

Executive Summary

How do Canadians feel about their country's democratic system of government and institutions in the year 2012? Canadians 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 (e.g., Parliament, the Prime Minister, political parties), 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, whether by closely following the issues, identifying with a political party or looking at voting as a civic responsibility (despite it being seen as a central feature of the country's democracy). At the same time, Canadians are actively engaged in other ways, through signing petitions, connecting on issues through social media and helping solve issues in their local community – in these ways, the country's youth are at least as active as older generations.

Canadians' cynicism about politics notwithstanding, they also demonstrate notable confidence in their democratic institutions in terms of supporting the rights of individuals to openly criticize their government (provided, of course, it is done through legal means). 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 also stand out in the hemisphere (along with Americans) in supporting the full participation of marginalized groups (e.g., women, gays) in the political process.

Canada has weathered the recent global economic recession much better than most other countries, and in comparative terms Canadians are 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 support active federal government efforts 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.

The results of this study can be summarized around five main themes:

1. ATTITUDES ABOUT DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Public confidence in the state of democracy in Canada. Canadians are generally, if not enthusiastically, positive about the state of democracy in their country today. Seven in ten express satisfaction with the current democracy, although only seven percent are very satisfied compared with three in ten who are dissatisfied. Satisfaction levels have declined a bit since 2006, but remain among the highest in the hemisphere (second only to Uruguay).

What does "democracy" mean to Canadians? Several themes emerge, but most prominently the public thinks about democracy as providing the right to good government, in terms of the freedom to vote and elect governments. Other themes emphasize personal freedoms (e.g., freedom of speech, freedom of movement) and a good quality of life (fairness and equality, right to a decent life). The ways in which Canadians define democracy are notably similar across the country.

Public confidence in political institutions. While Canadians are positive about their political system as a whole, they are

much less likely to think as highly of the country's political institutions. The public's degree of trust in major institutions varies significantly, with views largely stable since 2010 but in some cases notably lower than in 2006.

Canadians are most likely to say they have a lot of trust in the country's **Armed Forces** (53%) and **RCMP** (36%), and to a lesser extent the **Supreme Court** (34%) and **justice system** (26%) (with no more than one in six having little or no trust in any of these). These ratings of the RCMP, Supreme Court and justice system are among the most positive in the hemisphere.

In contrast, no more than one in six place a lot of trust in the country's **Parliament** (17%) or **Prime Minister** (16%), and even fewer give a strong vote of confidence to **political parties** (10%) or the **mass media** (6%). For the latter two institutions, Canadians' trust levels are among the lowest in the hemisphere, although higher than those given by Americans. Opinions in Canada are unchanged since 2010, but trust in Parliament has declined noticeably since 2006. Public skepticism is fuelled in part by a growing belief that those governing the country are not interested in what citizens like themselves think.

Canadians are evenly split on the performance of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and predictably divided along regional and partisan political lines. Across the hemisphere, Canadians are among the least likely to express strong trust in their national leader, comparable to opinions expressed in Costa Rica and Peru.

Support for changing the political system. Despite widespread cynicism about political institutions, there is little evidence of a groundswell of public desire for a more populist form of government. Few (13%) agree with the populist notion of people governing directly rather than through elected representatives, and this proportion has not grown since 2008 (although the percentage outright rejecting this approach has declined). Government by the people does not attract a strong constituency in any part of the country, nor is it embraced anywhere else in the western hemisphere.

As well, there is limited support in Canada for allowing the Prime Minister to govern without Parliament (15%) or the Supreme Court (11%) when the country is facing difficult times, or to limit the voices of opposition parties (7%). This largely echoes the opinions of citizens throughout the hemisphere.

One type of change that would be acceptable to most Canadians is a national government led by a coalition of political parties (influenced, perhaps, by having lived with minority governments for much of the past decade). Seven in ten (69%) endorse the legitimacy of parties coming together when none wins a majority, and this reflects a majority view across the country (including both Conservative voters and those on the political left). However, public support for coalition governments drops significantly (to 43%) if they include parties with a majority of seats but not the party winning the most seats.

2. CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Engagement in politics. Most Canadians give some attention to politics, but it is a small proportion (15%) who say they have a lot of interest. Fewer than three in ten (28%) agree they understand the most important political issues facing the country, and the gap between young and old on this question has widened just since 2010. Internationally, Canadians express a greater interest in politics than citizens of most Latin American and Caribbean countries, but it is Americans who stand out as articulating the strongest interest (influenced perhaps by this year's national election).

The fact that Canadians are not more politically engaged may be in part due to the relative absence of well-defined political ideology in this country. On the general political spectrum, most (68%) Canadians place themselves broadly within the middle, with the remainder roughly balanced between left (14%) and right (18%). Left-leaning Canadians are most heavily represented in Quebec, among those under 30 and those with a non-Christian affiliation or none at all, while those on the right tend to be in Alberta, high-income households, immigrants and evangelical Christians.

