

# Environics Institute

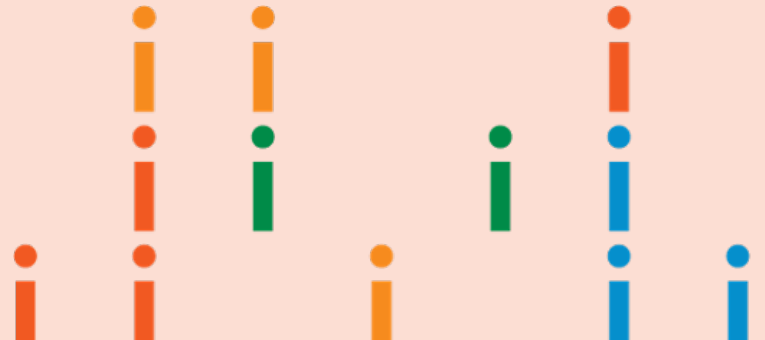
For Survey Research



## Democracy and political polarization in Canada and the U.S.

Results from the AmericasBarometer 2021

December 2021



# About the AmericasBarometer

- The AmericasBarometer is led by the Latin American Public opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University. It consists of a periodic comparative survey of democratic values and behaviours that covers countries in North, Central and South America, as well as a significant number of countries in the Caribbean (the 2021 survey covers 22 countries).
- The AmericasBarometer 2021 survey in Canada was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with LAPOP at Vanderbilt University. The Canadian survey was conducted online with a representative sample of 2,201 Canadians (aged 18 and over) between July 2 and July 7, 2021.
- AmericasBarometer data for the United States were supplied by the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University, which takes no responsibility for any interpretation of the data. The 2021 survey in the U.S. was conducted online with a representative sample of 1,500 Americans (aged 18 and over) between July 19 and July 25, 2021.

# The following questions were included in both the Canadian and American surveys in 2021:

- In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?
- Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?
- To what extent do you...
  - ... respect the political institutions of [country]?
  - ...think that citizens' basic rights are well-protected by the political system of [country]?
  - ...feel proud of living under the political system of [country]?
  - ...think that one should support the political system of [country]?
  - ...trust the mass media?
  - ...trust elections in this country?
- To what extent do you...
  - ..trust the Prime Minister of Canada/the President ?
- To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian/an American?
- Here are some things that can happen during elections. Would you say they happen always, sometimes or never in [country]?
  - Votes are counted correctly and fairly.
  - The rich buy the election results.
  - Politicians can find out who each person voted for.
  - Some foreign governments may influence the election results of [country].

# Key findings (I): Political polarization in the U.S.

---

The U.S. is “polarized” in the following three senses:

1. A significant proportion of the population place themselves at either end of the political spectrum, rather than in the centre (and this pattern is becoming more accentuated over time).
2. Each of the two main parties attracts most of its support from either end of the political spectrum, rather than from the centre.
3. There are significant gaps in trust in the political system between those who identify as liberals and those who identify as conservatives.

## Key findings (II): Canada

---

- In contrast to the situation in the United States, Canadians on the political left and right have generally become less divided on questions about democracy (left and right have grown less polarized).
- Each of the three main federal political parties draws most of its support from people who place themselves in the middle of the political spectrum.
- Overall levels of trust in democratic institutions in Canada are either stable or increasing over time.
- Pride in being Canadian has declined over the past four years; some of this decline may be related to recent revelations about the mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples.

# Measuring “political ideology”

---

Survey question wording differs slightly between the two countries

In the United States (liberal ↔ conservative):

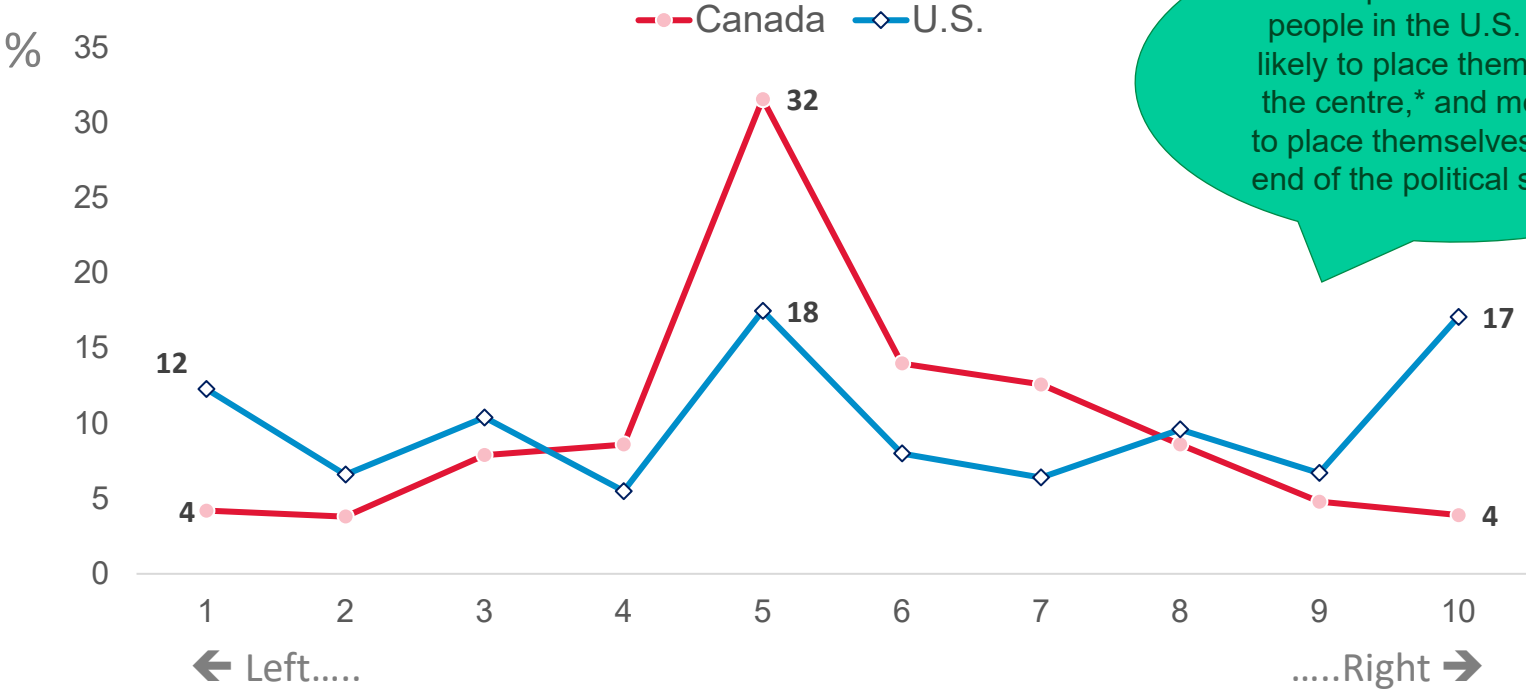
- *This is a 1-10 scale that goes from **liberal to conservative**. One means liberal and 10 means conservative. Nowadays, when we speak of political leanings, we talk of liberals and conservatives. In other words, some people sympathize more with the liberals and others with the conservatives. According to the meaning that the terms "liberals" and "conservatives" have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale?*

In Canada (left ↔ right [to avoid confusion with names of political parties]):

- *The following scale goes from **left to right**, where “1” means LEFT and “10” means RIGHT. Nowadays, when we speak of political leanings, we talk of those on the left and those on the right. In other words, some people sympathize more with the left and others with the right. According to the meaning that the terms "left" and "right" have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale?*

# Political ideology: On a scale of 1 to 10

2021



Compared to Canada, people in the U.S. are less likely to place themselves in the centre,\* and more likely to place themselves at either end of the political spectrum.

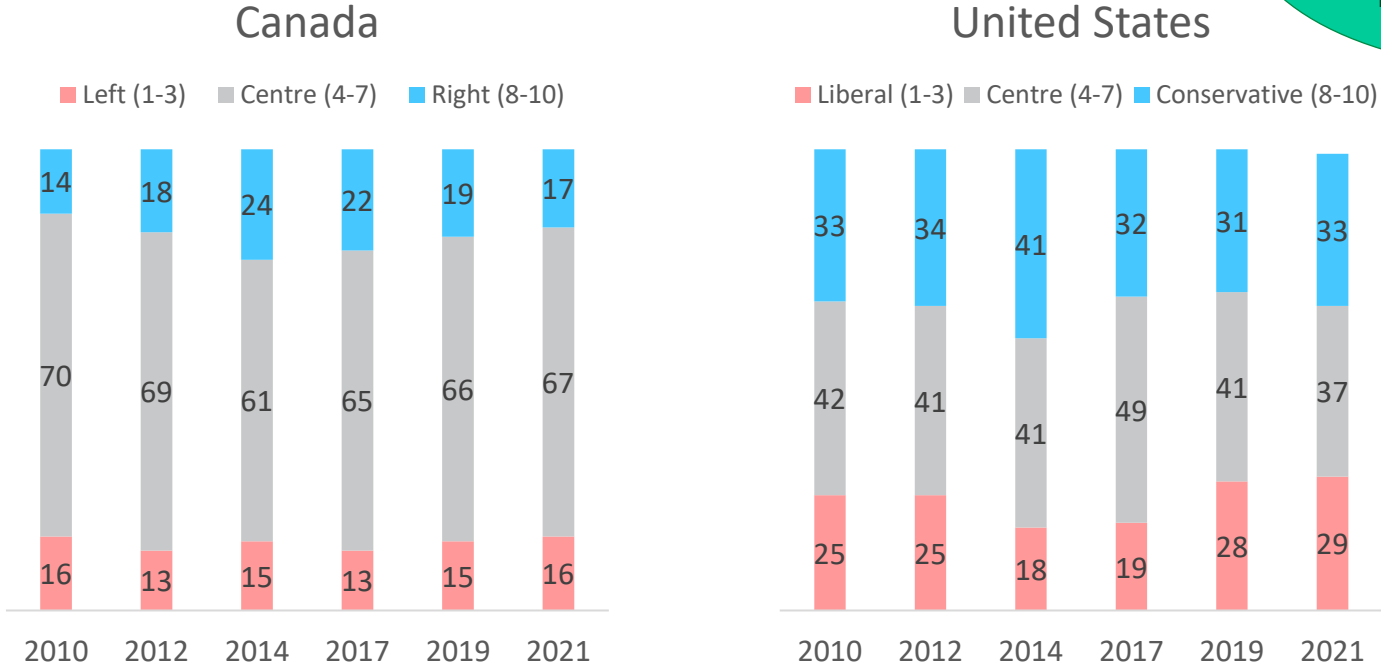
According to the meaning that the terms 'left' and 'right' have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale? (10-point scale).

\* Note: a 10-point scale has no mid-point; however, it appears that many respondents assumed that 5 was in the middle.

# Political ideology: Left, centre and right

2010-2021

The U.S. centre has shrunk by 12 points since 2017, while the left (liberals) has grown by 10 points. There has been less change in Canada.

