

# Democratic governance reform

The federal system of government today is largely the same as when it was established under Confederation almost 150 years ago. Some of the institutions of government are revealing notable limitations in the 21st century, and there is now active discussion about what changes might be needed (e.g., the Senate, how we elect MPs). The survey explored public priorities and level of support for changes to key institutions of the federal government.

## Changes to federal institutions

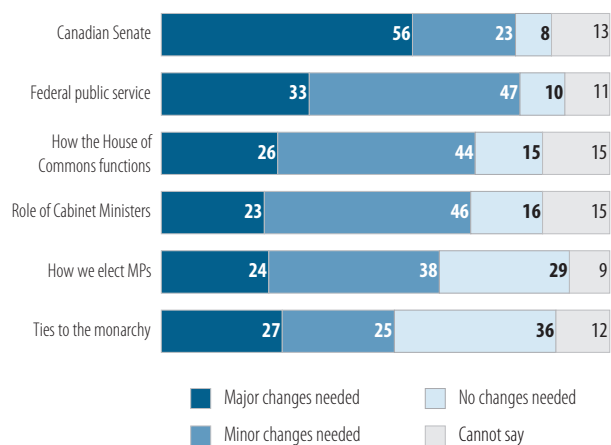
*Among a list of six federal institutions, Canadians are most likely to identify the Senate as in need of major reform. Lesser priority is given to overhauling the federal public service, the functioning of the House of Commons, the role of Cabinet Ministers, the electoral system and ties to the monarchy.*

The survey listed six major federal government institutions, and asked whether each requires major change, minor change or no changes at all (the specific type of change was not included in the question). In almost all cases, a clear majority of Canadians express a desire for change, although there is no consensus on whether this should be major or minor in scope.

Across the list, the Senate is most widely seen as in need of major change (56%, versus 8% who say no changes at all), followed by the federal public service (33% vs. 10%), how the House of Commons functions (26% vs. 15%), the role of Cabinet Ministers (23% vs. 16%), how MPs are elected to Parliament (24% vs. 29%), and the country's tie to the monarchy (27% vs. 36%). In each case, roughly one in ten Canadians cannot offer an opinion about the need for reforming these institutions.

When asked to identify which of these institutions is *most* in need of major change (among those who identified two or more as needing major change), the Canadian Senate again rises clearly to the top (34%), followed by how MPs are elected to Parliament (11%), the federal public service (11%), Canada's tie to the monarchy (5%), how the House of Commons functions (3%) and the role of Cabinet Ministers (2%). Another third (33%) insist that both or all of the institutions named are equally in need of major reform.

Do we need to change federal institutions?



Q.7  
Please indicate whether you believe each of the following government institutions is in need of major changes, minor changes, or needs no changes at all...

Opinions about the need for reform of these institutions are generally similar across the population, with a few notable variations:

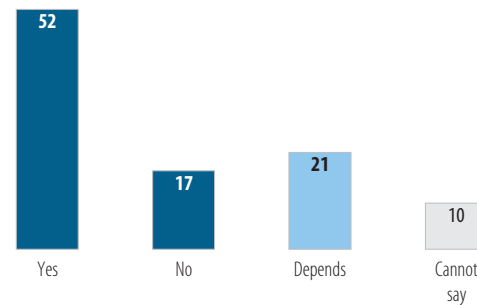
- **Senate reform.** Support for major change is strongest in Atlantic Canada and Quebec, as well as among older Canadians, those with higher incomes, and those who are highly engaged.
- **Federal public service.** Support for major change stands out most in Quebec, among rural and older residents, and those who are highly engaged.
- **House of Commons procedures.** Major change is most widely supported by older Canadians.
- **The role of Cabinet Ministers.** Support for major change is most widespread in Atlantic Canada and Quebec, as well as among rural and less educated Canadians.
- **How MPs are elected.** Major change is most widely supported in Quebec and British Columbia, as well as among rural residents.
- **The country's tie to the monarchy.** Quebecers are far and away the most likely to endorse major change to this institution (52%); this view is least widely shared in Ontario and B.C., as well as among older, and the most educated and affluent Canadians.

