

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Priorities for Government

One of the key areas that the Rethinking Government project has explored over the past decade is public preferences in terms of priority areas for the federal government. This first wave of Rethinking Government 2007 continues this examination.

Canadians were asked to rate the priority of 20 policy areas for the federal government. Results reveal that health care continues to register as the highest priority area, with 89 per cent of Canadians assigning high priority to this issue, followed closely by education (87 per cent). Despite the attention given to the environment over the past eight months or so, the proportion of Canadians who feel the environment should be a high priority for the federal government is up only three points to 84 per cent (and ranks third overall). Child poverty, managing the economy, post-secondary education, crime and justice issues, and food safety are seen as important second tier priorities for the federal government. At the bottom of the list of tested priorities are Aboriginal issues, supporting cultural heritage, and immigration, which were seen as a high priority for the federal government by less than half of those surveyed.

Across some of these priority areas respondents were also asked whether they would like to see increased, maintained, or reduced federal government involvement. Despite only a modest increase as a priority, results reveal a significant rise in Canadians' preference for increased federal involvement in the environment (up ten points since 2006 to 71 per cent). Two-thirds of Canadians (66 per cent) feel the federal government should increase its involvement in health care (up three points since 2006), and 59 per cent believe more focus should be placed on education (down two points). As has been the case in previous years, relatively few Canadians support increased federal involvement in Aboriginal issues (29 per cent).

Satisfaction with Government

Turning to satisfaction with federal government performance, survey results reveal a slight decline in approval ratings over the past few months. Those who say they approve of overall Government of Canada performance is down two points since February 2007 (and now stands at 32 per cent), while those who take a negative view of federal performance is up three points (to 33 per cent). In addition, the proportion of Canadians who feel the Government of Canada is moving in the right direction is down three points since February 2007, while those who feel the Government of Canada is moving in the wrong direction is up one point.

Canadians were also asked to rate the performance of the federal government across the specific priority areas described earlier. Canadians assign highest ratings to federal government performance in the areas of food safety (48 per cent), preventing acts of terrorism (48 per cent), and transportation safety (47 per cent). At the bottom of the list, few Canadians think the federal government is doing a good job in the areas of child poverty, Aboriginal issues, taxation, or immigration. Tracking this data

suggests that despite a decline in overall approval ratings for the Government of Canada, performance ratings on many of the specific priority areas examined are up somewhat over the past year. The most significant gains are seen in terms of federal performance on immigration (up five points), transportation safety (up four points), developing cultural heritage (up four points) and preventing acts of terrorism (up three points). However, results also reveal a decline in satisfaction ratings across some of the priority areas examined. The most significant declines are seen in managing the economy (down four points), and in taxation (down three points).

This edition of Rethinking Government also asked Canadians to rate the performance of the Government of Canada in a number of areas related to the environment (i.e., implementing stricter laws and regulations to protect the environment, encouraging individuals and companies to reduce their impact on the environment, investing in alternative and renewable energy sources, and ensuring that Canada's natural resources are maintained for future generations). Results reveal fairly consistent (and negative) views on federal performance across all the issues tested. Fewer than one in three Canadians think the government is doing a good job on any of these issues, while the plurality rate federal government efforts in these areas as poor.

Trust and Ethics

Six months after the Federal Accountability Act was passed into law, Rethinking Government findings suggest Canadians continue to hold mixed/negative views on trust and ethics in government. Currently, 28 per cent of Canadians express trust in the federal government, while 32 per cent say they do not trust the Government of Canada (and the proportion who express little trust in the Government of Canada is up five points since February 2007).

Survey results also reveal that the majority of Canadians (60 per cent) agree that those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with people, and only 18 per cent disagree with this idea (although agreement with this idea is down five points since November 2006). A majority of Canadians (53 per cent) also agree that they "don't think government cares much about what people like me think", while only three in ten disagree with this idea (these results are identical to those found in November 2006).

Survey findings also reveal that Canadians' assessment of the adequacy of safeguards to ensure ethical behaviour from federal officials has remained largely unchanged over the past year. Currently, 35 per cent of Canadians agree that sufficient safeguards exist to ensure that federal public servants conduct themselves in an ethical manner (down one percentage point since May 2006), while 37 per cent disagree with this idea (also down one point since May 2006). Turning to elected officials, results reveal that one in three Canadians (33 per cent) agree that there are sufficient safeguards to ensure the ethical conduct of federal politicians (up one point since May 2006), while four in ten disagree (43 per cent – down one point over the past year). Despite largely stable views on this issue over the past year, Canadian views on the adequacy of safeguards have improved quite significantly since 2005. Agreement that sufficient safeguards exist to ensure ethical behaviour from federal public servants is up four points since May 2005, and agreement that there are sufficient safeguards for federal politicians is up eight points. Moreover, disagreement that sufficient safeguards exist has declined for both federal public servants (down 11 points) and federal politicians (down 13 points) since May 2005.

Economic Issues

As the Canadian economy continues to grow, and our dollar continues to rise relative to the U.S. dollar, Rethinking Government results reveal that Canadians express low levels of concern about their economic future. Currently, only one in four Canadians (24 per cent) say they have “lost all control” over their economic future, while six in ten (58 per cent) disagree with this idea. Agreement is down one percentage point since February 2007, and down significantly from the late 1990s when half of Canadians felt they had lost all control of their economic future.