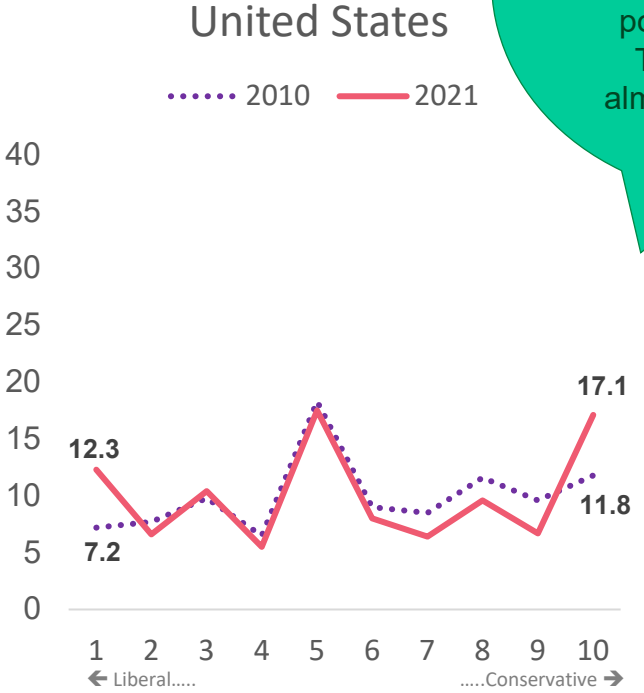
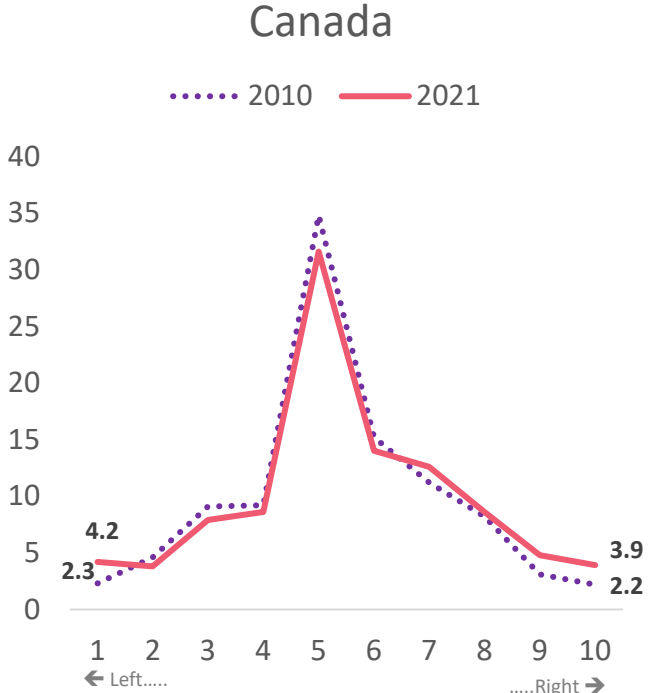


According to the meaning that the terms 'left' and 'right' have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale? (10-point scale; left = 1 to 3; centre = 4 to 7; right = 8 to 10).



# Political ideology: On a scale of 1 to 10

2010-2021

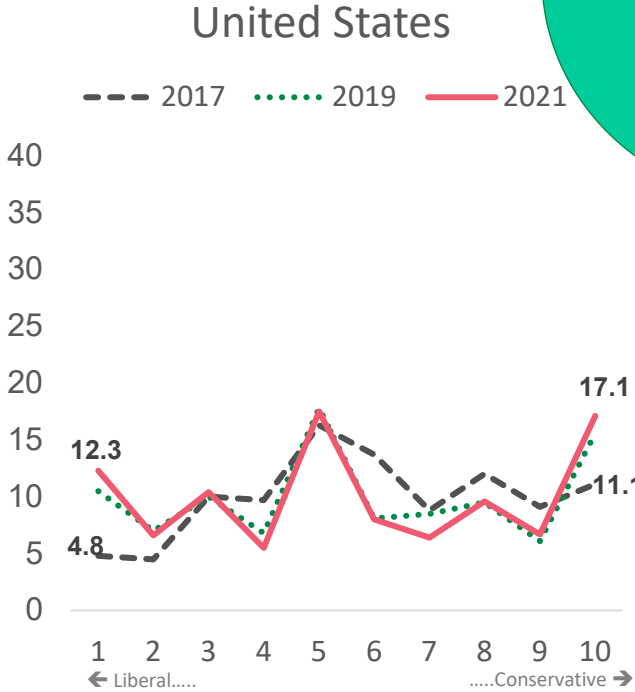
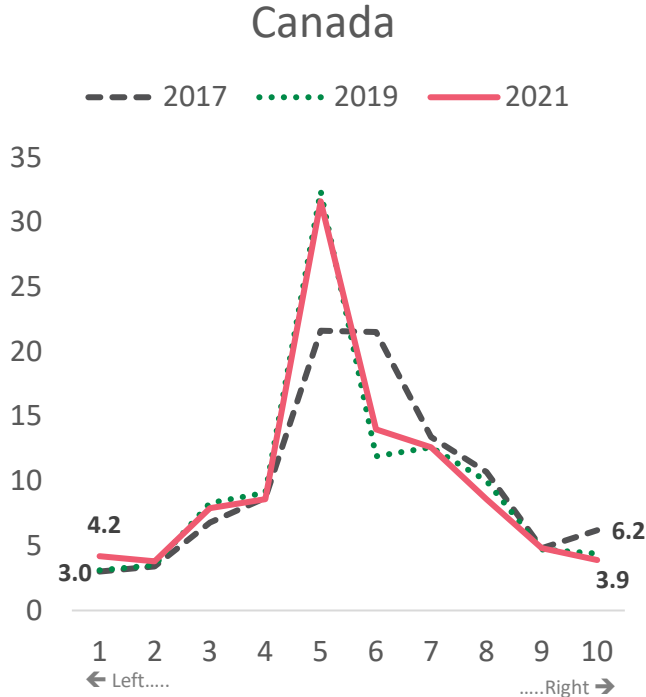


Compared to 2010, Americans are now more likely to place themselves at the farthest ends of the political spectrum. There has been almost no change in Canada.

According to the meaning that the terms 'left' and 'right' have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale? (10-point scale; left = 1 to 3; centre = 4 to 7; right = 8 to 10).

# Political ideology: On a scale of 1 to 10

2017-2021



Compared to 2017, Americans are now more likely to place themselves at the farthest ends of the political spectrum. Canadians are more likely to place themselves in the centre.

According to the meaning that the terms 'left' and 'right' have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale? (10-point scale; left = 1 to 3; centre = 4 to 7; right = 8 to 10).

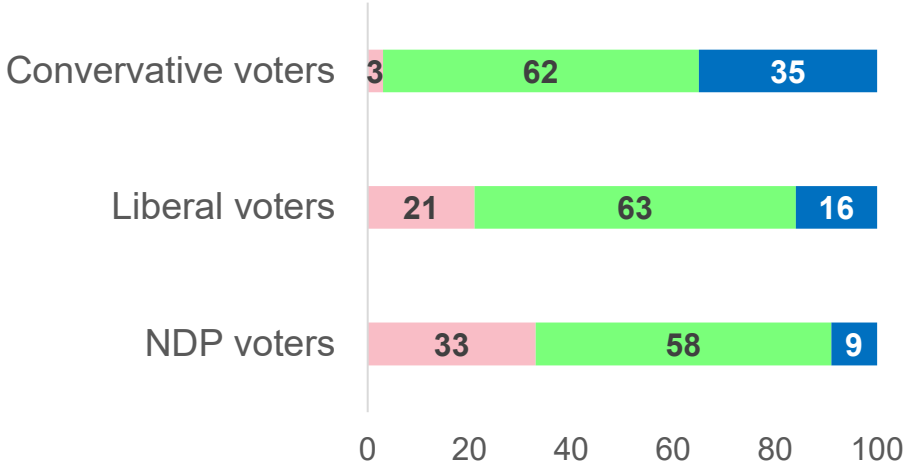
# Political ideology, by vote intention

2021

U.S. parties draw support from either end of the spectrum; Canadian parties draw from the centre.

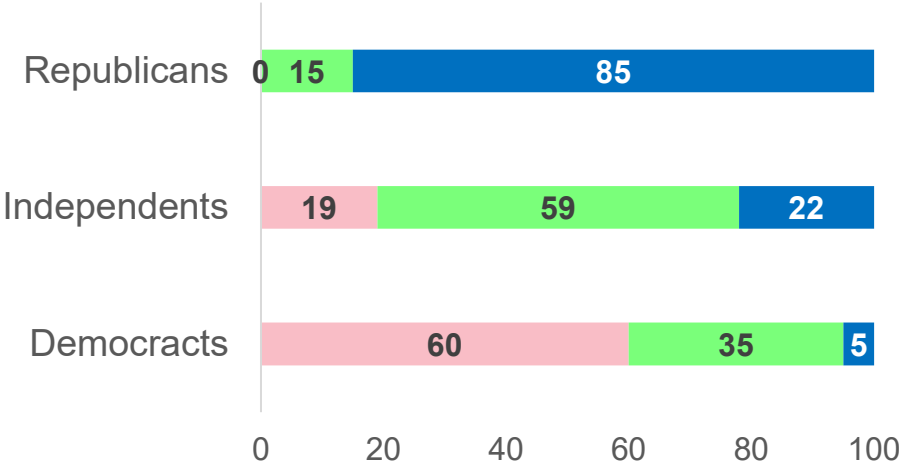
## Canada

Left (1-3) Centre (4-7) Right (8-10)



## United States

Liberal (1-3) Centre (4-7) Conservative (8-10)



\* In Canada, party support is based on a question about vote preference; in the U.S., it is based on a question about which party you identify with.

# Summary: Left/right divisions on key measures

---

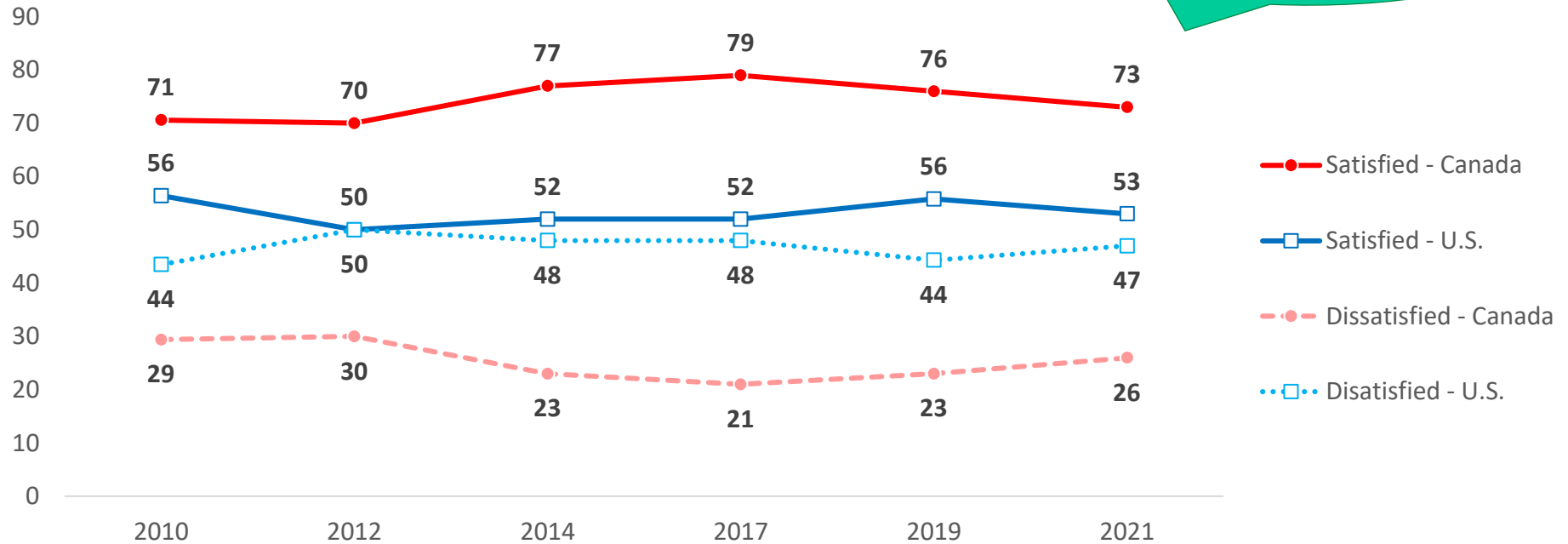
Measure	Canada: Left % minus Right %	United States: Liberal % minus Conservative%
A lot of support for the country's political system	- 10 pts	- 27 pts
A lot of pride in living under the country's political system	- 3 pts	- 31 pts
A lot of trust in the Prime Minister/President	- 6 pts	+ 41 pts
A lot of pride in being a Canadian/an American	- 6 pts	- 46 pts
It always happens that votes are counted correctly and fairly in elections in Canada/the U.S.	+ 14 pts	+ 54 pts

The gap between liberals and conservatives in the U.S. on key measures of political trust and pride is much wider than the left-right gap in Canada (details follow).

# Satisfaction with democracy

Satisfaction with democracy is significantly higher in Canada than in the U.S.; the trend is stable in both countries.

