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## ***2.0 TRUST IN DEMOCRACY***

*A NATIONAL CHECK-UP*

[Ottawa – January 13, 2012] It will come as little surprise that our review of Canada’s democratic health produces some spotty results. What may be more interesting is what the trend lines are, what seems to be producing trust and mistrust and which aspects of our democracy is seen as most in need of attention. There are some ironies and contradictions as well which will become clearer as we consider the issue of alternatives to the status quo and how prominently issues of democracy reckon in the public hierarchy of preference national conversations. Some ‘alternatives’ may be contributing to the very problems they are seen to be helping (e.g. social media) and whereas some aspects of the problem are seen as surprisingly low priorities (e.g. voter turnout and youth disengagement), the overall issue of eroding democratic health does appear around the top of the list of preferred National conversations.

In addition to standard directional and approval measures, we also use some longer term tracking indicators that get at the deeper problems of institutional mistrust. One of those indicators asks citizens how much they trust the government in Ottawa (or Washington in the United States) to do the right thing most or all of the time. Today in Canada, the incidence of those who pick all or most of the time is only 26%. That number compares very poorly to the salad days of the sixties when the government enjoyed the trust of a clear majority of citizens in both Canada and the United States. As shown in Chart 2.1, however, this current mark is pretty typical of the numbers witnessed in both Canada and the USA over the past couple of decades.

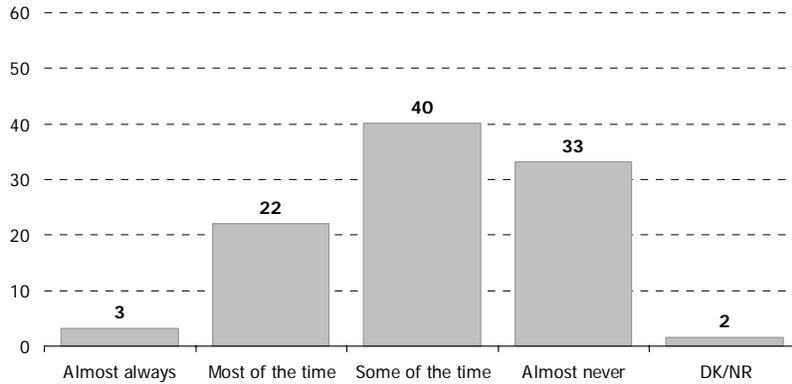
The fact that the chart shows the numbers working in lockstep in Canada and the USA punctures the oft held belief that this erosion is caused by the local issues of the day (e.g., Watergate or Sponsorship). In fact, the steep decline – which Nevitte linked to the decline of deference – is part of a broader decline in trust which has occurred throughout the advanced western world. The key driver of this broad decline in trust has been a growing conviction that the public interest has become subordinate to the private interests of political parties, big business, and other groups while average citizens have become an afterthought. The Conservatives cannot be pleased that they have seen four successive declines since moving the trust needle up after the 2008 election, but the Sisyphean challenges of “restoring trust in government” lie well outside the grasp of any single government.



**Chart 2.1 – Trust in government**



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



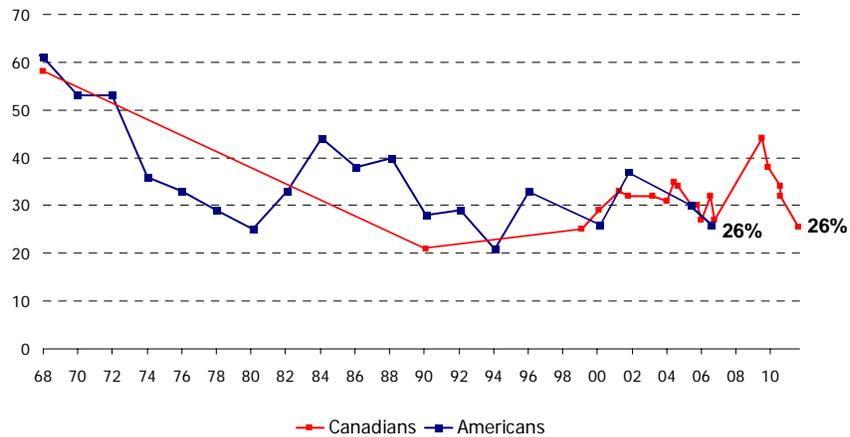
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BASE: Canadians; December 14-21, 2011 (n=2,005)

