



Report for:  
**SFU Centre for Dialogue**

## **Revitalizing our Democracy**

**Environmental Scan of Public Opinion Research  
on State of Canada's Democracy**

*Report submitted by:*

*Dr. Daniel Savas*

*Visiting Professor, SFU School of Public Policy*

*Associate Fellow, SFU Centre for Dialogue*

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# Revitalizing our Democracy

## Environmental Scan of Public Opinion Research

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### Background & Methodology

The SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue is developing a major 5-year national multi-stakeholder collaborative initiative on strengthening Canada’s democracy. The initiative will build on the Centre’s existing work in this space and envisions a significantly larger and expanded collaborative effort with universities, government, and NGOs across the country. The intention is to build upon (rather than replicate) what is currently being done, to identify strategic interventions that can support existing activities through collaborative efforts, and to identify areas where gaps exist and define the most effective and impactful activities to address them.

To this end, the Centre has completed its Phase 1 Research & Consultations, which included two major components:

- **Consultations with Stakeholders:** A series of in-depth interviews with more than fifty individuals in organizations whose work is related to supporting and reinforcing Canada’s democratic institutions and processes. The report of this research was sent out to a broad network of individuals across Canada, including those who took part in the interviews.
- **Draft Concept Paper for Revitalizing our Democracy:** A draft concept paper that defined a broad vision for the democracy initiative. This paper was also sent out to the network to seek their feedback. A feedback report was also produced.

Moving forward, the Centre for Dialogue is convening a meeting on January 29, 2018 of like-minded organizations, academics, civil society organizations, government and private sectors thought leaders who wish to be involved in a collaborative initiative to strengthen Canada’s democratic ecosystem. Working together the meeting will:

1. Clarify the initiative’s “problem statement”.
2. Identify key indicators of success for the initiative.
3. Identify specific actions that can be undertaken and achieved in the first 1-2 years of the initiative.

Based on discussions from the meeting, and building on our research to-date, the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue will draft a new concept paper that reflects the outcomes of the January meeting and share it with participants before moving to next steps.

To support its Revitalizing our Democracy initiative, and to nourish discussions surrounding the rationale for the initiative, the Centre undertook a broad

environmental scan of public opinion research conducted over the past decade or so on questions related to democracy and governance in Canada. The following report presents a summary of the findings from the review of public opinion research. The Appendix lists the specific research studies consulted for the scan.

## **Goals & Objectives of Environmental Scan**

The main goal of the environmental scan is to examine the mood of Canadians on the state of their democracy. The analysis will nourish discussions in the co-design and development process in three ways:

1. Help determine the extent and depth of the need for the initiative.
2. Help frame the issues facing our democracy, and identify areas for more focused efforts.
3. Help determine the parameters for specific actions and activities to address key issues.

## **Topics Covered in Environmental Scan**

Based on information contained in publicly-available opinion research, the environmental scan answers five questions:

1. Is Canada's democracy working?
2. Do Canadians trust their government?
3. Do Canadians feel their views are being represented?
4. Do Canadians feel governments care what they think?
5. Do Canadians want to see changes in how Canadian democracy works?

For each question, and where data is available, every effort is made to provide comparisons of Canadian public opinion with populations from other parts of the world.

## **Methodology**

A number of public opinion research studies were acquired through a broad internet search, and through a parsing of websites of key research institutes known to have conducted studies on democracy in Canada and/or internationally. The latter included the Environics Institute, Ekos Research, the Pew Research Center, Samara Canada, the Broadbent Institute, the Angus Reid Institute, and the Manning Centre. Further, suggestions and recommendations from colleagues and other individuals led to other research studies, including the Edelman Trust Barometer, and The Economist's Democracy Index. Please consult the Appendix for a full list of the studies consulted for this environmental scan.

A caveat: the scan cannot claim to have mined all relevant studies; it is possible that some relevant studies were missed. Any omissions are the fault of the author and regrettable. However, given the consistency in the trends in the studies consulted, we

believe that any significant omissions would not likely change the overall thrust of the trends drawn in this environmental scan.

Four main criteria were used for the selection of studies for the scan. First, they needed be public opinion research studies conducted on relevant issues tied to democracy in Canada. Second, the studies needed to be recent enough (i.e. conducted within the past two to three years) to have relevance for the goals of the Centre for Dialogue’s initiative. Third, it was helpful, though not mandatory, that the studies have tracking data back a few years so that trends could be monitored for change over time. Fourth, it was helpful, though not mandatory, that the studies have some comparative data with other countries in the world so as to permit a contextualization of Canadian views of their democracy with those living in other countries.

## **Analysis & Interpretation**

The presentation and analysis of findings from a diverse set of studies, covering different periods of time, using different survey questions, and applying different metrics for analysis presents many challenges. First and foremost, it is useful to note that research from the many studies was conducted for purposes not directly linked to the goals of the environmental scan. Second, drawing a common and consistent narrative from a diverse set of analyses is not always possible. Third, the lack of direct access to data tables and/or data sets for most of the studies meant we needed to rely on the data presented in the reports; the scan did not attempt to re-analyze primary survey data.

