

Executive summary

How do Canadians today view the institutions of their federal government, how much reform do they think is called for, and what types of changes do they believe are needed or would be prepared to accept? In broad terms, the Canadian public is looking for improvements, but stopping short of demanding wholesale changes in the country's governance systems (in sharp contrast with the current political climate in the USA).

A clear majority of the Canadian public currently believes the government in Ottawa today is generally working, rather than broken. This sentiment has strengthened measurably in the space of 18 months (when last measured), most likely as a result of a new government taking office following the October 2015 federal election. This does not mean that everyone is satisfied, and three-quarters of Canadians believe there are problems (if not major ones) with how the country is governed. There is no one focus of primary concern, with Canadians identifying a range of problem areas, first and foremost wasteful spending, but also poor decision-making, and a lack of responsiveness to citizen priorities and needs. By comparison, there is less emphasis given to problems with corruption and the lack of innovation and improvement in how the government operates. Overall, the survey indicates that Canadians would like to see improved governance at the federal level, but more in the form of incremental improvements than sweeping transformation in how the country's democratic institutions function.

REFORMS TO FEDERAL INSTITUTIONS. What types of changes or reforms would Canadians like to see made to the country's federal institutions? Among the areas covered in this research, the Canadian Senate is the institution most widely seen by the public as being in need of change. While there is no consensus on what this might look like, there is strong majority support for either major reforms or outright abolishment, and there is broad agreement that reopening the Constitution is justified in order to make something significant happen. There is also widespread public support

for making changes that do not require constitutional change, such as strengthening the rules of conduct for Senators and making the appointment process more transparent.

Canadians express interest in changing the country's electoral system, but this does not reflect widespread or deep-seated desire for reform. Majorities express support for making it possible to vote in federal elections online, and reforming the current election financing laws, while there is considerably less openness to mandatory voting laws (as are now in place in some countries like Australia). In terms of changing the country's longstanding "first past the post" method of electing MPs to Parliament, a majority favours changes, but only one in four Canadians believes that these should be major in scope. None of the alternative voting systems currently under consideration are clearly favoured, although the mixed member proportional method is comparatively more popular than the others tested. The results suggest the public as a whole is not yet engaged in the issue of reforming the federal electoral voting system, and that Canadians will need more information and public discussions to better understand the alternatives.

Canadians believe the federal government should be engaging with citizens in how it governs the country, although this does not mean there is an expectation or desire for consultation on every decision and policy. The balance of opinion tilts toward the middle ground: engagement where the input is most likely to improve decisions and outcomes, as opposed to consulting on most major decisions or, alternatively, in only a few cases. As for how the public would like to be engaged, there is greater preference for some traditional methods (public opinion surveys, public meetings) over the more selectively-used royal commissions or 21st century innovations like social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. This suggests that the federal government has not yet made use of the right social media engagement tools for meeting current expectations about engagement on public policy.

Increased recognition of Indigenous peoples is a central plank in the new government's mandate, and this is reflected in the appointment of several Indigenous MPs to important Cabinet posts such as Justice. Consistent with this new priority, the Canadian public is generally supportive of expanding Indigenous peoples' representation in the country's governing institutions, although this support is not unqualified as many say their opinion depends on what form this representation might take. For instance, when asked about designating a specific number of seats for Indigenous representatives in the House of Commons, in the Senate or on the Supreme Court, opinions are evenly divided as follows: one-third support, one-third oppose, and one-third say it depends or are unsure. Overall, it is significant that two-thirds of Canadians are open to, if not clearly supportive of, mandating the representation of Indigenous peoples in the central institutions of the federal government.

GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY.

Public institutions and the people who run them no longer enjoy the level of public confidence and deference they did in previous generations. The Canadian public's trust in MPs and federal civil servants remains qualified at best; most say they have "some" or "little" trust in these actors. Perhaps for this reason, there is widespread public agreement that rules and procedures are necessary to ensure the accountability of those who are governing on its behalf.

At the same time, the research also demonstrates that Canadians consider such rules to be necessary, but by no means sufficient, in guiding those who work in government. Strong majorities agree that accountability should be based on what is accomplished (rather than what procedures have been followed) and on clear principles (rather than on detailed rules). As well, even those who believe there are not enough rules and procedures in the federal government today are not keen to add new ones if such rules lead to less timely decisions, slower innovation or additional costs to taxpayers.

GOVERNANCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE. Government agencies and departments are now focusing on determining how best to incorporate digital technologies into policy development and service delivery. There is clear public interest in seeing expanded use of digital technologies, particularly in such areas as providing citizens with government information online, delivery of public services,

direct access to elected officials through online platforms, and new forms of consultation through digital media. Four in ten say they would be interested in being able to communicate directly with governments via text messaging on service-related issues (e.g., tax returns, passport renewals). At the same time, there is no pent-up demand for new digital government services. Only one-third believe governments are currently doing too little in the application of digital technologies, and few can think of particular areas in which they could be doing more. These results suggest that, by and large, Canadians may not yet be familiar with the existing governance-related applications of digital technologies, and therefore unlikely to fully appreciate their current and potential benefits.

Despite expressing interest in digital government, Canadians also have concerns about the potential risks, such as the deliberate or inadvertent leak of personal information. At the same time, it is by no means apparent that such worries represent a significant obstacle to public support and use of expanding digital services offered by government.

Canadians are quickly becoming familiar with the fast-emerging world of "sharing economy" businesses. Four in ten have already used, or know someone who has used, Uber (the app-based taxi-type service) and AirBnB (the web-based service for lodging in private homes). The growth of these services underscores their popularity, but not everyone is yet on board with this business model as a good thing. Most Canadians believe these businesses should be subject to regulation in such areas as insurance, taxation and safety standards, whether this involves the current regulatory structure or a new one that accommodates both traditional and sharing economy businesses.

HOW OPINIONS VARY ACROSS THE POPULATION.

Canadian opinions on the topics covered in this survey are largely similar across the population, and the conclusions articulated above apply regardless of individuals' province, socio-economic status, age group or gender. Attitudes differ to varying degrees among groups on specific issues, but there is no underlying pattern of divergent perspectives, be they regional or socio-economic, on the broad topics of government effectiveness, institutional reform, government accountability or governing in a digital world.