

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This component of Rethinking Government compares the views of the broader Canadian public with those of Canadian decision-makers across a range of issues (priorities and satisfaction with government, trust and ethics, health care, foreign ownership of Canadian firms). Similarities and differences between these two groups are summarized below (and discussed in more detail in later sections of this report).

Priorities and Satisfaction with Government

Decision-makers and the general public were asked to rate the priority of a number of policy areas for the federal government.¹ Results reveal that while health care and the environment are assigned similarly high priority ratings by both the public and decision-makers, the public assigns higher priority to most of the other issues tested (education, managing the economy, taxation, unemployment). Differences are particularly pronounced in terms of unemployment: two-thirds of general public respondents see this as a high priority area, compared to only one in three decision-makers.

There are also significant differences between decision-maker and public views on whether future federal budget surpluses should be used for debt reduction, tax relief, or investment in social programs. As in previous years, the general public places a higher priority on investment in social programs than do decision-makers: six in ten general public respondents (57 per cent) would like to see the government invest budgetary surpluses in social programs, compared to just over four in ten decision-makers (45 per cent). Conversely, decision-makers are more likely than the public prefer using any future surplus to reduce debt (29 per cent versus 21 per cent, respectively), or to lower taxes (24 per cent versus 20 per cent, respectively).

Both decision-makers and the public at large were asked about the federal government's taxation trends over the past several years. Survey results reveal that decision-makers are much more likely than the public to feel the federal government has been reducing taxes in recent years (52 per cent versus 20 per cent, respectively), while members of the general public tend to believe the federal government has been leaving taxes about the same in the last couple of years (53 per cent, compared to 37 per cent of decision-makers). Decision-makers are also significantly less likely to feel the federal government has been increasing taxes in the last couple of years (nine per cent, compared to 23 per cent of the public).

Both groups were also asked to rate the overall performance of the Government of Canada. Results reveal that a majority of decision-makers rate the federal government's overall performance as good (54 per cent), and only one in four (24 per cent) say it is poor. The Canadian public is somewhat less positive in their appraisal of federal government performance, however, a clear plurality (44 per cent) assign a positive rating to the federal government's performance.

¹ In the public survey, Canadians were asked to rate the priority of 20 separate issues for the federal government. Decision-makers were asked to rank a subset of seven issues in terms of their priority for the federal government.

Turning to satisfaction with overall Government of Canada direction, results reveal that both decision-makers and the general public feel the federal government is moving in the right direction. Fifty-four per cent of decision-makers and 56 per cent of the general public believe the federal government is moving in the right direction, compared to only about one in three in either group who feel the federal government is moving in the wrong direction.

Trust and Ethics

Rethinking Government also examined public and decision-maker views on trust and ethics in government.

Both decision-makers and the general public express mixed views in terms of their trust in the Government of Canada. About four in ten decision-makers (40 per cent) and general public respondents (36 per cent) feel the Government of Canada can be trusted to do what is right almost always or most of the time. Conversely, just over half from both groups feel the Government of Canada can be trusted only some of the time or almost never.

Both decision-makers and the general public also express fairly high levels of cynicism about government. A majority from both groups (55 per cent each) agree that those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with people; only about one in four from either group disagree with this idea.

Despite fairly consistent views in terms of trust in the Government of Canada and belief that those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with people, decision-makers and the public hold very different views on the ethical standards of the federal government. General public respondents are significantly more likely than Canadian decision-makers to feel that the ethical standards of the federal government have slipped badly in the past decade (55 per cent versus 34 per cent, respectively).

Decision-makers are also significantly more likely than Canadians as a whole to agree with the idea that government is a positive force in their lives (53 per cent, compared to 33 per cent of the Canadian public).

Health Care

This edition of Rethinking Government also examined decision-maker and public support for individuals paying extra to get quicker access to health care services. Results reveal that decision-makers are more supportive of allowing individuals to pay extra to expedite access to health care. The plurality of decision-makers (44 per cent) agree that individuals should be allowed to pay extra to get quicker access to health care services, while most general public respondents (50 per cent) disagree with this idea.

Rethinking Government results also suggest that both decision-makers and the public at large remain pessimistic that the federal government will be able to improve the health care system in the next two years (and decision-makers hold particularly negative views). Fully six in ten decision-makers (60 per cent) disagree that meaningful improvements to the health care system can be made in the next two years, as do a majority of general public respondents (51 per cent). Conversely, only one in five decision-makers

(21 per cent), and only one in three general public respondents (31 per cent) agree that the federal government will be able to improve the health care system in the near future.

Foreign Investment and Ownership

With the recent purchases of high profile Canadian firms such as Stelco, Falconbridge, and Inco by foreign companies, the issue of foreign ownership of Canadian firms continues to garner significant media attention. This edition of Rethinking Government examined decision-maker and public views on this issue.

Results reveal that both decision-makers and the public feel foreign ownership of Canadian firms is on the rise. Three in four decision-makers (72 per cent) and general public respondents (75 per cent) believe the rate of foreign ownership of Canadian companies is higher than it was 20 years ago, compared to roughly five per cent from either group who feel it is lower. Varying the terminology slightly, we find that a similar proportion of decision-makers and public respondents (72 per cent each) believe that the rate of U.S. *and* foreign ownership of Canadian companies is higher today than it was 20 years ago.

Despite similar perceptions regarding the rate of foreign ownership of Canadian firms, decision-makers express far less concern about this issue. Just over half of Canadian decision-makers (51 per cent) say they are concerned about the rate of foreign ownership of Canadian firms, compared to 73 per cent of the Canadian public. Again varying the terminology slightly, we find that 57 per cent of decision-makers say they are concerned about the rate of U.S. *and* foreign ownership of Canadian companies, while a significantly larger proportion of the Canadian population as a whole (70 per cent) is concerned about this issue.

Canadian decision-makers are also less likely than the public as a whole to say they are opposed to the purchase of Canadian businesses by foreign-owned firms (45 per cent versus 65 per cent, respectively), or by foreign *state-owned* firms (54 per cent versus 72 per cent, respectively).

Not surprisingly, given their higher levels of concern about foreign ownership of Canadian firms, the public as a whole is more likely than decision-makers to want more information about the foreign investment review process. Seventy-one per cent of Canadians say the Government of Canada needs to be more forthcoming about the rationale in its decision-making process on foreign investments, compared to 59 per cent of decision-makers.