Across the hemisphere, Canadians are among the most likely to identify with the political centre, in contrast to Americans who are the most polarized and with the largest segment identifying with the right.

Voting is identified by many Canadians as a central feature of the country's democracy, but a freedom that fewer are choosing to exercise than in the past. One reason for this trend is the fact that a significant minority (43%) of citizens define the act of voting as a "choice" rather than a "duty," with this view especially widespread among younger generations.

Another factor is the erosion of loyalty to political parties, with only one in three (32%) Canadians currently identifying with a federal political party. Identification with a political party varies significantly across the hemisphere, with Canada falling somewhat below the average (and half the proportion of Americans (63%) who identify with a party).

Other forms of civic engagement. Voting aside, citizens are engaging in other forms of political expression, in the form of signing petitions (33%) and sharing information through social media (24%) in the past year. By comparison, only five percent of Canadians report participating in protests and demonstrations, most notably by youth in B.C. and Quebec. Across the hemisphere, Canadians are among the most active in terms of signing petitions and using social media, but trail well behind Americans.

A significant minority of Canadians were also actively involved in their local community in the past year, with three in ten (30%) having helped to solve a local problem and a similar proportion (25%) having attended a meeting for a local community issue. Canadians' general level of "civic action" (combining seven measures of community and political actions) reveals that the most active tend to be those on the political left, affiliated with non-Christian religions, and live in Vancouver. As well, it is younger Canadians rather than older ones who are the most civically engaged.

3. PROTECTION OF DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS

Protection of basic citizens' rights. As with the country's state of democracy, Canadians are more likely (29%) than not (12%) to believe that basic citizens' rights are protected under the country's political system, although notably a majority (59%) do not have a clear opinion. Public confidence in such protections is noticeably stronger among those with higher incomes and who identify with the political right. Internationally, Canadians are among the most positive of any country in the hemisphere (second only to Nicaragua), while Americans are noticeably less apt to share this view and Mexicans are somewhere in between.

Tolerance for political dissent. An important indicator of the public's confidence in the political system is their comfort with political dissent and the rights of those who openly criticize the system. Very few (7%) Canadians agree with the

view that such dissent represents a threat to the country, and this perspective is reflected across the country. The public broadly accepts citizen participation in those forms of dissent which are legal (e.g., community-based problem-solving, political campaigns, legal demonstrations), while largely condemning those that are outside of the law (vigilante justice, road blockades, seizing property). Views in Canada are typical of those expressed in other regions of the Americas, although there are considerable differences across countries. Americans are generally the most supportive of citizens' right to dissent.

Canadians are almost three times as likely to approve (35%) as disapprove (13%) of people who participate in legal political demonstrations, but there appears to be a widening gap between Quebecers (where approval is highest and growing) and elsewhere (with approval declining in Ontario and the Prairies). Across the hemisphere, Canadians are among the least likely to endorse political action through legal demonstrations, along with the citizens of Honduras, Haiti and Bolivia.

Protection of group rights. Canadians are largely supportive of protecting the rights of marginalized groups, including the rights of individuals from the LGBT community to run for public office and to marry, and for gender equality in the workplace and the political arena. In these areas, there is a sharp divide between the attitudes of Canadians and Americans, and citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean who express a much more conservative perspective.

At the same time, Canadians among the least likely to support legislated affirmative action quotas to promote participation of marginalized groups, such as reserving candidate spaces for women, or university placements for students from ethnic or racial minorities.

4. RULE OF LAW AND PERSONAL SECURITY

Confidence in the justice system. Canadians give a lukewarm endorsement of the country's justice system. Only one in four (27%) feel strongly that the courts are able to guarantee a fair trial, and only one in ten (10%) have strong faith in the system punishing the guilty if they themselves were a victim of crime (versus 42% with little to no faith). This ambivalence notwithstanding, by hemispheric standards, Canadians are among the most confident in the guarantee of a fair trial (second only to Guyana).

Corruption in government. Given the media focus on government misdeeds, it is perhaps not surprising that a majority of Canadians believe that corruption among public officials is common (47%) if not very common (17%). And given the current investigations currently underway in Quebec, it is in this province where government corruption is most widely seen as very common, and where it has increased noticeably since 2008 (while declining marginally elsewhere in the country). Internationally, Canadians are less likely than citizens of almost every other country to say corruption is very common. Very few Canadians report having been asked for a bribe by police (3%) or government officials (2%) in the past year – which, along with Americans, is the lowest level in the hemisphere (by comparison, 20% of Mexicans say police have asked them for a bribe).