2010-2021



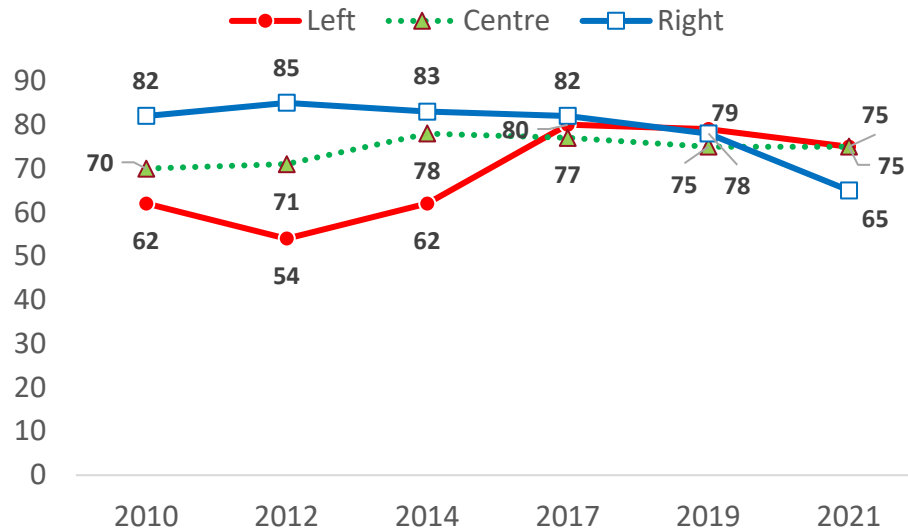
Would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?

# Satisfaction with democracy, by political ideology

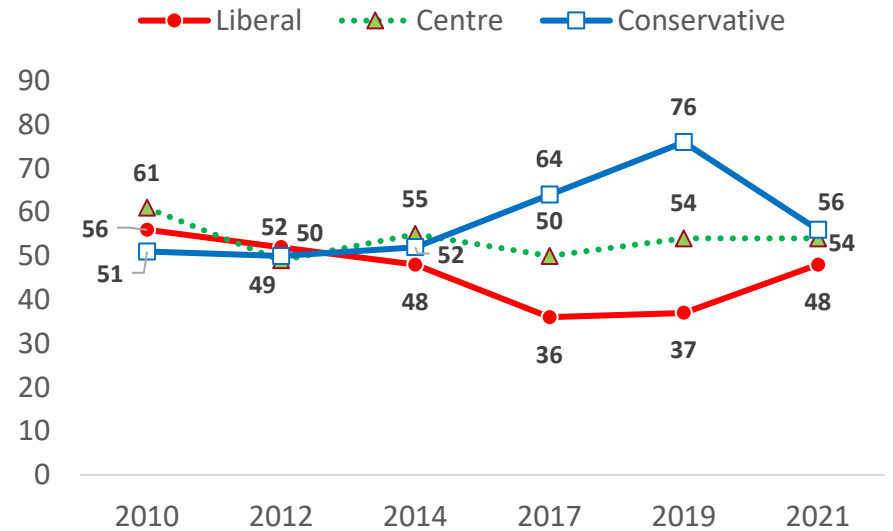
In Canada, convergence of satisfaction with democracy under Trudeau; in the U.S., divergence under Trump.

2010-2021

### Canada: satisfied



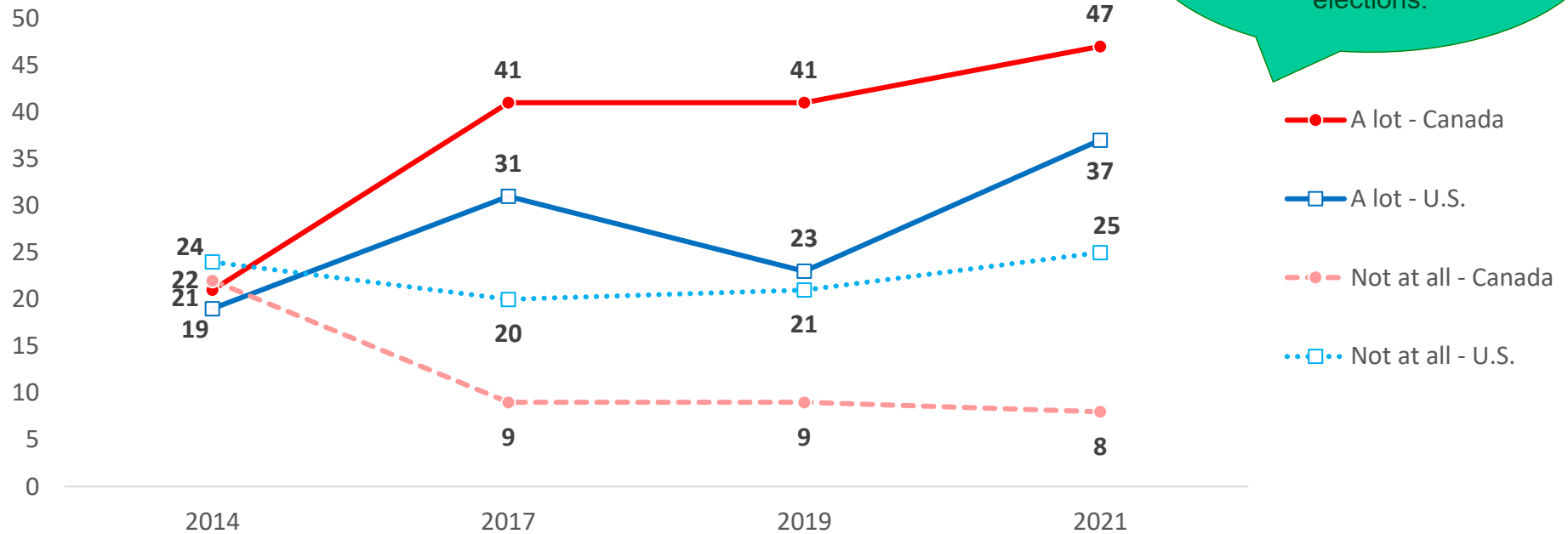
### United States: satisfied



Would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?

# Trust in elections

2014-2021



Americans are significantly more likely than Canadians to express a lack of trust in elections.

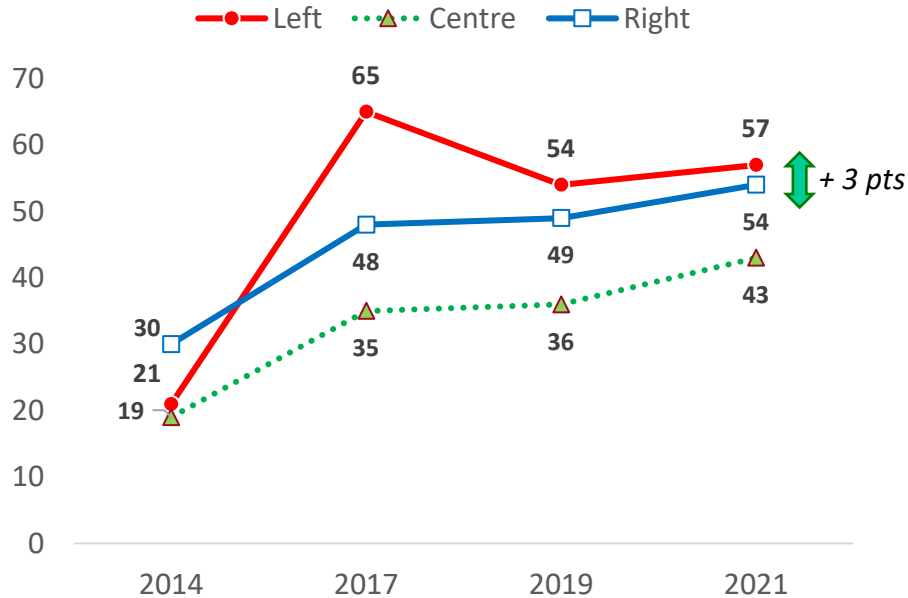
To what extent do you trust elections in this country? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7/not at all = 1 & 2)

# Trust in elections, by political ideology

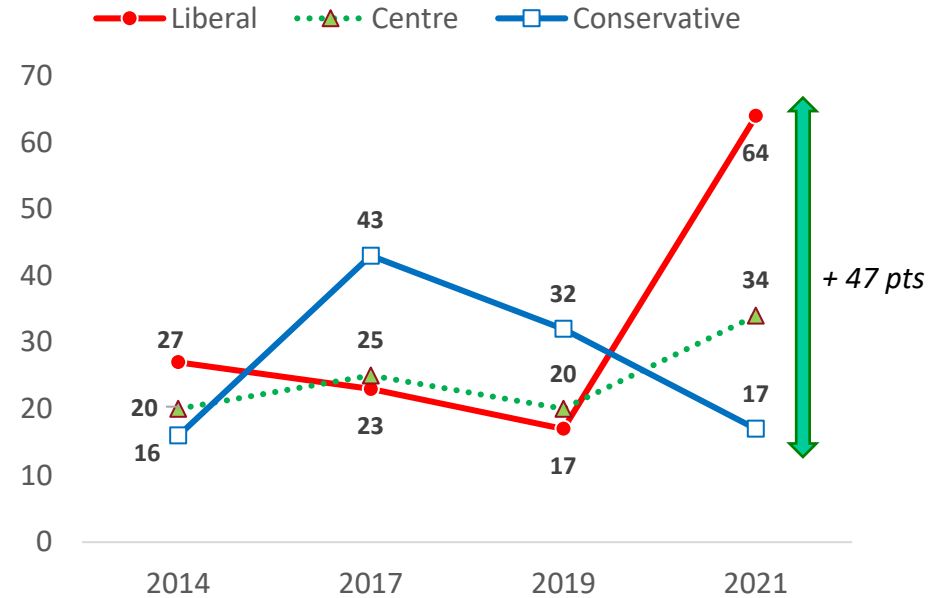
Trust in elections has become tied to political ideology in the U.S., but not in Canada.

2014-2021

### Canada: a lot of trust



### United States: a lot of trust

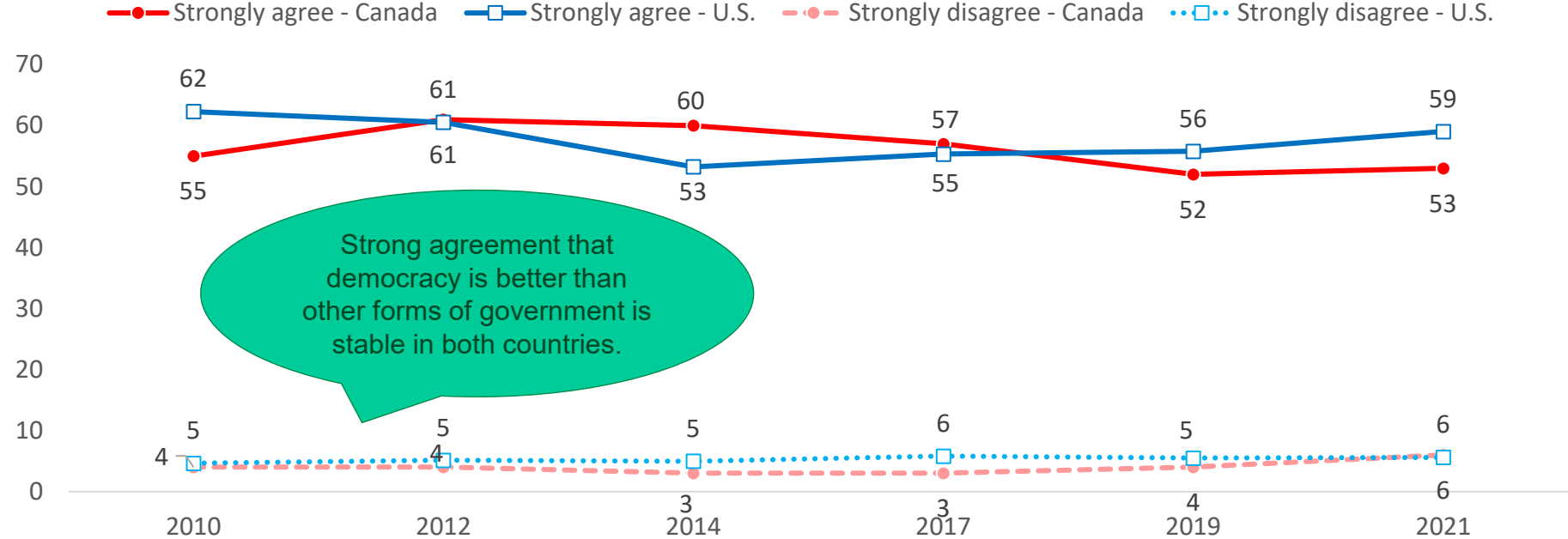


To what extent do you trust elections in this country? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7)



# Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government

2010-2021

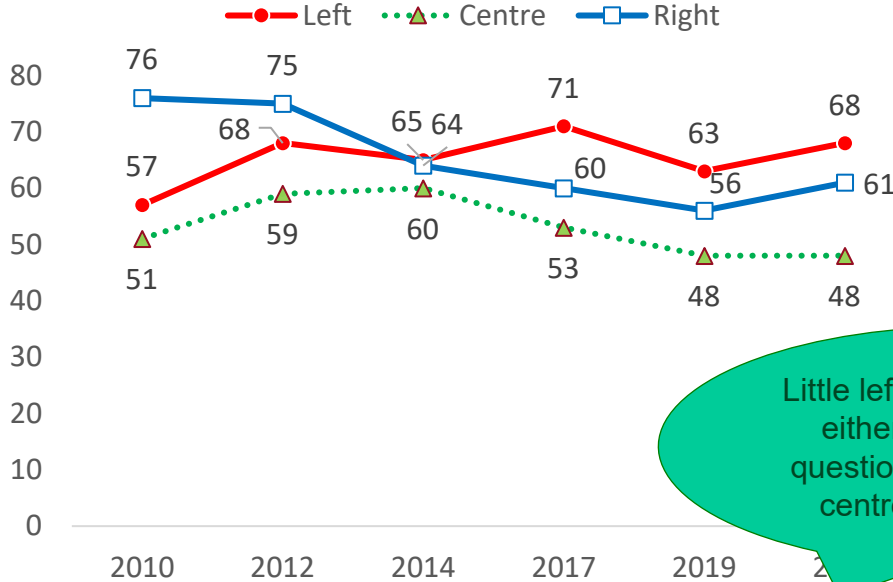


Agree/disagree: Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government? (7-point scale: strongly agree = 6 & 7/strongly disagree = 1 & 2)

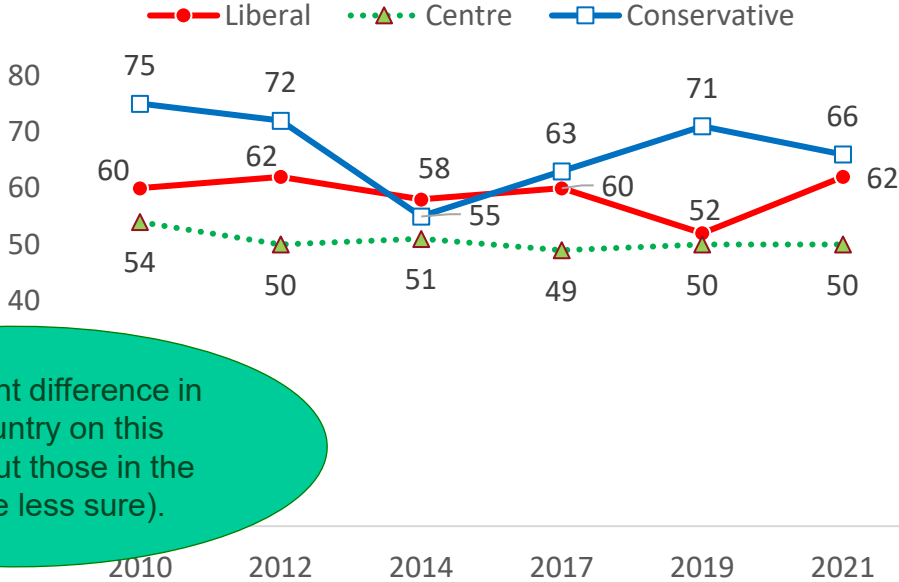
# Democracy is better than any other form of government, by political ideology

2010-2021

### Canada: strongly agree



### United States: strongly agree



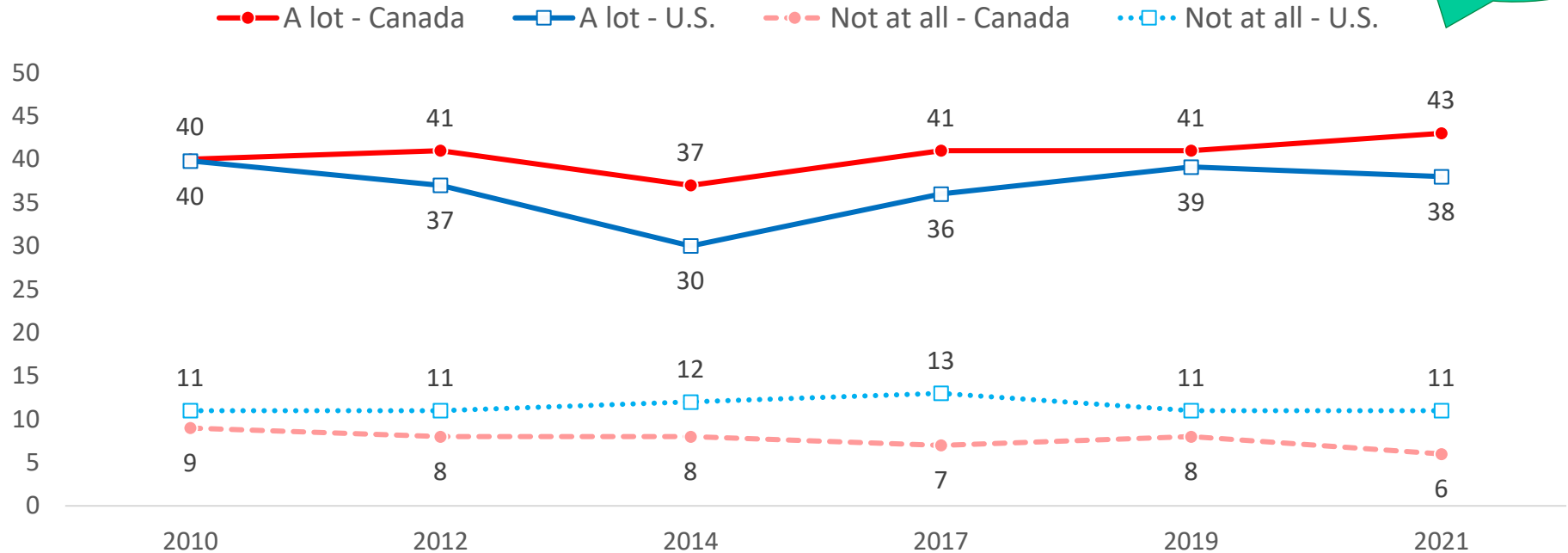
Little left-right difference in either country on this question (but those in the centre are less sure).

Agree/disagree: Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government? (7-point scale: strongly agree = 6 & 7)

# Support for the country's political system

Strong support for the country's political system is stable in both countries.

2010-2021

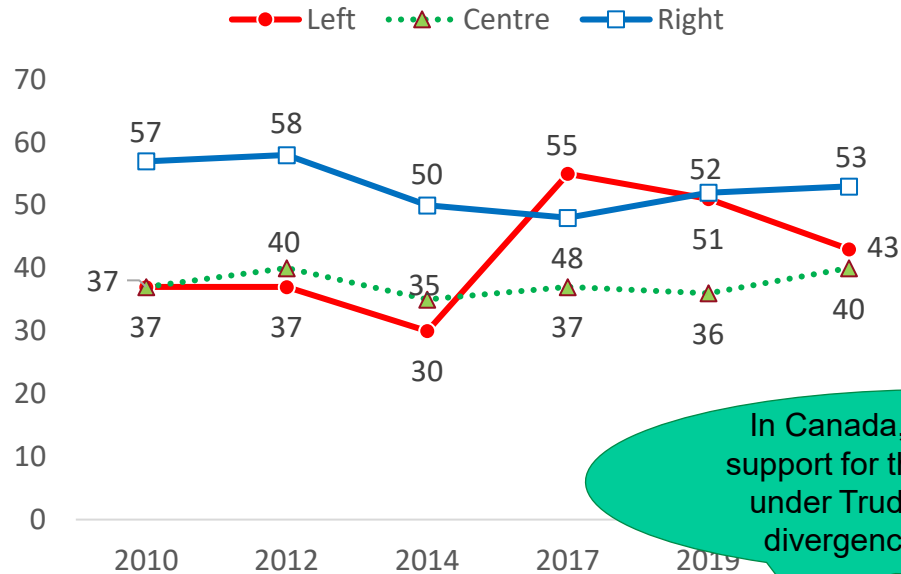


To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of [country]? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7/not at all = 1 & 2)

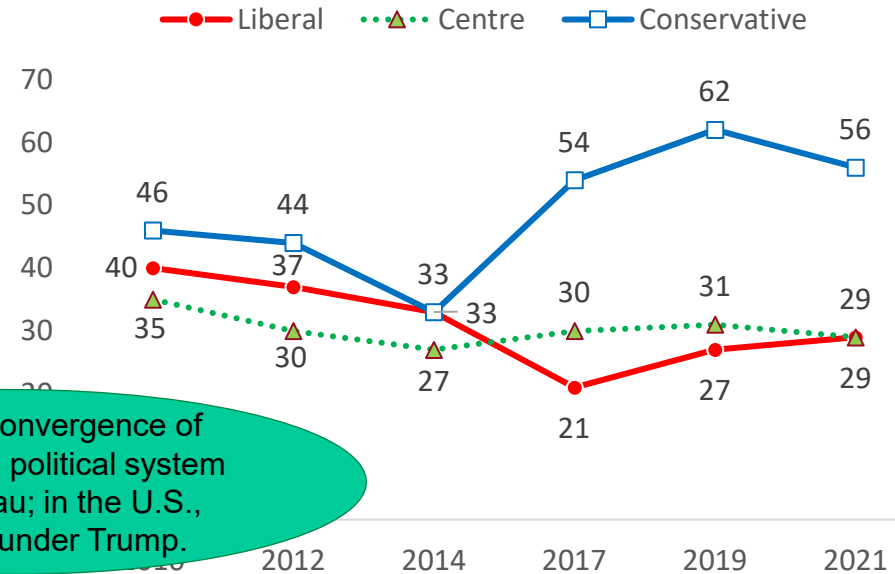
# Support for the country's political system, by political ideology

2010-2021

## Canada: a lot of support



## United States: a lot of support



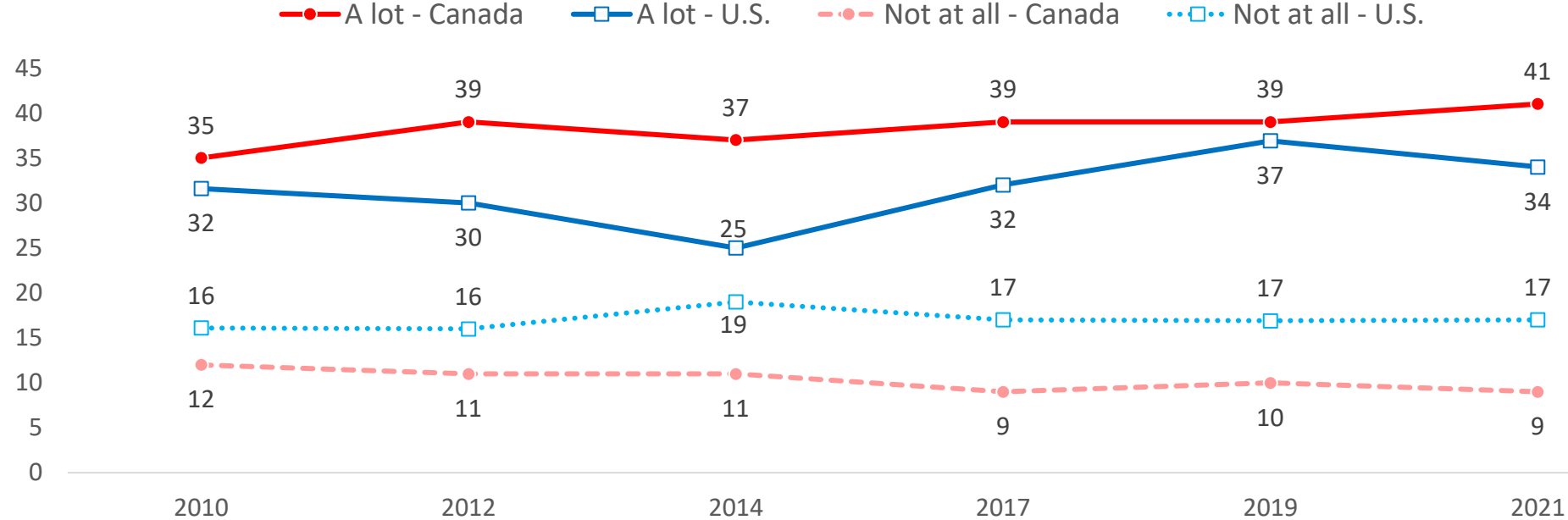
In Canada, convergence of support for the political system under Trudeau; in the U.S., divergence under Trump.

