

Important Priorities for Government

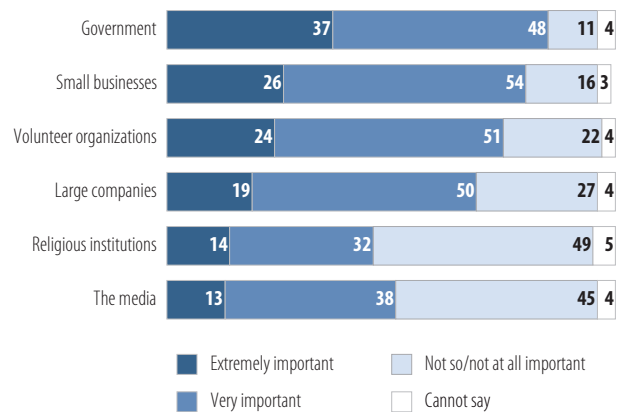
Role of Government in Quality of Life

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

The initial survey questions asked about the overall role of institutions in society, and reveal that Canadians place considerable importance on government relative to other sectors and institutions. Close to four in ten (37%) say government is “extremely important” in ensuring a good quality of life in their own community, with another half (48%) indicating the government’s role is “very important.” By comparison, one in four identify small businesses (26%) and volunteer organizations (e.g., United Way, YMCA) (24%) as having an extremely important role in local quality of life, with fewer assigning this level of importance to large companies (19%), religious institutions (14%) and the media (13%).

Opinions are generally similar across the population, with the importance of government somewhat more evident among residents of major urban centres, immigrants, engaged Canadians¹, 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 expresses the view that government’s role in local quality of life is of little or no importance. Opinions on these questions are notably consistent across regions, socio-economic status, age cohorts and employment sector.

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 30% of the population on this index.

Important values guiding government policy

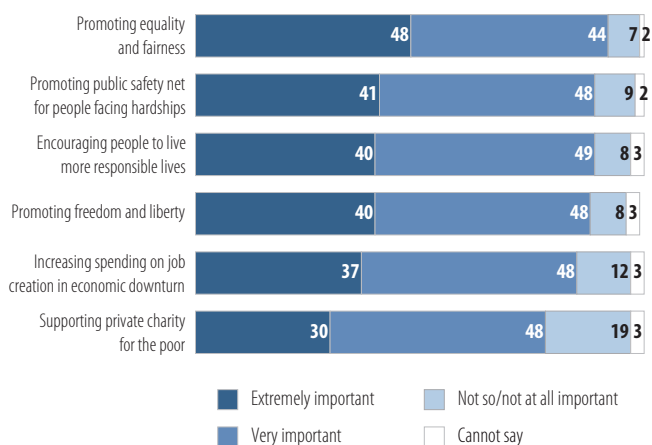
Among values guiding government policy, the public places the top priority on ensuring equality and fairness, with less emphasis given to promoting freedom, personal responsibility, and increased spending during downturns.

What values do Canadians believe should guide government policy, especially as they relate to economic policy? There is broad public agreement across the six values presented on the survey, with eight in ten or more identifying each as very, if not extremely, important.

Of these values, Canadians are most likely to place “extreme importance” on promoting equality and fairness (48%). Four in ten place this level of importance on providing a public safety net for people experiencing hardship (41%), encouraging people to live more responsible lives (40%), promoting freedom and liberty (40%) and increasing spending on job creation during economic downturns (37%), with somewhat fewer emphasizing and supporting private charity for the poor (30%).

These questions were drawn from a 2013 survey of Americans, which provides the basis for a cross-national comparison.² Canadians and Americans place a similar priority on their governments being guided to encourage people to live more responsible lives and promoting liberty and freedom. But Canadians are more likely to place very or extreme importance on providing a public safety net (plus 25 percentage points), supporting private charity for the poor (plus 19 points) and promoting equality and fairness (plus 13 points).³

Values that should guide government policy



Q.2

Please indicate how important you believe each of the following values should be in guiding government policy in our country today: [From Brookings 2013 US survey] ...