Results also reveal that only one in five employed Canadians (20 per cent) believe there is a “good chance” they could lose their job over the next couple of years, while fully seven in ten disagree with this idea. As with economic insecurity, fear of job loss is down dramatically from the late 1990s when almost half of Canadians felt there was a good chance they could lose their jobs in the near future. Moreover, fully two thirds of employed Canadians (67 per cent) believe that if they lost their job they would find an equivalent one within six months. This is unchanged from 2006, and up significantly since we first asked this question in 1998 (when fewer than half of Canadians felt they could find replacement employment within a six month timeframe).

Interestingly, despite high levels of economic optimism, just over four in ten Canadians (44 per cent) describe their household income as “very adequate” in meeting their family’s basic needs, representing a four-point decline since 2006, and a 12 point drop since 1998 (when economic confidence was significantly weaker than it is today).

Health Care

This edition of Rethinking Government also examined support for individuals paying extra to get quicker access to health care services. Survey results reveal that the plurality of Canadians (47 per cent) continue to disagree with the idea of a two-tiered health care system, however, a growing minority (40 per cent – up two points since February 2007) supports the idea of paying extra for quicker access to health care.

Looking at Canadians’ views on whether the quality of health care has improved, deteriorated, or stayed the same over the past two years, we find that Canadians express somewhat more negative views than they did when we last examined this issue in November 2006. Four in ten (42 per cent) feel the quality of health care has deteriorated over the past two years (up three points since November 2006), while those who believe health care is improving fell two percentage points (to 17 per cent) over this same time period. Despite this increase in pessimism over the past eight months or so, Canadian confidence in the quality of health care is significantly higher than in the late 1990s, when seven in ten Canadians felt health care quality was deteriorating.

Respondents were also asked if they would support or oppose the idea of private sector involvement in Government of Canada advertising – for example, a diapers company helping to sponsor a healthy pregnancies campaign with Health Canada. Results reveal that a majority of Canadians (59 per cent) say they would support such an initiative, while 36 per cent say they would oppose this idea.

Respondents were then presented with a series of arguments for and against advertising partnerships between the Government of Canada and the private sector. Results reveal Canadians tend to agree with many of the arguments in support of this idea. Majorities agree that this type of partnership would show Canadians that government and businesses can work together for the public good (54 per cent), and would help save tax dollars because some of the costs of the advertising campaign would be paid for by the private sector (52 per cent). Canadians are more divided in their agreement that this type of partnership is a good idea because it could increase the amount of government advertising that takes place, thus reaching more Canadians (although the plurality – 43 per cent – agree with this idea).

However, Canadians also agree with arguments against advertising partnerships between the Government of Canada and the private sector. Six in ten (60 per cent) are concerned that these types of partnerships may result in preferential treatment being given to the companies involved (in terms of laws, regulations, etc), and majorities are also concerned that these types of partnerships might be seen as an endorsement by the Government of Canada of the products or services of the companies (57 per cent), and that such a partnership will push the government too close to business (52 per cent).

After hearing the arguments for and against the idea of private sector involvement in Government of Canada advertising, respondents were once again asked if they supported or opposed this idea. Results reveal that after considering some of the possible issues associated with such a partnership, support drops four points to 55 per cent, while opposition to the idea increases five points to 41 per cent.

Views on Quebec Separation

The Quebec general election held in March 2007 saw the Parti Québécois relegated to third-party status, suggesting that Quebecers' desire for separation may be on the decline. Findings from this edition of *Rethinking Government* also suggest a diminishment in Quebecers' support for the idea of separation from Canada – the perceived likelihood of Quebec separation has declined among Quebecers across all of the timeframes tested (i.e., in the next 2, 5, and 10 years).

Currently, only seven per cent of Quebec residents indicate a belief that separation is likely to occur within the next two years (down six points since November 2006). Moreover, those who feel Quebec separation is *unlikely* to occur in the next two years is up 15 points since November 2006. Belief that Quebec separation is likely to occur in the next five years has also declined (down five points since November 2006, to 11 per cent); and fewer than one in six Quebecers (16 per cent) now feel it is likely that their province will separate from Canada in the next 10 years – down a full 11 points since November 2006.

Interestingly, while Quebec residents are now less likely to feel Quebec separation is a possibility within the next decade, residents from the rest of Canada are now somewhat more inclined to think Quebec separation will occur: across all three timeframes tested, belief that Quebec separation is likely to occur is up slightly since November 2006.

Tracking this data over the longer term reveals a fair degree of volatility over the past decade. In Quebec, belief in the likelihood of Quebec separation diminished dramatically throughout the late 1990s and earlier this decade, however, revelations about the sponsorship program and the ensuing Gomery Commission fuelled support for separation in the province in recent years. In the wake of 2007 Quebec election, the perceived likelihood of separation is again on the decline among residents of Quebec. In the rest of Canada, belief that Quebec will separate during these three timeframes has increased somewhat over the past year, but is consistent with findings from earlier in the decade, and well below agreement levels found in 2004-2005 (when the sponsorship program and Gomery Commission revelations significantly heightened belief in the possibility of Quebec's separation).

