

The Public Outlook on Electoral Reform: What Do Canadians Want?

Frank Graves

A majority of Canadians, 54 per cent, think “there is a need for electoral reform,” and a plurality, 47 per cent, think any changes should be put the people in a referendum, versus 43 per cent who do not. These are among the findings of an extensive public opinion poll by EKOS Research in mid-October.

The issue of electoral reform is of great importance to citizens. The issue does not produce the same visceral immediacy as debates about health care, climate change or economic stagnation. It does, however, find its roots in deep historical shifts in the relationship between citizens and their governments.

We are going to try and distill the public preferences for moving forward on these issues. There is no overall consensus and there are those who would be quite content with the status quo. Despite these cleavages, there is a clear overall lean that there is a problem and that it needs fixing. Most citizens agree that the status quo is flawed and change is required. Changes will inevitably leave some unhappy but there would be even more discontent if nothing were to change.

In this discussion, we are sharing the increasingly reflected views of a representative sample of Canadians. Some of the key questions have been asked repeatedly over the years so we can judge the trajectory of concerns and preferences. It is notable that while there is a desire to change the electoral system, the very act of rigorous citizen engagement is seen as one of the most promising ways of renewing

trust in government. Consider this research an example of just that and imagine that informed, reflected, and representative engagement became part of routine governance.

We are going to organize the rest of this discussion around five central questions;

- 1) What is the current state of health of Canadian democracy?
- 2) How is the public seeing the issue of electoral reform?
- 3) What should be the next steps? Should we move forward or delay?

4) Should we be broadening the horizon of reforms to consider things other than alternatives to the first-past-the-post system?

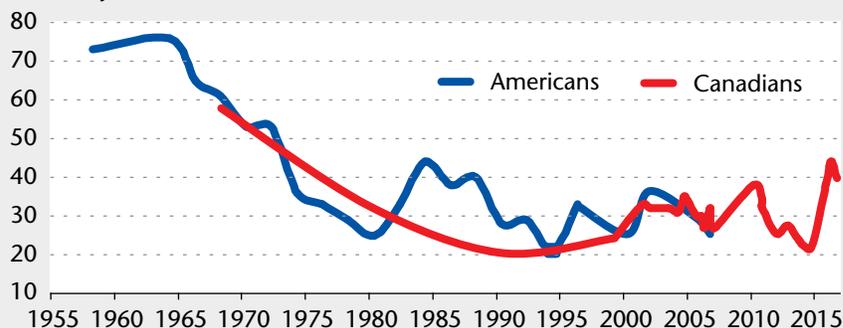
5) What would a citizen-built system of democratic reforms look like?

The question of whether or not we need to make changes is rooted in the question of whether the current system is performing adequately or needs to be improved. We know that Canada, like virtually all advanced western democracies, has experienced a precipitous decline in trust in government over the past several decades. The incidence of those who say they can trust the government in Ottawa to do the right thing is less than half what it was in the 1960s. On the other hand, we have seen an impressive rise in this indicator since the change in government last year. However, we suspect that this improvement is not sufficient to deal with the depths of the problems and our respondents also tell us that.

Chart 1: Tracking Trust in Government

Q. How much do you trust the government in Ottawa/Washington to do what is right?

% who say MOST/ALL THE TIME



BASE: Canadians (online only); October 12-14, 2016, n=1,098, MOE +/- 3.0%, 19 times out of 20

While the bounce is impressive, it has flattened and may well decline again. It is notable how closely Canada and the United States have been following the same trajectory.

Looking at another barometer of democratic health, we have tracked political cynicism for the past 15 years. Once again, we see a significant uptick in outlook on this indicator but it is still the case that, by a margin of 50 to 33, the public agree that the government doesn't care much about what I think. While that is better than the rather shocking 74 to 16 lean we saw in the final stages of the last government's tenure, it is still troubling to think that roughly

half of the citizenry think their government doesn't care about them.

Against this rather bleak outlook, we submit our 20 plus years tracking of whether or not Canada has the best system of government in the world. This rather lofty yardstick is satisfied for slightly over half of all Canadians. This represents a slight uptick from the modest down tick that occurred from 2004 to 2015. Like Churchill's wry note that democracy was the worst form of government except for all the others, Canadians exhibit lots of skepticism about our system of government but ultimately think it is world class.

Herein lies a significant challenge.

