

Democratic Reform and The Trust Factor

Frank Graves

The lack of public trust in government and democratic institutions has influenced a range of social and political phenomena from the Occupy movement to Donald Trump's presidential candidacy. But as pollster Frank Graves reports, the recent election of a new Liberal government has been accompanied by a resurgence of public trust in democracy. The question is, will it last?

Trust has become a scarce societal resource and there is a particular paucity of trust in government and democracy. This isn't a recent problem and the decline of trust has been a steady downward march for the past 40 years in upper North America. As late as 2014, only about one in four citizens believed they could trust their federal governments (in either Ottawa or Washington) to do the right thing. Contrary to views that this precipitous decline in trust is caused by specific events (e.g., Watergate, the sponsorship scandal), the evidence shows that there are much bigger cultural forces at play.

In this brief essay, we want to identify the broader historical field that has produced this problem and then look at how recent political history may be altering the prospects for a healthier, more legitimate democracy. It will also be instructive to look at some of the specific ideas being proposed as solutions to the malaise that has infected contemporary democracy. We do note that the recent Canadian election has produced something of a democratic boom and it is unclear whether those effects are ephemeral or more durable. It is important to separate recent events from the broader historical field and recognize that any assessment of the

public responses taken in the afterglow of a broadly satisfying election will undoubtedly understate the true extent of the public appetite for democratic renewal.

Before situating the current public landscape in a broader historical context, we want to begin by looking at some important new data. The new data show some profound shifts in

some of the key trust and legitimacy indicators. We also have some timely new data on public preferences among some of the key proposals for democratic reform.

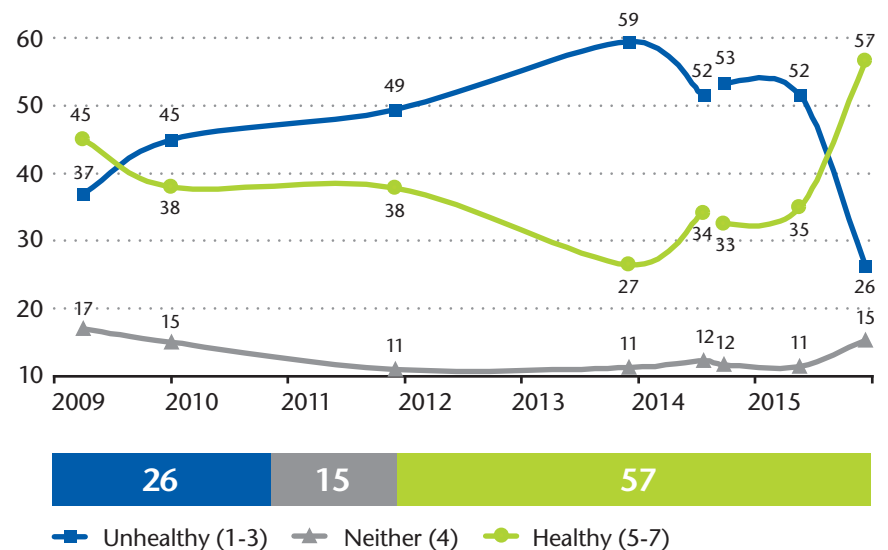
1) Documenting the impacts of Election 42 on key barometers of democratic health

We thought it useful to ask Canadians if and how they thought the world would be any different because of this electoral choice. The answer is that the public sees this as the beginning of a sea change; a profound shift in the very character of the country.

Six in 10 Canadians hold a positive outlook on the health of democracy, which may reflect just how far basic barometers of trust in government and democracy had descended under Harper's watch. What is remark-

A Democratic Boom?

Q. How would you rate the overall health of democracy at the federal level in Canada?



BASE: Canadians: December 7-10, 2015 (n=1,956). MOE +/- 2.2%. 19 times out of 20

able about this indicator is how this newfound optimism is shared by Canadians of every region, gender, age group, and educational cohort.

Whatever the long-term consequences of the recent 42nd federal election, we can document a dramatic shift in some of the basic barometers of democratic health. We would urge caution in over-reading the lasting significance of these shifts but they are indeed impressive. People cite democratic renewal as one of the areas in which they expect profound improvements from the new government. We see basic confidence and national direction reaching high points for the past 12 years. We also see some basic tracking of 'democratic health' tipping the outlook from clear majority mistrust to clear majority trust.

This improved outlook is a positive development but we should be very cautious in assuming that the structural issues that produced mistrust have been solved by a shift from grumpy to sunny. The real test of the significance of these dramatic upticks will only become clear as citizens observe the new government and its impact on democracy and public institutions.

