

BACKGROUND

The Common Good: Who Decides? A National Survey of Canadians

*Commissioned by The Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation,
in collaboration with the University of Alberta*

Purpose:

Prior to the ninth annual Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation Conference, entitled “The Common Good: Who Decides?” (November 22-24, 2012), the Environics Institute for Survey Research conducted a national survey of Canadians around this theme of defining the common good. Which values and priorities do Canadians believe define what is best for this country, to what extent do they feel there is a national consensus on these values/priorities, and how do they believe fundamental differences in priorities can best be reconciled?

Highlights:

- Canadians are more likely than not to agree there is a shared set of common values and priorities about what is best for the country. But relatively few strongly agree that such a consensus exists, or can easily identify what those values and priorities are. When the focus shifts to defining the common good at the provincial level, a clear sense of shared values is somewhat more evident among those living in Alberta, Atlantic Canada, Saskatchewan and Quebec.
- Among 12 defined values describing the type of country people think Canada should be, there is a broad consensus on four of them as being part of the common good: treating women and men equally in all walks of life, a political system that encourages citizens to let politicians know what they think, publicly-funded health care, and respect for all religions. Most Canadians find these values personally important aspirations for the country, and also believe most of their fellow citizens share their view.
- There is also widespread public agreement about the importance of four other values, but the strength of opinion is less definitive, and Canadians are less sure about the extent to which others share their own viewpoint. These values include: a social safety net that helps everyone in need, strict laws on crime to keep criminals off the streets, protecting the environment even if it limits economic development, and speaking or respecting both English and French languages. In the cases of environmental protection and respect for English and French, Canadians are much more likely to think the public is divided than in fact they really are.
- There is more qualified agreement about the importance of the final four values. In these cases a majority agree overall in their importance for Canada, but a much smaller proportion strongly agree, and as many or more disagree. These values include: fully welcoming immigrants from all over the world, a strong military, not having a big difference in incomes between the wealthy and everyone else, and (at the bottom of the list) taxes as low as possible even if it may limit government services.

- The public gives their elected representatives a mixed review when it comes to balancing competing interests when there are major differences on important issues. This view is largely the same whether it is politicians in Ottawa, provincial capitals or local communities. Almost four in ten Canadians believe major disagreements about important values can be more effectively addressed through direct citizen action than by relying on elected governments.
- There is broad public support for grassroots citizen actions taken in Canada over the past years, especially when they work within an established institutional process. Almost nine in ten Canadians approve of the BC HST referendum (although a bit lower in BC), six in ten express approval of the Occupy movement, while just over half approve of the Quebec student protest (with such endorsement notably lower in Quebec).

Research Findings in Detail

SUBSTANCE: DEFINING THE PUBLIC GOOD

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that “despite Canada’s size and diversity, most Canadians share a common set of values and priorities about what is best for the country?”

Canadians are more likely than not to agree that Canadians share a common set of values and priorities about what is best for the country, but relatively few have a definitive opinion. Just under two in ten (18%) strongly agree with this statement, with another six in ten (61%) who somewhat agree, compared with one in five who somewhat (14%) or strongly (5%) disagree. Only two percent were unable to offer a clear response to this question.

Public opinion about the extent to which there is a national consensus around common values and priorities is notably similar across the country. Strong agreement is marginally more evident in Vancouver (22%) and among Canadians 60 plus (22%), while overall disagreement (somewhat or strongly) is most evident in Quebec (26%).

2. On what values or priorities, if any, do you think most Canadians can agree on as what is best for the country?

Canadians’ qualified response to the first question about shared common values and priorities reflects the fact that few have a clearly defined sense of what these might be. When asked unprompted (without response options offered) to identify values and priorities commonly shared by Canadians, many have difficulty coming up with a list.

The values and priorities most widely identified - prosperity/wealth creation/economic development (25%) and public health care (25%) – are each named by only one in four Canadians. One in ten identify multiculturalism/tolerance of others (11%) and education (9%), while fewer mention democracy/freedom (8%), protecting the environment (6%), a social safety net (6%), good government/lack of corruption (5%) and being a peaceful country (5%), followed by others each mentioned by fewer than five percent. One-third (32%) could not offer any response to this question.

