

## **It's not happening here – Canadians keep the faith in their democracy and government**

Keith Neuman and Michael Adams

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In his new book, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, Edward Luce points to the spreading anti-government sentiment and populism (most boldly typified by Donald Trump and Brexit) as symptoms that now threaten a collapse of the world order of democracy and reason. This analysis focuses largely on the USA and Europe, but what's happening in Canada?

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is seen by many as the antithesis of Donald Trump, and in Ottawa it is largely business as usual – in stark contrast to the chaos currently unfolding in Washington and London. But is there growing anti-government sentiment bubbling under the surface; are we kidding ourselves that the craziness happening south of the border can't happen here? Early this year, global PR firm Edelman released its latest Global Trust Barometer presenting evidence for just such a trend, concluding that "Canada can no longer count itself as immune from the global trend of populism and sinking institutional trust."

This bold conclusion merits further examination. This spring our Institute conducted the latest in a series of national public opinion surveys on how Canadians view their democracy and central institutions of government. This is the latest installment of the Canadian portion of an [international AmericasBarometer](#) research program, which is conducted every two or three years across the western hemisphere.

The results of this research could not be clearer.

The Canadian public's level of confidence in its country's democracy and system of government has remained remarkably stable since 2014, and largely consistent with results dating back to at least 2010.

Across more than three dozen measures, public trust levels have either held steady or showed modest improvement in comparison with three years ago. For instance, eight in ten (79%) Canadians now say they are very if not somewhat satisfied with the way democracy works in this country, continuing a small but noticeable upward trend dating back to 2010 when 70% expressed this view. Four in ten (41%) now have a lot of trust in the way elections are held in this country, up 20 percentage points from 2014 when public controversy swirled around robo calls influencing the previous federal election.

We find no evidence of growing anti-government feelings or populist aspirations. And polarized views between those on the left and the right of the political spectrum have actually diminished noticeably, mostly because progressive Canadians are now much more comfortable with the current federal government than they were in 2014 when Stephen Harper was in charge.

It is hardly the case that Canadians give a full vote of confidence, as few have strong trust in such institutions as Parliament (19%), political parties (10%) and the mass media (16%). But the public has long expressed skepticism about these institutions, and such opinions have shown modest improvement over the past three years. What's more, it is among the youngest cohort of voting age adults (aged 18 to 29) where engagement and confidence in the country's institutions has strengthened most noticeably since 2014, reversing or erasing a previous generation gap.

Canada may be avoiding the downward spiral affecting other western nations because our economy and middle class are holding firm. Survey results show that Canadians are feeling more confident about the national economy and their own household finances, compared with three years ago. Income inequality is a reality in this country, but has yet to produce a growing divide between income classes when it comes to opinions about the country's democracy and institutions. We have yet to see an emerging segment of people feeling economically and politically alienated which might fuel the kind of backlash now spreading in other countries.

Of course, public sentiments can change. A major economic downturn or a significant terrorist attack on our home soil, if combined with a charismatic populist leader, could shift the public mood towards xenophobic populism and away from our democratic and inclusive traditions. But so far it is not happening here, and we would do well to properly recognize this as we celebrate 150 years in this place (or 15,000 if you are Indigenous); and to figure out how peace, order and good government can continue to be secured.

**Keith Neuman** is Executive Director at the Environics Institute for Survey Research

**Michael Adams** is Founder and President of the Environics Institute. His new book: *Could It Happen Here? Canada in the Age of Trump and Brexit*, will be published by Simon and Schuster in September.