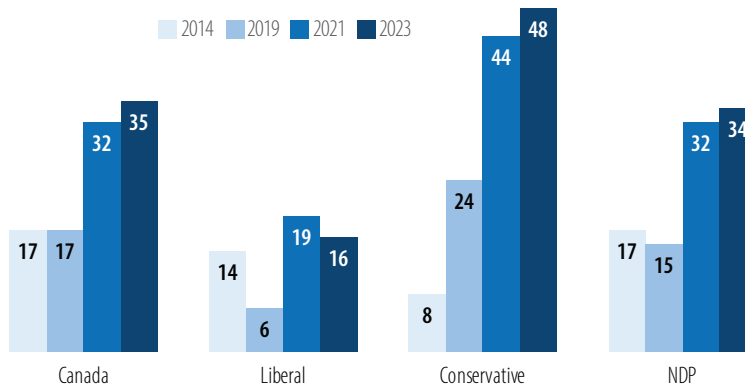
How would you describe the country's economic situation?

In the case of political partisanship, what is notable is that Liberal party supporters, prior to the 2015 election, were much more positive about the economy than are Conservative Party supporters today. This is not necessarily because Liberal supporters have a sunnier disposition; rather, the 2014 survey took place in the context of lower inflation and lower interest rates (and prior to any imagining of the disruption that a global pandemic might cause). What changed between 2014 and 2023 was not

simply the party in power federally, but also the increased salience of the economy as an issue among supporters of the opposition: the proportion of Conservative supporters who give the economy a poor rating doubled in just the past four years, from 24 percent in 2019 to 48 percent in 2023. This growing economic pessimism among Conservative Party supporters has coincided with their declining satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada.

How would you describe the country's economic situation?

2014–2023 Bad or very bad, by political party support



Q.SOT1

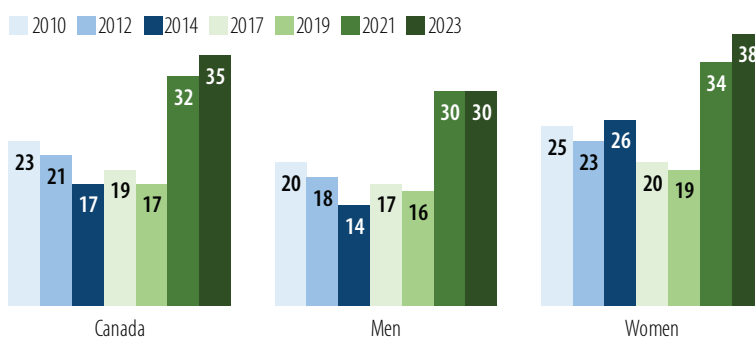
How would you describe the country's economic situation?

It is possible that the current modest gender gap in the assessment of democracy is also linked to assessments of the economy. Throughout the period covered by this series of surveys, women have tended to be a little more likely than men to say the country's economic situation is bad. But in 2023, the gender gap widened, to eight percentage points.⁴ This coincides with the dip in satisfaction with democracy among women mentioned earlier.

The finding that the recent decline in overall satisfaction with democracy in Canada coincides with growing concern about the economy at a time of higher inflation and interest

rates (particularly among those who do not support the current federal government) does not minimize its significance. Lower overall support for democracy remains a cause for concern (it could, for instance, make it harder to maintain broad public acceptance of the outcomes of political decision-making). But it may also be a function of the regular ups and downs of the economic cycle. The key question that remains, then, is whether satisfaction with democracy will rebound quickly with an improvement in the economic environment. This cannot be taken for granted; only future studies will tell.

How would you describe the country's economic situation?
2010–2023 Bad or very bad, by gender



Q.SOT1
How would you describe the country's economic situation?

⁴ The gender gap was wider than this in 2014, but at that time both men and women were less negative about the economy than they are today.

E: Changing the political system

A little over one in two say there should be at least major changes to the political system in Canada. Support for major changes varies based on factors such as views on the economy, political partisanship and satisfaction with democracy.

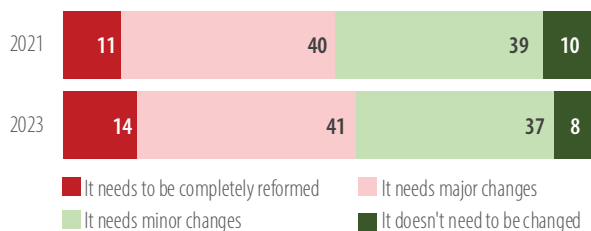
Most Canadians would like to see some changes made to the political system in Canada. A little over one in two say this change should be major, if not even more extensive: 41 percent say major changes are needed, and 14 percent say the system needs to be completely reformed. A little less than one in two would prefer less extensive changes, including 37 who say the system needs minor changes, and eight percent say it doesn't need to be changed at all.

The proportion preferring either complete reform or major change is higher for those age 18 to 29 (64%) and declines gradually by age, reaching 47 percent for those age 60 and older.

Support for major changes, however, varies much more based on factors such as views on the economy, political partisanship and satisfaction with democracy.

- 73 percent of those who describe the country's economic situation as bad or very bad prefer either complete reform or major change to the political system in Canada, compared to 44 percent of those who say the economic situation is very good or good;
- The proportion preferring either complete reform or major change is highest for supporters of the federal Conservative Party (68%) and lower for supporters of the Liberal Party (37%). Similarly, this proportion is much higher for those who say the current prime minister is going a bad job (75%) compared to those who say he is doing a good job (37%).
- 81 percent of those who are dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Canada prefer either complete reform or major change to the political system, compared to 41 percent of those who are satisfied with the way democracy works;
- 81 percent of those who strongly disagree that democracy is better than any other form of government prefer either complete reform or major change to the political system, compared to 41 percent of those who strongly agree.

How much change does the political system in Canada need? 2021–2023



Q.CAN14A

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view about the political system in Canada?

Interest in significant change to the country's political system is therefore strongly related to overall satisfaction with the current party in office and, in particular, its ability (or inability) to preside over a healthy economy.



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