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Majority of Canadians worried about potential election fraud, study finds

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Many Canadians are heading to the polls in 2015 worried about the potential for the “illegal manipulation” of their votes, and showing as little trust in elections as people in some Latin American countries.

SECTIONS

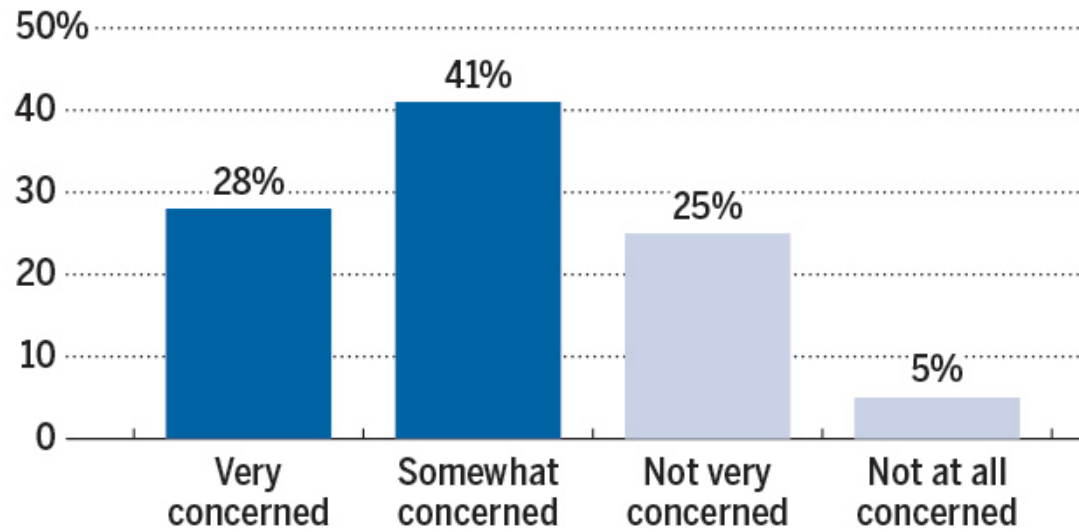
Survey of 26 countries in the Americas found that Canadians’ trust in elections is
relatively weak, with only one in five (21 per cent) expressing “strong trust” in elections.
An equal proportion (22 per cent) have little or no trust, with 57 per cent in the middle,

showing “some” trust.

But the more startling finding is that nearly 70 per cent are concerned that political parties may try to “manipulate the outcome of future elections through illegal activities.”

CONCERN ABOUT ELECTION FRAUD

How concerned are Canadians about political parties illegally manipulating election outcomes?



SOURCE: AMERICASBAROMETER/2014 DENNIS LEUNG / OTTAWA CITIZEN

(<https://postmediaottawacitizen2.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/1224-survey1-election04.jpg>)

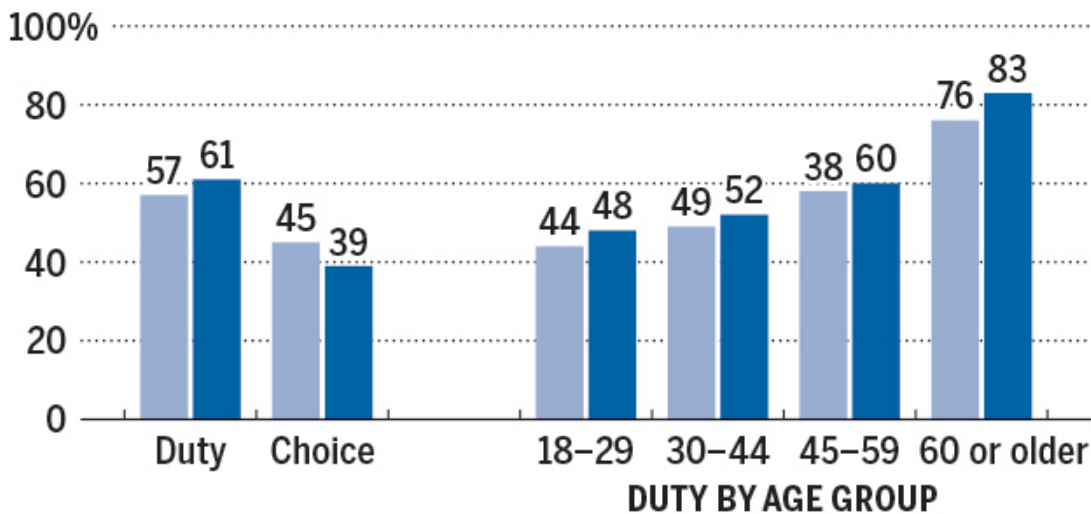
Environics Institute and the Ottawa-based Institute on Governance (IOG) teamed up on the Canadian survey for the massive AmericasBarometer Study that is conducted in 26 countries every two years.

