

Rethinking

Government

**Exploring Changing Relationships Among
Individuals, Governments and Business**

Wave 2 Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Priorities and Satisfaction with Government

Over the past several years, Rethinking Government has asked Canadians how they would prefer to use any future budgetary surpluses: to reduce debt, lower taxes, or invest in social programs. Results reveal that Canadians continue to prefer investment in social programs over tax cuts or debt reduction. Six in 10 (59 per cent) indicate they would like to see any surplus invested in social programs, 21 per cent would like to see the surplus used to lower taxes, and roughly the same proportion (19 per cent) want it used to reduce debt. Tracking this data reveals that support for investment in social programs has increased six points since October 2005, while support for tax cuts and debt reduction have declined somewhat over this time period.

Rethinking Government results also suggest that the tax cuts included in the last federal budget have registered with many Canadians: we see a six point increase in the proportion of Canadians who believe that the federal government is reducing taxes, and a steep decline in the proportion of Canadians who feel the Government has been increasing taxes – down a full 12 points over the past year. However, most Canadians (56 per cent) continue to believe the federal government has been leaving taxes about the same (and this is up six per cent over the past year).

Respondents were also presented with the scenario of being Prime Minister for a day and asked which of a range of policy options they would choose to invest in. The findings reveal that increasing support for families living below the poverty line was selected most often, followed by increasing funding to Medicare, establishing a patient wait times guarantee, and creating a fund to help Canadian workers upgrade their skills and education. Similar to the more general question outlined above, tax relief and debt reduction were given lower priority by Canadians.

Turning to satisfaction with government, we find that the proportion of Canadians who feel the Government of Canada is moving in the right direction is down three points since May 2006 (and currently stands at 54 per cent). In terms of the performance of the federal government, we find Canadians are becoming more polarized in their views: they are more likely to both approve and disapprove of federal performance than they were in May.

Trust and Ethics

The Federal Accountability Act, which aims to enhance the overall transparency and accountability of the federal government, is expected to become law later this year. With this in mind, Rethinking Government continued its examination of public views on trust, ethics, and accountability in government.

Survey results reveal that while the majority of Canadians continue to feel the ethical standards of the federal government and the federal public service have slipped badly in the past decade, agreement with these ideas has dropped significantly over the past several months. The proportion of Canadians who feel the ethical standards of the federal government have slipped badly in the past decade is down a full nine points since February 2006 (to 56 per cent), and is currently at its lowest point since 2002. Similarly, the proportion of Canadians who feel the ethical standards of the federal public service have slipped in the past decade has declined (from 59 per cent in October 2005 to 52 per cent currently).

The issue of trust was also explored through an examination of perceived influences on public policy in Canada. Respondents were asked to indicate which groups currently have, and which groups should have, the most influence in defining public policies in Canada. The media topped the list of those who are perceived to *have* the most influence (chosen over other groups 61 per cent of the time), while average citizens topped the list of those groups who *should have* the most influence (chosen over other groups 74 per cent of the time). In order to add texture to our examination of Canadians' impressions of influences on public policy, we conducted a gap analysis between those who *should have* influence and those who are perceived to *actually have* influence over public policy. The findings suggest that average citizens are seen as exerting the least amount of influence relative to what they should in terms of defining public policy (a 43-point deficit), followed by parliamentarians (11-point deficit) and senior public servants (8-point deficit). At the other end of the spectrum, the media (30-point surplus), senior business leaders (17-point surplus) and lobbyists/special interest groups (16-point surplus) are seen as currently exerting more influence over public policies than they should.

In order to get a sense of what could be done to restore confidence in government, Rethinking Government asked Canadians which of a range of options would be most effective in improving the level of honesty and reducing corruption in the federal government. Requiring full, immediate disclosure of all contracts and subcontracts on a central website, and requiring all donations to federal parties or leadership campaigns to be disclosed and posted on a single website were seen as the most effective measures to improve the level of honesty in government.

Health Care

Improving the public health care system has been a key priority for both federal and provincial governments for some time now, however, findings from Rethinking Government suggest there has been little improvement in Canadians' views on this issue over the past several years. The plurality of Canadians (48 per cent) continue to disagree that the federal government will be able to improve the health care system in the next two years, and this is up two points since this question was last asked in February 2006.

This edition of *Rethinking Government* also examined public attitudes toward two-tiered health care. Results reveal that while 50 per cent of Canadians disagree that individuals should be able to pay to get quicker access to health care, a large number (37 per cent) support abandoning the current single-payer system. The proportion of Canadians who oppose two-tiered health care has remained largely stable over the past several years, but is down considerably from the late 1990s when more than six in ten Canadians disagreed with the idea that individuals should be allowed to pay extra for quicker access to health care.

