

AmericasBarometer
Canadian Survey

2023 SERIES

02

Citizen Voice

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The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established by Michael Adams in 2006 with a mandate to conduct in-depth public opinion and social research on the issues shaping Canada's future. It is through such research that Canadians can better understand themselves and their changing society.

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Citizen Voice:

A Report from the 2023 AmericasBarometer Survey in Canada

Are citizens feeling increasingly ignored by their governments in Canada? There is certainly no shortage of examples of groups who feel their concerns are being overlooked. Most famously, during the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands blockaded both the streets near Parliament Hill and international border crossings to register their opposition to public health regulations intended to restrict the spread of the virus. But just prior to the onset of the pandemic, the news headlines were dominated by blockades of a different type, this time in support of Indigenous rights. On the issue of energy and climate change policies, a number of provincial governments have felt compelled to challenge federal legislation in the courts because they believed their concerns had been ignored. But at the same time, many citizens have reacted negatively to steps by provincial governments to pre-emptively invoke the notwithstanding clause of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, thereby protecting their legislation from being challenged. In the wake of these and other similar events, do citizens in Canada feel they really have a voice?

In a healthy democracy, citizens should feel that governments are responsive to their concerns, whether these are expressed through the act of voting or through free expression in between elections. Citizens must feel they have a voice, and that this voice has influence in setting the direction of the country.

Given the nature of the political cycle, it is natural that some groups will feel more listened to at some times (such as when the party they support is in government) than at other times (when their preferred party is in opposition). Duly elected governments can also become less popular as they near the end of their mandates, leaving a growing share of the public feeling ignored until the day comes when a new government can be chosen. What is important is that, these

normal fluctuations aside, the public as a whole does not feel that the political system is becoming less responsive, less democratic and more corrupt over time.

The evidence from the Canadian portion of the 2023 AmericasBarometer survey is mostly reassuring. Certainly, Conservative Party supporters were more likely to feel they had influence prior to the change of federal government (from Conservative to Liberal) in 2015, while the opposite is true of Liberal Party supporters. But overall, there is no trend toward an increasing share of the public in Canada feeling that they are not listened to by their governments. The vast majority of Canadians also feel they have some way to change things in the country, whether by voting or through some other democratic means (such as running for office).

At the same time, there are signals that the country's political culture is becoming somewhat less tolerant of dissent. On the one hand, there has been an increase in the proportion of Canadians who think that people in this country have very little freedom to express their political views without fear. On the other hand, a declining proportion of younger Canadians strongly disagree that, for the progress of the country, the voice of opposition parties should be limited. And while relatively few young Canadians strongly agree with the idea that prime ministers should limit the voice of opposition parties, this small proportion has nonetheless more than doubled between 2012 and 2023. The scale of these changes, however, should not be exaggerated, as most Canadians continue to feel they have enough freedom to express their views without fear, and very few agree with limiting the voice of the opposition.

Key findings

- The proportion of Canadians who strongly disagree that those who govern Canada are interested in what people like them think has declined, from 37 percent in 2010 to 23 percent in 2023. But the groups most likely to disagree have shifted, as the party holding office in Ottawa switched from Conservative to Liberal.
- When asked about the way they can have the most influence to change things in the country, the largest share of Canadians, by far, say that it is by voting to elect those who support their position; most of those who do not choose this option prefer other democratic means, such as running for office, participating in community associations or joining in protests. However, one in five Canadians believe instead that it is not possible to have an influence to change things. Those most likely to say that it is not possible to have an influence to change things are people who are disinterested in politics, rather than the supporters of any particular party.
- Currently, only 15 percent of Canadians strongly agree that “the people should govern directly rather than through elected representatives.” However, Canadians age 18 to 29 (21%) are twice as likely as those age 60 and older (10%) to strongly agree with this statement.
- The proportion saying Canadians have very little freedom to express their political views without fear has increased from 16 percent in 2017 to 25 percent today. This view is more likely to be expressed by those who hold minority opinions on social issues such as immigration, gender equality, LGBTQ2S+ rights and climate change.
- Relatively few Canadians strongly agree with the idea that, for the good of the country, prime ministers should limit the voice of opposition parties. But this proportion has more than doubled between 2012 and 2023 among younger Canadians age 18 to 29, from seven percent to 17 percent.

About this survey

These results are from the Canadian portion of the 2023 AmericasBarometer, a biennial 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 2023 survey covers 25 countries). The project is led by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University.

