

No consensus on electoral reform in sight, but Canadians still believe their democracy works

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Our world is changing rapidly, due in large part to fundamental and often disruptive transformations brought about by the globalization of economic production, finance and the migration of people, as well as the digital revolution and rapidly evolving social values. In the face of such change, how has Canadians' faith in the public sphere – and the institutions that embody it – held up?

It is in this context that the Environics Institute teamed up with the Institute on Governance to conduct an extensive survey on the experience and attitudes of Canadians when it comes to the operation and services provided by their federal government (a full report on the research is available at www.environicsinstitute.org).

We wanted to know whether people have confidence in their federal political institutions and if they think these institutions are in need of fundamental change. After all, parliamentarians are elected on the same basis as they were in 1867, although it is true we have evolved from a show of propertied male hands in the town square to a secret ballot and a universal adult franchise that at last includes women and Indigenous people. However, our esteemed Senators are still appointed by Her Majesty's representative, the Governor-General, on the advice of the prime minister, who need give no account for his choices.

In the context of an American presidential election that flirts with raw nativism and eschews basic civility, and a European Union struggling to hold together in the face of similar tensions, Canada seems a comparative sea of tranquillity. And for the most part, Canadians seem to retain their faith in government as an overall force for good. Still, plenty of Canadians feel that the way we choose our leaders is insufficiently democratic – one of them being our new prime minister, who has promised to change our electoral system before the next election. Yet the mood on institutional change signalled by our representative sample of Canadians paints a more nuanced picture of what they think needs changing and how. In only a few areas can Canadians be said to be clamouring for change, although there are many areas where they would appear to accord the government a fair degree of social license that it has yet to act on.

The Senate is the area where clamouring is loudest: Here Canadians want major reforms or even outright abolition. Of those with an opinion, half want the former, half want the later. But without consensus on fundamental change for the upper chamber, it looks like we will have to be satisfied with a bit of reform – hopefully at least encompassing an end to expense account shenanigans. Abolition or major restructuring would require opening up the constitution, which the public in our poll would go for, but which Canada's political leadership is loath to touch.

As for the prime minister's promise to do away with our "first past the post" electoral system, we see a likely scenario. A substantial minority actively supports changing the current system and others might also be open to change depending on the circumstances, but there is no consensus choice among the main alternatives that have been put forth. Only a plurality would opt for a mixed member proportional

method while others opt for a ranked ballot or the status quo. Put to a referendum, none of these three alternatives would achieve majority support and reform would die just as virtually every other proposal put to referendum in this risk-averse country. Presumably that has encouraged some advocates of the status quo to insist that a referendum is the only legitimate basis for change, while others contend that agreeing on a system – new or otherwise – is the proper business of Parliament.

In short, unless the government decides to push ahead with a particular model in the absence of a referendum, the way ahead will not be one of deep reform but rather of adapting incrementally with the times. What might that mean? Not compulsory voting, which Canadians clearly don't like, but perhaps e-voting, just as a century ago we adopted the secret ballot. Canadians are clearly open to the idea of e-voting, and while they may underestimate the technical challenges, this is an area that the government will simply have to explore if we wish Millennials to engage in political life the way the rest of us older folk are learning to shop, get a ride, or rent a room.

Our research revealed that bringing government into the digital age is just one of several areas where the thinking of Canadians appears to be evolving. Another area of dramatic change concerns the participation of Indigenous Canadians in public life, and in public institutions. In a swath of areas – from establishing a permanent Cabinet committee on indigenous matters to including a minimum number of Indigenous Canadians in Parliament, Cabinet and even the Supreme Court, a significant majority favours or is at least open to such changes, depending on the circumstances. It is difficult to imagine these kinds of survey results even a few years ago.

When Canada is placed in international context, we find that Canadians are much less critical of their democracy and social institutions than residents of other countries in the western hemisphere. We know this from the AmericasBarometer research program that conducts surveys across the western hemisphere every two years (the Environics Institute and Institute on Governance partnered to conduct the Canadian portion of this study in 2014). Invariably, south of the Rio Grande, attitudes are mixed and they often change depending on which party or faction is in power. Brazilians for example think practically everyone and every institution is on the take. Their president was removed from office recently on grounds of corruption. Argentina is hoping and praying that years of populism without a price tag will soon be over. Venezuela is in chaos and Mexico is deeply divided. And the United States, once the model for a democratic future, is looking a bit shaky, even scary these days.

And then there is Canada, the mostly fortunate outlier. We see room for improvement in our public institutions but are still generally content. We feel free of systemic corruption and when we see it we are outraged, not cynical or complacent. We do not offer a bribe to a policeman or a government official as a matter of course. We expect to be treated civilly by all public officials and when we aren't, we speak out via the media, old and new.

Canada is not perfect, but Canada works and will continue to work if we remain vigilant and demand transparency and accountability and increasingly raise the standard of what it means to live in a democracy.

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