To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of [country]? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7)

# Feel proud living under the political system

No change in the U.S.; some gradual improvement in pride in the political system in Canada.

2010-2021

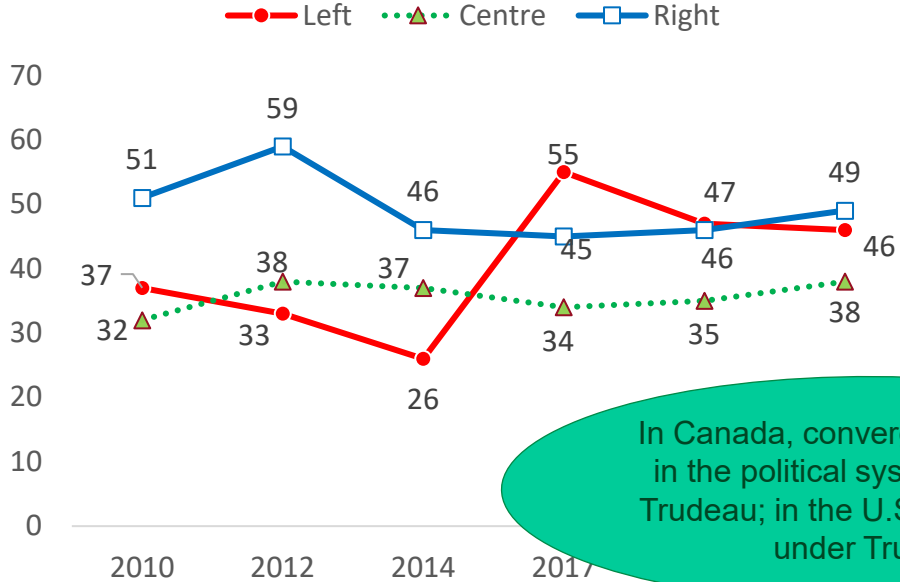


To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of [country]? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7/not at all = 1 & 2)

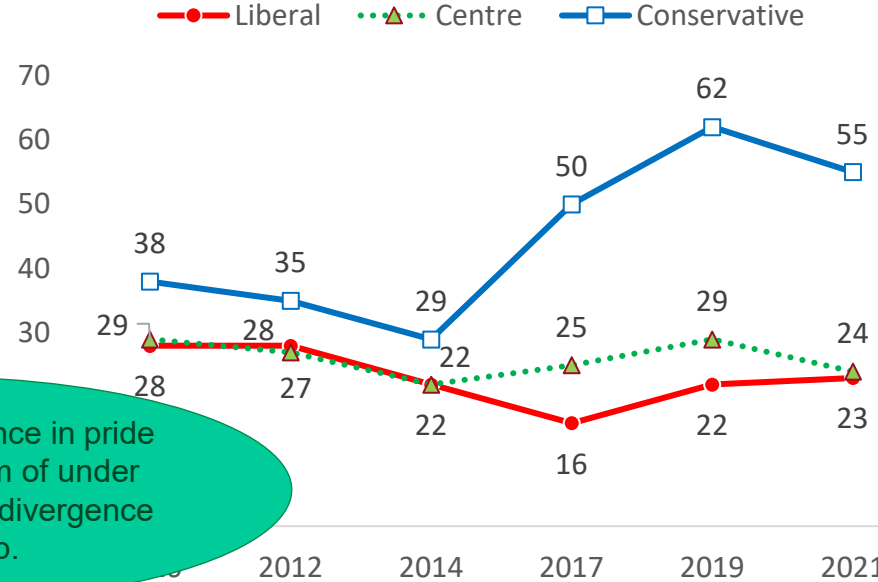
# Feel proud living under the political system, by political ideology

2010-2021

### Canada: a lot of pride



### United States: a lot of pride



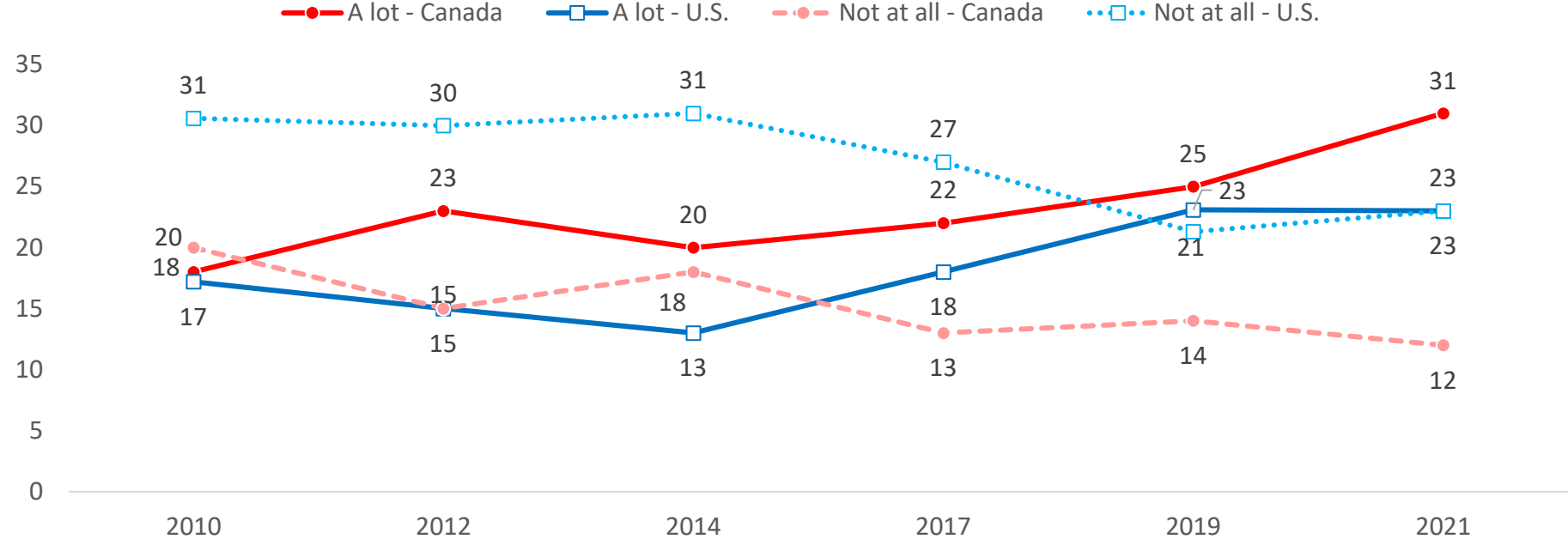
In Canada, convergence in pride in the political system of under Trudeau; in the U.S., divergence under Trump.

To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of [country]? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7)

# Respect for political institutions

Some gradual improvement in both countries.

2010-2021



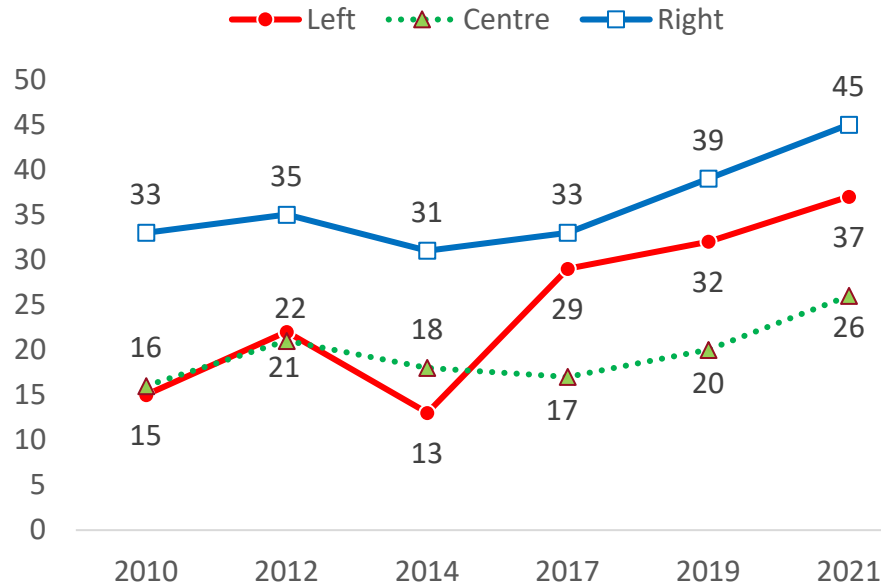
To what extent do you respect the political institutions of [country]? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7/not at all = 1 & 2)

# Respect for political institutions, by political ideology

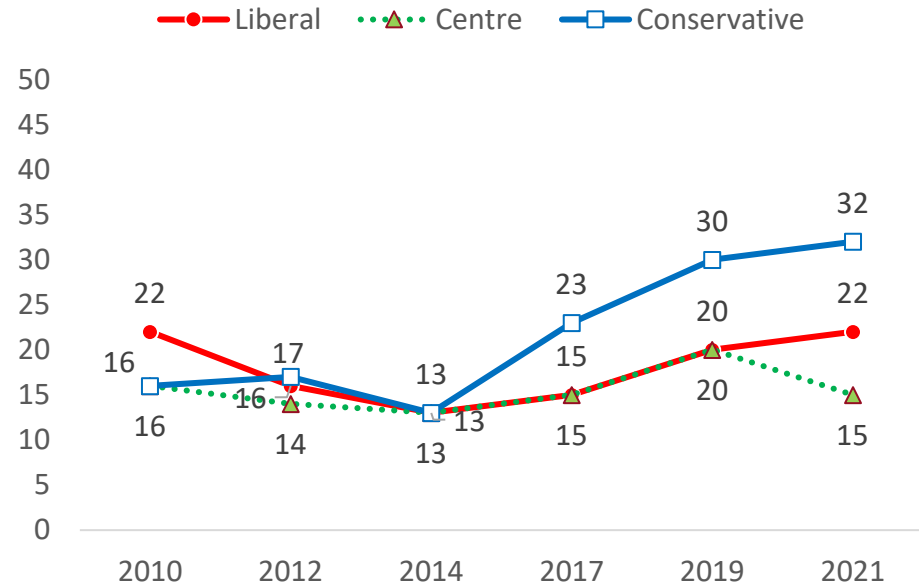
In both countries, improvement among both left and right, but the centre lags.