These challenges aside, every attempt was made to signal overall trends that were at least similar across the various studies. Where contradictions appeared or seemed to exist, they were noted rather than explained. In a very few instances, the author reinterpreted the analysis presented in a study’s report, reflecting his different view of the findings. The grouping of categories and themes in the environmental scan was developed to reflect the content of the many studies, and on the goals of the scan itself.

NOTE: The interpretation and analysis of survey statistics necessarily reflects two things. On the one hand, it reflects the reader’s judgement of their significance. For example, if 50% of Canadians trust their government, this could be seen as a “glass half full” interpretation of Canadian democracy; it could, however, instead be viewed as problematic because “only half” of Canadians have this trust. On the other hand, interpretation of survey statistics also reflects the reader’s expectation or desire for what the result “should be”. Is 50% trust in government acceptable and hence a positive result or is it instead an indicator of subpar performance that needs attention? That said, as a result of these two factors, different readers may arrive at different interpretations and draw different conclusions than what have been offered in this environmental scan.

## Key Take Aways

Six key take aways emerge from the environmental scan of public opinion research on the state of Canada’s democracy.

First, Canadians’ confidence in the way democracy works in Canada is more moderate than strong. This has waned considerably since 2008 and has not recovered despite a change in government at the federal level. Canadians are becoming less convinced of the value of living in a democracy as opposed to other types of systems, and hold quite mixed views of government as a positive actor in meeting the challenges we face in our society.

Second, Canadians display moderate rather than strong levels of trust in their government compared to other actors in society. While this reflects a generalized negative public sentiment to established authority of all types (e.g. business, media, etc.), it is towards government and democratic institutions in particular that Canadians express their greatest reservations. There are some minor signs of positive change coinciding with the change in government at the federal level in 2015, but polling was conducted early in its mandate. Overall, trust levels of government institutions have declined since 2008, and have not recovered.

Third, despite small signs of improvement, Canadians are unconvinced that the actors and institutions of representative democracy in Canada are working the way they should to provide outcomes aligned more with citizens’ interests. There is a general and growing public sentiment that change is needed in the way political leaders and democratic processes function so that citizens’ priorities are more directly reflected in government decisions rather than being “represented” by elected officials.

Fourth, Canadians are largely unconvinced that government is truly interested in or concerned with obtaining their views or opinions when it is developing policy to address issues. However, there are signs of progress that government action to reach out to citizens is being noticed, and in a positive light. This coincides with what appears to be a more politically engaged electorate, one that believes it can play a fundamental and meaningful role in our democracy by making legitimate contributions to policy discussions.

Fifth, Canadians are generally supportive of a certain degree of change to the way democracy works in Canada. This is true when it comes to the way they choose their elected officials (i.e. electoral reform), the Senate, the representation of Indigenous peoples, and the use of digital technologies. However, the Canadian public is less inclined to embrace a major overhaul, except in the case of the Senate.

Lastly, Canada remains a strong model of democracy across the world in comparative terms, and is ahead of the United States in most studies. However, its position among the top performing democracies does not neglect the fact that Canada is behind many countries on some measures. While it is expected that Scandinavian countries would also head up any list of strong democracies and compare quite favourably to Canada, there are a number of other countries whose populations rate their democracies more favourably – e.g. Philippines, Tanzania, Indonesia, Ghana, Kenya.

## 1.0 Do Canadians Feel our Democracy is Working?

Canadians' confidence in the way democracy works in Canada is moderate, and there is evidence it has waned over the past decade, with few signs of improvement along the way. Based on public opinion research conducted, there is concrete evidence of some "disquiet" among Canadians that reflect an increasingly dissatisfied and cynical public as to the role and performance of democratic government in our country.

### ***Static and moderate level of satisfaction with government; underlying problems suggest government is not working***

A substantial majority of Canadians (79%) in the 2017 America's Barometer research express *overall* satisfaction with the way democracy works in our country. This puts Canada at the top of the list of other democracies in the Americas, notably the United States (50%), and Mexico (26%). However, it is notable that Canadians' favourable views on democracy, like those in other countries, are distinctly more moderate (68%) than strong (11%). And, importantly, overall satisfaction levels today are significantly lower than a decade ago in 2006 (90%) when they began to drop, and then remained virtually unchanged from 2010 onwards.

The Pew Research Center's 2017 Global Attitudes Survey of world democracies reveals a similar trend; 70% of Canadians in the Center's research say they are satisfied with the way democracy is working in Canada. However, Canada finds itself further down a list of countries outside the Americas, behind Sweden, India, and Tanzania (79% each, respectively), the Netherlands (77%), and Germany (73%), but well ahead of the United States (46%).

In its 2016 Democracy Index<sup>1</sup>, The Economist Intelligence Unit places Canada sixth among all countries in the world with a score of 9.15 out of 10, tied with Ireland. It is slightly behind Norway (9.93), Iceland (9.5), Sweden (9.39), New Zealand (9.26), and Denmark (9.2), but well ahead of the United States which is twenty-first with a score of 7.98.