The 2023 AmericasBarometer in Canada survey was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with LAPOP at Vanderbilt University. It was conducted online with a representative sample of 2,500 Canadians (aged 18 and over) between July 20 and August 4, 2023.

DOES THE GOVERNMENT CARE WHAT THE PEOPLE THINK? Government leaders at all levels and from all parties are invariably criticized by the opposition for being out of touch with the concerns of ordinary people. Many members of the public would echo this criticism, to a certain extent at least. When asked whether those who govern the country are interested in what people like them think, only one in five Canadians (18%) *strongly agree* that they do.

At the same time, only a minority (23%) *strongly disagree* that those who govern this country are interested in what people like them think. This means that most Canadians (60%) are somewhere in the middle, without strong feelings either way.

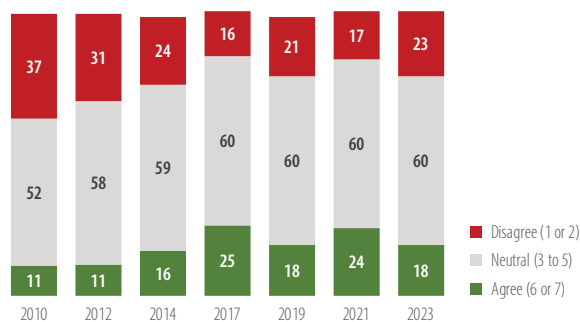
More importantly, strong disagreement with the statement has not been growing over time. In fact, the proportion of Canadians who strongly disagree that those who govern Canada are interested in what people like them think declined from the early to mid-2010s, from 37 percent in 2010 to 16 percent in 2017; since then, it has been oscillating between 15 and 25 percent (the 23% who express this opinion in 2023 is six percentage points higher than in 2021, but more or less the same proportion as in 2019 and 2014). This means that there is no trend toward an increasing share of the Canadian public feeling that their governments are out of touch.

What has changed noticeably is that the groups most likely to disagree have shifted, as the party holding office in Ottawa switched (in 2015) from Conservative to Liberal. In 2012, for instance, 31 percent of Canadians strongly disagreed that those who govern this country are interested in what people like them think – but this figure was:

- higher than average among Quebecers (39%), and those who had voted for the Liberals (33%) or the NDP (47%) in the election held the preceding year;
- lower than average among Albertans (24%) and those who had voted for the Conservatives (16%) in 2011.

In 2023, the pattern is reversed. Strong disagreement now stands at 23 percent overall, but is now:

Agree or disagree: Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think
2010 – 2023



Q.EFF1

Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? (Using a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 7 means “strongly agree.”)

- lower than average among Quebecers (18%), and those who intend to vote for the Liberals (8%) or the NDP (18%) in the next election;
- higher than average among Albertans (31%) and those who intend to vote for the Conservatives (34%).

Another way to illustrate this reversal is by looking at how opinions vary according to people’s assessment of the prime minister’s job performance. In both 2012 and 2023, those who said the prime minister was doing a bad job were much more likely than those who said the prime minister was doing a good job to feel that governments didn’t care what people like them think. But in 2012, the prime minister was Conservative Stephen Harper, and in 2023 it is Liberal Justin Trudeau. The previous prime minister’s supporters were naturally more likely to feel listened to before 2015 than today; the opposite is true of the current prime minister’s supporters. A person’s sense of how much governments listen to them, then, is partly influenced by whether they support the party forming government or not.

HOW CAN CITIZENS HAVE THE MOST INFLUENCE TO CHANGE THINGS IN THE COUNTRY?

In a democracy, it is important that citizens feel that they can collectively influence the direction of the country. Typically, the way of exercising that influence is by voting in elections.

When asked about the way they can have the most influence to change things in the country, the largest share of Canadians, by far, say that it is by voting to elect those who support their position. This option is chosen by one in two (50%).¹

About one in ten (9%) prefer another form of civic participation, namely participating in community boards or associations. Somewhat fewer feel they can have the most influence by running as a candidate for elected office (7%), by participating in protests (7%) or in another way (7%).