In all cases, support for major change is closely tied to the general view of the federal government as currently broken, as well as unsatisfactory experiences with government services in the past year. This connection suggests that opinions about the need to change specific federal institutions are as much about overall feelings about government in general as they are about the specifics of these institutions.

**Free votes in the House of Commons.** In the current parliamentary system, political parties require all of their MPs to vote the “party line,” except in rare cases of “free votes” where MPs are given the opportunity to vote as they choose. There is broad public support for changing this practice, with 52 percent of Canadians saying that MPs should have more opportunity to decide how to vote, compared with 17 percent who believe the current system works best. The remainder say it depends (e.g., on what types of votes would be “free” – 21%) or cannot offer an opinion (10%). Given the force of party discipline in Canada, it is striking that more than half of Canadians appear to support its relaxation.

Support for expanding free votes in Parliament is most likely to be voiced by men, older Canadians, and those with higher levels of education and income, with other groups more likely to be equivocal or unsure how they feel about this issue. Preference for the status quo does not attract more than one-quarter in any identifiable group (the one exception being Canadians very satisfied with their recent service experience, a group that stands out as least interested in changes to government institutions).

Should MPs have more opportunities for free votes in Parliament?



Q.12

*In the current parliamentary system, political parties require all of their MPs to vote the “party line”, except in rare cases of “free votes” when MPs are allowed to vote however they choose. Do you believe this current system works the best or do you believe that MPs should have more opportunities to decide for themselves how to vote?*

## Changing the federal electoral system

Canadians widely endorse online voting and changing election financing laws, but not mandatory voting. There is modest support for changing the current “first past the post” electoral system. No clear preference emerges on which alternate model would be an improvement.

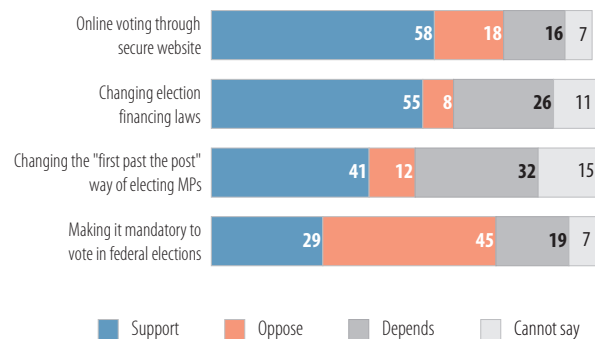
The survey presented four specific areas in which the current federal electoral system might be changed: instituting online voting, changing campaign financing laws, introducing mandatory voting and changing the way MPs are elected to Parliament.

**Online voting.** The most popular change in the list is the opportunity for citizens to vote online in federal elections through a secure website (58% support this change, compared with 18 percent who oppose it). There is majority support for this innovation across the population, but it is most popular in Ontario (63%), and among Canadians with higher levels of education and income, as well as those most engaged. Opposition is most apt to be voiced in Quebec (25%), Manitoba/Saskatchewan (26%) and B.C. (23%). While it is often assumed that online voting would be an effective way of increasing voter participation among younger generations, the appeal of online voting is essentially the same across age cohorts.

**Changing campaign financing laws.** A majority (55%) of Canadians support changing the laws governing how federal political parties finance their election campaigns, compared with only eight percent who oppose this (the remainder say it depends or have no opinion). In this case, support is most widespread in Quebec (61%), among Canadians 60 and older (65%), and those highly engaged (63%). Opposition is low across the country, but is marginally higher in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (13%), Toronto (12%) and among citizens 18 to 29 years of age (13%).

**Changing the way MPs are elected.** There has been considerable public debate about the country’s “first past the post” electoral system, and the new Liberal government in Ottawa has made a commitment to change the system before the next federal election in 2019. Canadians are more likely to support (41%) than oppose (12%) a change in this system, while almost half say it depends (e.g., on what replaces it) or do not offer an opinion. Opinions about this type of change do not vary much across the population: support is most

### Changing the federal electoral system



Q.9

Would you support or oppose each of the following changes to the way our electoral system works ... ?

evident among men, Canadians 30 to 44 years of age, those with a post-graduate degree, and those who are highly or moderately engaged, while somewhat lower in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and those with low engagement. But opposition is weak across the board, and Canadians in all groups are more likely to respond with “depends” or “cannot say.”