Canadians believe our system is flawed and needs repairs but they don't think it is a wreck. It is more about how it can be better, fairer, and more responsive in the future. Canadians want to rethink—not reinvent—their democracy.

While we have seen some modest improvements the overall picture is one that suggests there are serious problems to be confronted. Here we turn to what Canadians think of one critical ingredient of our democracy; the first-past-the-post system of electing MPs and governments.

We will look at both preferences and the sense of appropriate pace for making changes. First, we thought it might be helpful to examine what should be the ultimate principles that underpin any electoral system.

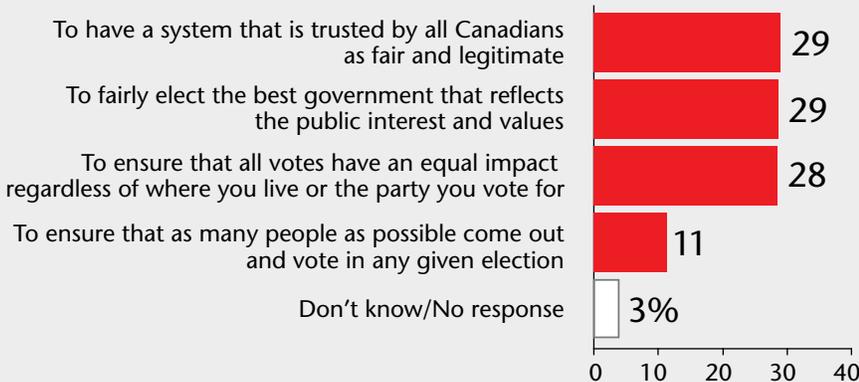
There is no single principle that adequately captures the essence of an ideal electoral system. There are, however, three clear dominant principles that are basically tied as the most important: legitimacy, good government, and equality. The electoral system should be fair and enjoy legitimacy. The system should generate good government (which best reflects the overall public interest). The third part of this ternary system of ultimate principles is equality – all votes should be of equal value. Some feel it should be all about turnout but that is clearly not of the same salience and may be seen more as instrumental rather than an ultimate principle.

Recognizing the importance of equality and basic fairness, the next indicator gets to the essential problem with the status quo. In a nutshell, the public think that a party's success in terms of seats should reflect its share of popular vote.

Despite a bump up in trust since the last election a clear and growing majority think that the majorities achieved in 2011 and last October violate this basic canon of equality and fairness. The public separate their satisfaction with any given election from their conviction that in an ideal

Chart 2: Most Important Principle of the Electoral System

Q. In your view, which of the following reflects the most important principle that should underpin the electoral system?



BASE: Canadians (online only); October 12-14, 2016, n=1,098, MOE +/- 3.0%, 19 times out of 20

Chart 3: Perceived Fairness of First-Past-the-Post

Q. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:

It is unfair that a party can hold a majority of the seats in the House of Commons with less than 40% of the vote

October 2016



BASE: Canadians (online only); October 12-14, 2016, n=1,098, MOE +/- 3.0%, 19 times out of 20

December 2015



BASE: Canadians (online only); December 7-10, 2015, n=1,811, MOE +/- 2.3%, 19 times out of 20

□ DK/NR ■ Disagree (1-3) ■ Neither (4) ■ Agree (5-7)

world half the seats should require half the vote.

While the testing of electoral reform alternatives can be made quite complex we wanted to keep it simple and link it back to ultimate principles. We experimentally tested two versions of the three main alternatives. In one we gave a very basic description that allows us to track it against earlier surveys. A second version was randomly assigned to half the sample. They got a more detailed description and a basic summary of the key pro and con arguments. The two methods produced similar results with the key difference being the relatively better performance of the first-past-the-post in the informed version

Overall, the results are relatively clear but provide no consensus position. In all versions, proportional representation does best. First-past-the-post does worst in the less informed version but the clear advantage of the preferential over the first-past-the-post is more modest in the informed version.

Is the current system broken or sound? The previous seems to suggest it is broken (albeit not structurally).

So should we move forward? The case seems to lean yes to making major changes but there are some pretty stark divisions.

A modest majority think we need to make changes while around a third think the current system is sound. This is highly correlated with party support and age. Older Canada and Conservative supporters think we should leave well enough alone. Everyone else—particularly younger Canada—says change please.