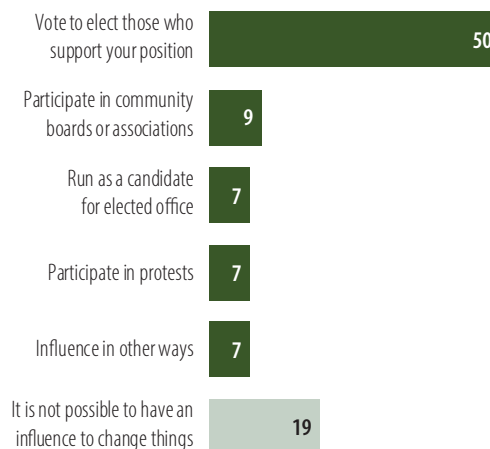
This leaves one in five Canadians (19%) who do not choose any of these options, saying instead that it is not possible to have an influence to change things.

The proportion that feels it is not possible to have an influence to change things is slightly higher among women (22%) than men (15%), and among those age 30 and older (19% to 23%) compared to those age 18 to 29 (13%). It is slightly lower than average for those living in larger communities with populations of a million or more (16%), but slightly higher than average for those living in smaller communities with populations of less than 100,000 (24%).

While younger Canadians (age 18 to 29) are no more likely than average to say it is not possible to have an influence, they are more likely to prefer means other than voting in elections, including participating in community boards or associations (18% in this age group say this is how they can have the most influence to change things, compared to the average of 9%), and participating in protests (18%, compared to the average of 7%).

In what way do you believe you can have the most influence to change things in the country?

2023



Q.VB21N

In what way do you believe you can have the most influence to change things in the country?

The most distinguishing characteristic of those who feel it is not possible to have an influence to change things is that they are more likely than average to be disinterested in politics and the news. The proportion feeling it is not possible to change things reaches 28 percent among those who see political information on social media a few times a year or less, 29 percent among those who pay attention to the news less often than a few times a week, and 31 percent among those with little or no interest in politics.²

¹ Survey participants could only select one item in answering this question.

² It is not possible to say, however, whether those with little interest in politics assume there is no way for people like them to have influence, or whether those who have grown frustrated with their lack of influence have subsequently lost interest in politics.

THE PEOPLE SHOULD GOVERN DIRECTLY RATHER THAN THROUGH ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES. Those who feel that elected representatives are not responsive enough to the concerns of voters often propose instruments of direct democracy as an alternative, such as the more frequent use of citizen-initiated plebiscites. But there has consistently been little support in Canada for such a decisive change to the country’s political system.

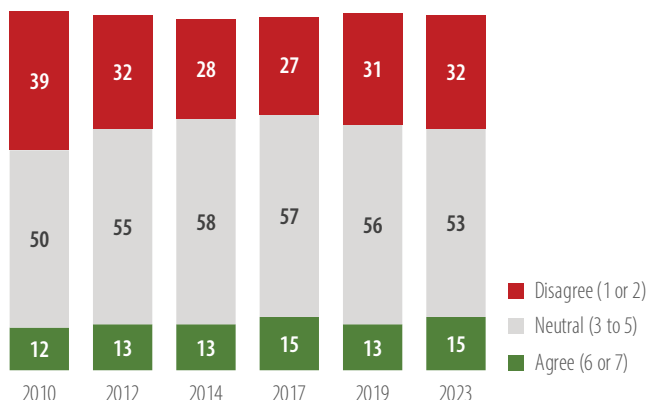
Currently, only 15 percent of Canadians strongly agree with the idea that “the people should govern directly rather than through elected representatives.” About twice as many (32%) strongly disagree. About one in two (53%) are in the middle, without strong feelings either way. Opinions on this question have changed little over the past decade (though the proportion strongly disagreeing was slightly higher in 2010, at 39%).

While, historically, support for direct democracy in Canada has been associated with populist political movements, such as the Reform Party, with greater support in Western Canada, agreement that “the people should govern directly” does not vary by region. Only 14 percent of people in Western Canada as a whole, and 17 percent in the three Prairie provinces, strongly agree that “the people should govern directly rather than through elected representatives” – levels not significantly different from the national average.

Opinions, however, do vary by age. Canadians age 18 to 29 (21%) are twice as likely as those age 60 and older (10%) to strongly agree that the people should govern directly. Conversely, those age 60 and older (47%) are three times more likely than those age 18 to 29 (16%) to strongly disagree. This pattern is not new; similar differences among age groups appear in previous years as well (between 2010 and 2019). Strong disagreement also rises as both educational attainment and annual household income increase.