The new government has laid out a

“ Whatever the long-term consequences of the recent 42nd federal election, we can document a dramatic shift in some of the basic barometers of democratic health. We would urge caution in over-reading the lasting significance of these shifts but they are indeed impressive. ”

very ambitious program of democratic renewal. In this final section we look at some of the evolution of public attitudes to these measures, as well as a few that they haven't made as prominent.

2) Potential fixes: The evolution of public attitudes to improving democratic health

Not surprisingly, we have seen public receptivity to a number of fixes to improve this serious problem. These range from sweeping ideas such as replacing political parties to more common suggestions including moving from first-past-the-post to proportional representation.

The idea of mandatory voting is supported by a clear majority, although it is opposed by around one-third. The most attractive feature of this measure, which has been in place in

Australia since 1924, is that it solves the problem of low voter turnout. Obviously, one would prefer a situation where the vast majority turn out voluntarily (as in the case of Denmark, for example) but one could argue that the inventory of evils associated with the new permanent campaign of get out (and keep home) the vote has risen to a point where this more drastic measure is necessary. Notably, turnout in Australia is around 90 per cent and the measure enjoys the support of around 80 per cent in polls. The system doesn't seem to favour any particular party. In the long run, parties must consider platforms and campaigns that focus on all voters rather than just narrow-casting to specific segments.

“ Notably, turnout in Australia is around 90 per cent and the measure enjoys the support of around 80 per cent in polls. The system doesn't seem to favour any particular party. In the long run, parties must consider platforms and campaigns that focus on all voters rather than just narrow-casting to specific segments. ”

Preferred Electoral System

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

Some form of proportional representation



Canada's existing first-past the post-system



A preferential voting system



■ Best option for Canada ■ Second-best option for Canada
■ Worst option for Canada ■ DK/NR

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

Even though people are much more sanguine about democratic health, they still desire some major changes to the way democracy works. The new government has said they will explore mandatory voting but they

are committed to ending the first-past-the-post system. Here, we will look at how citizens respond to three major options: the status quo (i.e., first-past-the-post), proportional representation, and preferential ballot. We present these as the level of principles rather than detailed design, as we feel this is more appropriate given public literacy on the topic.

Support for the status quo—first-past-the-post—is not high. In fact, there is a strong mandate to implement something that more closely resembles the democratic ideal that all votes have equal influence in shaping electoral outcomes. In approaching electoral reform, it is clear that voters place the highest priority on the idea of equality of voter impact. Consequently, first-past-the-post is least preferred and proportional representation most preferred with preferential ballot in between.

When we asked approximately 2,000 Canadians from December 7-10, the week the House was sitting, fully 41 per cent chose some form of proportional representation as the best option for Canada, while another 30 per cent said it was the second best option. As for the existing first-past-the-post system, 25 per cent said it was the best

system, and another 23 per cent said it was the second best. Equally, 25 per cent said preferential voting would be the best system, and 34 per cent said it would be second best. The current public preferences are quite clear; the public want to abandon first-past-the-post, would prefer proportional representation, but could *consider* a preferential ballot.

In addition to electoral reform, our research has consistently shown two critical book-ends to improving trust in government. Our most recent updates show these two ideas of increasing transparency and routine citizen engagement continue to evoke very strong resonance among the public. The idea of heightened transparency contains the notion of changing government from a black box to a glass box. The idea of citizen engagement could see a transformation of traditional polling to scientific approaches that are reflective, representative, and informed.

3) Broad historical shifts

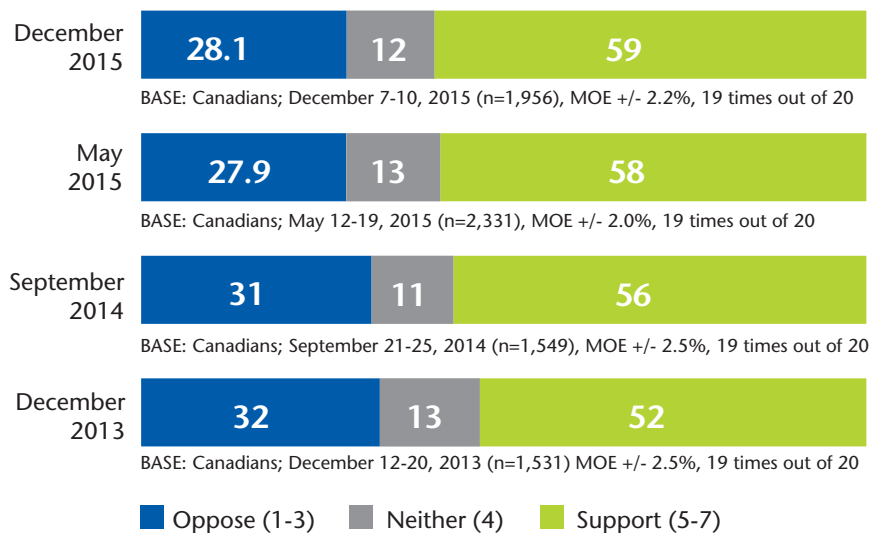
Let's return to the deep historical context in upper North America. Perhaps the biggest change among a plethora of structural changes in our society has been the shift from a

