

Government accountability and oversight

Public confidence in government institutions depends in large part on trusting that laws and policies are adhered to, that resources are expended in an efficient and honest way, and that institutions in every way act in the best interests of the citizens they represent. The survey explored several aspects of government accountability and oversight.

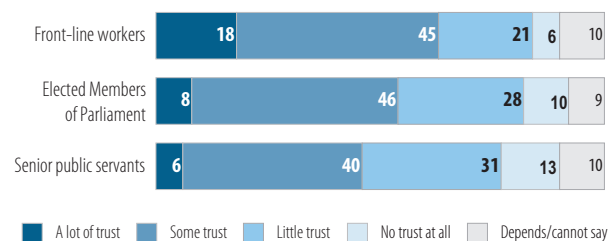
Trust in government accountability

More than six in ten Canadians trust front-line workers delivering public services to do the right thing when they have the power to do so. Somewhat fewer place this level of trust in elected members of Parliament and senior public servants.

The survey asked respondents about their level of trust in three types of federal actors in terms of doing the right thing when they have the authority and resources to do so. Canadians are most likely to say they have a lot of trust (18%) or some trust (45%) in front-line workers who deliver public services. Another quarter have little (21%) or no trust (6%) in this group. Just over half have a lot of trust (8%) or some (46%) trust in elected members of Parliament, while somewhat fewer feel this way about senior public servants (e.g., managers and policy experts) (46% have a great deal or some trust, versus 44% have little or none).

Trust levels across the three sets of actors vary somewhat in a consistent pattern across population subgroups. Higher levels of trust (a lot or some) are most widespread among Canadians 60 years and older, those with higher levels of education and income, those who are highly engaged, those who have had a positive experience with government service in the past year, and those who think the federal government is generally working. Not surprisingly, the most negative sentiment is expressed by those who believe the government is completely broken – 54 percent in this group have little or no trust in front-line workers, 73 percent have little or no trust in elected members of Parliament, 77 percent in the case of senior public servants. In addition, trust in senior public servants is higher in urban areas and lower in Quebec, while trust in front-line workers is higher among men and those born in Canada.

Trust in government actors to do the right thing



Q.21

To what extent do you trust each of the following individuals in the federal government to do the right thing when they have the authority and resources to do so ... ?

Perceptions about government oversight and accountability

There is widespread public agreement that rules and procedures are essential to government workers properly doing their jobs, but Canadians also say accountability should be based mainly on principles rather than detailed rules, and on what is accomplished rather than what procedures are followed.

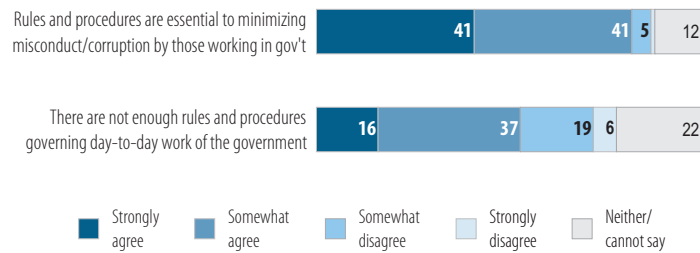
The public expects there to be clearly defined rules and procedures governing the work of people in government, but how much emphasis should there be on rules and procedures as opposed to principles and what gets accomplished in the end? The survey reveals conflicting public attitudes on this issue.

On the one hand, there is near consensus among Canadians about the need for rules and procedures in federal government operations. More than eight in ten strongly (41%) or somewhat (41%) agree with the statement “Rules and procedures are essential to minimizing misconduct and corruption by those working in government,” compared with

just six percent who disagree. And a small majority also strongly (16%) or somewhat (37%) agree that “There are not enough rules and procedures governing the day-to-day work of the [federal] government,” versus less than half as many (25%) who disagree and an almost equal proportion (22%) who cannot say either way.

Responses to these two statements are similar across the country. Agreement is stronger in the east than in the west (Quebecers are most apt to strongly agree, with British Columbians least apt to do so). Strong agreement is also more widespread among Canadians with lower levels of education, those who believe the federal government is broken, and those who say that government needs to change fundamentally. Belief in the necessity of rules in government increases with age cohort (31% among those 18 to 29 strongly agree, rising to 55% among those 60 plus). But on the need for *more* rules, it is Canadians 60 plus who are least apt to strongly agree.

The importance of rules and procedures in guiding those working in government



Q.22a,d

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the federal government ...

