

Trust in Canada: Recent Trends in Measures of Trust 2024

Executive Summary



What Can Recent Surveys Tell Us About Public Trust in Canada?

Recent Trust Trends

- Canadians' trust appears low in recent years including before the pandemic when it comes to in many institutions (i.e. organizations such as governments, businesses, NGOs, or news media) and messengers (i.e., sources of information).ⁱ
- Canadians' trust in many institutions and messengers (especially the government, scientists, and healthcare professionals) increased at the beginning of the pandemic and has since waned back to near pre-pandemic levels.ⁱⁱ However, some surveys from 2022 and 2023 suggest that trust in certain groups had fallen lower than before the pandemic.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Context matters: Surveys ask about different types of trust such as trusting a group to tell the truth or to be ethical. Surveys also present various hypothetical situations. For example, regarding trust in artificial intelligence (AI), situations have included trusting AI to effectively run a business chatbot compared to AI replacing a child's teacher.^{iv} Trust levels vary depending on the type of trust and/or the situation in question.

What is Trust?

Trust is a willingness to take an action that depends on an expected positive result regarding a trust object (such as another person or institution).^v In measuring trust, surveys often focus on either the degree to which a trust object appears deserving of trust in general (i.e., perceived trustworthiness) or the degree to which one would be willing to be personally vulnerable to the actions of the trust object.

Why Measure Trust?

- Trust is vital for cooperation, social capital, and progress.
- Higher trust in institutions (such as governments, health organizations, and science in general) has been found to correlate with following public health guidelines and reduced belief in conspiracy theories.^{vi}
- Trust in one institution or group often correlates with trust in other areas.^{vii}
- Information is often mediated through a secondary source (such as science through journalists) so trust in one source can be affected by trust in others.^{viii}

Trust Trends in Specific Domains

- **Science:** Despite recent concerns, trust in scientists and researchers/academics has been relatively high and durable, however there are signs of increasing politicization and polarization of science.^{ix}
- **Health:** Similarly, trust in doctors and other healthcare workers has been relatively high and durable in recent years.^x
- **Technology:** Canadians are concerned about the impact of technology on their lives, and their trust in social media (and the internet in general) is low and declining. Trust varies greatly by the type of technology in question.^{xi}
- **Artificial Intelligence (AI):** Public sentiment is ambivalent, with optimistic curiosity and fearful concern both being common. Trust in AI is highly context dependent.^{xii}
- **Government:** Following an increase in trust in governments at the beginning of the pandemic, Canadians' trust in politicians and governments has declined somewhat.^{xiii} Trust in politicians is particularly low.^{xiv} Frustration with political systems appears to be on the rise.^{xv}
- **Economy:** Worsening wealth inequality, inflation, and the cost of living and housing crises have translated into growing distrust and frustration with dominant elements of the economy particularly globalization, large businesses, executives, and capitalism in general.^{xvi}
- **News Media:** There is some evidence of recently declining trust in mainstream news media, especially among politically right identified Canadians.^{xvii}

Demographic Trends

- Those with higher trust in some cases include: baby boomers, recent immigrants, those who are happy, hopeful, socially connected, have a high income, or are formally educated.^{xviii}
- Political polarization: politically right identified Canadians often had lower trust, and saw a much more dramatic reduction in trust in recent years.^{xix}

Limitations

Of course, simple survey questions can't give a full picture of a concept as complex and context-dependent as trust, but they can provide some insight into public opinion and broad trends.^{xx}

About TRuST

This report was created by the Trust in Research Undertaken in Science and Technology (TRuST) network at the University of Waterloo which brings together leading experts in various fields for an interdisciplinary examination of trust with a particular focus on public trust in scientific and technical information. For more information visit uwaterloo.ca/trust-network



Notes

ⁱ For instance, in late 2019 about two-thirds of respondents agreed that “I do not have confidence that our current leaders will be able to successfully address our country’s challenges” (Edelman, 2020, p. 15). However, in long term trends this low trust was shown to be preceded in recent decades for political leaders, governments, and journalists (Environics, 2023, p. 5-6). See Proof Strategies (2023a) and Léger (2023c) for examples of institutional trust questions. See Pollara (2022) for an example of messenger trust).

ⁱⁱ For instance see Edelman (2019; 2021; 2023a) for institutions; see Proof Strategies (2020; 2023a) for individuals. As with many claims in this summary there are exceptions to these trends. For example, Proof Strategies (2023a)’s institutional trust deviates from other sources’ trends (although their messenger trends were more similar to other sources (Proof Strategies, 2020, p. 4)). See full report for more detail.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Korzinski (2022b) paragraph 18.

^{iv} See Léger (2023a) page 18 for the AI example.

^v Engelke et al. (2019) page 68.

^{vi} See Caulfield et al. (2021) section 3 for more detail.

^{vii} Such as a connection between trust in government and climate change science, and trust in corporations and GMOs (Pechar et al., 2018, p. 307).

^{viii} See Lyon et al. (2012) page 3.