About 1,541 Canadians answered that survey online last summer, and the results were recently released. Environics and the IOG also did a companion survey of 2,000 Canadians about their attitudes on governance and the public service, released exclusively to the Citizen. (Margin of error can't be applied to online surveys but the two samples were each weighted by region, age and gender to match Canada's population.)

Keith Neuman, executive director of the Environics Institute, said elections are “important symbols and manifestations of democracy,” and flagging trust is worrisome, especially for Canada, which has little modern history of controversial or fraudulent elections.

VOTING AS A DUTY OR A CHOICE

■ 2012 ■ 2014



SOURCE: AMERICASBAROMETER/2014 DENNIS LEUNG / OTTAWA CITIZEN

(<https://postmediaottawacitizen2.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/1224-survey1-election01.jpg>)

He believes the findings probably reflect Canada's reaction to the robocalls scandal that captured national attention after the Citizen and Postmedia News first reported that voters had been fraudulently directed to the wrong polling stations during the 2011 election.

The robocalls investigation, and recent sentencing of former Conservative staffer Michael Sona for his role in the scheme, have stayed in the headlines as parties prepare for the 2015 election.

Neuman said the question about election fraud was new on the Americas survey, which goes back to 2006, so he was unable to compare the results with public opinion prior to robocalls affair.

The furor over robocalls triggered changes to Canada's election laws with the Fair Elections Act this year, which opposition critics have argued tilts the playing field to favour the Conservatives. The government says the act closes loopholes and gives law enforcement more power to prevent abuses.

The survey found that concerns about potential election fraud surfaced across the country but were strongest among Canadians who identified themselves as "on the

political left,” were older, had lower incomes, and showed high levels of civic engagement.

“I was surprised ... but it’s not that Canadians think we are a banana republic or elections are being stolen from us,” said IOG president Maryatonett Flumian.

“I think they have a heightened awareness and a suspicion after the discussion around robocalls that something was not right, but it’s very technical and they don’t have a full understanding. It has them paying more attention to election issues and could even result in higher voter turnout.”

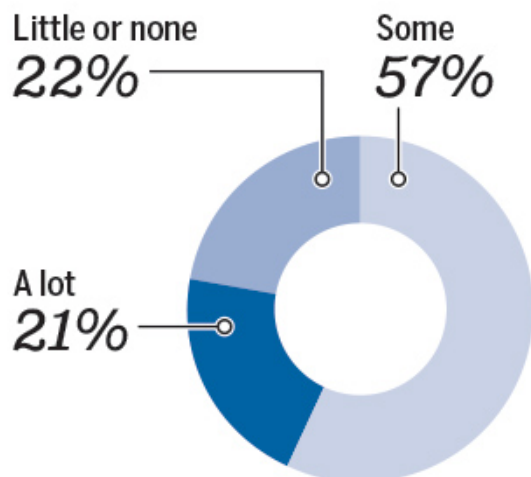
With only one in five Canadians showing “strong trust” in elections, the country scores similarly to many Latin American countries. About 20 per cent of Americans have “strong trust” in elections while that number is 14 per cent in Mexico, 23 per cent in Central America, 17 per cent in South America and 12 per cent among the Caribbean nations.

Mistrust of elections is evident among supporters of all the federal parties. “This is clearly not a partisan issue; all parties are concerned,” said Neuman.

The mistrust of elections stands out because Canadians are generally positive about government and democracy — despite the highly partisan and fractious nature of politics. They are proud of their country, strongly believe in democracy, and are relatively content with the way it operates.

In fact, Canada is the most positive of the 26 countries surveyed about its democracy — but Canadians don’t necessarily have the same enthusiasm for the country’s political institutions.

DO YOU TRUST ELECTIONS IN THIS COUNTRY?