2 Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution (2013). Do Americans believe capitalism and government are working? <http://tinyurl.com/pv5766q>

3 The value statement about increased spending during economic downturns was not included in the US survey.

Priorities for how governments operate

Canadians place the highest priority on how governments operate in the areas of protecting the privacy of personal information and being publicly accountable for decisions and policies.

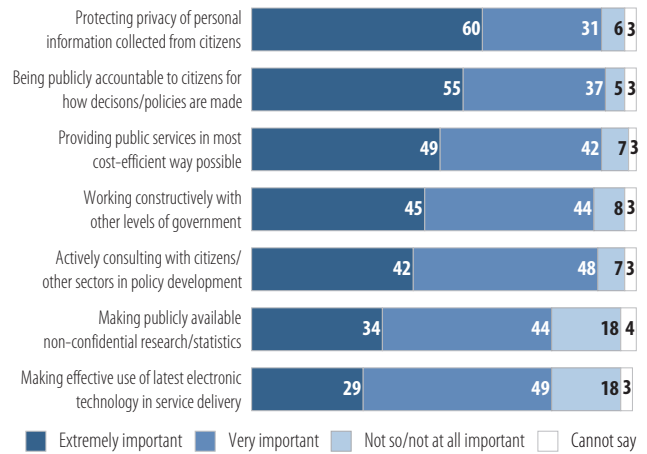
The survey explored the public's priorities on how governments should operate, with respect to seven broadly defined dimensions. Not surprisingly, there is a widespread consensus among Canadians in endorsing these dimensions – in all but one case at least nine in ten say they are at least “very” important, with greater variation in the proportion who consider them to be “extremely” important.

At the top of the list is **protecting the privacy of personal information that governments collect from citizens**, identified by 60 percent as extremely important, with another 31 percent saying very important and very few (6%) indicating not so or not at all important. Close behind are **being publicly accountable to citizens for how decisions and policies are made** (55% extremely important), **providing public services in the most cost-efficient way possible** (49%), **working constructively with other levels of government** (45%), and **actively consulting with citizens and other sectors in the development of policies** (42%).

Somewhat lower priority is given to **making publicly available the non-confidential research and statistics that governments collect** (34% extremely important), and **making effective use of the latest electronic technology in the delivery of information and services** (29%).

These priorities are largely consistent across the population. The level of importance assigned to these dimensions tends to be higher among older Canadians (especially for those 60 and over), among those highly engaged, and those who are fundamentally critical of government (i.e., believe it is broken, and more likely to be the problem than the solution – see below). There are few differences by socio-economic status, except in the case of making effective use of the latest electronic technology, which is given greater emphasis by those with the lowest levels of education and income.

Important priorities for how governments operate



Q.3

Now thinking about how governments operate, how important do you believe each of the following is to having a good government that serves everyone well ... ?

Role of specific government actors

The public believes elected officials should heed their constituents over their own judgement and work collaboratively with the civil servants who serve them. Most are comfortable with political parties playing an active role in government policy development.

The survey asked Canadians specific questions about how they view the appropriate governance roles of elected officials, civil servants and political parties.

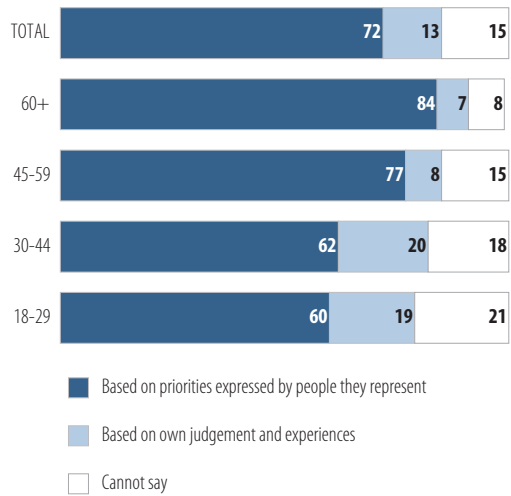
ELECTED OFFICIALS. Politicians are elected by the people to represent them in government, but they are often called upon to exercise their own judgement and experience in making decisions that may not be consistent with their constituents' wishes. How does the public view this balance? The survey results reveal a clear priority, with more than seven in ten (72%) Canadians saying it is more important for elected officials to base their decisions on the priorities of the people they represent (regardless of their own views), compared with just 13 percent who believe it is more important for them to exercise judgement and experience (even when this does not reflect the views of those who they represent). Another 15 percent cannot offer an opinion either way.