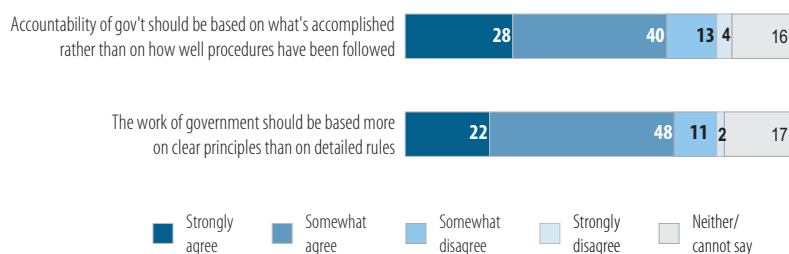
While Canadians may say that rules and procedures to guide those working in government are necessary, they also believe they are not in themselves sufficient. Seven in ten strongly (22%) or somewhat (48%) agree that *“The work of government should be based on more clear principles than detailed rules,”* and a comparable proportion strongly (28%) or somewhat (40%) agree that *“The accountability of the government should be based on what is accomplished rather than how well procedures have been followed.”* On both statements, fewer than one in five disagree, with a comparable number saying they neither agree nor disagree, or have no opinion.

Moreover, the perspective expressed in these statements is not considered at odds with the previous statements about the need for rules and procedures; most Canadians adhere

to both (e.g., 63% agree both with the statement about rules being essential *and* the statement about the importance of outcomes over procedures). This suggests that the public believes that rules and procedures are necessary, but not sufficient for good governance and, by implication, that care should be taken to ensure that rules do not serve as obstacles to the achievement of results.

Opinions on these statements are generally consistently held across the population. Quebecers are somewhat more likely than others to express strong agreement about importance of clear principles and outcomes over procedures. This latter view is also more widely shared by Canadians 60 plus, and those who say the federal government is broken and needs fundamental change.

The importance of rules and procedures in guiding those working in government



Q.22b,c

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the federal government ...

Trade-offs in expanding rules and procedures in government operations

Canadians who believe there are not enough rules and procedures in government are divided on whether more rules are justified if it reduces the timeliness of decisions and service delivery. Even fewer would like to see more rules if it meant slower innovation or additional costs to taxpayers.

Those Canadians who agree there are not enough rules and procedures governing the day-to-day work of government (53% of the population) were also asked if they believe there should be more rules and procedures with four specific caveats. The purpose of these questions is to assess the strength of public opinion around government oversight, and to identify where the concept of more rules in government might become less desirable given certain consequences.

All four of the caveats presented in the survey do in fact make a significant difference in Canadians' belief in the need for more rules and procedures in government operations. Among those who previously said there are not enough rules, fewer than half say that more should be added if it meant reducing the timeliness of government decision-making and delivery of public services (47%), or reducing the flexibility of public servants to make decisions and adjust to circumstances (42%). In both cases, about one-third indicate that such a trade-off would not be desirable, while roughly

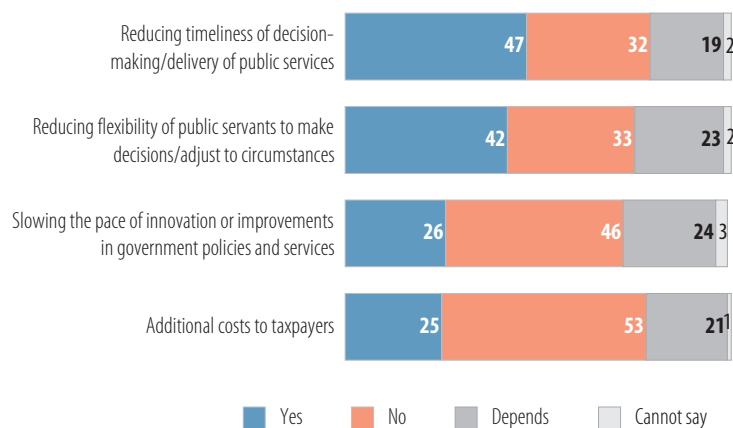
one in five say it would depend (e.g., on the specifics of the rules and what areas of government might be affected).

Even fewer in this group advocate for more rules and procedures in government if it meant slowing the pace of innovation or improvements in government policies and services (26%), or additional costs to taxpayers (25%). In both cases, about half say such rules would not be justified, with another one in five feeling it would depend on the specifics.

Opinions about these trade-offs are generally consistent across the population. Support for more rules even if it meant less timeliness of decisions and service delivery is somewhat more evident among highly engaged Canadians and much lower in Quebec (where only 29% share this view). Quebecers, however, are keener than others to endorse adding rules at the expense of reducing public servant flexibility, as are Canadians with lower levels of education and income. Youth (18 to 29) are most apt to say more rules would be in order at the expense of innovation, with no difference in opinions by socio-economic status. As for incurring additional costs to taxpayers, support for more rules even at a higher cost is greater among men, urban residents and Canadians 18 to 29, and lowest in Alberta, among rural residents and those with less education.

Should there be more rules governing day-to-day work of government if it meant ...?

Those who say that there aren't enough rules and procedures



Q.23

Do you believe there should be more rules and procedures governing the day-to-day work of the government if it meant ...?