Finally, political leanings matter, but in a very specific way. Those who place themselves on the right of the political spectrum are much more likely to strongly agree (34%) that the people should govern directly, compared with those who place themselves in the left (8%). Conversely, those on the left (44%) are more than twice as likely as those on the right (20%) to strongly disagree. Despite this, there is surprisingly little disagreement among supporters of the main federal political parties. In fact, the level of strong

Agree or disagree: The people should govern directly rather than through elected representatives
2010 – 2023



Q.POP107
The people should govern directly rather than through elected representatives. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? (Using a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 7 means “strongly agree.”)

agreement is identical among supporters of the Liberal (16%), Conservative (15%) and New Democratic (15%) parties (though Liberal Party supporters (43%) are more likely than the others to strongly disagree).

These patterns suggest that, while the left-right political spectrum remains relevant in Canadian politics – as it clearly picks up on different preferences about how the political system should work – it does not necessarily correspond exactly to differences among supporters of political parties (NDP, Liberal or Conservative) that are traditionally seen as being more to the left or the right.

CAN PEOPLE EXPRESS THEIR POLITICAL VIEWS WITHOUT FEAR?

Canadians enjoy constitutional protections for freedom of belief and expression. Yet, some may still be reluctant to express their opinions for fear of negative reactions from other people or institutions. The term “cancel culture” has gained currency as a means of describing (and denouncing) situations where speakers or performers are disinvited or discouraged from participating in public events because their views are deemed unacceptable.

While most Canadians feel they have enough freedom to express their views, the proportion that feels they have very little freedom has increased since 2017.

Currently, two in three Canadians (67%) say that people in this country currently have enough freedom to express political views without fear. However, this is fewer than in 2017, when the figure stood at 75 percent. The proportion saying Canadians have very little freedom to express political views without fear has increased over that period, from 16 percent to 25 percent. Eight percent today say there is too much freedom to express political views without fear, virtually unchanged from the seven percent who felt this way in 2017.

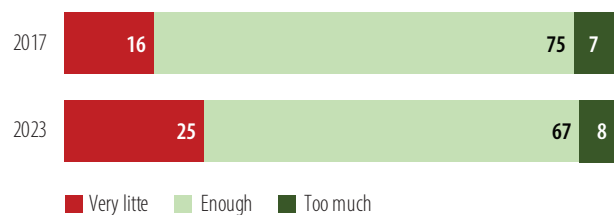
The proportion that believes there is very little freedom to express political views without fear is somewhat higher among Albertans (31%), among those living in smaller communities with populations of fewer than 100,000 people (31%), among those without a post-secondary education (33%), those who support the federal Conservative Party (35%), and those on right of the political spectrum (38%).

More important than these factors, however, are opinions on other social issues: those who hold minority opinions on immigration, gender equality, LGBTQ2S+ rights and climate change are much more likely than average to say that people in this country currently have very little freedom to express political views without fear. This includes:

- those who think that the number of immigrants in Canada should be decreased a lot (50%);
- those who think that climate change would not be a serious problem for Canada even if nothing is done to reduce it (44%);
- those who strongly agree that men are better political leaders than women (43%);

Do you think that now in the country we have very little, enough or too much freedom to express political views without fear?

2017 – 2023



Q.LIB2C

Do you think that now in the country we have very little, enough or too much freedom to express political views without fear.

- those who disapprove of same-sex couples having the right to marry (41%);
- and those who would be uncomfortable with having a gay, lesbian or bisexual person as prime minister (39%).

Not surprisingly, the groups that are most likely to say there is very little freedom are also those whose opinions have changed the most since 2017. While the proportion saying there is very little freedom in Canada to express political views without fear increased by nine percentage points overall, it increased by 16 points among Albertans and those on right of the political spectrum, and by 15 points among those living in smaller communities with populations of fewer than 100,000 people and those without a post-secondary education.³ It also increased by 16 points among those who disapprove of same-sex couples having the right to marry, and by 22 points among those who think that climate change would not be a serious problem for Canada even if nothing is done to reduce it.

It is perhaps not surprising that those who feel out of step with the priorities of the current Liberal government in Ottawa, such as fighting climate change and defending LGBTQ2S+ rights, might increasingly perceive a lack of freedom to express their views without fear. What is not clear from the survey is whether this is an inevitable part of the political cycle – where the winning party’s supporters naturally feel more included than its opponents – or a more worrying sign of a society that is becoming less tolerant of political dissent.

³ There was no question about federal vote intention in the 2017 survey, so it is not possible to report changes since then among the supporters of the different political parties.

SHOULD WE LIMIT THE VOICE OF OPPOSITION PARTIES?