more trusting collectivist society to a more individualistic society—one that is more wary of the state and public institutions. The deferential and conformist societies of the post Second World War gave way to the counterculture and protest of the sixties and seventies — a transformation that continues to this day. While the elimination of the blind trust and conformism under the forces of rising mass education, a more critical media, and pop culture has produced a more aware and critical public, this shift has also posed huge challenges to governments and democratic institutions. There is little evidence that the advent of Internet 1.0, 2.0 and beyond has done anything to reverse this pattern of very low trust.

“While there are no doubt democratic impacts, social media may also have a down side when it comes to democracy. While Twitter and Facebook are certainly inundated with political content, some worry that this replaces true political action with “click democracy”.”

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?



Our research has shown that the public believes that the Internet and social media are having a positive impact on democracy. Given our analysis, we might be less convinced of this. While there are no doubt democratic impacts, social media may also have a down side when it comes to democracy. While Twitter and Facebook are certainly inundated with political content, some worry that this replaces true political action with “click democracy”.

The most recent changes suggest that the almost unimaginable decline in trust in government—which occurred in the last half of the twentieth century—continues uninterrupted and has, perhaps, further eroded in this new

century. It is a plus that a more educated and less docile public holds its public institutions to account. Not only does such low trust have dire implications for the basic legitimacy of governments and democracy, the absence of trust is also a brake on economic productivity. Markets don't function well in the absence of basic trust.

It is important to note that the current roots of declining trust are deep and that there are no immediate fixes for restoring trust in government. The drivers are ultimately cultural, what some have called the rhythms of post-materialism, and there is no evidence that what Neil Nevitte referred to as the decline of deference has halted since he noted that trend 15 years ago. If anything, the decline has continued and perhaps even accelerated among the younger half of the population.

We have been talking about trust in government but the new post-materialist outlook also provides scant trust to business and professions (notably mistrustful of bigger, not smaller businesses). The mistrust in government is much more focused on politicians and political parties, not officials. We have

other indicators showing trust in democracy plummeting to new lows in Canada. Trust in politicians has been almost cartoonishly low in Canada.

4) Movements in trust over the Harper era

Stephen Harper inherited government in a very challenging period, but things only worsened during his rule. This is somewhat ironic as Harper took office largely on claims of restoring honesty and transparency and his initial victory was driven largely by concerns that the previous Liberal government had lost touch in terms of basic accountability and trust issues. So these issues can be important factors in shaping political choice. If we were to isolate one factor that is paramount in driving declining trust in government, it would be that the public interest has become subordinate to other interests.

We noted that the roots of the decline in trust in government and democracy were deep and that this phenomenon was not unique to Canada. We also note that while the major declines occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, there is evidence that the

trend lines are going down again. We have been asking people to rate the overall health of democracy as another test of this issue.

“ Stephen Harper inherited government in a very challenging period, but things only worsened during his rule. This is somewhat ironic as Harper took office largely on claims of restoring honesty and transparency and his initial victory was driven largely by concerns that the previous Liberal government had lost touch in terms of basic accountability and trust issues. ”

The pattern here is both clear and troubling. While we were leaning to see democracy as somewhat healthy in early 2009 (by a margin of 45 per cent to 37 per cent), this had steadily eroded to the rather dismal reading we got in 2013 where just over one-quarter of the public saw democracy as healthy and, for the first time, a clear majority said our democracy was sick. So, while the Harper government was by no means responsible for the poor democratic health of the country, it didn't help. We will see some major shifts on this indicator later.

In conclusion, the democratic malaise gripping Canada in this century seems to have improved, at least in the short run. The appetite for renewal, however, is still strong and, ultimately, the new government's success in producing democratic progress will be judged on the agenda of innovation that it and Canadian citizens hold for the future. **P**

Frank Graves is President and CEO of EKOS Research, one of Canada's leading polling and public opinion research companies. fgraves@ekos.com

Trust In Occupations

Q. How much trust do you have in each of the following?

