

EMBASSY

Canadians widely concerned about income equality: Survey

Opinion | KEITH NEUMAN

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On Nov. 15, the non-profit Environics Institute for Survey Research released a major new public opinion study on democracy and governance. The focus of this research is on Canada, but it is part of a 26-country project encompassing the Western Hemisphere, known as the AmericasBarometer.

Why focus on democracy and governance in a stable country such as Canada? Because this very stability depends on the confidence of its citizens, and it is sometimes necessary to take an evidence-based reading of public sentiment from time to time.

Why focus on the Americas as a reference point? The norm is to compare ourselves with the United States and Europe, Great Britain, and sometimes Australia, Russia, or China. But we share a continent with 30 other countries, some of which are already significant in today's world (Brazil, for instance), and many others are emerging as economic and democratic players.

How do Canadians feel about their country's democratic system of government and institutions in the year 2012? They continue to be among the most positive of citizens across the Western Hemisphere, but no longer stand out quite as much as before.

Citizens maintain a general sense of pride in the country's democracy overall, but their trust in the institutions that run the country is mixed: most are positive about the country's armed forces and, to a lesser extent, the RCMP and justice system. But there is much less trust in political institutions (Parliament, the prime minister, and political parties, for instance). And while opinions have held largely stable since 2010, there is clear evidence of decline (especially for Parliament) since 2006.

If expectations for governance are not being met, Canadians do not express widespread desire for significant change in the system, either by expanding democracy through more "government by the people" populism or by shrinking democracy through more dictatorial powers granted to the prime minister.

It is also apparent that most Canadians are not actively engaged in the political process in terms of following the issues, identifying with a political party or voting (many see voting as a consumer choice rather than a civic duty). At the same time, Canadians are involved in their communities in other ways, through signing petitions, connecting on issues through social media, and helping solve issues in their local community. The country's youth are at least as active as older generations in this.

Canadians' cynicism about politics notwithstanding, they also demonstrate notable confidence in their democratic institutions in terms of supporting the right of individuals to openly criticize their government, provided it is done through legal means—Canadians may be rebels but they are not revolutionaries. Across the Americas, Canadians are among the most confident in the protection of their basic citizens' rights and in the guarantee of a fair trial. Canadians stand out in the

hemisphere (along with Americans) in supporting the full participation of marginalized groups (women and gays, for instance) in the political process.

Inequality concerns

Canada has weathered the recent global economic recession much better than most other countries, and Canadians are among the most upbeat in the Western Hemisphere about their national economy and household financial situation. But not all Canadians are doing well financially, and there is widespread concern about income equality. Most Canadians feel their politicians are defending the rich to the detriment of the poor, and expect their governments to reduce income disparities.

On this issue Canadians fall somewhere between citizens in Latin America and the Caribbean (who more strongly endorse active government efforts on income inequality) and Americans (who are divided on this issue). What distinguishes Canadians is their support for reducing poverty and inequality through higher taxes on the rich.

What should we take from these findings? It is reassuring that despite evident public frustration and occasional anger at governments and politicians across the country, Canadians continue to believe in their democratic system, and maintain reasonable levels of confidence and trust in most institutions, the rule of law, and the protection of basic rights.

At the same time, the results are not so positive that we can afford to take the public's confidence for granted. Canada has so far avoided the economic and political turbulence now enveloping much of Europe and many other countries, but is far from immune to the global forces at play. We may need to be more attentive, and perhaps more creative, in our approach to democracy and governance if we want to maintain our valued status as a benchmark for other countries.

The AmericasBarometer 2012 survey was conducted in the spring in 26 countries with a total sample of 40,971 individuals. In each country a domestic research institute administered the survey in the principal languages. Except in Canada and the US, the survey was conducted as an in-person interview in people's homes. The Canadian survey was conducted in English and French using an established online panel with a representative sample of 1,501 Canadians (aged 18 and over) between May 15 and 22.

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