

Canada: A Benchmark for Democracy and Local Governance

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On November 27, 2014, Keith Neuman unveiled the 2014 AmericasBarometer survey on Canada's similarities and differences with the U.S. and other countries in the western hemisphere with respect to democracy and governance to MRIA's Ottawa chapter.

Survey results revealed a high tolerance level in Canadian society, a country where many still trust people in their community and feel safe in their neighbourhood. Despite Canada's reputation for stability, Neuman talked about controversies surrounding the 2011 federal election and the related robocalls story, provoking questions about the integrity of our electoral system.

Neuman, executive director of the Environics Institute, shared the results of the Canadian portion of the AmericasBarometer with an enthusiastic group of academics, research professionals and students in Algonquin College's Marketing Research and Business Intelligence program. He demonstrated to this audience that surveying Canadians' opinions on democracy and good governance can deliver useful information for governments and other institutions that need to understand their various publics.

Environics conducts several streams of research, one of which is public opinion research, to understand the views of Canadians on social and public policy issues. This includes taking the lead on the Canadian portion of the AmericasBarometer project.

To gain more insight into the success, shortcomings and potential value of this study to Canadians, we interviewed Neuman.

A Brief History of the Project

The AmericasBarometer did not begin in Canada, but was the culmination of years of work by Mitchell Seligson, a political scientist at Vanderbilt University, who believed that it was important to conduct public opinion research in Latin America. He launched the project in the 1970s, and it grew from four countries to 26 countries by 2014.

Neuman refers to the project as "quite an impressive research program." From his perspective, the noteworthy success of the AmericasBarometer project can be attributed to several factors, including a demand for and interest in such knowledge and insight in Latin America, the Caribbean and the U.S. Other factors include the presence of partner

organizations in every participating country, employing personnel for conducting the research locally, and adopting a research methodology that is both “solid and rigorous.”

According to Neuman, this is not marketing research where the aim is to “gain profile,” but a unique data source that stemmed from a “growing interest in Latin America,” a region that has seen a lot of political and social change.

The AmericasBarometer survey is conducted every two years with the general population in over 25 countries in North America, Central America, South America and the Caribbean. The notable exception is Cuba, where government regulations restrict non-government-funded survey practices.

A core set of questions is used in each version of the study; the remaining questions are developed by the AmericasBarometer office at Vanderbilt University. A local university or independent research institute or firm is responsible for collecting the data in each country. The local research organization is allowed to add its own questions for its own region.

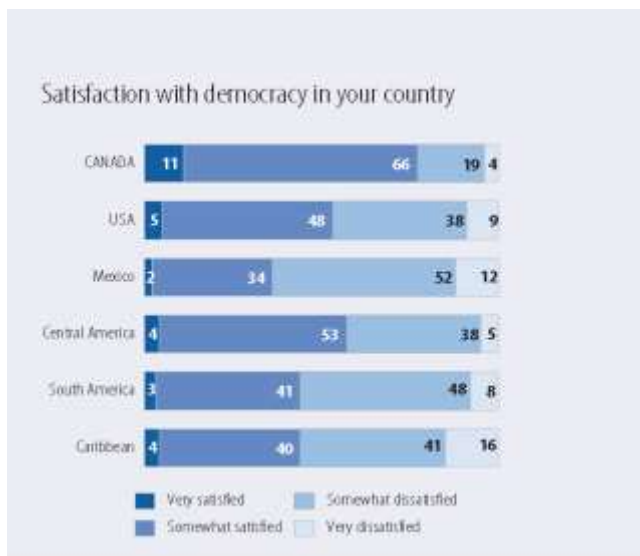


Figure 1: International Comparison

Canada as a Recent Entrant and Benchmark

Canada stands out as being the most satisfied people in the Americas in terms of how its democratic system is working (see Figure 1). This lead has widened since 2012, as many countries in the survey have experienced a worsening view of their democracies.