Amidst this positive overall picture are various shades of discontent suggesting Canadians do not feel government in Canada is functioning very well. The most recent Edelman Trust Barometer (2017), for example, finds that a majority of Canadians (55%) believe the "system is failing". Further, a 2016 Environics Institute study reveals that more than two-thirds of the Canadian population (69%) believe the federal government has problems, including 36% who feel it is *working, but with major problems*, 25% who say it is *broken, but working in some areas*, and 8% who assert it is *completely broken*. By comparison, just over 1-in-4 (27%) think it is *working*. Findings from a 2016 Ekos Research draw a similar picture – fewer than half of Canadians (45%) give the Government of Canada positive reviews for its performance;

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<sup>1</sup> The Economist's Democracy Index gives scores to countries based on five criteria: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. It is not based directly on public opinion research data.

just over a third (35%) rates it as “poor”. That said, the same Ekos study also shows a significant improvement in the federal government’s performance rating over the past decade – up 15-points from 30% in 2007.

### ***Canadians question democracy as system of government***

How do these trends in overall performance translate into perceptions of Canadian democracy *per se*? Recent polling results display four troubling signals in Canadians’ level of commitment to democracy.

First, the 2017 America’s Barometer research reveals no real consensus among the population as to the value of democracy as a system of government; while a majority feel democracy is better than any other form of government despite having problems (57%), over four-in-ten are less convinced; 40% hold no clear opinion (3-5 out of 7), 3% disagree. These mixed reviews have been constant for much of the past decade since 2010, but the outlook today is much less positive than the 79% who expressed confidence in democracy as a form of government in 2006. Moreover, the 2017 Pew Research Center study shows only 44% of Canadians are committed to representative democracy; a similar number (42%) are not committed. Notably, 41% of the Canadian public in the same research feels “rule by experts” would be a good way to govern Canada; 17% hold the same view about a “strong leader without the interference of Parliament”, and 10% endorse the idea of “military rule”.

Second, over time Canadians are becoming less convinced of the value of living in a democracy as opposed to other types of systems. For example, while two-thirds (65%) of those surveyed for the 2017 America’s Barometer believe democracy is preferable to other forms of government, more than a third either don’t feel having a democracy matters (22%) or they think having an authoritarian government may be preferable in certain circumstances (13%). Notably, the combined proportion of Canadians doubting the value of a democratic system of government has jumped 11-points in the past 5 years (24% in 2012 to 35% in 2017). This shift has been particularly strong among younger Canadians, aged 18-29 (up 14-points). Despite this trend, Canadians are against any increase in the power of the Prime Minister at the expense of Parliament; 78% do not think the Prime Minister should govern without Parliament in difficult times, and 41% strongly disagree with the idea of limiting the voice of Opposition parties in Parliament. In both instances, Canadians’ views are in line with other countries in the Americas.

Third, Canadians are quite mixed in their views of government as a positive actor in meeting the challenges we face in our society. The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer, for example, reveals a public as likely to see government at the root of problems in society (63%) as being essential or responsible for finding solutions to or fixing the problems (66%). This is consistent with a 2014 Environics Institute study (43% government is cause, 44% government responsible for solution).

Lastly, Canadians are not particularly supportive of their political system, overall. Fewer than half in the 2017 America’s Barometer survey hold strong views about

taking pride in our system (39%) or feel they should support it (41%). Just 1-in-5 (22%) say they strongly respect their political institutions. These views have remained virtually unchanged for the past decade, and are substantially less positive than the views Canadians held in 2006 when two-thirds were proud and supportive of Canada's political system, and three-in-ten held it in high regard.

When compared to other countries in the Americas, Canada stands apart from the rest when it comes to being proud of their system of government; three-in-ten or fewer in the United States, Mexico, Central America, South America, or the Caribbean hold the same view. However, Canadians are less likely than others to feel they should respect their political institutions; populations in Central America (45%), the Caribbean (35%), Mexico (30%), and South America (29%) are all more likely to hold this view.

## 2.0 Do Canadians Trust Their Government?

Canadians display moderate rather than strong levels of trust in their government compared to other actors in society. While this appears to reflect a generalized negative public sentiment to established authority of all types (e.g. business, media, etc.), it is towards government and democratic institutions in particular that Canadians express their greatest reservations. That said, there are some minor signs of positive change, coinciding with the change in government at the federal level in 2015.

### ***Mixed reviews of trust in government overall***

The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer reveals that fewer than half the Canadian population (49%) trusts their government to do what is right, a full 9-point drop from 2016. Ekos Research found a similar pattern (41% trust the federal government all or most of the time), down slightly from 2016. However, their research also shows that more Canadians trusted their government in 2017 than at any time over the past three decades; indeed, one has to go back to the late 1960s or the early 1970s to find a time when more Canadians trusted the federal government (58% trust all or most of the time). Further, it is interesting to note that a sizeable 15-point gap in trust in government has opened up between what Edelman describes as the "informed public" (62% trust) and the "mass population" (47% trust). The fact the gap has grown over the past five years suggests a fragmentation of the public, with distrust in government being driven by those less informed.

