

Executive Summary

What does the public expect from governments, and how well do they believe their country, province and local municipality are governed? The survey results reveal that Canadians continue to see their governments as essential institutions, and there is broad agreement on some of the expectations about how they should operate. But citizens are divided on how well these expectations are being met today, whether it is at the municipal, provincial or federal level. Most can agree that improvements are needed, but there is no collective public vision of what this might entail.

WHAT CANADIANS EXPECT FROM THEIR GOVERNMENTS IN TERMS OF HOW THEY OPERATE.

The survey confirms previous research showing that Canadians consider governments to be essential institutions, not just as governing bodies but in ensuring the quality of life in their community. A key aspect of this role is in looking out for everyone in society, including those facing hardships (e.g., financial, health-related, discrimination). While the overall scope of government activity and oversight has contracted in many areas over the past decade, citizens continue to place significant expectations in terms of policies, programs and services.

More specifically, most Canadians place a high priority on a range of government practices, among the most important being the protection the privacy of the personal information it collects from citizens, and public accountability for how decisions and policies are made. Comparatively lower emphasis is given to how governments consult with citizens, publish non-confidential research and statistics, and implement innovating improvements in the delivery of online services. Providing services in a cost-effective way is also important, but sits in the middle of this list.

In the public's eye, elected officials are the face and essential actors in government, and there is broad agreement that their decisions should be based more on the priorities of their constituents than on their own judgement and experience (a view most strongly held by younger generations). Canadians also see an important role for the civil servants who run government departments and agencies, and believe they should be playing an active part

in shaping policies and decisions (rather than limiting their role to carrying out whatever politicians might decide). Few citizens accept the view that good public policy emerges from tension between politicians and civil servants.

Political parties do not enjoy a positive public image, but their contribution to good governance is not fully rejected. Only one in five Canadians say political parties currently have a positive impact on the effectiveness of government, but most also believe they have a constructive role in government policy development that extends beyond election periods.

HOW WELL GOVERNMENTS ARE LIVING UP TO PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS.

Canadians' assessment of their governments' effectiveness is decidedly mixed. The public is somewhat more likely to see their governments as "working" rather than "broken", with opinions more positive when it comes to municipal government, followed provincial governments and least so for the federal government. At the same time, Canadians are as likely to say that governments are the cause as the solution to important problems facing society today, and fewer than half believe that people in government are genuinely trying to do their best for the people they represent, with this confidence lowest when it comes to the federal government. When asked how government is broken, Canadians are most likely to emphasize wasteful spending and lack of responsiveness to citizen priorities and needs.

Citizens' assessment of government performance in specific areas is similarly mixed. Canadians are most positive about how their governments are protecting the privacy of citizen information and making effective use of electronic technology, and less so when it comes to being accountable for decisions, providing public services in a cost-effective way, actively consulting citizens, and publishing government generated-research and statistics. Again, municipal governments receive the stronger ratings, while the federal government rates the lowest (with this difference most evident in terms of public accountability for decisions, active consultation with the public and working constructively with other levels of government).

Canadians are most likely to see the people they elect to office as the accountable actors when governments fail to operate as they should, rather than civil servants, front-line workers, political parties or the media. This view is consistent for all three levels of government, and is equally strong regardless of whether it involves governments failing to make good decisions, using taxpayer dollars efficiently, being accountable and transparent, or providing needed services to citizens.

The public is divided about the contribution that the country's media make to good governance in Canada today. On the one hand, the media is widely lauded for holding governments to account for their performance, and providing the only way for most citizens to know what their governments are doing. On the other hand, most Canadians also believe the media is often biased in how it covers important issues, and is too focused on uncovering government scandals and controversies.

HOW GOVERNMENTS NEED TO CHANGE. Given the less than enthusiastic endorsement of current government effectiveness, it is no surprise that Canadians want to see improvements. But there is little agreement on what this might entail, perhaps because it is not a question that is given much thought by most citizens, nor is it one that leads to easy or obvious answers. Opinions are divided with respect whether the need is for fundamental change in how governments operate or is more a matter of incremental improvements. Not surprisingly, opinions on this question are closely tied to whether one sees government as working or broken.

The desire for better governance notwithstanding, public opinion does not offer a clear direction on what needs to change. Canadians identify a number of areas for improvement, such as improving public accountability and transparency, providing better leadership, and more efficient spending. But none of these emerge as a broadly endorsed theme, and four in ten Canadians could not suggest any

specific improvements when asked. More telling, perhaps is a notable degree of skepticism about the prospect of seeing progress: Fewer than four in ten express confidence that governments are capable of making the necessary changes.

Canadians are favourable toward four types of government operational innovations that were presented on the survey. Three-quarters express support for publishing more information online about how government decisions are made, and for taking a more ambitious approach to modernizing service delivery along the lines of what the private sector offers. Almost two-thirds endorse governments more actively consulting with citizens through online platforms, and offering the option of online voting in future elections.

Given the balancing act involved in providing programs and services on the one hand, and paying for them on the other, how much government does the public want? There is no consensus on this question, but Canadians are more likely to prefer smaller governments that provide fewer services and lower tax rates, compared with bigger government with more services and higher tax rates. But just as many advocate for the status quo or do not have a clear opinion on the question.

Finally, there is modest public support in principle for the practice of governments contracting out the delivery of public services to private sector contractors, which tend to be seen as better able to offer lower prices and higher quality service. At the same time, many Canadians make it clear that the benefits of private sector involvement depend on the type of public service being delivered. Moreover, a notable minority oppose this type of outsourcing out of concerns about companies focusing too much on profits, potentially leading to higher prices, or a general distrust of the private sector. In the end, the public is more likely than not to expect governments to be ultimately accountable for ensuring that contracted-out services are delivered properly.

HOW OPINIONS VARY ACROSS THE POPULATION.

Canadians' opinions about the effectiveness of their governments are similar across the population, in that the broad conclusions outlined above apply regardless of province, community size, socio-economic status, age group, gender or whether born in Canada or abroad. But some variations in attitudes are worth noting:

- Citizens' direct experience with a government service or agency in the previous 12 months is closely linked to attitudes about the effectiveness of government. Those who were very satisfied with this experience (regardless of jurisdiction) were significantly more positive in their opinions about government effectiveness, in comparison with those not as satisfied or who had no such experience in the previous year. This link does not confirm causality, but it is consistent with other evidence showing that direct experience (both positive and negative) with organizations has a powerful influence over broader opinions of their effectiveness.
- Being informed about how governments operate appears to have a limited influence on views about government effectiveness. The survey categorized Canadians by how engaged they are in public policy and public affairs (based on media use, voting behaviour and education level). Those most highly engaged (the top 30% of the population) are more positive on some questions (e.g., government as the solution rather than the cause of problems), but overall do not stand out as having a noticeably different perspective to governance and government effectiveness. Canadians with a low level of engagement are distinctive as a group in being least apt to express any opinion on many of the topics covered.
- For the most part, public opinion about governance is not a matter of who Canadians are in terms of where they live or who they are, as defined by their demographic characteristics. The most notable pattern is a somewhat more negative view of government among older citizens, those living in rural areas, and those who live in Quebec.