In a democracy, it is expected that there will be strong differences of opinion. It is vital, however, for all points of view to be heard, which means that, at a minimum, the party holding power should not be able to limit the voice of the opposition. To some extent at least, most Canadians support this fundamental principle. Only one in ten (11%) strongly agree with the view that “it is necessary for the progress of this country that our prime ministers limit the voice and vote of opposition parties.” Four times as many (40%) strongly disagree, and 48 percent are in the middle, without a strong opinion either way.

Overall, opinions on this question have not changed significantly in recent years, though strong disagreement was slightly higher in 2012 (45%) and 2014 (46%) than currently (40%).

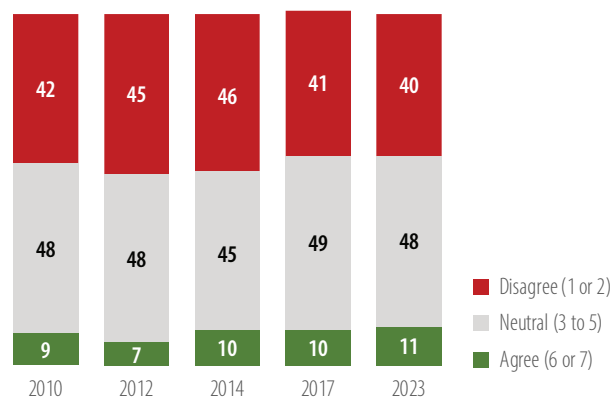
Currently, opinions vary significantly by age, gender, political ideology and federal vote intention.

- Strong *disagreement* that prime ministers should limit the voice of opposition parties increases with age, from a low of 28 percent among those age 18 to 29, to a high of 51 percent among those age 60 and older.
- Men (47%) are more likely than women (35%) to strongly disagree.
- Strong *agreement* with the proposition is much higher among those who place themselves on the right of the political spectrum (35%) than among those who place themselves on the centre (7%) or the left (8%).
- While those on the right are more likely to agree than those on the left, the opposite is true of those who support the Conservative Party compared to those who support the Liberal Party. Strong agreement is lower among Conservative Party supporters (8%) than Liberal Party supporters (19%), while strong disagreement is higher (51%, compared to 30%).

It is understandable that Conservative Party supporters would be more reluctant to agree that the opposition’s voice should be limited, at a time when their preferred party forms the official opposition. But it is another example of where the differences between those on the left and right of the political spectrum do not align well with the differences among supporters of the different political parties.

Agree or disagree: It is necessary for the progress of this country that our prime ministers limit the voice and vote of opposition parties

2010 – 2023



Q.POP101

It is necessary for the progress of this country that our prime ministers limit the voice and vote of opposition parties. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? (Using a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 7 means “strongly agree.”)

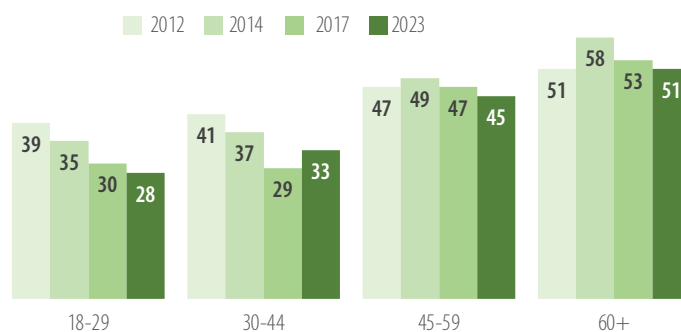
While overall opinions on this question have not changed significantly in recent years, there have been more important changes among specific population groups.

AGE. Disagreement has declined more among younger Canadians: since 2012, it is down by 11 points among those age 18 to 29, and by eight points among those age 30 to 44, compared to two-point drops for those age 45 to 59, and those age 60 and older. As a result, the gap between the youngest and oldest age groups has widened, from 12 points to 23 points.

REGION. Disagreement has declined since 2012 in Atlantic and central Canada, but increased in the West. The biggest contrast is between Quebec and Alberta: strong disagreement has declined by 13 points in Quebec, but increased by 14 points in Alberta. While Quebecers were previously more likely than Albertans to strongly disagree that prime ministers should limit the voice of opposition parties, the opposite is now the case.