What Canadians identify as commonly-held values and priorities for the country vary only modestly by region and demographic segments of the population. Economic prosperity is somewhat more likely to be mentioned in eastern Canada and Ontario (especially in Toronto), among older Canadians and those with higher levels of education. Public health care is most prominent in

Ontario, among women, residents of mid-size cities, and Canadians with more education and income. Likelihood of identifying any common values/priorities is largely a function of education (82% of those with a university education could identify at least one, compared with only 47% of those without a high school diploma).

3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements as describing the kind of Canada you personally believe Canada should be?

The survey presented 12 statements describing a range of values or priorities describing Canada, and respondents were asked the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement in describing their own personal vision for the country. Canadians had no difficulty responding to this question and the breadth of agreement varied significantly across the 12 statements, which can be categorized into three tiers:

Tier 1 – Public consensus. On four of the 12 statements there is public consensus about being an important part of the country’s values and priorities. In each case, at least nine in ten Canadians agree with the statement as fitting their own vision of what they believe Canada should aspire to as a country, with two-thirds or more in strong agreement, compared with fewer than one in ten who disagree overall. The widest public consensus is around the statement about gender equality, with more than nine in ten (92%) expressing strong agreement, compared with just one percent who disagree.

<i>Canada should be a country . . .</i>	OVERALL AGREE %	Strongly agree %	Somewhat agree %	Somewhat disagree %	Strongly disagree %	OVERALL DISAGREE %
In which men and women are treated equally in all walks of life.	99	92	7	*	1	1
With a political system that encourages average Canadians to let politicians know what they think.	96	76	20	1	1	2
With a public health system that covers everyone, that is fully supported through taxes.	92	66	26	4	3	7
Where the practices of all religions are respected, provided they fall within the law.	90	67	23	5	4	9

A general consensus on these four values is evident across the country, the one notable exception being that agreement with respect for religious practices is lower in Quebec (74% agree, versus 25% disagree). Strong support for a publicly –funded health care system is most widespread in Toronto (82% strongly agree), while strong agreement with a political system that encourages citizens to speak out to politicians is most widespread among Canadians with higher levels of education and income, and least so among those 18 to 29 (59% strongly agree).

Tier 2 – Widespread agreement. There are four statements on which a strong majority of Canadians agree are important aspirational values for the country, but compared with Tier 1 statements are less likely to attract strong agreement (around half of the population). These values include: a social safety net that helps everyone in difficult circumstances, strict laws on crime to keep criminals off the streets, environmental protection even if it slows economic development, and fluency or respect for both of the country’s Official Languages.

<i>Canada should be a country . . .</i>	OVERALL AGREE %	Strongly agree %	Somewhat agree %	Somewhat disagree %	Strongly disagree %	OVERALL DISAGREE %
With a social safety net that helps everyone facing difficult economic circumstances	92	51	41	5	2	7
With strict laws on crime that place the highest priority on keeping criminals off the streets	90	59	31	6	3	9
Where the environment is protected, even if this slows down economic development	88	49	39	8	2	10
Where all citizens either speak, or at least respect, both English and French languages	85	51	34	9	4	13

On these statements, opinions are broadly consistent across the country. The most notable difference is on the degree of strong agreement about citizen fluency and respect for English and French, which is more widespread in Quebec (66%) and Atlantic Canada (62%), than in Ontario (47%), British Columbia (47%) or the Prairies (40%).

Strong agreement with strict laws on crime is most widespread among Atlantic Canadians (69%) and allophones (75%), while lowest in Quebec (50%) and among Canadians with higher levels of education (44% of those with a university degree, compared with 67% among those without a high school diploma).

Tier 3 – Qualified agreement. The last four values also elicit majority agreement overall, but opinions are considerably more divided relative to the values in Tiers 1 and 2. Fewer than three in ten Canadians express strong agreement in each case, with an equal or larger proportion saying they disagree with this value as important for the country.