**Chart 2.2 – Tracking trust in government**



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



*Note: Most recent figure recalculated to exclude those who answered "Don't know/No response".*

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BASE: Canadians; most recent data point December 14-21, 2011 (n=2,005)



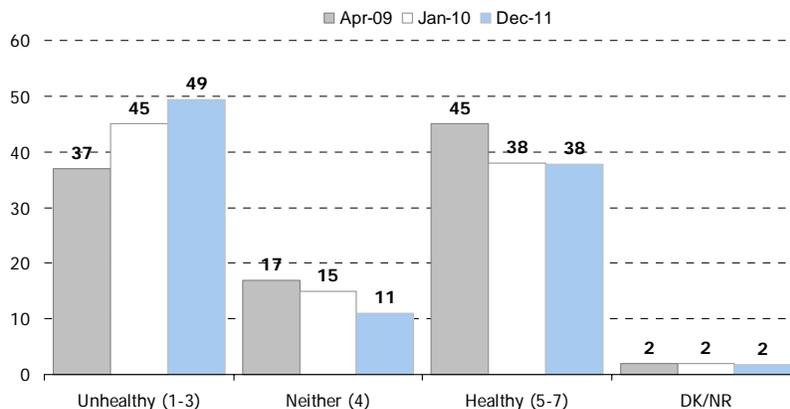
Another shorter term indicator shows similar poor results and a pattern of recent decline. Over the past couple of years, the public rating of democratic health has gone from a plurality healthy to a plurality unhealthy. Taken together, these two indicators and their trend lines paint a picture of marginal public trust which is moving in a more negative manner recently. The underlying anatomy of trust is also interesting. Somewhat obviously, one of the key correlates of trust is party preference. Conservative supporters are very trusting of the government in Ottawa; all other supporters, not so much. In fact, outside of the Conservative supporters, the clear majority of all other citizens rate our overall democratic health as unhealthy.

So what are the conditions most associated with trust? Other than voting for the winner, it appears that positive views are strongest in Alberta (negative views are by far strongest in Quebec). This regional finding mirrors earlier research we have conducted showing Alberta is now the centre of happiness in Canada<sup>1</sup> (and perhaps trust which some argue is closely linked to social capital and cohesion). Similarly, the very low levels of trust in Quebec are also consistent with other lower measures of social cohesion in Quebec. Two other interesting correlates of higher trust are religiosity (i.e., regular church attendance) and living with family.

**Chart 2.3 – Perceived Health of Democracy:**



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



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BASE: Canadians; most recent data point December 14-21, 2011 (n=2,005)

We now look beyond these very general social barometers to the more specific problems on people’s minds when they think of their apparently checkered democratic health. There are two dominant issues: concerns about the effectiveness of Parliament and the issue of proportional representation. We don’t have adequate evidence to fully understand which aspects of poor

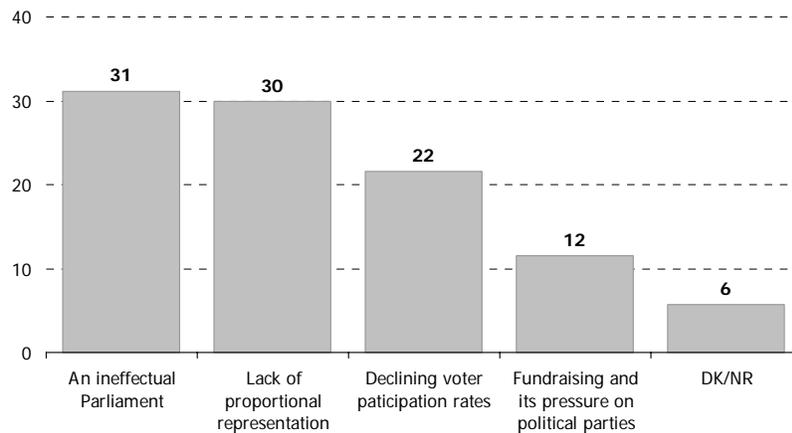
<sup>1</sup> See our report on quality of life titled “Quality of Life in Canada” published on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011 and accessible online at: [http://www.ekospolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/full\\_report\\_qol\\_2011.pdf](http://www.ekospolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/full_report_qol_2011.pdf)

effectiveness place this issue at the top of the list. Questions of decorum are obvious, but it would be ironic if Canadians' search for the less fractious and more decisive character of majority governments now has them mourning the loss of an effective opposition.