Satisfaction in one’s democracy has declined by 10 percentage points or more in South America, most noticeably in Venezuela (down 31 points), Brazil

(down 25), Colombia (down 19), Peru (down 15) and Argentina (down 10), as well as Jamaica (down 17), Belize (down 16) and Mexico (down 11). The opposite trend has taken place to a more modest degree in Bolivia, Chile and Guyana. Satisfaction in democratic system is now lowest in Venezuela (31 per cent), Mexico (36 per cent), Guyana (35 per cent) and Peru (37 per cent). Canadians are also among the most likely to see democracy as the best form of government, despite its problems, second only to Argentina (69 per cent). Agreement with this viewpoint has declined across much of the Americas, especially in Panama, Jamaica, Venezuela and Guyana. It is now least apt to be expressed among those living in Panama (32 per cent), Peru (35 per cent) and Jamaica (38 per cent).

Since its entry as a participating country in 2006, Canada has helped to establish a benchmark for attitudes toward democracy in the hemisphere. Research of this magnitude, while not always policy directed or able to impact policy, is a capable instrument that allows the nation to self-reflect, but also to “understand the mindset of others” and to know “what other Canadians think,” according to Neuman.

The research is particularly valuable because it is conducted every two years, and thus allows Canadians to see how opinions are changing over time. “This is very important because you can do any particular survey and that’s a snapshot, but to really understand the significance, you need to know if that’s the way things have always been or if that’s something new,” explains Neuman.

What defines Canada’s place as a benchmark for democracy and governance in the hemisphere is that it surpasses in certain areas the U.S., the hemisphere’s oldest democracy. A key example is the measure of Canadians’ positive feelings about services provided by their municipalities. This satisfaction level has increased steadily over the past three waves of the study (2010, 2012, 2014). Canada is followed closely by the Caribbean countries in their satisfaction with local municipal services.

Strong Local Governance and Safe Neighbourhoods

The numbers reveal Canadian’s appreciation for strong local governance and safe neighbourhoods.

Quality of local municipal services. As in 2012, in 2014 Canadians stand out as being among the most positive (51 per cent rate “very good”) in the hemisphere with respect to services provided by their municipality.

Trustworthy neighbours. Canadians are generally comparable to the hemispheric average in viewing their neighbours as trustworthy (one in six report people in their community as

“very trustworthy”). We report low experience with crime. Canadians’ personal experience with crime is among the lowest (11 per cent) in the hemisphere, comparable with the U.S. and several other countries (Costa Rica, Chile and Trinidad and Tobago).

Safe neighbourhoods. Canadians (42 per cent) stand out as feeling the most secure in their neighbourhoods, and are among only a handful of countries where this level of comfort has strengthened over the past two years. Perceptions of safe neighbourhoods have declined almost everywhere else, most noticeably in Costa Rica, Panama, Paraguay and the Dominican Republic.