A 2017 Pew Research Center study of world democracies reveals that 67% of Canadians trust the federal government to do what is right for the country, though trust is more moderate (47%) than strong (20%). The Center's findings show Canada is among the top 10 countries when it comes to trust, but behind several others, including Tanzania (89%), India (85%), Indonesia (83%), Vietnam (82%), Philippines (80%), Ghana (70%), and Kenya (68%); Canada is tied with Sweden and Russia. Some of these countries (e.g. Kenya) could be considered "failed democracies" which suggests the notion of "trust" may mean different things in different contexts.

### ***Despite some positive signs, Canadians not ready to fully trust government institutions and actors***

The moderate levels of trust Canadians have in government are most clearly reflected in how much the public trusts specific institutions, and how they view the credibility of information from government spokespeople. The 2017 America's Barometer shows, for example, that an average of just 28% of the Canadian public trusts nine different institutions "a lot" (from the Canadian Armed Forces to Parliament and the Supreme Court); another 58% on average trusts the same institutions "somewhat".

More specifically, those with above average levels of trust include the Canadian Armed Forces (53%), the RCMP (43%), and the Supreme Court (37%) which all have a *strong* foundation of trust (i.e. "a lot") among the Canadian population. More than 90% trust these three institutions overall. By comparison, a smaller number express strong trust in representative institutions like political parties (10%), Parliament (19%), municipal government (22%), and the Prime Minister (26%). Still, these same institutions enjoy fairly high overall trust levels (76% to 86%), because of the large proportion of Canadians who trust them more moderately (i.e. "somewhat").

This same pattern is repeated in other surveys. In its 2016 survey, for example, Environics found that a bare majority of Canadians (54%) trust their elected Members of Parliament to do the right thing when they have the resources and authority to do so; but most have only "some" trust (46%) in them, rather "a lot" of trust (8%). Senior public servants are rated lower than MPs (46% trust overall). To contrast, Canadians are more likely to trust front line government workers (63%); but, again at moderate (45%) rather than strong (18%) levels. Further, Samara Canada, in its latest 2017 Democracy 360 report, found that 47% of Canadians trust Members of Parliament to "do the right thing".

International comparisons show that Canadians are more likely than those in the United States to trust most institutions, the Armed Forces is the only exception (57% for Americans vs. 52% for Canadians). However, trust levels in some countries in the Americas are higher for certain institutions; for example, 40% of people living in Caribbean countries strong trust in their national leader compared to the 26% of Canadians who trust the Prime Minister. And, while 30% of the populations in Central American countries trust municipal governments, the number falls to 22% in Canada.

It is nonetheless notable that, consistent with other measures in polling on democracy, the degree of trust in some of these institutions is significantly below levels held in the 2006-2008 period. There is also a substantial drop between 2008 and 2010 occurred, and then trust levels have remained virtually unchanged since. For example, a decade ago, in 2006, 31% of Canadians in the America's Barometer poll said they trusted Parliament "a lot", compared to 19% in 2017; the turning point was in 2010, when strong trust was at only 13%. Similarly, strong trust in the Supreme Court dropped from 51% to 37% over the same time period, most precipitously in 2010, to 32%. For

the Canadian Armed Forces, strong trust levels were at their height in 2008 (66%) before dropping to 49% in 2010, and then rebounding slightly to 53% thereafter.

There are some exceptions to this trend line in trust levels, both likely attributed to the 2015 federal election which resulted in a change in government. Between 2010 and 2014, for example, 1-in-6 Canadians in the America's Barometer said they trusted the Prime Minister "a lot". In 2017, the percentage increased 11 points to 26% (from 15% in 2014). Further, Canadians' trust in elections almost doubled from 21% to 41% during the same time period. Samara Canada, for its part, noted a 7-point increase between 2015 and 2017 in the proportion of Canadians who trusted their Member of Parliament (40% to 47%). Trust in political parties also increased over the same period (42% to 47%).

### ***Decline in trust touches elites more generally, not just government***

There is some compelling evidence that Canadians' less than enthusiastic trust in their government actors and institutions is not limited to government alone. Instead, it appears to coincide with an overall less trusting atmosphere of authority and people in positions of power. The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer, for example, shows that Canadians are less trusting of institutions overall than they were in 2016, falling 7 points (56% to 49%), placing Canada in the "Distruster" category for the first time. The downward shift of views touches multiple sectors: NGOs (down 2 points), business (down 6 points), media (down 10 points), and government (down 10 points). Still, fewer Canadians trust government (43%) than other institutions (media 45%; business 50%; NGOs 59%).

Markedly, Edelman also finds that Canadians are more likely to trust sources of information *outside of established authority*, hinting at a growing anti-establishment or populist sentiment similar to many other countries in the world. When asked, Canadians say they are much more likely to believe "individuals" (70%) are telling the truth than "institutions" (30%). Likewise, they give more credence to Reformers (64% vs. 36% Preservers of status quo), and to leaked information (74% vs. 26% company press statements).