<i>Canada should be a country . . .</i>	OVERALL AGREE %	Strongly agree %	Somewhat agree %	Somewhat disagree %	Strongly disagree %	OVERALL DISAGREE %
That fully welcomes immigrants from all over the world	71	29	42	18	10	28
With a strong military	66	27	39	24	9	33
Where there is not a big difference in income between the wealthy and everyone else	63	27	36	22	11	33
Where taxes are kept as low as possible, even if this may limit the services governments can provide	53	20	33	30	14	44

Among these four statements, there is most agreement about the importance of Canada being a welcoming place for immigrants: agreement clearly outweighs disagreement, but only 29% strongly agree versus 28 percent who disagree overall. There is somewhat less public support for the country having a strong military and low levels of income inequality. Canadians are most divided on whether or not Canada should be a country with low taxes even if it limits government services: Only one in five (20%) strongly agree, compared with more than twice as many (44%) who disagree overall.

Given the more qualified levels of support for this third tier of values, it is not surprising that opinions differ across the country:

- On welcoming immigrants, overall agreement is most evident in B.C. (83%) and lowest in Quebec (40%). Support for this value is also higher among men (75%, versus 66% of women) and among younger Canadians (81%, declining to only 62% among those 60 and older).
- On a strong military, overall agreement is most widespread in Atlantic Canada (82%) and the Prairies (81%), and much lower in Quebec (44%). Strong agreement is also more evident among Canadians with lower incomes, and least so among those with a university education.
- On minimizing income differences between the wealthy and everyone else, overall agreement is most widespread among residents of rural communities (75%), women (71%, versus 56% of men), and those with the lowest incomes (78%, versus 51% in the top income bracket).
- On keeping taxes as low as possible, opinions do not vary noticeably across the country but strong agreement is somewhat more evident among Canadians with lower levels of income and education, among men, and those under 30 years of age.

4. *To what extent do you think other Canadians share your own opinion about the importance of these values and priorities for the country?*

The survey also asked respondents about these same value statements, in terms of the extent to which they think *other Canadians* share their own sense of priority. The purpose of this question is to gauge individuals' sense of public consensus around their own view about the common good for Canada.

The sense of public consensus tends to be strongest for those value statements on which there is most widespread personal agreement, with a few exceptions. For three of the Tier 1 value statements, a clear majority believe that most other Canadians share their own particular opinion (a political system that encourages expression, gender equality, and a publicly-funded health care system). Joining this group is the Tier 2 priority on strict laws about crime, with two-thirds (65%) saying that most Canadians share their priority. With all of these statements, those who strongly agree personally are also more likely to feel that other Canadians share this priority.

For the remaining eight statements, fewer than half believe that others share their own viewpoint, and (in all but one case) a majority or plurality judge that only “some” do so. At the bottom of the list, only one in four believe most other Canadians share their own priority when it comes to protecting the environment (25%) and keeping taxes as low as possible (25%), with a clear majority saying that “some” do so.

For some values there appears to be a significant disconnect in terms of Canadians being more likely to think the public is divided than in fact they really are. This is most evident in the case of environmental protection (88% agree this value is important, but only 26% of this group believe most other Canadians share this priority) and respect for English and French (85% agree this is important, but only 33% of this group feel most others share this view).

<i>Canada should be a country . . .</i>	<i>Believe your own opinion on this value is shared by ...</i>		
	Most Canadians %	Some Canadians %	Few Canadians %
With a political system that encourages average Canadians to let politicians know what they think.	71	24	4
In which men and women are treated equally in all walks of life.	68	27	3
With strict laws on crime that place the highest priority on keeping criminals off the streets	65	28	5
With a public health system that covers everyone, that is fully supported through taxes.	61	33	5
With a social safety net that helps everyone facing difficult economic circumstances	47	44	8
Where the practices of all religions are respected, provided they fall within the law.	42	48	7
That fully welcomes immigrants from all over the world	34	56	6
With a strong military	32	53	13
Where all citizens either speak, or at least respect, both English and French languages	32	49	16
Where there is not a big difference in income between the wealthy and everyone else	28	52	17
Where taxes are kept as low as possible, even if this may limit the services governments can provide	25	56	16
Where the environment is protected, even if this slows down economic development	25	59	15

5. *To what extent do you agree or disagree that most residents of your own province share a common set of values and priorities about what is best for the province?*

In addition to measuring public opinion about shared national priorities, the survey also explored the extent to which Canadians feel there is a shared sense of common values and priorities among residents of their own province. Given the decentralized and regional nature of Canadian politics and culture, is the public more likely to feel there is a consensus around the common good at the provincial level?