**Mandatory voting.** Perhaps it is not surprising that making it mandatory to vote in federal elections (as applies in such countries as Australia) is not a change that is embraced by Canadians. Three in ten (29%) would support such a law (which would carry penalties amounting to a small fine), compared with 45 percent who oppose it. This change does not attract majority support in any group, but is most apt to be well-received in Vancouver (42%), and least so in Manitoba/Saskatchewan (21%, compared with 56% who oppose it).

**Alternative electoral systems.** The survey probed further on how the country's electoral system might be changed by presenting brief descriptions of four electoral voting systems, including the current one (called "single member plurality") and three alternatives in use in other countries. Survey respondents were asked to rank them in order of preference, from the option they like the most to the one they like the least.

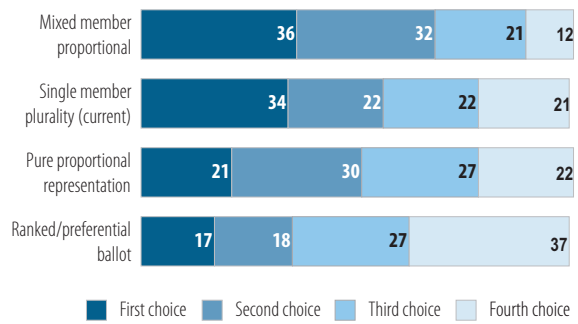
None of the four options is a clear favourite with Canadians, but an order of preference is evident. The "mixed member proportional" option attracts the most support, with 36 percent selecting it as their first preference, and only 12 percent selecting it as their least favourite. The "single member plurality" (the current system) was the second most favoured system (34% selected as a first choice, versus 21% as the least preferred option). The other two options receive less support: the "pure proportional representation" system (21% versus 22%), and the "ranked or preferential ballot" (17% versus 37% as least favourite).

When the results are considered just for those Canadians who express overall support for changing the way MPs are elected, a clearer preference emerges. For this group, the mixed member proportional option emerges as the clear favourite (37%), well ahead of the other three options, each garnering around 20 percent who select it as their first choice.

Across the population, the mixed member proportional system is most widely preferred in Quebec (40% choose it as their first choice), as well as by women and Canadians aged 30 to 59. Support for the status quo (the single member plurality system) is strongest in Atlantic Canada (44%), among Canadians 60 plus (40%), those with a post-graduate degree (40%), immigrants (40%) and those who are highly engaged (36%). The ranked/preferential ballot is the last choice among most groups, but is most apt to be liked by men and Canadians in the top income bracket.

Finally, the absence of any clear preference among optional voting systems is most evident among women, rural residents, those with lower levels of education and income, those with low engagement, and those who believe the federal government is broken.

## Support for federal electoral voting systems

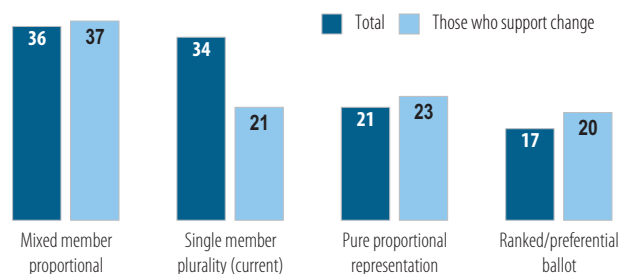


Q.10

Here are descriptions of our current voting system for Parliament, and three possible alternatives (ones used in other countries). Please rank these four options in order, from the one you like the most, to the one you like the least.

## Preferred federal voting system

First choice preference



Q.10

Here are descriptions of our current voting system for Parliament, and three possible alternatives (ones used in other countries). Please rank these four options in order, from the one you like the most, to the one you like the least.

## The Canadian Senate

Most Canadians would like to see changes to the Senate even if it means reopening the Constitution, although opinion is divided on whether it should undergo major reform or be abolished. The public also supports strengthening the rules of conduct and making Senate appointments more transparent.