Further, the same pattern is mirrored in the credibility of information obtained from spokespeople across nine different fields (from academic and technical experts to CEOs, Boards of Directors and employees, financial analysts, NGO representatives, government regulators/officials, and mainstream Canadians). Between 2016 and 2017 fewer Canadians were prepared to say that information they received from people in these nine different positions was credible, an average drop of 7 percentage points (48% to 41%). The largest declines in credibility occurred for financial industry analysts (54% to 41%), CEOs (37% to 25%), and government regulators/officials (34% to 26%). In 2017, government actors are considered the least credible among all spokespeople, along with Boards of Directors (26%).

### 3.0 Do Canadians Feel Their Interests Are Being Represented?

Canadians are unconvinced that the actors and institutions of representative democracy in Canada are working the way they should to provide outcomes aligned more with citizens' interests. There is a general and growing public sentiment that change is needed in the way political leaders and democratic processes function so that citizens' priorities are more directly reflected in government decisions rather than being "represented" by elected officials. Change, for many Canadians, means a shift in the role elected officials play in the decisions they make on behalf of citizens – towards more "direct democracy", and away from "representative democracy" where elected officials make decisions using their own experience, knowledge, and judgement.

#### ***Representation of citizen needs perceived as inadequate; some indications of improvement***

In its 2014 study, the Environics Institute found Canadians evenly split on whether they think elected officials are trying to do their best for the people they represent (41% "yes", 41% "no"); this was less true at the federal level (34% vs. provincial – 38%, municipal – 50%). The Institute's 2016 research revealed that of those Canadians who felt the federal government was broken, 61% said it was because it "was not responsive to citizen priorities or needs", one of the top two reasons given for government not working. However, there has been some improvement in this regard, because just two years earlier the proportion who cited this reasons was 78%.

Samara Canada's 2017 Democracy 360 research shows that Canadians' views of the representation efforts of elected officials are improving. It found that just over half of Canadians (53%) were satisfied with the job their Member of Parliament was doing representing the views of people in their riding, an increase of 8-points from 43% two years earlier. Still, a larger percentage gave MPs a positive rating for representing the views of their party (63%).

Samara's study also notes some positive changes in the degree to which the proportion of House of Commons seats held by representatives from specific population groups "matches" the proportion they represent in the Canadian population (groups include women, visible minorities, indigenous peoples, youth, foreign-born). Samara's overall "diversity score" (i.e. how well the five different Canadian demographic groups are reflected in the makeup of the House of Commons) has jumped 7 points from 50 to 57 over the past two years. In almost all cases, progress has been made towards achieving parity, i.e. where the proportion of seats matches the proportion in the Canadian population. The greatest successes have been with the representation of visible minorities (25-point gain in achieving parity – 50% to 75%) and indigenous peoples (24-point gain in achieving parity – 54% to 78%).

### ***Shift in how Canadians see representation role of elected officials***

The inadequacy of the representation of citizens' priorities may be having an impact on how Canadians perceive the role of their elected officials; that is, they are growing more inclined to prefer the populist idea of direct democracy. In a 2014 survey, for example, the Environics Institute found that a substantial majority of the Canadian public felt elected officials should make decisions based on the views of those they represent (72%) rather than on their own experience and judgement (13%). This is a clear preference for the more populist "direct democracy" approach as compared to the more traditional "representation" approach.

Further, the Pew Research Center's 2017 study of world democracies reveals that 67% of Canadians believe it would be good to have a democratic system where citizens, not elected officials, vote directly on major national issues to decide what becomes law. This places Canada at the global median (66%) of 38 countries, tied with the United States, Hungary, Philippines, and Ghana; Turkey (84%), Lebanon (83%), Kenya (80%) and Greece (78%) lead all countries. In a similar vein, the 2017 America's Barometer shows Canadians to be much less resistant than a decade ago to the populist idea of people governing directly. In 2008, 60% *disagreed* with this approach; a decade later, just 27% of Canadians held negative views.

While the idea of people governing directly seems to have a limited foothold in Canadians' preferences at the present time (only 15% "strongly agree" in 2017), the number who are *not committed* in their views of which is better – direct democracy (where the people govern directly) or representative democracy (where the people govern through their elected representatives) – has doubled since 2008 (from 28% to 57% in 2017). This suggests further that there is substantially less resistance to a fundamental change in the role of elected representatives today than a decade ago.

There is also some indication that Canadians are prepared to see institutional and process changes to the role elected officials play as they make decisions. For example, in its 2016 study, the Environics Institute found 52% of the Canadian public support the notion of more free votes in Parliament; that is, leaving MPs the opportunity to decide for themselves how to vote rather than being forced to "vote the party line".

## 4.0 Do Canadians Feel Government Cares What They Think?

Canadians are largely unconvinced that government is truly interested in or concerned with obtaining their views or opinions when it is developing policy to address issues. However, there are signs of progress that government action to reach out to citizens is being noticed, and in a positive light. This coincides with what appears to be a more politically engaged electorate, one that believes it can play a fundamental and meaningful role in our democracy by making legitimate contributions to policy discussions.