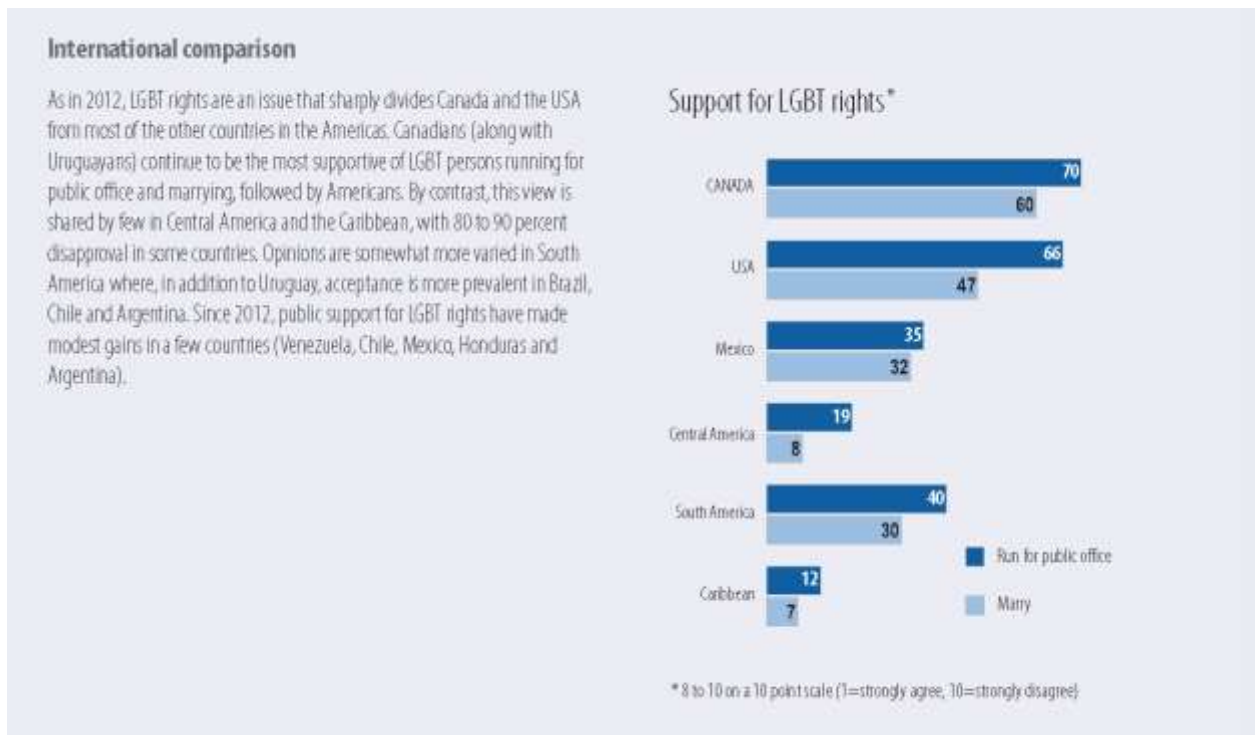


Figure 2: LGBT Rights

From the Canadian survey, Neuman admitted he was surprised at the consistent theme of stability over the past four years, given all the recent “hard-nosed politics” in Ottawa. However, a significant number of Canadians have had questions about the viability of the election system, which he attributes to “some of the controversy and scandals that emerged from the 2011 elections.”

Among other surprise findings, Neuman notes, “While a minority of Canadians feel that it is justified for the Prime Minister to close down the Parliament or the Supreme Court in times of crisis or emergency, that minority has been inching up over the past several years!” He was not sure what that indicated, but speculated about “openness” towards adaptive forms of democracy.

Value of This Research to Canadians

Public opinion research in Canada unlocks new avenues for citizen engagement. Such research, Neuman believes, provides a way for Canadians to understand their country better and feel more strongly attached to it. It also provides a basis for developing empathy with different groups in Canadian society. The gap between perception and reality is widened when, “a lot of people [Canadians] may think that they support certain policies which they think are really important, but because of the media, they may think that most other Canadians do not support them.”

What augments the value of this research, according to Neuman, is that “one in five Canadians was born in another country and so a lot of people who come from other countries might be interested in knowing how opinions in Canada compare with their country of origin or ancestry.”

Coming Methodologies and the New Public Opinion Research

Future public opinion research methods might show innovations in sampling, because “online surveys are based on recruited panels which are less than perfect,” explains Neuman. “We may continue to look for ways to improve the sampling frames that we are using for the survey, although there’s a budgetary implication and we might be constrained.”

Canada’s continued participation in AmericasBarometer is indicative of Environics’ interest in measuring social reality and citizen insights. Neuman elaborates: “It is important because it provides a state of the union or nation. Having an accurate sense of where the citizens are an important starting point or precondition to making changes or improvement. So, the AmericasBarometer provides unique and important information by which governments and other actors can move forward with better knowledge.”

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