***SOURCE:
AMERICASBAROMETER/2014***

DENNIS LEUNG / OTTAWA CITIZEN

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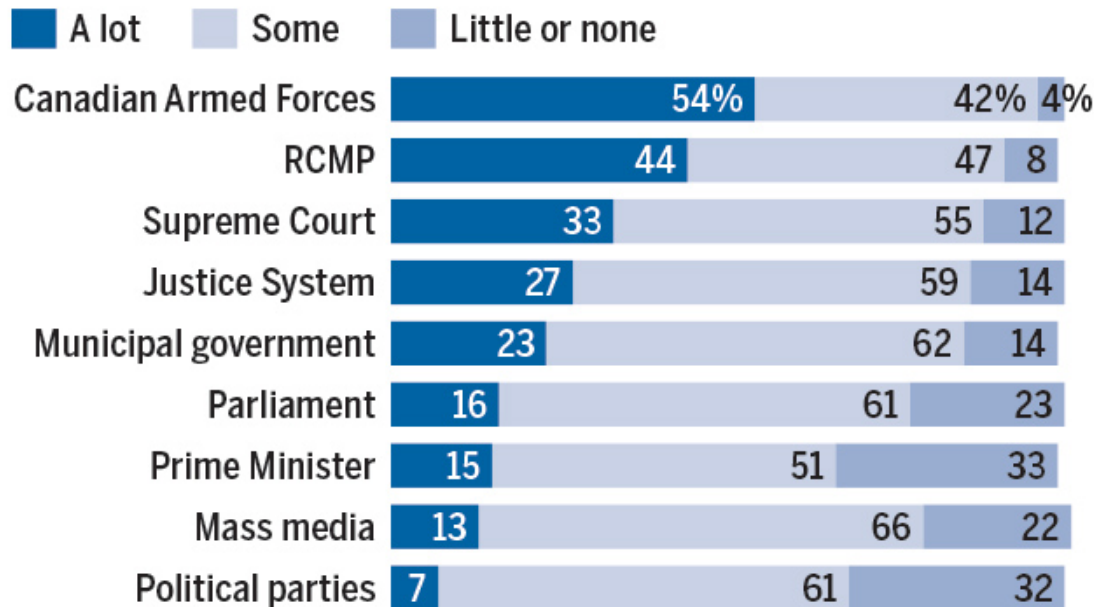
The unelected national institutions such as the military, RCMP and, to a lesser degree, the Supreme Court and justice system, are held in some regard. Fifty-four per cent have “a lot” of trust in the military; 44 per cent in the RCMP and 33 per cent in the Supreme Court. But it goes downhill from there.

Among our elected institutions, no more than one in six (16 per cent) has strong trust in Parliament, while 23 per cent said they mistrusted Parliament.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper was seen as a polarizing leader, with one-third of Canadians thinking he does a good job, one-third saying he does a bad job and another one-third in the middle. His trust levels have remained unchanged in recent years, putting him among the least-trusted of the 26 national leaders in the hemisphere. This year he was fifth from the bottom and ahead of Guyana, Costa Rica, Peru and Trinidad and Tobago.

Canadians’ actual trust in the prime minister is similar to their trust in Parliament as an institution, with one in six (15 per cent) indicating strong trust, compared with more than twice as many (33 per cent) expressing clear distrust.

LEVEL OF TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS



Note: May not add up to 100 due to rounding

SOURCE: AMERICASBAROMETER/2014 DENNIS LEUNG / OTTAWA CITIZEN

(<https://postmediaottawacitizen2.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/1224-survey1-election03.jpg>)

Canadians report even less trust for political parties, with only seven per cent indicating “strong” trust and 32 per cent with little or no trust for parties. The remaining 61 per cent have “some trust.”

Canadians’ and Americans’ trust in political parties — and in the news media — are the lowest in the Americas.

The lack of trust in the political system may be partly explained by Canadians’ view that politicians don’t really listen to them. Only one in six agreed “those who govern this country are interested in what people think.” Three in 10 disagreed (31 per cent), while the rest were somewhere in the middle.

Other findings from the two surveys:

– A growing number of Canadians would now accept the “legitimacy” of coalition government. Fewer than half, however, believe a coalition can be formed with the second- and third-place parties joining forces to take power from the party that won the most seats.

Canada has had only one coalition government since Confederation — Sir Robert Borden's 1917 Union government — and Neuman argues Canadians weren't ready for one in 2008 when, weeks after the election, the federal opposition parties proposed joining forces to unseat Harper, who had won a minority. Harper prorogued Parliament and the threat disappeared as problems arose within the opposition.

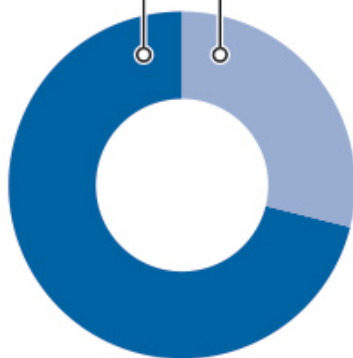
– Although voter turnout has been declining, Canadians still consider it critical to democracy, and the majority (61 per cent) believe it is a duty rather than the 39 per cent who say it is a choice.

SUPPORT FOR CHANGES TO VOTING PROCEDURES

OPTION OF VOTING IN ELECTIONS ONLINE THROUGH SECURE WEBSITE

Favour:
71%

Oppose:
29%



MAKING IT MANDATORY FOR CANADIANS TO VOTE IN FEDERAL ELECTIONS

Favour:
41%

Oppose:
59%



SOURCE: AMERICASBAROMETER/2014 DENNIS LEUNG / OTTAWA CITIZEN

(<https://postmediaottawacitizen2.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/1224-survey1-election02.jpg>)

About 41 per cent — primarily those under age 30, immigrants, educated and those on the political right — are open to making voting in federal elections mandatory, as it is in Australia. The rest oppose it.

– Most Canadians express a passing interest in politics, but only 28 per cent say they understand the big political issues of the day. Most place themselves in the middle of the political spectrum but there has been a decided shift to the political right since 2010, even though many of the values and attitudes these respondents hold are typically associated with the left.