### ***Increasingly, Canadians feel government is paying attention to their opinions***

There is some evidence that Canadians feel government cares about what they think, but doubts do exist. The polling research offers somewhat conflicting views, due to different questions being asked. The 2017 America’s Barometer research, for example, shows that a slim majority of Canadians (52%) believe at least somewhat that elected officials are interested in what they think. In its 2017 survey conducted around the same time, Ekos Research shows an opposite pattern when the question is framed through a negative lens; 46% of Canadians *do not* think government cares much about what they think. The common pattern between these two sets of results, however, is that a sizeable portion of the Canadian population doubts that those elected to govern are interested in paying attention to citizens’ opinions (28% for America’s Barometer, 36% for Ekos). Interestingly, Canadians’ skepticism is not limited to government. The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer generalizes it more broadly to a perceived disconnect between those in power generally and the population at large; it reveals 81% of Canadians feel “the elites who run our institutions are out of touch with regular people”.

Amidst these trends, there is evidence of some positive movement in governments valuing citizens’ views. For Ekos, the proportion of Canadians who feel government disregards their views is *down* 8-points in the past year (54% to 46% in 2016), and is at its lowest level in 14 years (48% in 2003). Similarly, for the America’s Barometer, there has been a 21-point *increase* in the past 5 years in the proportion of the Canadian population who feel elected officials are interested in knowing what citizens think (31% in 2012 to 52% in 2017).

Coincidentally, this positive trend in the belief that government is listening to Canadians’ opinions aligns with a growing public interest in and understanding of politics and issues. For example, the 2017 America’s Barometer signaled a significant 11-point increase over the past five years in the number of Canadians who say they are at least somewhat “interested in politics” (from 54% in 2012 to 65% in 2017). And, more Canadians today strongly believe they “understand the most important issues” than was the case in 2010 (22% vs. 35% in 2017). Ekos tapped into the same sentiment, noting a 10-point increase in the past decade in the proportion of Canadians who had called or written to a government office to express a view on a

particular topic (34% in 2007 to 44% in 2017). Samara Canada also found that 67% of Canadians in 2017 reported having a discussion about politics in at least one of five ways, most notably following a politician on social media (34%); this was up 6-points from 2015 (61%).

***Canadians place considerable value on government engaging the public in decision making process; believe it can make a difference***

There is little doubt that Canadians see government consultations with the public as a valuable tool in the way democracy works in this country. In a 2014 Environics Institute survey, for example, 42% of the public stated it was “extremely important” government actively consult with citizens and other sectors in policy development. In 2017, Ekos found that 68% of Canadians felt it was important to provide Canadians opportunities to have input into government decision making; 78% held the same view when it came to government listening to Canadians in order to understand their views and concerns.

Canadians are also convinced that consulting the public on policy decisions can have a positive impact on the outcomes, most notably in giving the decisions more legitimacy. Since 2004, Ekos’ research has consistently shown that the vast majority of Canadians (8-in-10 or more) would “feel personally better about government decision-making if they knew governments sought informed input from average citizens on a regular basis”; in 2017, 84% agreed at least somewhat with this view, the highest number in a decade (86% in 2007). In 2017, Ekos also found a solid majority of Canadians (62%) believed they could probably solve most of Canada’s major problems if decisions could be brought to the people at the grassroots.

When it comes to the specific nature and timing of Canadians’ contribution to the policy process, the public believes their role should be fairly open-ended. For example, in 2016, the Environics Institute noted that most Canadians (44%) thought the public should be consulted on policy “where citizen input is likely to improve decisions and actions”; a further 27% believed public involvement was appropriate “in most of the major decisions government makes”. By comparison, far fewer felt citizen engagement should be more restricted to “only in a few cases where decisions deal with controversial issues” (17%).

***Canadians give moderate to failing grades to government for efforts to engage the public; trending upward***

Canadians are increasingly pleased with federal government efforts to consult with them, but they are not yet satisfied that enough is being done. In 2017, for example, Ekos found that just over a third (37%) felt the government was doing a “good job” in consulting Canadians, but the same percentage rated its efforts as “poor”. In its 2014 research, the Environics Institute found that just 33% of Canadians gave governments at all levels an “excellent or good” rating for actively consulting citizens and other sectors.

However, Ekos' findings represent a significant improvement since 2007 when just 18% of Canadians were satisfied with public consultation efforts (vs. 37% in 2017). Notably, this trend line coincides with an equally significant uptick in citizen participation in government consultations; in 2017, 35% of Canadians said they had taken part in at least one government sponsored consultation; this is up 12-points from 23% in 2007.

When it comes to specific types of consultation efforts, Ekos finds Canadians give less than positive reviews to the federal government. For example, just 32% feel it does a good job giving Canadians an opportunity to have input in government decision making; 40% think it is listening to Canadians to understand their views and concerns; and 37% give it a favourable grade for getting Canadians to interact on issues of shared concern.