This sentiment reflects a majority view across the population, although stronger among some groups than others. The most noticeable difference is across age cohorts, with the priority placed on representing constituent priorities most widespread among Canadians 60 and older (84%), and least so among those under 30 (60%). This viewpoint is also somewhat more evident among women, proponents of smaller government, and highly engaged Canadians (among those with low engagement, 30% were unable to offer an opinion on the question).

CIVIL SERVANTS. What role do Canadians believe civil servants should play in how they relate to the elected officials to whom they report? Two-thirds (66%) believe that civil servants should actively provide expert advice and recommend policies, compared with fewer than one in five (18%) who say they should limit their role to carrying out whatever decisions are made by elected officials. This reflects a majority view across the country, but strengthens along with age, education level and household income, as well as with level of engagement with public policy and public affairs.

How elected officials should make decisions

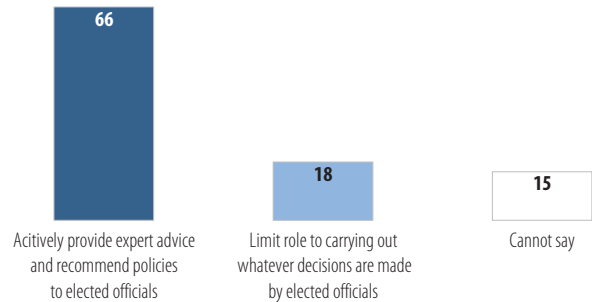
By age cohort



Q.4

Thinking now of the elected officials who lead our governments, is it more important that they make decisions ... ?

Best role for civil servants



Q.5

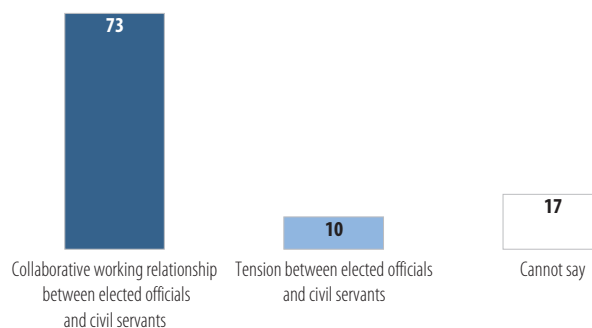
Thinking now of the civil servants that manage government departments and agencies, do you think they should ... ?

Canadians also believe that the best government policy results from a collaborative working relationship between elected officials and civil servants (73%), rather than one characterized by tension (10%). This viewpoint is strongest among older Canadians, those with a university education and those who are highly engaged, while less evident among francophones, Canadians under 45, and those in the lowest income bracket. In no group do more than one in five believe tension creates better policy, with the exception of those who advocate bigger government (29%).

POLITICAL PARTIES. Political parties in Canada are known chiefly as organizations for electing representatives and leaders, but most Canadians appear to be comfortable with the idea of them also being actively involved in governance and policy-making. Six in ten (62%) believe that political parties have a constructive role helping to set government policy between elections, compared with 22 percent who say their role should be limited only to organizing and running elections.

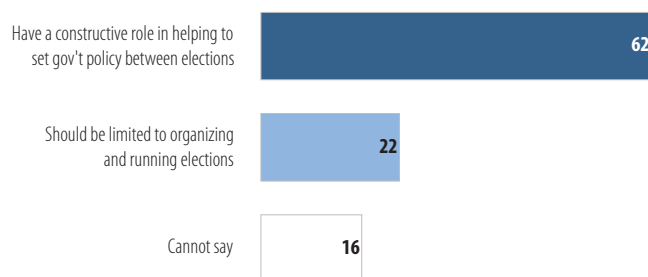
Support for party involvement in policy is most evident in Quebec (71%; and especially among French-speaking Canadians at 80%), as well as among women, Canadians 60 and older, those employed in the non-profit sector and those who are highly engaged.

Best way to create good public policy



Q6.
Which view is closer to your own ... ?

Role of political parties



Q7
Do you believe that political parties in our system of government ... ?