2010-2021

## Canada: a lot of respect



## United States: a lot of respect



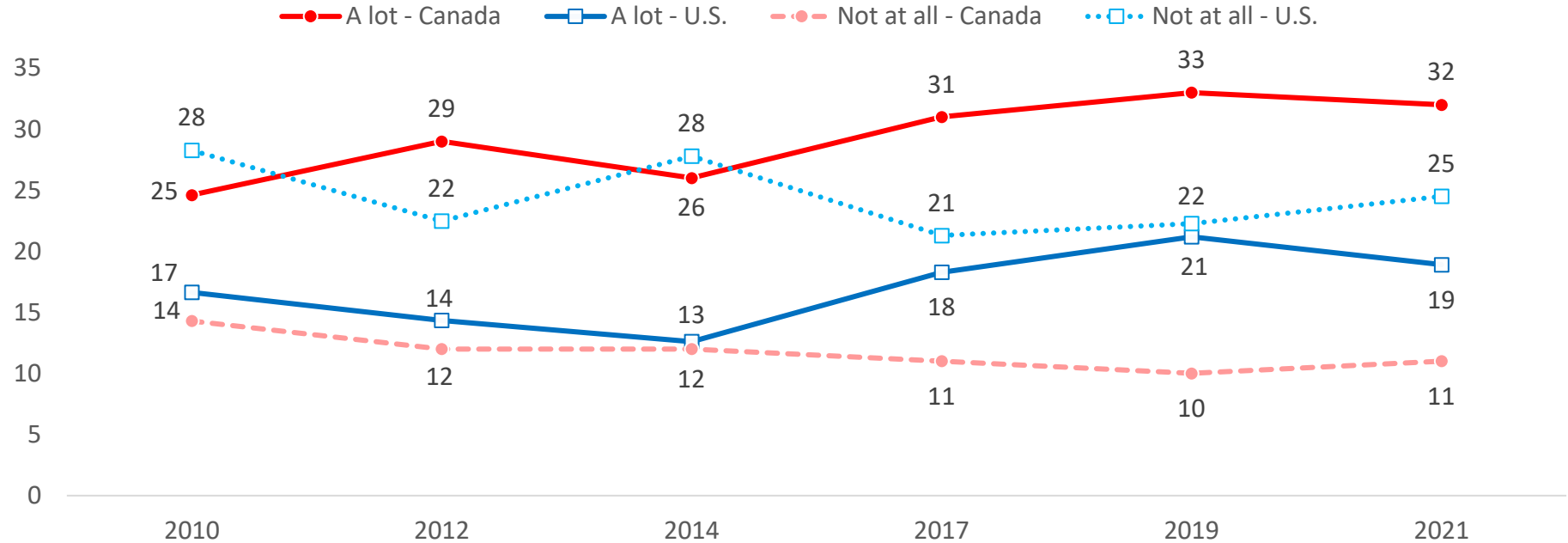
To what extent do you respect the political institutions of [country] ? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7)



# Citizens' basic rights are well-protected

Americans are more likely to disagree than to agree that basic rights are well-protected; Canadians are three times more likely to agree than to disagree.

2010-2021



To what extent do you think that citizens' basic rights are well-protected by the political system of [country]? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7/not at all = 1 & 2)

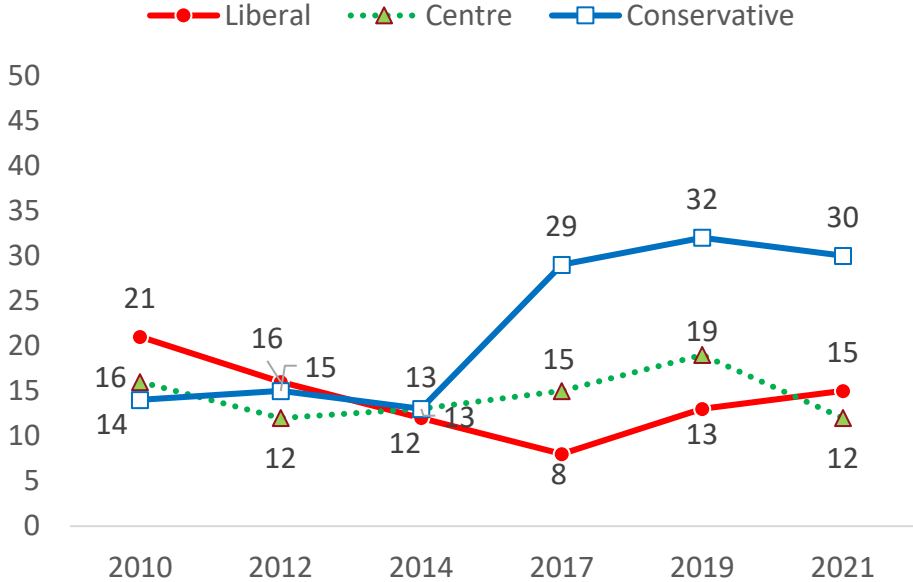
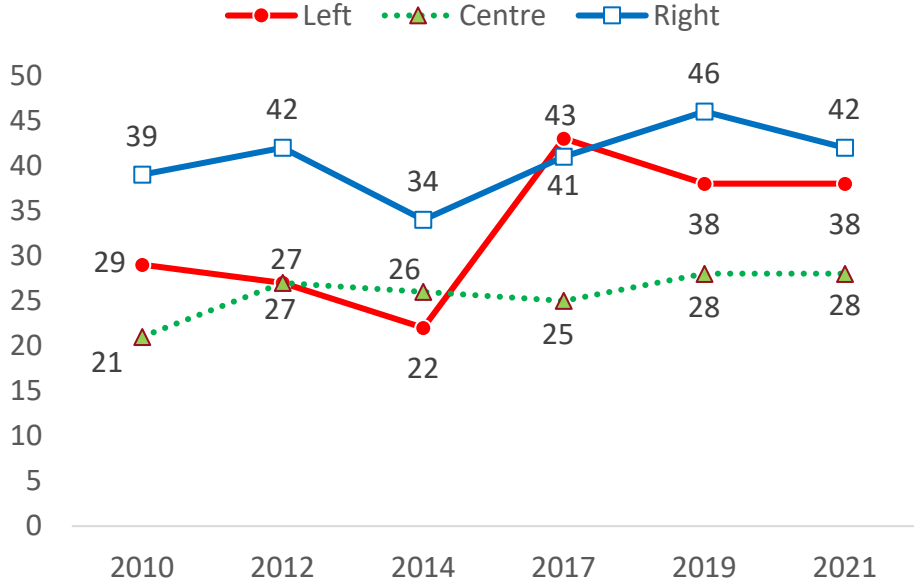
# Citizens' basic rights are well-protected, by political ideology

2010-2021

In Canada, ideological convergence under Trudeau; in the U.S., divergence under Trump.

Canada: a lot

United States: a lot

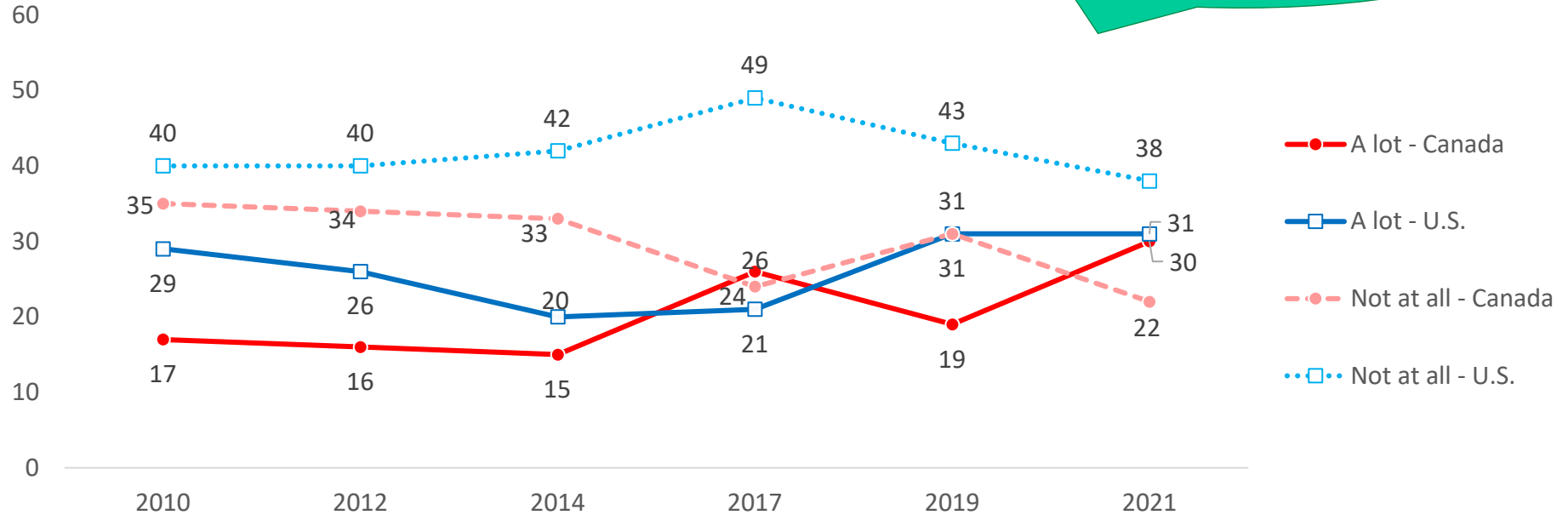


To what extent do you think that citizens' basic rights are well-protected by the political system of [country]? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7)

# Trust in the Prime Minister/President

In the U.S., overall trust in the President remains low, and did not shift much as the White House changed hands. However, the following slide tells the real story.

2010-2021



To what extent do you trust the Prime Minister/the President? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7/not at all = 1 & 2)

# Trust in the Prime Minister/President, by political ideology

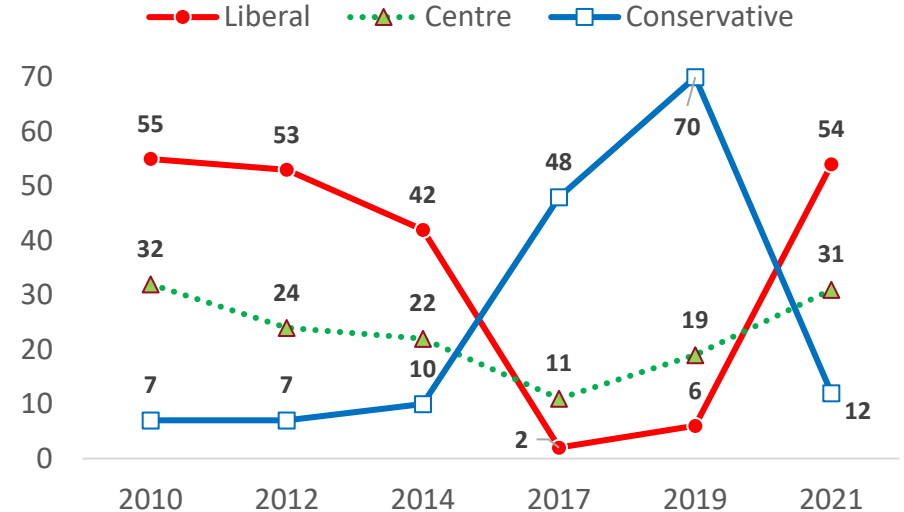
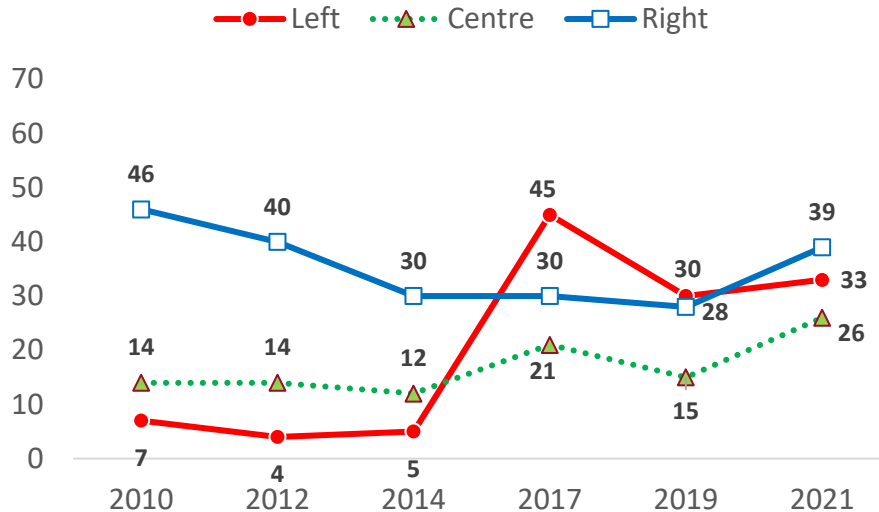
2010-2021

Trust in the PM: convergence between left and right after 2015 election.

Trust in the President among liberals and conservatives swings wildly as the White House changes hands.