## **5.0 Do Canadians Want to See Changes in How Canadian Democracy Works?**

Canadians support a certain level of change to the way democracy works in Canada. This is true when it comes to the way they choose their elected officials, the Senate, the representation of Indigenous peoples, and the use of digital technologies. However, the Canadian public is less inclined to embrace dramatic change, except in the case of the Senate.

### ***Support for change, but not major overhaul***

There is some evidence that Canadians have an appetite for making changes to the way government operates, but they do not see the need for a complete overhaul. In 2016, the Environics Institute found that a slim majority of Canadians (51%) believe governments need to do a better job of how they currently operate compared to 36% who feel the need for fundamental change. The Institute notes this was a complete reversal of views from a similar study they conducted two years earlier when 48% sought fundamental change and 40% wanted governments to simply do a better job of how they operate. It surmises this shift in public opinion may well reflect a public mood swing based on the approach to governing taken by the newly elected Liberal government.

In the same 2016 Environics study, when Canadians are asked to indicate the single most important change the federal government needs to make in order to do a better job, few mention major structural changes. Instead, most single out "better leadership/representation" (17%), followed by "being more accountable, honest, open, transparent" (10%), "more efficient spending/decrease deficit" (7%), and "listen to the people/voters" (6%); a full third are unable to identify what might be changed.

### ***Support exists for changes in the way citizens choose their elected officials***

Despite their inclination for incremental changes to the way government operates, Canadians do seem to have an appetite for some kind of electoral reform – i.e. changing the way citizens choose their representatives. But, it is a complex issue for Canadians. In 2016, for example, the Environics Institute found that 62% of the Canadian public felt that changes were needed to how Members of Parliament are elected. However, this included just 24% who saw the need for major changes; another 38% supported minor changes.

What might change look like? Canadian public opinion is not decisive in this regard. On the one hand, there is some support for getting rid of the current first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. On the other hand, Canadians are not completely clear what type of system they want to replace the FPTP.

In its 2016 study, the Environics Institute found that a plurality of the population – 41% – would like to see the FPTP system changed to something else. However, 12% oppose the idea, and fully 47% are either hesitant (32% “it depends”) or cannot say one way or the other (15%). This finding is consistent with a 2015 Broadbent Institute survey on democratic renewal where 58% of Canadians felt the current system needs only minor changes (41%) or works fine the way it is (17%); still, a substantial number wanted to see major changes (33%) or have the system changed completely (9%).

Further, when asked to rank their preferences for different types of proposed replacement electoral systems, Canadians express no clear majority preference for one system over another, though a shift away from the current FPTP is evident. In its 2015 survey, for example, the Broadbent Institute found 43% of Canadians ranked the current first-past-the-post (FPTP) system as their number one choice, well ahead of Mixed Member Proportional (27%), Pure Proportional Representation (17%), and Ranked or Preferential Ballot (14%). A year later, in 2016, the Environics Institute found 34% of Canadians choosing the current FPTP system as their number one choice (a drop of 9-points from the Broadbent Institute findings), but still almost the same as the top choice – Mixed Member Proportional (36% - up 11-points from the Broadbent Institute).<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the particular mechanism for electing representatives, the Broadbent Institute also tapped into what Canadians are looking for in a voting system. Its research found that 4 of the 7 most important aspects Canadians want in a voting system are tied to ensuring the most effective representation of citizens in government, particularly one that has mathematical equivalency between the number of votes and elected representatives. This included: giving citizens the ability to directly elect MPs who represent their community (46%), ensuring representation of MPs from all regions of

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<sup>2</sup> It is to be noted that the questions for the Broadbent Institute study and the Environics Institute research were not identical, nor were the descriptions of the different proposed electoral systems.

the country (43%), ensuring the number of seats a party has in Parliament closely matches its level of support throughout the country (41%), and ensuring the number of seats in Parliament reflects the proportion of the vote a party receives nationally (38%).

Beyond their views on the type of voting system, Canadians are very much in favour of changes to the act of voting itself. The Environics Institute (2016) found that a solid majority of the public (58%) supports using online voting through a secure website. Comparatively few, however, back the idea of making it mandatory to vote in federal elections (29% vs. 45% oppose).

### ***Clear indication that Canadians want major reforms to the Senate***

Unlike their views on electoral reform, Canadians are unequivocal in how they feel about the need to change the Canadian Senate. An overwhelming majority (79%) say the institution needs major (56%) or minor (23%) changes, topping the list of federal institutions the Environics Institute tested in 2016. Changes could include major reforms to the institution's structure and operations (36%) or outright abolition (33%). And, despite the commonly held view that Canadians would not want to re-open the Constitution to achieve changes to the Senate, Environics found that two-thirds of the public believe that major Senate reform is important enough to justify reopening the constitution.

That said, the 2016 Environics Institute research also indicated a majority of Canadians support a number of measures to change how the Senate operates that would not require opening up the Constitution. These include strengthening the rules of conduct for Senators (74%), making the appointment process more transparent (72%) and non-partisan (52%).

