

Effectiveness of the federal government

Role of government in quality of life

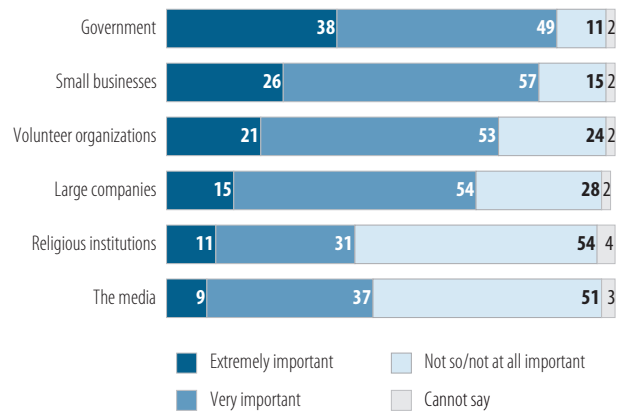
Canadians see government as essential to ensuring their local quality of life, and more so compared with the private and non-profit sectors, and the media.

The initial questions on the survey asked about the overall role of government (writ large) in society, and in relation to other major sectors of society. As in 2014, Canadians place considerable importance on government relative to other sectors and institutions. Close to four in ten (38%) say government is “extremely important” in ensuring a good quality of life in their own community, with most of the remainder (49%) indicating the government’s role is “very important.” These results are essentially unchanged from the previous survey conducted in fall 2014.

By comparison, around one in four identify small businesses (26%) or volunteer organizations (e.g., United Way, YMCA) (21%) as having an extremely important role in local quality of life, with fewer assigning this level of importance to large companies (15%), religious institutions (11%) or the media (9%). These proportions are down marginally since 2014 in all cases excepting small business (where it has remained unchanged).

Opinions about the contribution of government to societal quality of life are generally similar across the population, with the importance of government somewhat more evident among immigrants, engaged Canadians,¹ and those who are broadly positive about the role of government in today’s society (see more on this below). No more than one in five from any group express the view that government’s role in local quality of life is of little or no importance (with the exception of those who believe that the federal government is completely broken – comprising 28% of this group, up 6 points from 2014). Opinions on this question are generally consistent across regions, socio-economic status, age cohorts and employment sectors.

Importance in ensuring good quality of life in your community



Q.1

How important do you believe each of the following sectors is to ensuring a good quality of life in your community ... ?

¹ A variable was created to measure the degree to which Canadians are paying attention to, and engaged with, public policy and public affairs. An index of “engagement” was created based on responses to questions about media use, voting behaviour, and education level. “Engaged Canadians” represent the top 38% of this index.

Is the federal government working?

Canadians are twice as likely to believe the federal government is working as opposed to broken, showing improvement since 2014. The public is most apt to say the government is broken because of wasteful spending, poor decision-making, and not being responsive to citizen priorities and needs.

Canadians were asked a global question about the effectiveness of the federal government today, borrowed from a 2013 survey of Americans conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute and The Brookings Institution, and also included on our 2014 governance survey. Public views about the effectiveness of the federal government are mixed but show significant improvement since 2014. More than six in ten Canadians now say the federal government is generally working (27%) or working but with major problems (36%), up 13 percentage points. One-third are negative, saying the government is “broken, but working in some areas” (25%) or “completely broken” (8%), down eight points. Only five percent are unable to offer an opinion (down 4 points).

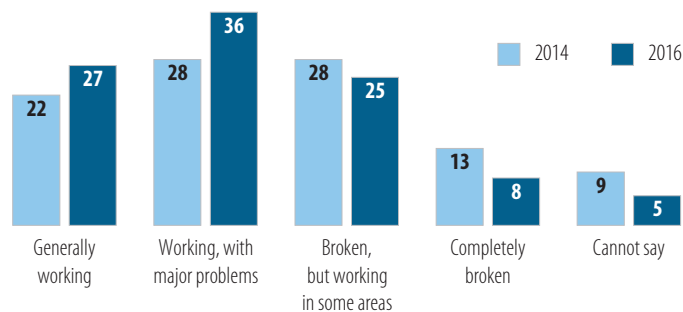
Canadians’ assessment of the federal government’s effectiveness is generally consistent across the country, and the upward trend in ratings is evident in all groups, but most significant in Atlantic Canada and Ontario, as well as among Canadians with lower incomes and francophones, while declining modestly in Alberta (down 6 points).

This pattern suggests that the boost in positive ratings of the federal government’s effectiveness is due in part to the recent change in government after the October 2015 general election.

As was found in 2014, opinions are closely related to direct experience with a federal government agency or service in the previous 12 months: Among those very satisfied with this service experience, 71 percent say that government is generally working; this drops to 34 percent among those somewhat satisfied, and declines further to only seven percent among those who are not satisfied (62% of this group says government is broken). Individuals who have not had any experience with government services in the past year are somewhat more negative than average, but this group has shown the most improvement since 2014 (with positive ratings up 13 points).

It is worth noting that Canadians’ satisfaction with federal government services has improved measurably since 2014, with more than half now saying they are very (9%) or somewhat (44%) satisfied in dealing with federal government agencies or services in the previous 12 months (up 12 percentage points).

Is the federal government today working or broken?



Q.2
Would you say that the federal government today is ... ?

How is the federal government broken? The third of Canadians critical of the federal government’s effectiveness were asked in what way it is partially or completely broken. The question offered eight response options, with the opportunity to volunteer additional reasons. As in 2014, Canadians give multiple reasons for their view, with each mentioned by at least four in ten. This group is most likely to say the federal government is broken because of wasteful spending (80%), followed by poor decisions or policies they do not agree with (62%), not being responsive to citizen priorities and needs (61%), and inadequate services to help those in need (52%).