Views on Confederation and National Unity

As the provinces and the federal government continue to discuss how to best resolve the “fiscal imbalance” between Ottawa and the provinces, survey results reveal that Canadians hold divergent opinions on how their province’s contributions match those of other provinces. Overall, fewer than half of Canadians (44 per cent) feel their province puts more money into the Confederation than it gets out. However, these findings vary significantly by province/region. Respondents in the stronger economic provinces of Alberta and Ontario are more inclined to believe that they contribute more than they receive (55 per cent and 53 per cent, respectively). Conversely, respondents in the smaller provinces of Manitoba/Saskatchewan and Atlantic Canada are least likely to feel their province puts more into Confederation than it gets out.

The issue of whether Quebec should be considered a “nation” garnered significant media attention earlier this summer. Looking at the public perspective on this issue, we find that only about one in three Canadians overall (36 per cent) feel the Quebec people form a nation. Not surprisingly, however, these results vary between Quebec and the rest of Canada. Fully 72 per cent of Quebec residents feel the Quebec people form a nation, while fewer than four in ten residents from any of the other provinces agree with this proposition. Varying the terminology, we find an increase in national support for the notion that the Quebec people form a nation within the Canadian nation, although it is still a minority who agree with this idea (45 per cent). Again, results vary by province, with two-thirds of Quebecers agreeing with this proposition, while fewer than half of residents from outside Quebec agree with this idea.

Respondents were also asked what recognizing Quebec as a nation would mean for Canadian unity. The plurality of Canadians overall believe that recognizing Quebec as a nation would weaken Canadian unity (44 per cent), 31 per cent believe it would make no difference, and only 19 per cent believe it would strengthen Canadian unity. However, as with other results, these findings vary by region, and particularly between Quebec and the rest of Canada. The plurality of Quebecers (35 per cent) believe recognizing Quebec as a nation would actually strengthen Canadian unity; conversely, only one in five (or fewer) residents from outside Quebec feel recognizing Quebec as a nation would strengthen national unity, and the majority feel this would weaken Canadian unity.

Turning to questions related to Quebec sovereignty, results reveal an increase in support for Quebec sovereignty in recent months. When asked to choose which of four options they would prefer for Quebec (complete independence, sovereignty association, decentralized federalism or the status quo), one in five Quebec residents (19 per cent) say they would opt for complete independence (up two points since February 2006), and 28 per cent chose sovereignty association (up five per cent since February 2006). At

the same time, support for the “federalist” options of decentralized federalism and the status quo are down five points since February 2006.

Similar results are exhibited when Quebecers are forced to choose between complete independence from Canada or maintenance of the status quo. Just over half (54 per cent) currently say they would choose the status quo in this forced choice scenario (down five points since February 2006), and 39 per cent would now choose independence (up six per cent over this same time period).

Quebec residents were also asked about their support for sovereignty using the same type of question as was asked in the 1995 referendum. Results reveal that Quebecers are now more likely to indicate “Yes” in a referendum than they were a few months ago. Currently, 49 per cent of Quebec residents say they would vote “Yes” in a referendum on Quebec sovereignty (up six points since February 2006), while 41 per cent say they would vote “No” (down four points over this same timeframe).

Those who indicated they would say “Yes” in a referendum were asked if they would consider voting “No” if the rest of Canada recognized Quebec as a nation. Results reveal that roughly two-thirds of these respondents (63 per cent) indicated they would still vote “Yes”, however, almost one in three (30 per cent) said they would consider changing their vote to “No” (and six per cent were unsure).

Survey results also indicate that despite the recent increase in support for sovereignty in Quebec outlined above, the proportion of Quebecers who see themselves as “sovereignists” is down four points since 1994 (from 47 per cent to 43 per cent currently).

And looking at Quebecers’ views on the impact of Quebec sovereignty on a range of social and economic issues (i.e., the state of the French language, the environment, the educational system, and the economy), we find mixed views expressed regarding the benefits associated with becoming an independent country. The majority of Quebecers (57 per cent) feel the state of the French language would be better in an independent Quebec, and a slight plurality (46 per cent) feel the environment in Quebec would be better protected under this scenario. However, far fewer feel the quality of the educational system would be better in an independent Quebec (36 per cent), and the plurality of Quebecers (34 per cent) feel the economic situation would, in fact, be worse as an independent country.