Canadians respect the rule of law, but there is no consensus when it comes to the challenges faced by law enforcement when fighting crime. Four in ten (40%) Canadians believe it acceptable for authorities to sometimes “cross the line” in order to catch criminals. Opinions are broadly similar across the Americas, but the expectation on governments to always abide by the law is more widespread in many countries, including the USA, Brazil, Venezuela, Panama and Jamaica.

Personal security. Most Canadians describe their own neighbourhood as safe, but they are less likely to do so than six years ago, and this is accompanied by a similar decline in sense of trust in ones’ neighbours. Perceptions of neighbourhood safety are strongest in Atlantic Canada and weakest in Montreal and among women in larger urban centres. One in six say their neighbourhood is affected a lot (2%) or somewhat (12%) by gangs, most notably in western Canada. Canadians, along with Americans, are among the most secure in their sense of local safety, but it is in these two countries alone where the decline in sense of community trust is most evident.

One in seven (13%) Canadians report having been the victim of a crime in the past 12 months, generally consistent with self-reports dating back to 2006. Reported crime victimization is higher in western Canada and among youth, but is at or below average in the country’s three largest urban centres (Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver), where victimization rates have declined since 2008. Personal experience with crime in Canada is lower than in many countries across the Americas, but is by no means the lowest.

5. GOVERNMENT’S ROLE IN ECONOMIC EQUALITY

Defending the rich versus the poor. Many Canadians do not believe their politicians have their priorities right when it comes to addressing income inequality. A majority (51%) believe their elected officials *currently* defend the interests of the rich over those of the poor (versus only 6% who say they now mostly defend the poor), while nine in ten believe these priorities *should be* evenly balanced (60%) or favour the poor (34%). Public attitudes show a similar pattern elsewhere in the hemisphere, with Canadians and Americans less likely than others to want their politicians to focus primarily on defending the poor.

Government actions to reduce income inequality. Consistent with their views about politicians’ priorities, Canadians (by a 51% to 6% margin) believe the federal government should implement strong policies to reduce income inequality between the rich and poor. This view is most widespread in Quebec (versus the Prairies), and reveals a growing divide between those on the left and right sides of the political spectrum (although support still outweighs opposition among those on the right). Canadians’ support for active federal intervention in this area is not as strong as in Latin America or the Caribbean, but is double the level of support expressed by Americans (the lone country where opposition outweighs support).

Canadians are most likely to believe that governments can reduce poverty and income inequality by creating jobs and improving the economy (40%), or by increasing taxes on the rich (31%), with few placing their faith in improvements to public education, public assistance to the poor, improving infrastructure or reducing government spending. Across the hemisphere, Canadians stand out as being the most likely to endorse poverty reduction through higher taxes on the rich (followed by Americans).

Canadians’ expressed priority on addressing income disparities does not translate into widespread support for paying higher taxes for boosting direct government transfers to the poor (24%) or expanded public health services (35%). Predictably, opinions on such taxes reflect a clear divide between left and right sides of the political spectrum. Internationally, Canadian support for such taxes is similar to that in the USA, and varies significantly across the rest of the hemisphere.

Federal government role in the economy. There is no public consensus about the role the federal government should play in the national economy, but Canadians are more likely (29%) than not (10%) to agree that the government (versus the private sector) should be primarily responsible for job creation, and this view has strengthened since 2008. Opinions are more divided when it comes to government ownership of key industries as a way to promote economic growth (17% agree versus 26% disagree). Views on the role of government in the national economy divide sharply across the hemisphere, with citizens in Latin America and the Caribbean advocating an active government role, and Americans just as strongly opposed.

National and household economic well-being. Across the western hemisphere, Canadians are far and away the most positive about health of their national economy. Close to four in ten (37%) describe the current economy as good or very good, compared with 21 percent who say it is bad or very bad (essentially unchanged from 2010). This stands in sharp contrast to citizens in most other countries (only Uruguayans are more upbeat), especially in comparison with the citizens of El Salvador, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and the USA.

Canadians are also generally positive about their household financial circumstances, being twice as likely to describe them as good (40%) than as bad (20%), largely unchanged from 2010. By hemispheric standards, this is better than most countries but by no means the best; the most positive household finances are reported by citizens in South America (notably Brazil, Argentina and Ecuador). By comparison, difficult household circumstances are most widely reported in Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

While Canadians may be among the most economically secure citizens in the Americas, they are also among the least likely to describe themselves as very satisfied with their lives overall (25%) – although they are no more likely to say they are dissatisfied. Strong overall life satisfaction is most evident in Central and South America, although there is considerable variation across countries (highest in such countries as Brazil, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Panama and the Dominican Republic, and lowest in Haiti and Suriname). In Canada, life satisfaction is strongest in Atlantic Canada and the Prairies, among Canadians 60 plus, and among those placing strong importance on religion in their lives.