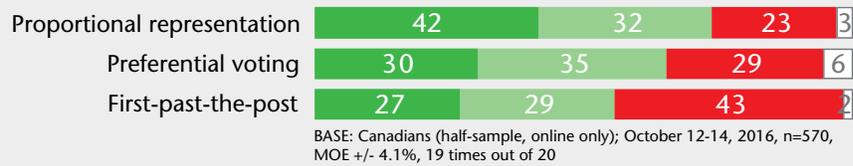
A closely related question provides a similar, if somewhat closer result. What is interesting here is the profound gap between the change and status quo positions across generations. Support for major changes is twice as high among younger voters than it is amongst seniors.

The path forward is relatively clear but the government will need to en-

Chart 4: Preferred Form of Electoral Reform

Q. Please rank these three systems from best to worst in terms of how beneficial you think they would be for Canada.

Brief introduction



Detailed introduction (i.e., 'informed' respondents)

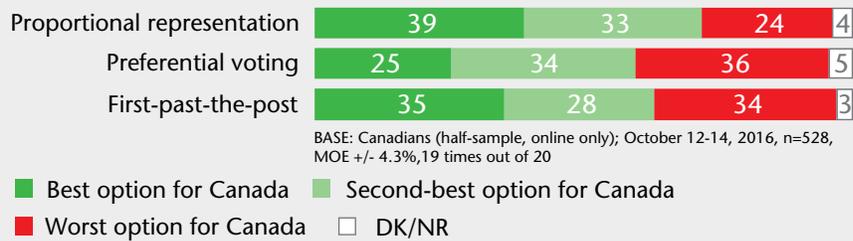
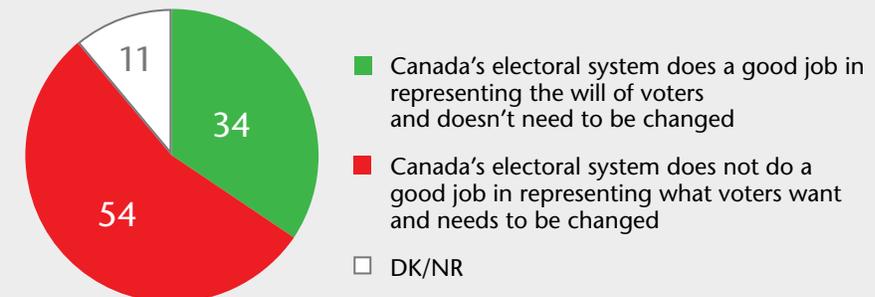


Chart 5: Perceived Need for Electoral Reform

Q. Which of the following views comes closest to your own?

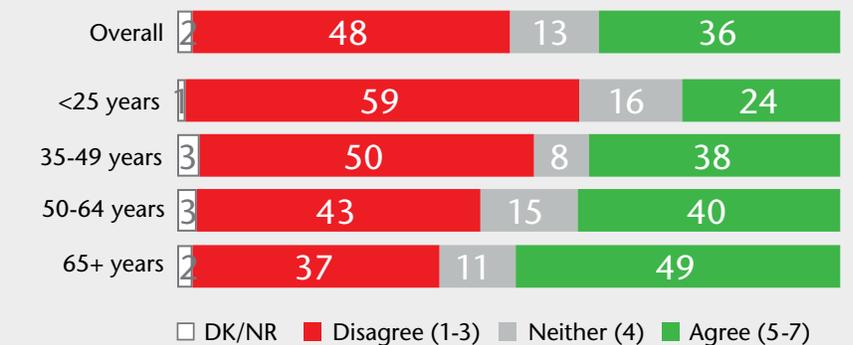


BASE: Canadians (online only); October 12-14, 2016, n=1,098, MOE +/- 3.0%, 19 times out of 20

Chart 6: Need for Democratic Change by Age

Q. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:

I see no reason to make major changes in how democracy in Canada works



BASE: Canadians (online only); October 12-14, 2016, n=1,098, MOE +/- 3.0%, 19 times out of 20

Chart 7: Views on Electoral Reform

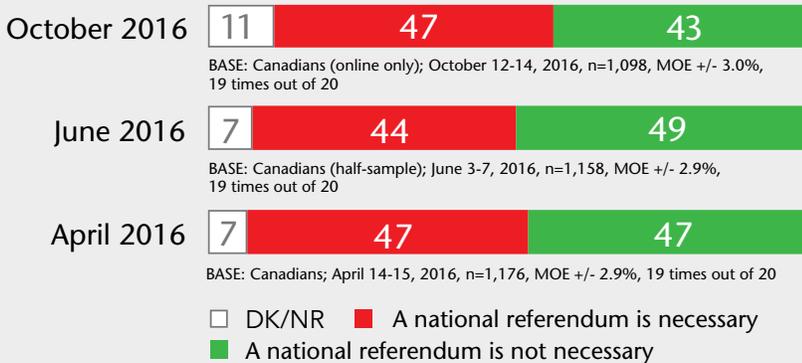
Q. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:



□ DK/NR ■ Disagree (1-3) ■ Neither (4) ■ Agree (5-7)
 BASE: Canadians (online only); October 12-14, 2016, n=1,098, MOE +/- 3.0%, 19 times out of 20

Chart 9: Need for a Referendum on Electoral Reform

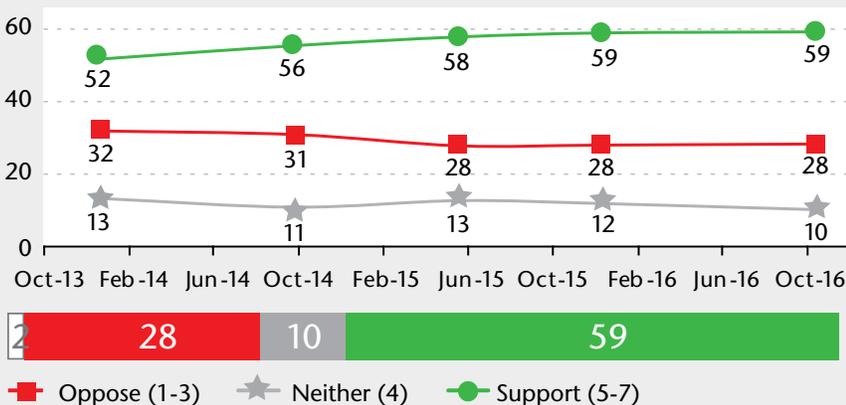
Q. Some people say that any change to the electoral system is so fundamental that it would require a national referendum. Others say that a rigorous program of public engagement and Parliamentary review should be sufficient. Which statement is closer to your point of view?



BASE: Canadians (online only); October 12-14, 2016, n=1,098, MOE +/- 3.0%, 19 times out of 20
 BASE: Canadians (half-sample); June 3-7, 2016, n=1,158, MOE +/- 2.9%, 19 times out of 20
 BASE: Canadians; April 14-15, 2016, n=1,176, MOE +/- 2.9%, 19 times out of 20
 □ DK/NR ■ A national referendum is necessary ■ A national referendum is not necessary

Chart 10: Support for Compulsory Voting

Q. A number of countries such as Australia and Brazil have implemented compulsory voting, where citizens are required to vote in elections. Would you oppose or support introducing compulsory voting in Canada?



BASE: Canadians (online only); October 12-14, 2016, n=1,098, MOE +/- 3.0%, 19 times out of 20

gage in a cautious approach that satisfies the need for deliberation and consultation. The current government is expected to deliver on this promise (which was loosely supported by the NDP and the Green Party). The public see no need for undue haste, some of which is a desire to see this go away and some of which is a desire for care. There is a clear lean to wanting this solved before the next election but the gap with it could be delayed is not huge.

So how about that referendum? The views here are pretty evenly split. The perceived need for a referendum is much higher among those who don't want change. As someone who worked on Charlottetown and the last Quebec referendum, I can certify that this is a sensible view for those seeking the status quo. Referenda are expensive, divisive, and rarely achieve success.

What if changes to the voting system are not the only or even the most compelling methods for improving democratic health? Our evidence suggests that this is clearly possible. Given the potentially thorny path through what would be a likely futile referendum maybe there are other solutions. Or perhaps electoral reform should be delivered with an ensemble of additional reforms that strike to the heart of the problem.

The public would seem to be equally and perhaps even more receptive to other options.

Let's begin with mandatory voting. Many argue that voting is such a basic civil obligation that everyone must do so, just as they must pay taxes and complete their census form. Australia has been using this since 1924 with good results. Another 21 countries have joined in this approach. The current focus on getting out your own vote and keeping home your and opponent's has led to a fixation on a series of operational approaches that stress turnout rather than policy.

Apparently, a clear and growing majority of Canadians agree with this

approach. Given the inventory of evils associated with the dark ops of the permanent campaign, this might be a more direct route to democratic renewal. Perhaps it could be tested with a sunset clause to re-evaluate.