The results reveal that there is a somewhat greater sense of shared purpose in some provinces, but not in others. Overall, eight in ten Canadians strongly (28%) or somewhat (54%) agree that most residents in their own province share a common set of values and priorities about what is best for the province, compared with those who somewhat (12%) or strongly (4%) disagree.

<i>Agree–disagree that most residents in your province share a common set of values/priorities about what is best for the province</i>	OVERALL AGREE %	Strongly agree %	Somewhat agree %	Somewhat disagree %	Strongly disagree %	OVERALL DISAGREE %
CANADA	82	28	54	12	4	16
Atlantic Canada	93	36	57	5	1	6
Quebec	79	28	51	13	5	18
Ontario	81	25	56	13	5	18
Manitoba	88	21	67	7	3	10
Saskatchewan	83	33	50	11	5	16
Alberta	87	42	45	8	4	12
British Columbia	81	24	57	13	4	17

A majority in every province agree overall about a common set of values/priorities, but strong agreement is most evident in Alberta (42%) and Atlantic Canada (36%), and least so in Manitoba (21%).

More revealing is the fact that Canadians are more likely to strongly agree about sharing provincial values than strongly agree about national values by an appreciable margin in Alberta (23 percentage point difference), Atlantic Canada (19 points), Saskatchewan (19 points) and Quebec (13 points). Elsewhere, citizens do not see much difference in the extent of shared values at the national and provincial levels.

PROCESS: RECONCILING DIFFERENCES

6. *When there are major differences in opinion on important issues in the country, in your province and in your community, how often do you believe your elected representatives do a good job of balancing these differences between competing interests?*

Canadians give a mixed review of the job being done by their elected representatives to balance competing interests when there are major differences on important issues. Overall, about one in five (20%) say their politicians do a good job in balancing such interests “most of the time”, with another half (50%) who believe this happens “some of the time”, and the balance indicating they believe this happens “not very often” (20%) or “never” (7%).

Public assessments are notably similar whether the arena is in Ottawa, their provincial capital or their local municipal council, improving marginally as the jurisdiction moves from Ottawa, to the province to the local community.

<i>How often your elected representatives do a good job of balancing differences between competing interests on important issues</i>	<i>Elected Representatives in:</i>		
	Ottawa %	Provincial capital %	Your community %
Most of the time	19	18	23
Some of the time	48	51	53
Not very often	24	20	16
Never	8	8	5

Public judgement about the effectiveness of politicians in reconciling competing interests varies modestly across the country, with positive views more evident in Quebec, Saskatchewan and Alberta, and least so in Ontario. In terms of addressing issues at the local level, rural Canadians are much more likely to say their local representatives do a good job most of the time (43%), in comparison with residents of major urban centres (19%), mid-size cities (17%) and smaller towns (24%).

This pattern is consistent across the jurisdiction judged, suggesting that Canadians' opinions about the effectiveness of their politicians are more influenced by their home province, than by whether these politicians are national, provincial or local.

7. *When there are major disagreements about important values and priorities, are we better off relying on: a) our elected governments to find a way of balancing these differences; or b) citizens taking grassroots actions through protest and other means?*

Canadians' qualified confidence in their elected officials to address difficult societal issues is further underscored in the context of their effectiveness relative to citizen grassroots actions. When asked which is better able to address major disagreements about important values and priorities, fewer than half (45%) of Canadians pick their elected governments, compared with 38 percent who place greater faith in citizens taking grassroots actions through protest and other means to say what should be done. The remainder believes both options are equally important (8%), reject both (3%) or are unable to provide a definitive view (5%).

Confidence in elected governments to address the major issues facing society is stronger in the western provinces (51%) than in Ontario (44%), Quebec (41%) and the Atlantic provinces (44%). But opinions on this question are most directly influenced by household income: Canadians with household incomes of \$100K plus look to government over citizen action by a 50% to 34% margin, while for those earning under \$30K the proportions are flipped (36% to 53%).

Opinions also vary somewhat across generations. Confidence in governments to address major issues is most evident among Canadians 60 plus (50%), followed by those 30 to 44 years of age (47%), and then those 45 to 59 (44%). Canadians 18 to 29 are evenly divided between those who place their confidence in governments (39%) and citizen action (40%).