### ***Canadians support greater representation of Indigenous peoples; but lack of consensus on mechanisms to achieve it***

It is notable that the 2016 federal election resulted in a record number of 10 Aboriginal candidates winning seats in Parliament, with two appointed to the federal cabinet. However, while there is considerable support for giving Indigenous peoples more representation in the country's governing institutions, the path to getting there is less clear.

Overall, Environics Institute (2016) found 46% of Canadians back greater indigenous representation. In the same study, however, the public expresses hesitation towards specific mechanisms that could provide this representation. Largely, Canadians were unable to get fully behind the idea of representation quotas for Indigenous peoples, i.e. designating a minimum number of indigenous seats in the House of Commons or the Senate, designating at least one Supreme Court seat for indigenous peoples, or designating a minimum number of senior federal civil service positions to indigenous peoples. In each case, approximately one third of Canadians supported the

mechanism, a third opposed, and another third said “it depends”. Notably, however, a majority backed the idea of establishing a permanent Cabinet committee on Indigenous Affairs.

In its 2016 *Canadian Public Opinion on Aboriginal Peoples* study, the Environics Institute found greater openness to a different set of quota-type representation mechanisms. For example, a substantial number of Canadians supported having Aboriginal representation at every First Ministers meeting (74%), requiring at least one Aboriginal minister in the federal cabinet (72%), and establishing a new Parliamentary committee of Aboriginal MPs to review all laws from an Aboriginal perspective (63%).

***Canadians interested in using digital technologies to improve their access to elected officials and to information; no consensus on government efforts***

The Canadian public widely endorses governments using digital technologies to improve citizen access to democratic institutions and representatives. This is particularly true for access to information. For example, more than seven-in-ten Canadians in two separate Environics Institute studies supported greater use of digital technologies to publish more information online (79%) and to provide citizens with online access to government information and data (73%). A slim majority (51%) also backed the idea of expanding the information provided by government and elected officials through social media.

There is also a desire among Canadians for governments to use digital technologies to connect with them, either through expanded online consultations (62%), or direct access to elected officials (69%). A substantial number also support this move to deliver public services (69%); notably, 43% said they would be personally interested in using text messaging to communicate with government agencies in Canada for services such as tax returns, employment insurance, and passport renewals.

Do Canadians think government is keeping up with the digital times? There is no real consensus answer to this question. Based on Environics Institute research (2016), a third of the Canadian public believes governments in Canada are doing the right amount in using digital technologies, while slightly more than a third feels it is doing too little. Another quarter cannot say one way or the other. Among those disappointed with governments’ current efforts, however, most (60%) cannot say which specific areas or type of services for which they would like to see governments make greater use of digital technologies. Unprompted suggestions included electronic voting, improving websites, communicating with the public, getting input, health care services, and forms and applications.

Notably, Samara Canada’s 2017 Democracy 360 Report suggests that elected officials, at least, have entered the digital space in a substantial way to connect with the electorate. For example, on average, 86% of MPs use four social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter (99% each, respectively), YouTube (88%), and Instagram (56%). Use of the first three is up from a year ago.

## **APPENDIX – PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH CONSULTED**

The environmental scan considered information from a wide variety of public opinion research. Below is a list of those used to compile this report:

1. AmericasBarometer (2017): The Public Speaks on Democracy and Governance in the Americas. Report on Canada. Data collection and reporting done by The Environics Institute; data collection occurred from March 24 – April 4, 2017 (Online, N=1,511).
2. Ekos Research (2017): Rethinking Citizen Engagement. Data collection occurred from February 20 – 26, 2017. (Telephone, N=1,009).
3. Edelman Trust Barometer (2017): Report on Canada. Data collection occurred from October 17 – November 13, 2016. (Online, N=1,150).
4. Samara Canada (2017): Democracy 360: The Second Report Card on How Canadians Communicate, Participate, and Lead in Politics. Data collection occurred from September 23 – October 6, 2016. (Online, N=4,003)
5. Environics Institute (2016): Canadian Public Opinion on Governance. Sponsored by the Institute on Governance. Data collection occurred from February 1 – 10, 2016. (Online, N=2,000).
6. Environics Institute (2014): Canadian Public Opinion on Governance. Sponsored by the Institute on Governance. Data collection occurred from July 31 – August 9, 2014. (Online, N=2,000).
7. Broadbent Institute (2015): Canadian Electoral Reform – Public Opinion on Possible Alternatives. Data collection occurred from November 3 – 6, 2015. (Online, N=2,986).
8. Environics Institute (2016): Canadian Public Opinion on Aboriginal Peoples. Sponsored by Canadians for a New Partnership, Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, The Inspirit Foundation, Institute on Governance, National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, Reconciliation Canada, and Tides Canada. Data collection occurred from January 15 to February 8, 2016 (Telephone, N=2,001).
9. Pew Research Center (2017): Global Attitudes Survey. Data collection occurred from February 16 to March 3, 2017 (Telephone, N=1,022).
10. The Economist Intelligence Unit: Democracy Index. 2016. Data compiled and measures created in 2016.