Even more obviously, when are we going to get around to an Internet ballot? This could increase turnout and simplify the task of voting. We bank online, buy movies and music online, indeed we do almost everything online now. Why should we trudge to the polling station when we could do the same job on our smart phone? Over half of Canadians say they would be very likely to vote online in the next federal election. The polling station will go the way of the buggy whip and Canadians think it is time to go digital voting.

What about something that isn't really part of the debate about democratic renewal? Is it possible that there is something totally outside of the electoral system that could have a more beneficial effect than any electoral reforms? The public think so, and so do we.

Imagine that we could go into the living room of all Canadian households to discuss the critical issues of the day. Now further imagine that they are given basic information to allow them to provide informed and reflective advice to decision makers on the key issues of the day. Much as we have done in this current exercise. Citizens wouldn't just have a kick at the can every four years; they would have a regular seat at the table on all critical issues—not to direct or control but to provide advice.

Note how appealing this notion is in the tracking below.

Huge majorities say this would be a good idea and would make them feel better about government. The technology to do this rapidly and scientifically is more than available. Our democratic institutions were invented to deal with farmers, miners, and others who had neither the time nor the information to provide such input. That is no longer the case.

So let's put all of this in the hopper and see what happens.

Finally, we look at what Canadians believe to be the most effective means of improving democratic health. A few things are readily obvious. First of all, there is no single magic bullet that will restore trust in government. Second, there is a clear hierarchy of reforms that would make things better. The list is surprisingly topped by citizen engagement, not electoral reform. Proportional representation, online voting, and mandatory voting are all

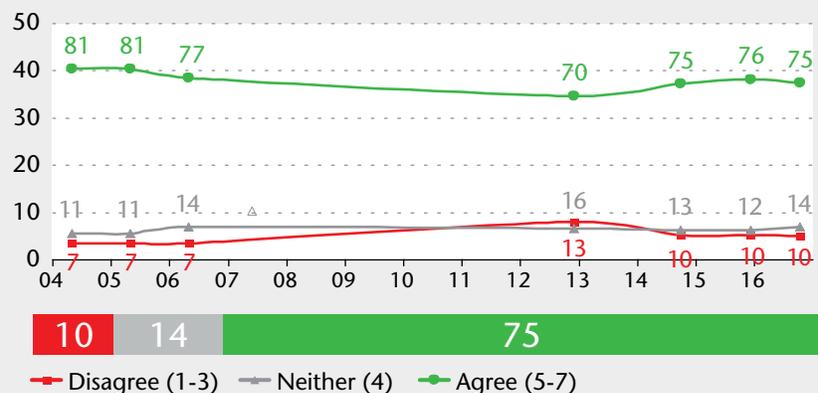
popular ingredients of a citizen-built recipe for democratic health.

In closing, there is a will and a mandate to move forward. The status quo is anachronistic and the public want reforms that will enhance legitimacy, equality and good government. There is no need for recklessness or speed but there is a need to move forward to the next level. **P**

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Chart 11: Tracking Need for Public Engagement

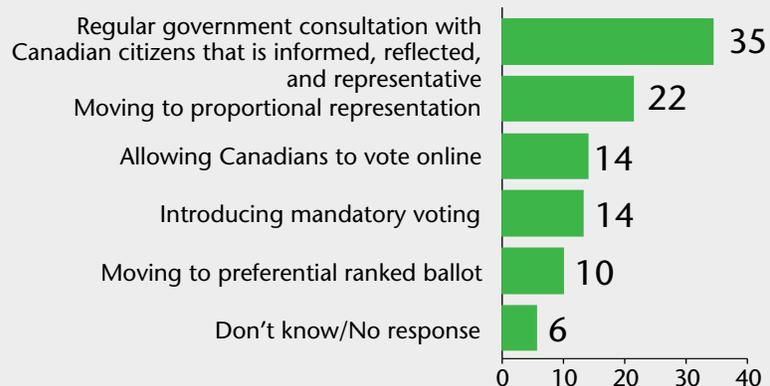
Q. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:
I would personally feel better about government decision-making if I knew that governments sought informed input from average citizens on a regular basis



BASE: Canadians (online only); December 7-10, 2015, n=1,811, MOE +/- 2.3%, 19 times out of 20

Chart 12: Best Method for Improving Democratic Health

Q. *In your opinion, which of the following would be the best way of improving democratic health in Canada?*



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