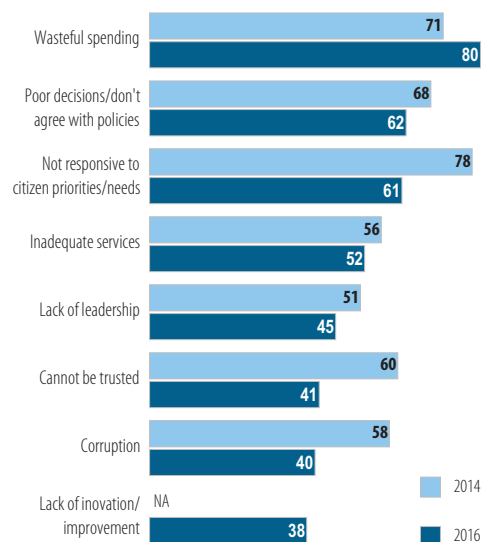
Approximately four in ten criticize the government for a lack of leadership (45%), being untrustworthy (41%), corruption (40%), and a lack of innovation or improvements (38%). Only three percent offer other reasons, and two percent cannot provide any response to the question.

The rank order of reasons for government failure is largely the same as in 2014, but the proportion of Canadians citing them has declined in all cases except for wasteful spending (which increased by 9 percentage points). The most significant declines are in mentions of untrustworthiness (down 19 points), corruption (down 18), and not being responsive to citizen priorities and needs (down 17). The one new item added to the list in 2016 was a lack of innovation and improvements.

The segment of the population identified as “engaged Canadians” are more likely than others to emphasize wasteful spending, poor decision-making, lack of responsiveness to citizen priorities, and a lack of innovation and improvements (the one new item added in 2016).

How is federal government broken?

Those who say federal government is broken



Q.3

In what way would you say the federal government is broken?

The need for change

Canadians are more likely to believe the federal government needs to make effective incremental improvements rather than fundamentally change how it operates. The most salient areas of improvement involve better leadership, greater accountability and more efficient spending.

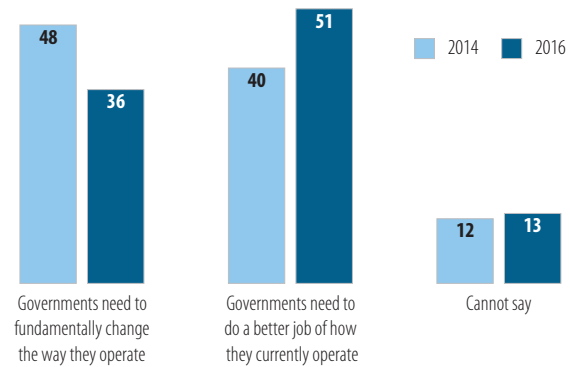
Even those citizens who believe the federal government is working would likely also agree there is room for improvement. The survey asked a general question about the magnitude of change that Canadians might feel is warranted, in terms of how the government serves the needs of the people who elected it to office. On this question there is no consensus: Just over one-third (36%) say the government needs to fundamentally change the way it operates, compared with a larger proportion (51%) who believe it is more a matter of doing a better job of how it currently operates. These results reflect a substantial shift since 2014, when the balance of opinion was almost reversed (48% saying fundamental change versus 40% doing a better job). Such a near-term shift may at least partly reflect a focus on the approach taken by a specific government-of-the-day, rather than on deeper structural issues.

Opinions about this question are remarkably consistent across segments of the Canadian population. The shift away from a perceived need for fundamental change is evident in every identifiable group, including those who had an unsatisfactory experience with federal government services in the past year.

Canadians were asked to identify what they consider to be the single most important change the federal government needs to make to do a better job (asked in an open-ended format, with no response options offered). The public provided a range of responses, but when categorized into conceptual categories, none are expressed by as many as one in five. At the top of this list of desired changes are providing better leadership/representation (17%); being more accountable, honest, open or transparent (10%); providing more efficient spending, reducing deficits (7%); and a number of other priorities none of which are mentioned by more than six percent. Another third (33%) cannot identify anything in particular in response to this question.

These are largely the same types of changes that Canadians identified in 2014, and roughly in the same order. The

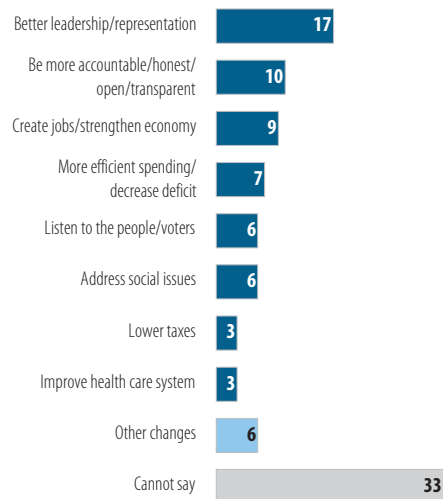
How much do governments need to change to serve the people who elect them?



Q.5

In order to properly serve the people who elect them, do you think ... ?

Single most important change government needs to make



Q.6

What in your view is the single most important change the federal government needs to make in order to do a better job?

current survey reveals greater emphasis on addressing social issues (6%, up 2 points), and less focus on accountability and transparency (down 10) and listening to the people (down 8). Priorities for federal government changes are generally similar across the population.