### Chart 2.4 – Biggest issue facing democracy



Q. Which of the following issues do think is the biggest problem with democracy in Canada?



Copyright 2011. No reproduction without permission. **BASE:** Those who do not rate the state of democracy as healthy; December 14-21, 2011 (n=1,548)

Consistent with earlier research that we and others have conducted, lack of proportional representation is another dominant concern. Canadians' basic sense of fairness leads them to support proportional representation, while large differences in the number of voters in different jurisdictions getting the same single Member of Parliament under our current first-past-the-post system lead them to feel this a major issue. It is particularly salient among young voters who, in past research, have told us that this is one of factors discouraging youth voting. It is also mildly surprising given the Greek chorus around declining voter participation that this is identified as an issue but not a top issue. This pattern will be seen again with the selected conversations in part 6 of this series – democratic health is a top issue; voter participation is only a modest issue. Finally, the issue of fundraising and the pressures it places on the political parties is seen as a relatively minor issue (a point which would bring the public into disagreement with many experts). Notably, the issue rates much higher in Quebec where there are still lingering corrosive impacts of the sponsorship scandal.

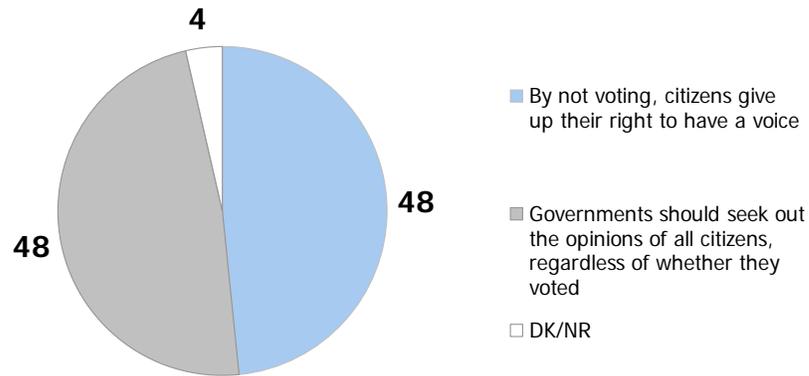
It may well be that the relatively lower ratings of the salience of voter turnout, against a backdrop of very deep concerns about overall democratic health, may reflect deep ambivalence about the responsibility to vote. In contrasting two forced choices – “non-voters give up their right to have a voice” versus “it is important to seek out the voices of those who didn't vote” – we see the public are exactly deadlocked on this important question. If one believes that not voting surrenders one's right to democratic input, then it may explain why issues of declining

voter rates receive relatively lower priority and indeed why voting rates themselves may have fallen. Half of Canadians feel that it is important to capture the opinions of all Canadians, even those who don't vote and this view is more popular amongst younger Canadians who are the very citizens who are least likely to vote. Some would argue that the very fact that these voices were missing in the last election makes it even more important to seek out some form of representation afterwards. Good polling tries to represent all members of the population equally. If politics is falling short of full representation at least polling should redress some of this shortfall.

### Chart 2.5 – Do non-voters count?



*Q. Voter participation rates in Canada have declined dramatically over the past two decades, particularly among young people. Some people argue that by not voting, a citizen gives up his or her right to have a voice in government. Others say that it is important for governments to seek out the opinions of all Canadians, even if they did not vote. Which of these statements comes closest to your own point of view?*



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BASE: Canadians; December 14-21, 2011 (n=2,005)

The dynamics of the impact of the missing voters can be demonstrated more clearly with a specific policy example. Chart 2.7 shows public's response to the Government's recent decision to withdraw from the Kyoto Accord. As one can see, 53% oppose the decision and only 33% support it. For purposes of this illustration, we are not really that interested in this specific issue in and of itself but as a proxy for a broader issue. In a fascinating presentation at the National Arts Centre on the 41st election last fall, pollster Greg Lyle showed how this government achieved a majority with minority support on most of its key positions. He noted that the majority opposition tended to be scattered ineffectually across the other party choices while supporters were heavily concentrated in the governments supporters. Not only were the opponent scattered, but they were less likely to vote.