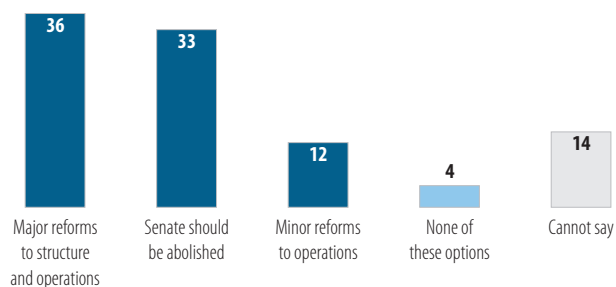
The Canadian Senate has been a source of controversy for the past few decades, partly because of the spending patterns of Senators, but also due to questions about its effectiveness as an unelected chamber of Parliament filled with politically-appointed members. Results presented previously reveal that Canadians identify the Senate as the federal institution most in need of change. The survey explored further what types of changes might be supported.

**Senate reform or abolition?** Much of the public debate has centred on whether the Senate should be reformed or simply abolished. Canadian public opinion is divided on this question, but the balance of opinion is in favour of significant change. Over one-third (36%) believe the Senate should undergo major reforms in how it is both structured and operates, while a slightly smaller proportion (33%) advocates that it be abolished. Others say the Senate should undergo *minor reforms* in how it operates (12%), while the remainder does not endorse any of these options (4%) or have no opinion to offer (14%).

Support for major Senate reforms is most evident among residents of Atlantic Canada (41%) and B.C. (41%; 46% in Vancouver), and among Canadians with higher levels of education and income. Abolition is the most popular option in Quebec (46%), among men (39%), Canadians 60 plus (48%), and those who believe the federal government is completely broken (47%). Highly engaged Canadians are the principal advocates of both major reforms (43%) and abolition (38%), while those less engaged are least able to offer any opinion. Minor reform is the least favoured option among most groups, but is most apt to be the choice of younger Canadians.

**Reopening the Constitution.** Major structural reforms or abolition of the Senate would involve changing the Canadian Constitution. Because this would require the consent of a majority of the provinces, it is widely considered to be politically untenable given the divergent positions across provinces (some strongly endorse abolition, while

What should be done with the Canadian Senate?

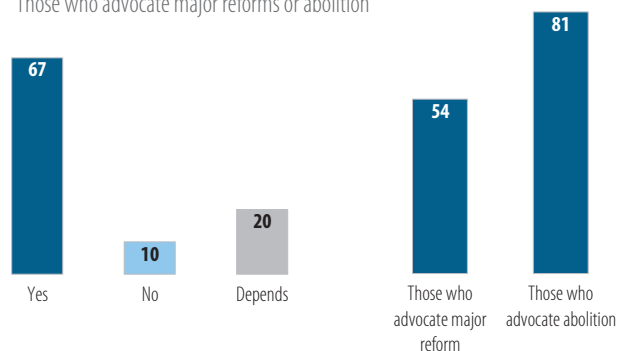


Q.13

Thinking now about the Canadian Senate, which one of the following options is closest to your own view ... ?

Should the Constitution be reopened to change or abolish the Senate?

Those who advocate major reforms or abolition



Q.14

[Abolishing/Major reforms] to the Senate can only be done by formally changing the Canadian Constitution, which would legally require the consent of a majority of provinces. Do you believe that major Senate reform is important enough to justify reopening the constitution?

others just as strongly oppose this). The survey asked those who advocate major reforms or abolition whether this is an important enough priority to justify reopening a serious discussion about constitutional change.

While pundits are invariably quick to dismiss constitutional change as a nonstarter and something that Canadians would just as soon avoid, two-thirds of Canadians in favour of major reform or abolition believe it would be justified to do so in order to fix the Senate. By comparison, only one in ten (10%) disagree, while another 20 percent say it would depend (e.g., on the type of Senate change being considered).

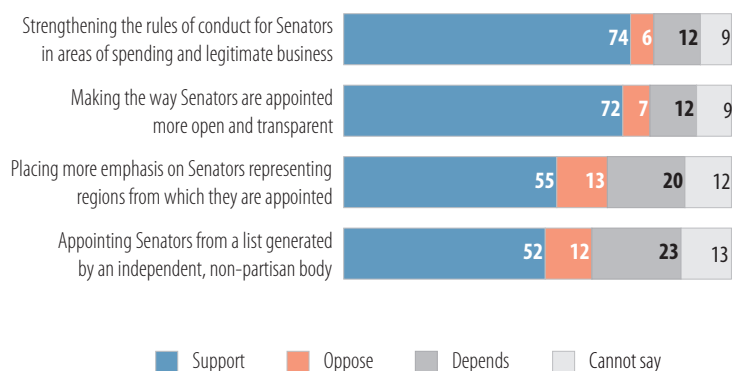
Support for reopening the Constitution to reform the Senate is the majority view across the country, but especially in Atlantic Canada (74%), among those 60 plus (76%), and those highly engaged (74%). Not surprisingly, reopening the Constitution is more widely supported by those advocating abolition (81%) than among those who would like to see major reforms (54%).