Canada: a lot of trust

United States: A lot of trust

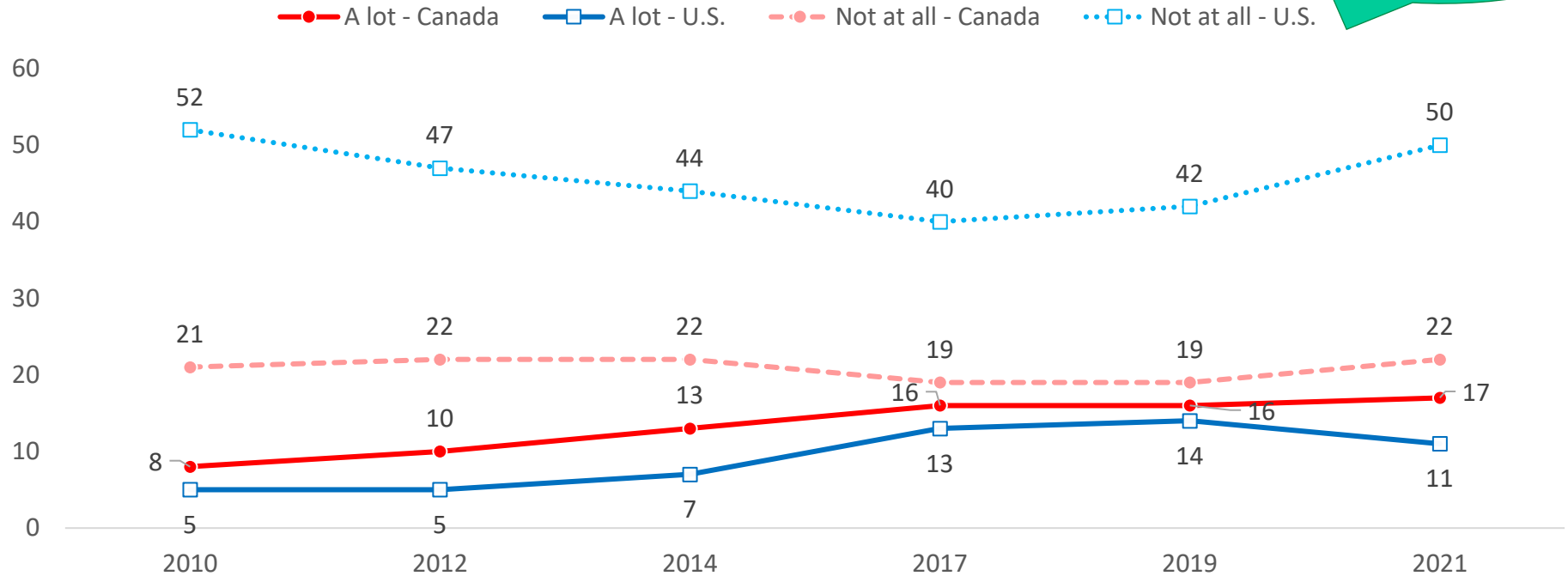


To what extent do you trust the Prime Minister/the President? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7)

# Trust in the mass media

Americans are twice as likely as Canadians to have low trust in the mass media.

2010-2021



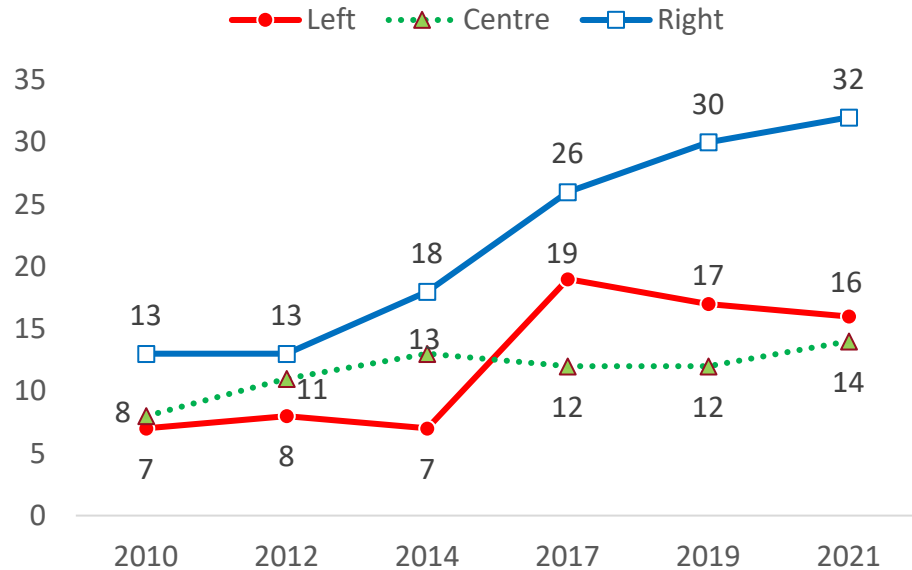
To what extent do you trust the mass media? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7/not at all = 1 & 2)

# Trust in the mass media, by political ideology

2010-2021

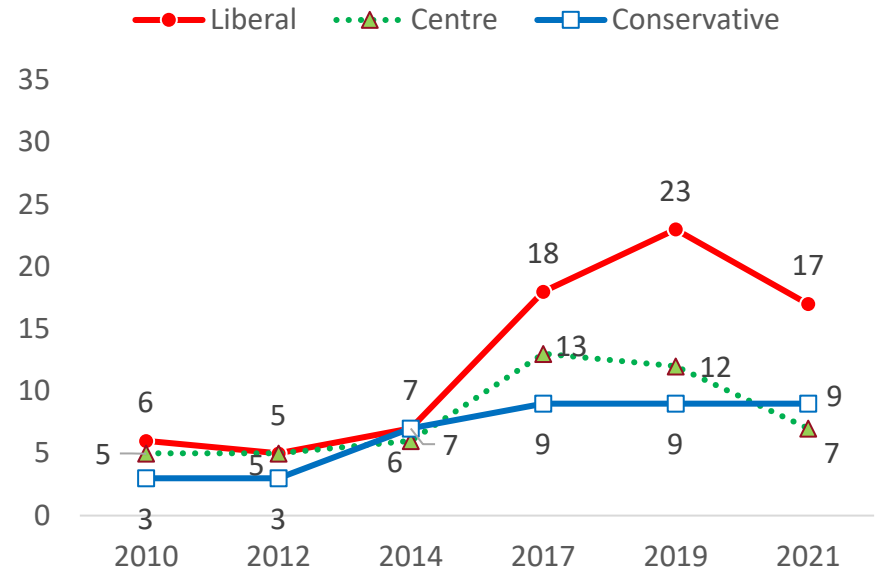
Trust in the mass media rising more sharply among those on the right in Canada.

Canada: a lot of trust



Trust in the mass media rises among liberals in the U.S. after 2016.

United States: a lot of trust

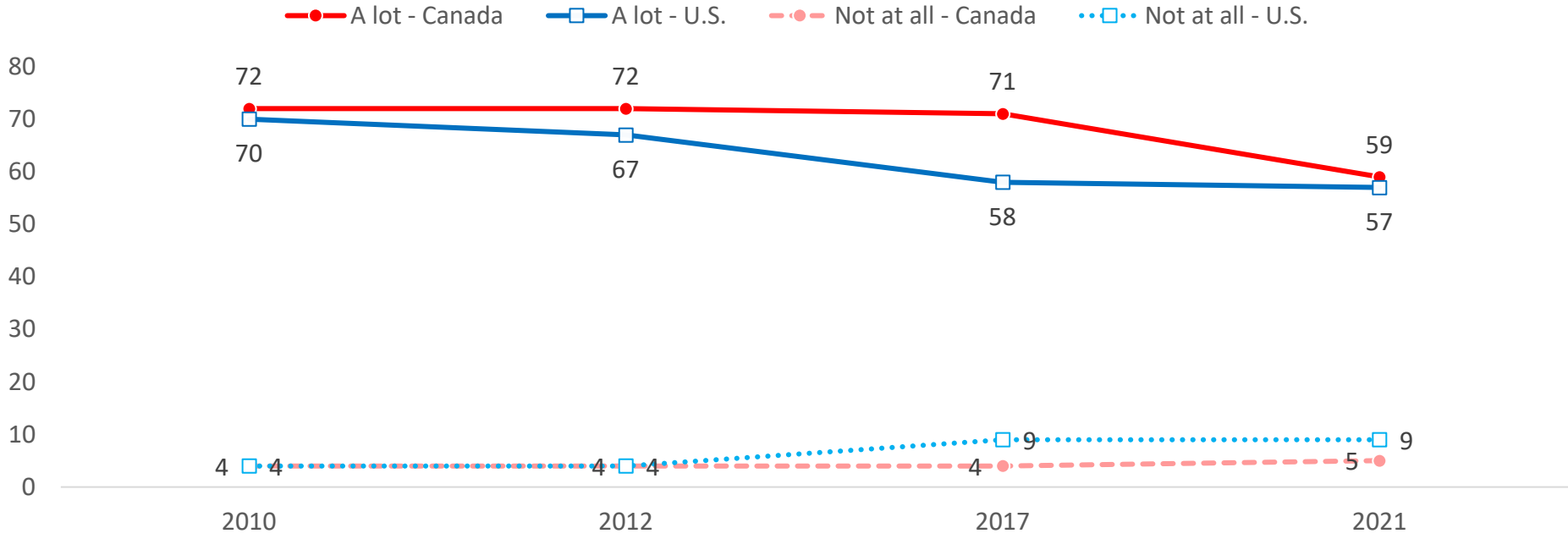


To what extent do you trust the mass media? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7)

# National pride

2010-2021

National pride has edged downward in both countries, but for different reasons.



To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian/an American? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7/not at all = 1 & 2)



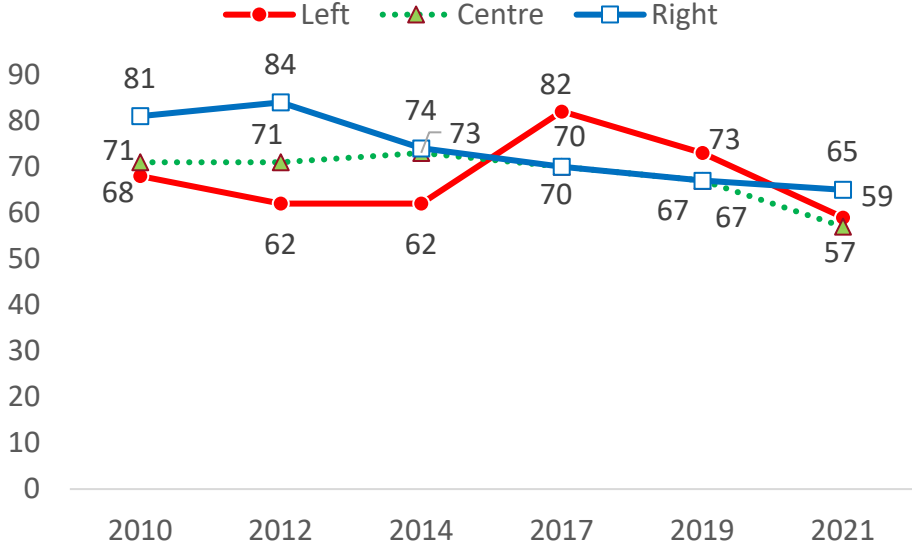
# National pride, by political ideology

2010-2021

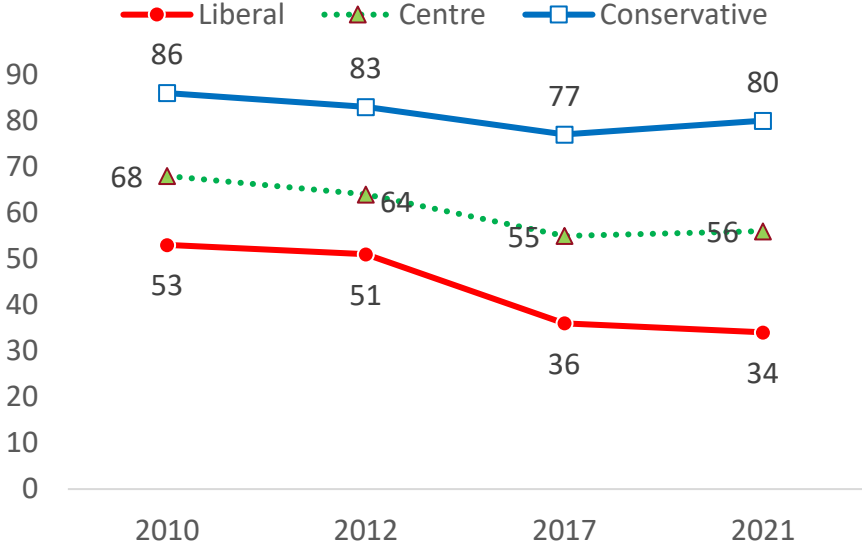
Most recent decline in pride among those in the centre and on the left may be related to Indigenous issues.