The Kyoto issue shows this in terms of generational impacts. When we look at older voters (over 45) the decision to exit Kyoto is opposed 56/44, but this is not a real political problem as most Conservative supporters are fine with the decision and the margin of opposition is modest. The more significant policy issue comes into clearer relief when we look at the under 45 citizens. Here

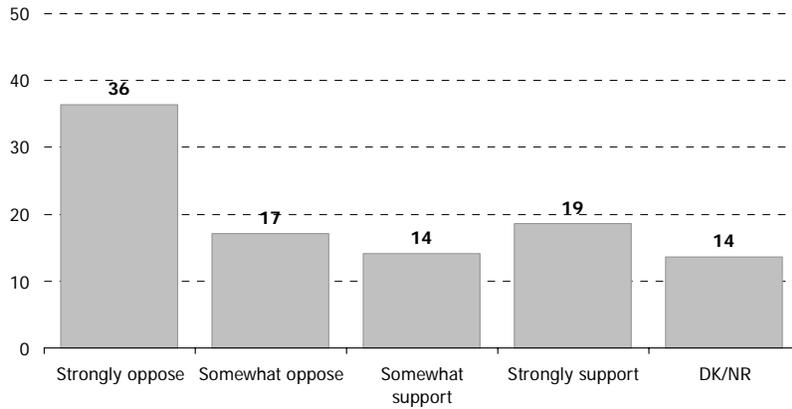


the margin of opposition is enormous at 70 to 30. But less than half of under-45 Canada is voting and most of over-45 Canada *is* voting. This profound gap between the preferences of younger Canada and older Canada is having no apparent impact on the policy decisions of the government. This lack of influence is a reflection of anaemic voting rates among younger voters. The research shows that older Canadians do not see this as a major issue and, later in this series, we will see that younger Canada is more prone giving up on traditional politics and political parties. Yet their enthusiasm for social media and new social movements like the occupy movement may, in fact, be reinforcing this problem and ceding their policy future to older Canada.

**Chart 2.7 – Support for Kyoto withdrawal**



*Q. Lately, there has been a lot of debate over the Kyoto Protocol and whether or not Canada should officially withdraw. Would you support or oppose withdrawing from the Kyoto Protocol?*

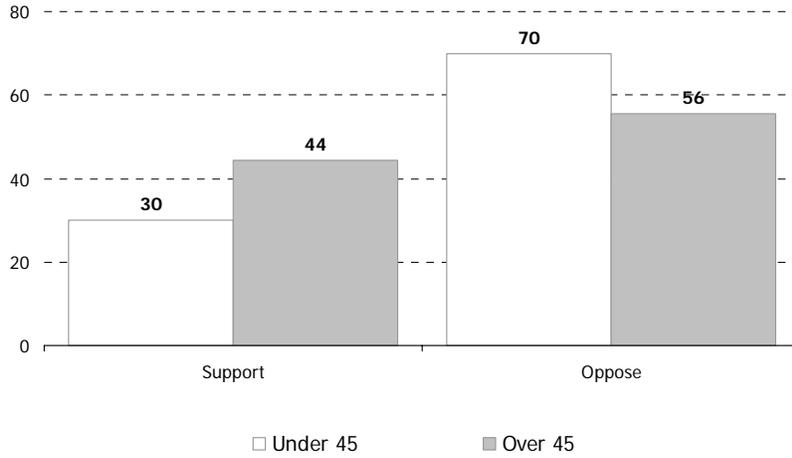




**Chart 2.8 – Support for Kyoto withdrawal by age**



*Q. Lately, there has been a lot of debate over the Kyoto Protocol and whether or not Canada should officially withdraw. Would you support or oppose withdrawing from the Kyoto Protocol?*



*Note: Figures exclude those who replied DK/NR.*

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## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using EKOS' unique, hybrid online/telephone research panel, *Prob/t*. Our panel offers exhaustive coverage of the Canadian population (i.e., Internet, phone, cell phone), random recruitment (in other words, participants are recruited randomly, they do not opt themselves into our panel), and equal probability sampling. All respondents to our panel are recruited by telephone using random digit dialling and are confirmed by live interviewers. Unlike opt-in online panels, *Prob/t* supports margin of error estimates. We believe this to be the only probability-based online panel in Canada.

This particular study involved an ***online only*** survey of 2,005 Canadians. While panellists are randomly recruited, the survey itself excludes the roughly 1 in 5 Canadians without internet access. The results should therefore be considered generalizeable to Canada's online population. The field dates for this survey are December 14-21, 2011. The margin of error associated with the total sample is +/-2.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Please note that the margin of error increases when the results are sub-divided (i.e., error margins for sub-groups such as region, sex, age, education). All the data have been statistically weighted to ensure the samples composition reflects that of the actual population of Canada according to Census data.