

STRENGTHENING CANADIAN DEMOCRACY

2019 National Poll Summary

Is Canadian democracy in jeopardy? Is there a pull towards anti-government populism? Is 'fake' news eroding our democratic culture?

As part of the Strengthening Canadian Democracy initiative, the Simon Fraser University Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue set out to answer important questions about Canadian democracy in a national survey in July 2019. The survey establishes a baseline for the strength of our democratic culture and resiliency of our democracy as a country.

WE EXPLORED THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KEY VARIABLES

We worked with Advantis to collect data among a randomly selected representative sample of 3524 Canadians.

- Sense of agency (external efficacy)
- Trust in elected officials and institutions
- Commitment to democracy and related values
- Attraction to anti-government populist messaging
- Levels of democratic participation
- Sense of belonging

Survey questions were developed from a 10-year scan, 52 expert interviews, and stakeholder workshops, and tested in a Metro-Vancouver pilot poll.

WHAT WE FOUND

The national survey found signs that the strength of Canadian democracy is fraying. A substantial portion of Canadians do not trust our democratic institutions or political actors, who do not have a strong sense of belonging, and who believe that some individuals should have more rights than others. Our concerns is that if left unchecked, the appeal of anti-democratic populism and the spread of misinformation will become normalized, further eroding our democratic values and increasing polarization.

IS CANADIAN DEMOCRACY IN JEOPARDY?

While the majority of Canadians like our democratic system of government and processes, it is evident that there are cracks in the strength of our democracy. Canadians have a lack of faith in their elected officials, and do not feel as if their country is governed democratically. While Canadians support key democratic principles, we are not immune to growing cynicism towards our elected officials and institutions.

77% of Canadians prefer democracy as a system of government over any other form of government

68% of Canadians believe that elected officials don't care about what people like them think

52% of Canadians don't feel like ordinary citizens have the ability to influence the government

IS THE "CULTURAL MOSAIC" A PART OF CANADA'S NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE?

Canada is a nation built on the backgrounds and experiences of immigrants. However, the survey revealed that a full third of Canadians may not subscribe to the idea of the "cultural mosaic". Instead, they believe that naturalized Canadians, those born elsewhere and later immigrated to Canada, should have less of a say in government decisions. Although diversity is valued in Canada, we are not immune to the impact of the rise of anti-democratic values around the world.

34% of Canadians believe that Canadian born citizens should have more of a say in government than naturalized citizens

53% of voters would support a candidate that promoted a 'Canada First' agenda, even at the expense of relations with out allies

DO CANADIANS PARTICIPATE IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS?

Canadians are active in democracy, with a majority reporting they are regularly involved in a range of active and passive democratic activities, such as voting in elections, attending meetings and events, and volunteering based on their concern or interest in a policy or cause. Although Canadians are active, they want more opportunities and more civic education.

60% of Canadians want greater civic education

62% of citizens are active in democracy

44% of Canadians want more opportunities to participate in democracy compared to 5% who want fewer

WHAT SHAPES DEMOCRATIC CULTURE?

Trust and belonging are important building blocks of Canadian democracy, and we must continue to build on and expand these values to strengthen the state of Canadian democracy. The survey results show Canadians who have a greater sense of belonging are also more likely to trust in our democratic institutions and political actors, and believe they have a greater impact on democracy, while trust also helps to undermine the view that democracy ignores citizens' interests in favor of the establishment.

70% of Canadians have a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood

Canadians are 3x more likely to think officials care if they have a strong sense of belonging

Canadians are 2x more likely to attend a public consultation if they have a strong sense of belonging

However, it is a concern that Canadians have a lukewarm level of trust in our democratic institutions and actors, including the media, Parliament, journalists, and elected officials.

Only 33% of Canadians have trust in their elected officials

Only 38% of Canadians trust the media

IS 'FAKE NEWS' AND DISINFORMATION ERODING OUR DEMOCRATIC CULTURE?

Canadians are concerned about the impact social media has on the rise of disinformation and polarization in this country. At the same time, increased connectivity is seen by many as a boon for political debates and as a platform for regular Canadians to have a meaningful voice in the political process.

79% of Canadians believe disinformation is a problem for democracy

57% of voters believe that access to the internet, mobile phones, and social media makes Canadians divided in their political opinions

WHO WE ARE

The Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue's Strengthening Canadian Democracy initiative's goal is to create a more resilient democratic culture across all communities in Canada. To achieve these goals, we work with researchers, practitioners, public servants, and members of the public across our nation to spark conversations about why democracy matters and what we can do to make it stronger. Our mission is to understand what works, when, and how, in creating a more resilient democratic culture among citizens.

WHY THE INITIATIVE

Trust in Canada's democratic institutions and elected officials is fraying. Feeling unheard and unable to create change, Canadians are becoming cynical, disillusioned, and wary of their democratic system. The behaviors of their institutions and elected officials are not helping.

Many groups across the country are working to improve separate aspects of Canada's democracy (institutional reform, voter turnout, political systems, or diversifying representation). We complement their work and improve Canada's democracy through a focus on the everyday experiences of democratic culture and growing awareness of why these experiences matter. By strengthening Canada's democratic culture, the initiative improves the foundations of our democracy.

Visit www.democracymatters.ca to sign up for our newsletter, learn more about the initiative, find reports and our growing list of resources. To contact the initiative, please email our Project Manager, Dr. Jennifer Wolowic at jwolowic@sfu.ca.