**Senate reform without Constitutional change.** The survey also presented four types of Senate reform that would not require Constitutional changes. All four are endorsed by a majority of Canadians, with the most popular being strengthening the rules of conduct in areas of spending and what constitutes legitimate Senate business (74% support, versus 6% oppose), and making the way Senators are appointed more open and transparent (72% support, versus 7% oppose), and making the way Senators are appointed more open and transparent (72% support, versus 7% oppose).

Smaller majorities favour placing more emphasis on Senators representing the regions from which they are appointed (55%) and appointing Senators from a list generated by an independent, non-partisan body (52%); in these cases opposition is low, but a significant proportion say it would depend or cannot offer an opinion.

Support for reform measures is generally consistent across the country. Quebecers are most in favour of appointments by an independent, non-partisan body, while support in all four cases increases with age and level of engagement. Placing greater emphasis on Senators representing their regions is more widely endorsed by those favouring major reforms (68%) than by those in support of abolishing the Senate (51%).

### Changes to the Senate that do not require Constitutional change



Q.15

Some changes to the Senate can be made without Constitutional change. Would you support or oppose each of the following changes ... ?

## Engaging Canadians in governance

Canadians are most likely to endorse public engagement in policy development and service delivery where it will improve decision-making and outcomes. Public opinion surveys, public meetings and citizen referenda are preferred methods over advisory boards, royal commissions and social media.

What priority do Canadians place on the federal government engaging with citizens when developing policies and programs, and how extensive do they believe such consultation should be? Not surprisingly, the public supports (and likely expects) meaningful engagement on issues that matter, but there is no consensus that the federal government consult with Canadians on every decision it makes.

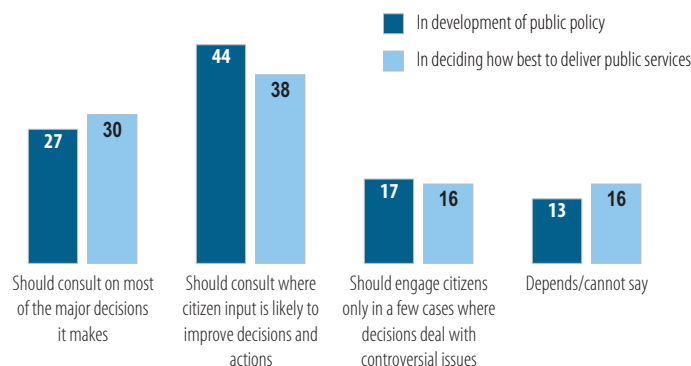
The survey posed a question asking about the extensiveness of federal government engagement with citizens, both in the development of public policies and in deciding how best to deliver public services. In both cases, the balance of opinion tilts toward a middle alternative. Pluralities say it is important for governments to consult with Canadians on a range of issues where citizen input is likely to improve decisions and

outcomes (44% in the case of policy development, and 38% in the case of delivering public services).

The next favoured option entails the most extensive level of engagement: consulting with citizens on most of the major decisions it makes about public policy (27%) or in how best to deliver public services (30%). The third option, entailing the least amount of public engagement, receives the lowest level of support: just one in six believe that governments should engage citizens only in a few cases where the decisions deal with controversial issues (17% in the case of public policy, 16% in the case of delivering public services).

Views on the extensiveness of citizen engagement in the development of public policy are similar across the country. The desire for consultation on most major decisions increases with age cohort, and with the view that the government is broken rather than working. In the case of public service delivery, the desire for more extensive consultation is most evident among rural residents and those with the lowest incomes.

How extensively should the federal government actively engage with Canadians?