Strongly disagree (1 or 2 on the scale): It is necessary for the progress of this country that our prime ministers limit the voice and vote of opposition parties

2012 – 2023 by age group



Q.POP101

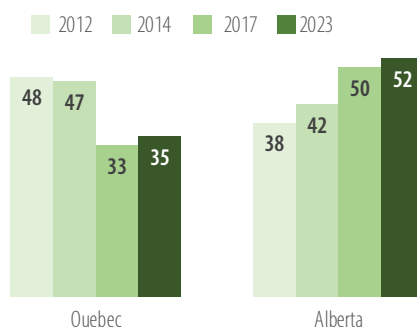
It is necessary for the progress of this country that our prime ministers limit the voice and vote of opposition parties. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? (Using a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 7 means “strongly agree.”)

VOTE INTENTION. There has been a similar switch in position among different party supporters. In 2012, when the Conservative Party was in government, that party's supporters were less likely than Liberal Party supporters to strongly disagree with the idea of prime ministers limiting the voice of opposition parties. But now that the Conservative Party is the opposition, that party's supporters are more likely than Liberal Party supporters to strongly disagree.

These changes aside, it should be emphasized that relatively few in any population group strongly agree with the idea that prime ministers should limit the voice of opposition parties. That said, this proportion, while small, has more than doubled between 2012 and 2023 among younger Canadians age 18 to 29, from seven percent to 17 percent. Among Liberal Party supporters, the proportion has increased from three percent to 19 percent (the corresponding drop among Conservative Party supporters was from 12% to 8%).

Strongly disagree (1 or 2 on the scale): It is necessary for the progress of this country that our prime ministers limit the voice and vote of opposition parties

2012 – 2023 Quebec and Alberta

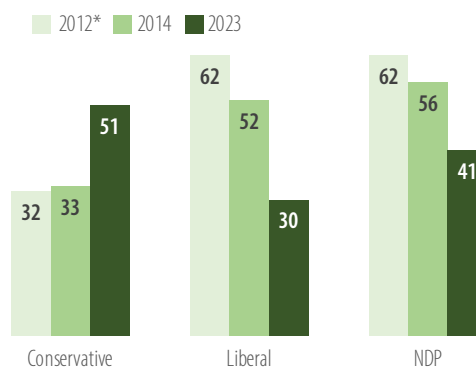


Q.POP101

It is necessary for the progress of this country that our prime ministers limit the voice and vote of opposition parties. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? (Using a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 7 means "strongly agree.")

Strongly disagree (1 or 2 on the scale): It is necessary for the progress of this country that our prime ministers limit the voice and vote of opposition parties

2012 – 2023 by federal vote intention



*Results for 2012 are based on a question about which party respondents voted for in the 2011 election.

Q.POP101

It is necessary for the progress of this country that our prime ministers limit the voice and vote of opposition parties. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? (Using a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 7 means "strongly agree.")

Conclusion

At different points in the political cycle, some groups within society will feel more listened to by the current government, while others will feel more ignored. Prior to the 2015 federal election, Liberal Party supporters were more likely than those supporting the Conservative Party to feel ignored by government, and more strongly opposed to the suggestion that there should be limits on the voice of the opposition. After 2015, roles have been reversed, with Conservative Party supporters being more likely to feel overlooked than their Liberal Party counterparts, and naturally more wary of limits on their critical voice. Overall, however, the trend is more positive than negative, as fewer Canadians today than a decade ago strongly disagree that those who govern this country are interested in what people like them think.

Some citizens do feel overlooked: about one in five don't see any means through which to have influence to make changes in this country. Those taking this view are much more likely to be disinterested in politics and the news. This is encouraging, if we assume that most of those who have an interest in making change find some means through which to do so, whether by voting, running for office or

participating in protests. It is less encouraging if it turns out that some of those who would have liked to make change have found their efforts ineffective and, as a result, have lost interest in politics altogether.

The opinions of younger people are always among the most interesting when thinking about the future of our democracy. This survey mostly offers reassurance. Young Canadians are no more likely than average to disagree that governments care what they think, or to feel they have no way to exert influence to make changes in this country. They express more interest in direct, as opposed to representative, forms of democracy – which may simply reflect an interest in exploring reforms to the status quo. One worrying sign, however, is a decline among younger Canadians in strong opposition to the idea that there are grounds to limit the voice of the opposition (though relatively few strongly agree with this idea). It remains to be seen whether this signals a weariness with the divisive tone of political debate that tends to prevail on social media, or a more concerning weakening of commitment to democratic norms.