National pride divides liberals and conservatives (and has dropped more sharply among liberals).

## Canada



## United States



To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian/an American? (7-point scale: a lot = 6 & 7)



# Would you say the following can happen during elections...?

2021

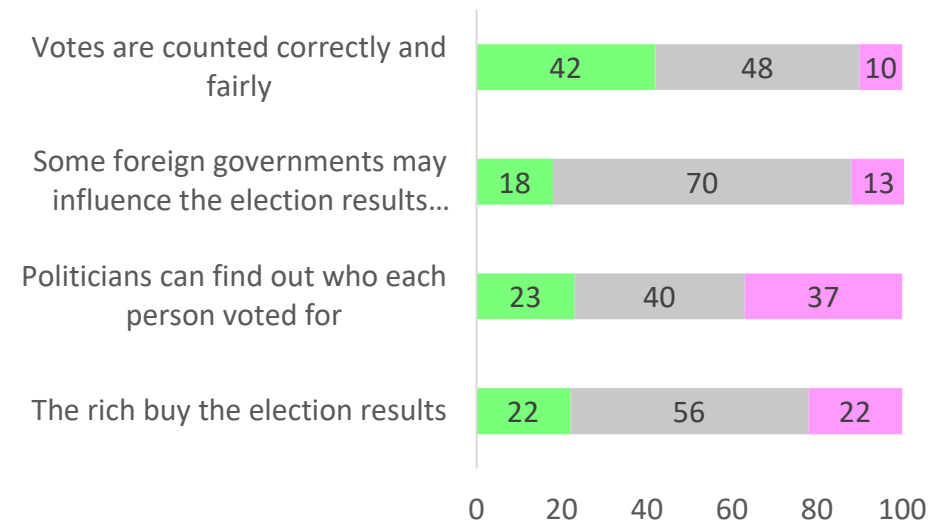
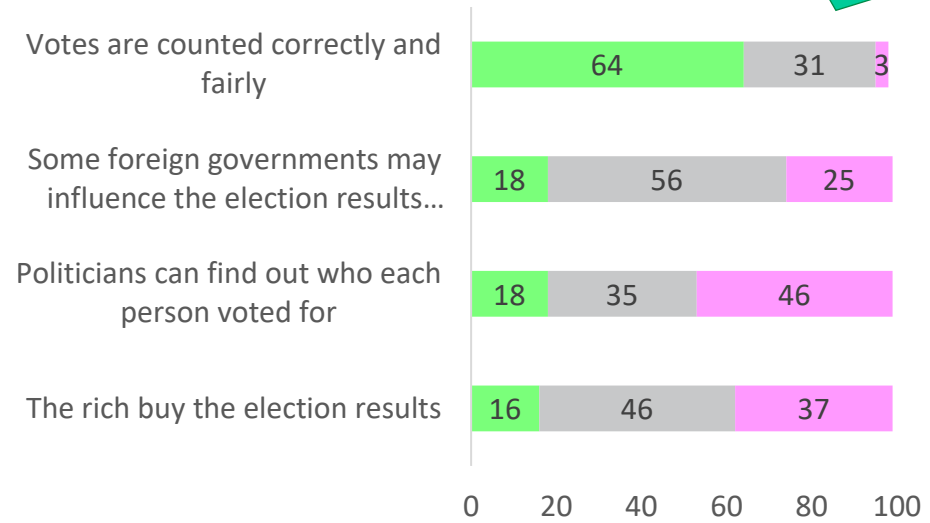
...in Canada

...in the United States

Americans are much less likely than Canadians to say votes are always counted fairly.

Always Sometimes Never

Always Sometimes Never



Would you say the following can happen during elections in Canada/in the United States?

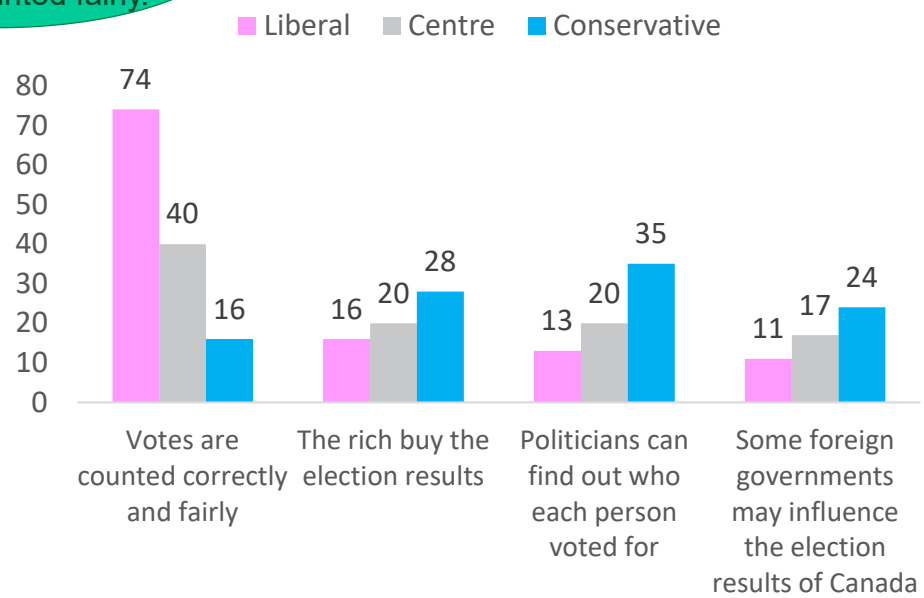
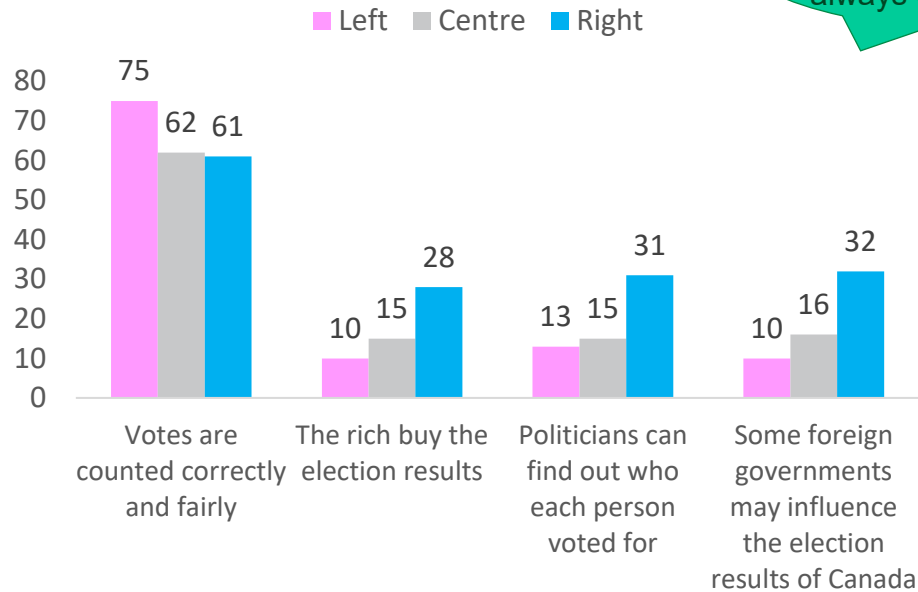
# Always happens during elections, by political ideology

2021

In Canada: always happens

the U.S.: always happens

Americans are divided ideologically on whether votes are always counted fairly.



Would you say the following can happen during elections in Canada/in the United States?

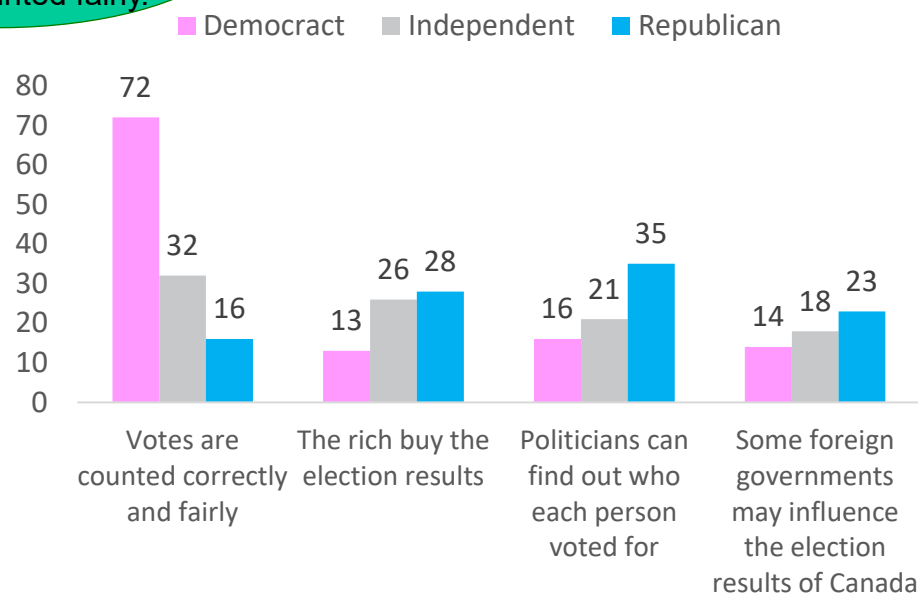
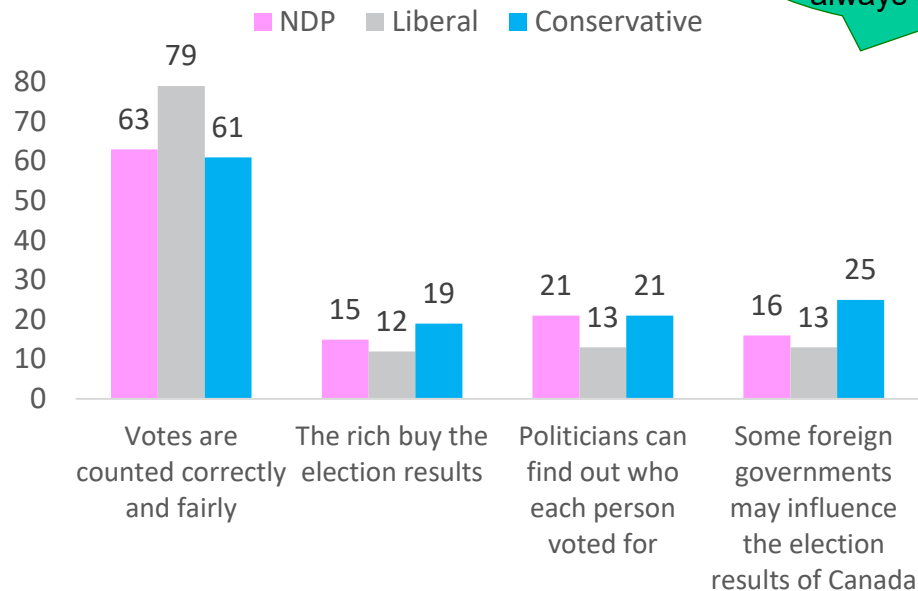
# Always happens during elections, by party support\*

2021

In Canada: always happens

the U.S.: always happens

Americans are also divided by party on whether votes are always counted fairly.



Would you say the following can happen during elections in Canada/in the United States?

\* In Canada, party support is based on a question about vote preference; in the U.S., it is based on a question about which party you identify with.



# Environics Institute

For Survey Research

---

Andrew Parkin  
*Executive Director*

andrew.parkin@environics.ca  
@parkinac

## Get in touch

900-33 Bloor Street East,  
Toronto, ON M4W 3H1

[environicsinstitute.org](http://environicsinstitute.org)

[info@environicsinstitute.org](mailto:info@environicsinstitute.org)

[@Environics\\_Ins](https://twitter.com/Environics_Ins)