Q.16

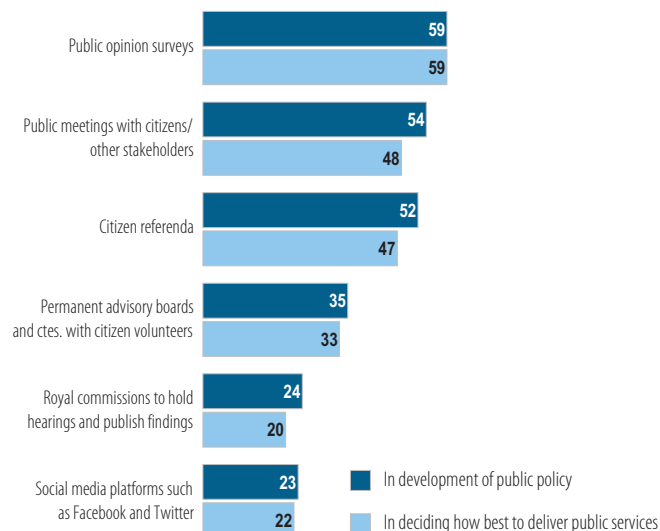
Which of one of the following statements best describes your own view about how extensively the federal government should actively engage Canadians in the [SPLIT SAMPLE: the development of public policies/deciding how best to deliver public services] ... ?

**Methods of public engagement.** The survey asked respondents about each of six different means by which the federal government can meaningfully engage citizens in the development of policy or in how best to deliver public services. Canadians are most likely to endorse public opinion surveys (59% for policy development and for service delivery, respectively), followed by public meetings (54% and 48%), citizen referenda (52% and 47%), and permanent advisory boards and committees composed of citizen volunteers (35% and 33%). Comparatively less confidence is placed on royal commissions (24% and 20%), and on using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (23% and 22%). This suggests that governments may not yet have hit on the right way to engage Canadians using these methods.

In terms of engaging the public in policy development, public opinion surveys is the most widely endorsed method across the population, but is especially popular in Atlantic Canada and Alberta. Older Canadians are the most enthusiastic about citizen referenda and permanent advisory boards, while younger Canadians are the ones who endorse social media platforms. Support for public meetings, referenda and permanent advisory boards increases with level of education, while Quebecers are less enamoured with all six of the options presented.

There is less regional and socio-demographic variation in the case of consultation on service delivery, although it is youth who are most apt to express confidence in social media as a form of meaningful engagement, while support for public meetings increases with level of education.

### Ways by which the federal government can meaningfully engage with Canadians



Q.17  
*In which of the following ways do you think the federal government can meaningfully engage with citizens in [SPLIT SAMPLE-MATCH WITH Q.16: the development of policy/deciding how best to deliver public services] ... ?*



## Representation for Indigenous peoples

*Canadians are open to mandating Indigenous peoples' representation in federal institutions, through such measures as guaranteed seats in Parliament and on the Supreme Court. Many remain uncertain pending further specifics about these types of changes.*

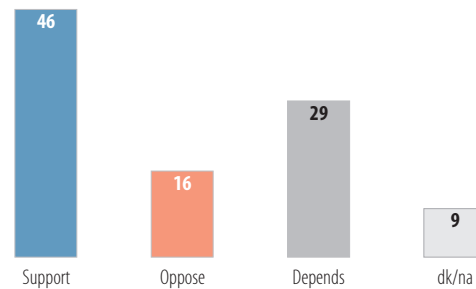
Currently, there are no formal mechanisms for ensuring that the country's Indigenous peoples are formally represented in federal institutions. The newly-elected federal government has made a commitment to give greater recognition to Indigenous peoples, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has named several Indigenous MPs to important posts in his cabinet.

How open are Canadians to ensuring Indigenous peoples have formal representation in the country's governing institutions? There is no public consensus, but the balance of opinion is clearly in favour. Close to half (46%) support such a change, compared with only 16 percent who oppose. The remainder say it depends (e.g., how this might be accomplished) (29%) or have no opinion to offer (9%).

Support for expanding Indigenous representation in the federal government is most widespread in eastern and central Canada, especially in Quebec (56%), as well as among Canadians earning less than \$60K in household income (54%) and those who believe the federal government is generally working (56%). Opposition to this idea is the minority view across the country, but is most evident in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (26%), among those in the top income bracket (23%) and those who say the federal government is completely broken (34%).