8. Do you approve or disapprove of recent grassroots citizen actions in Canada (Occupy Movement, Quebec student protest, BC HST referendum)?

The survey measured public opinion about each of three citizen action initiatives that took place in Canada over the past year, to assess the extent to which the public approves of these ways by which citizens took action to make their voices heard (Each survey respondent was presented with a two to three sentence description of one randomly selected example). All three examples of citizen action receive majority approval by Canadians, although the breadth of approval varies significantly.

	OVERALL APPROVE %	Strongly approve %	Somewhat approve %	Somewhat disapprove %	Strongly disapprove %	OVERALL DISAPPROVE %
BC HST referendum	86	52	34	8	3	11
Occupy movement	62	19	43	19	16	35
Quebec student movement	56	24	32	20	21	41

BC HST referendum. Close to nine in ten Canadians strongly (52%) or somewhat (34%) approve of the efforts taken by a group of citizens in BC to force a province-wide referendum on the recently-introduced Harmonized Sales Tax (HST). This view is reflected across the country, but is most widespread in Atlantic Canada (94% approval), and lowest in B.C. (78%, versus 19% disapproval).

Those voicing approval of this citizen action are most likely to say this is because they support the right of citizens to have a say on taxes they pay (51% of this group), while smaller percentages indicate it was a peaceful/lawful action, the BC government was not honest about the tax, the referendum was effective, and because they oppose higher taxes/HST in principle.

The few (11%) Canadians who disapprove of the HST referendum say this is because they do not believe the public was properly informed on the issue, the province needs the HST revenue, this is not the way to create social change, the government should be deciding on taxes, a general opposition to referenda, and the belief that the HST is a good or better tax than the alternative.

Occupy movement. Six in ten strongly (19%) or somewhat (43%) approve of the Occupy movement as it happened in Canada over the past year, compared with one-third who somewhat (19%) or strongly (16%) disapprove. As with the HST Referendum, approval of the Occupy movement is strongest in Atlantic Canada (74%) (followed by Quebec at 69%), and least evident in BC (55%), as well as in Alberta (52%). Approval is also broader among rural Canadians (68%) than among those living in major urban centres (58%).

Given the focus of the Occupy movement on income inequality, it is not surprising that approval is most widespread among Canadians in the lowest income bracket (84% approve versus 15% disapprove), and most divided among those in the top income bracket (51% approve versus 47% disapprove). Age is also a factor, with approval strongest among Canadians 18 to 29 (77%), declining to 51 percent among those 60 and older.

Those who approve of the Occupy movement are most likely to say this is because they believe income inequality is a serious issue that needs more attention from governments and others (52%), and that citizens should have a right to protest (35%). Those who disapprove maintain the protests were disruptive (29%), not the right way to create social change (26%), ineffective (24%), and too political/part of a left-wing agenda (18%).

Quebec student movement. Canadians are comparatively less supportive of the recent student protests in Quebec over tuition fee increases. A small majority strongly (24%) or somewhat (32%) approve of this citizen movement, compared with four in ten who somewhat (20%) or strongly (21%) disapprove.

The student protest was Quebec-specific, and public opinion is most divided in that province (45% approve versus 53% disapprove), in contrast to the rest of the country (60% approve versus 36% disapprove). Atlantic Canadians once again are most widely supportive of this citizen initiative (67%), while this view is less apt to be shared in B.C. (51%). Across the country, approval is higher among women, younger Canadians, urban residents, and those with lower levels of education and income,

Those voicing approval of the student protests in Quebec say this is because they believe tuition fees are a problem that needs more attention (52%), and because students have the right to protest (33%). Those who disapprove do so because they believe tuition fees are low enough to easily accommodate an increase (36%), the extent of disruption caused by the protests (33%), and the view that this is not the way to create social change.

Survey Methodology

The results are based on a telephone survey conducted for the Environics Institute by Research House with a representative sample of 2,001 adult Canadians (18 years and older) between October 2 and 14, 2012. The sample was stratified by province and community size to ensure adequate coverage of jurisdictions for analysis purposes. A sample of this size will produce a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error is greater for results for regional and socio-demographic subgroups of the total sample.

The survey questions were designed by the Environics Institute, in conjunction with representatives from the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation and the University of Alberta.