When those who oppose giving Indigenous peoples more representation in the country's governing institutions were asked (unprompted) why they do so, the most common reason given is that all Canadians are equal and that no group should be given preferential consideration (32% of this group, or 5% of the total population). Fewer gave as reasons that the current level of Indigenous representation is adequate (10%), that Indigenous peoples are currently over-represented (9%), that they are not responsible and might abuse the system (9%) or that representation should be based on qualifications, not background (5%). Nearly three in ten (28%) of this group cannot offer a specific reason for their opposition. (Note: The subsample size of this group who oppose the idea is too small to provide for valid analysis of regional or demographic groups.)

Support for giving Indigenous peoples more representation in governing institutions



Q.18

*The federal government has made a commitment to giving greater recognition to Indigenous peoples in Canada as political entities that should be formally represented in our country's institutions. Would you support or oppose giving Indigenous peoples more representation in the country's governing institutions?*

**Specific measures for expanding representation.** The survey further explored this issue by testing public support for five hypothetical steps for formalizing Indigenous representation at the federal level. None of the five specific measures presented on the survey has been publicly proposed or widely discussed, and this likely reflects the lack of clear opinions among many Canadians.

Of the five options presented, the public is most clearly supportive of establishing a permanent Cabinet Committee on Indigenous Affairs that would directly advise the Prime Minister; 50 percent support this idea, compared with 18 percent who oppose it. The remainder says it depends (23%) (e.g., on knowing more details about how it would be structured or operate) or have no opinion to offer (10%).

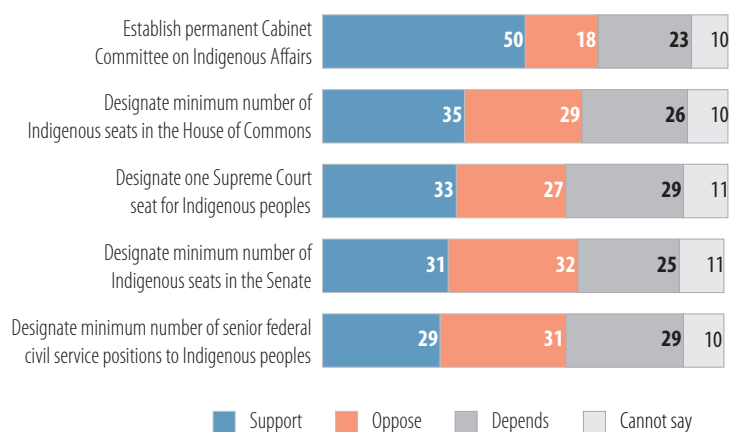
The other four measures for incorporating Indigenous representation into federal institutions receive a more mixed response, although well over half are open if not supportive. One in three Canadians support designating for Indigenous people a minimum number of seats in the House of Commons (35%) or a guaranteed single seat on the Supreme Court of Canada (33%), with most of the remainder evenly divided between those who oppose and those who say it would depend on the details. Support levels are marginally lower for reserving for Indigenous people

a minimum number of seats in the Canadian Senate (31%, versus 32% oppose) and designating a minimum number of senior federal civil service positions (e.g., deputy minister or executive director level) (29% support, versus 31% oppose).

Taken as a whole, these results indicate that a majority of Canadians are at least open to, if not in support of, these types of institutional changes to boost Indigenous representation in the federal government. Because none of these provisions has been previously proposed, they represent new ideas that the public will not yet have had time to give thought to.

Opinions vary only modestly across the country. As with the overall concept, support for expanding Indigenous representation through these five specific steps is higher in the east than the west (strongest in Quebec, weakest in Manitoba and Saskatchewan), higher among low income than high income Canadians, higher among women than among men, and higher among those who believe the federal government is working than among those who say it is broken. Beyond this, support for guaranteed Indigenous seats in the Senate is strongest among youth (ages 18 to 29), while support for a permanent Cabinet Committee is most evident among Canadians 60 plus, as well as those with higher levels of education.

### Expanding Indigenous representation in federal institutions



Q.20  
 Would you support or oppose ensuring Indigenous peoples have greater representation through each of the following ways ... ?