^{ix} Regarding recent concern about trust in science, see Bloomgarden (2023). It is important to note that rising distrust might be hidden by methodological shortcomings of surveys (Reif & Guenther, 2021). Examples of high trust in scientists include CFI & Ipsos, 2021 (pp. 5, 13-14), Council of Canadian Academies (2014, pp. xv-xviii). Earnscliffe Strategy Group (2023, p. 3), Environics (2023, p. 2), Gallup (2019, p. 79), Léger (2018), and Nanos (2023b, p. 6), Pollara (2022 p. 21), and Proof Strategies, 2020, p. 47; 2023a, p. 49). Evidence of the politicization of science in Canada was seen in EKOS (2023). The political polarization affecting trust in science has also been observed in a study from Germany (Bromme et al., 2022) and in the US (Cox et al., 2023; Kennedy & Tyson, 2023, p. 1).

^x See Earnscliffe Strategy Group (2023) pages 3 and 5, Environics (2022) page 12, and Nanos (2023b) page 6.

^{xi} For trust in technology by subsector see Edelman (2022b) pages 11, 13, 41 and 45. For concern about technology’s impact on Canadians’ lives see Ipsos (2023c) page 56 which found a decline in trust in the internet since 2019. Sources that found a low and/or declining trust in social media were: Earnscliffe Strategy Group (2023, pp. 3-5), Edelman (2020, p. 14; 2022, p. 17; 2023a, p. 7), Graves (2023b, p. 11), Léger (2022, p. 22), Statistics Canada (2023d). Brin et al. (2023, pp. 24-25) found a recent decline in trust in recommendation algorithms for providing news.

^{xii} However, fearful concern regarding AI tends to be more common than optimism or curiosity. See Canseco (2023), Graves (2023b) page 18, Ipsos (2023d), and Léger (2023a) page 14 for examples of public sentiment on AI in Canada. Regarding how trust in AI has been found to vary greatly based on its purpose and context, see Canseco (2023) data tables page 4 and Léger (2023a) page 18 and 19.

^{xiii} Regarding reduced trust since the 2020 and/or pre-pandemic see Earnscliffe Strategy Group (2023) page 5, Ipsos (2022b) paragraph 2, Korzinski (2022b), and OECD (2023). However, some surveys have found levels of trust that are similar to the recent past such as Graves (2023b) page 10 which found trust in the federal government in 2023 to be similar to earlier years of Justin Trudeau’s government; and Environics (2023) which found that 2023 trust levels in governments, political leaders fell within the ranges they have recorded since they began measuring trust in 1983 (although trust in political leaders in 2023 fell in the lower end of the historical range (pp. 5-6)). In contrast, Pollara (2022) found that trust in the federal government to provide accurate information had risen from 23% in 1992 to 41% in 2022 (p. 34).

^{xiv} Politicians usually have lower trust than “governments” more broadly, e.g., Edelman (2022c) page 17 compared to Proof Strategies (2023a) page 49.

^{xv} Frustration with Canada in general and related alienation and fear was found in Ipsos (2022d, p. 4; 2023a), and Nanos (2023b) page 4. Politicians have been found to be among the least trusted messengers (Edelman, 2022, p. 17; Pollara, 2022, pp. 32, 34; Proof Strategies, 2023a, pp. 4-6, 54).

^{xvi} Regarding the cost of living crisis see Graves (2023b), Léger (2023b; 2023c), Nanos (2023a), and Pollara (2023a). Regarding distrust of, and frustration with the economy, nearly half of Canadians in one survey agreed that capitalism today does more harm than good (Edelman, 2022c, p. 7), the percentage of Canadians that hold an optimistic view of globalization plummeted from 52% in 1999 to 14% in 2023 (Graves, 2023a, p. 9), and confidence in business leaders fell from a range of 62-72% from 1983 to 2006 down to low 40s since 2020 (Environics, 2023, pp. 5-6). Large corporations were the least trusted group when examined among public and governmental organizations in Léger (2023c) page 7.

^{xvii} For the polarization of trust in news media see Environics (2023) page 12 and Pollara (2023b,) page 4. For low trust of news media see Statistics Canada (2023d). Léger (2022) had less negative findings about trust in mainstream news media, although family and “people like me” were more trusted than any news media for providing “accurate new of information.” Brin et al. (2023) found that trust in journalists and editors fell by one third since 2016 (pp. 24-25). Journalists were found to be among the least trusted messengers in Edelman (2022) page 17 and this trust has declined recently after a brief increase at the start of the pandemic (Edelman, 2023a, p. 7 compared to Edelman, 2020, p.14). However, this low trust is not unprecedented: in longer term trends, Environics (2023) found that 2023 trust levels in journalists fell within the ranges they have recorded since they began measuring trust in 1983, although trust in journalists in 2023 fell in the lower end of the historical range (pp. 5-6).

^{xviii} In one annual survey immigrants and Baby Boomers were found to have higher than average levels of trust in institutions (Proof Strategies, 2019, p.18; 2023a, pp. 15, 30). Trust has been found to be higher in older Canadians (Proof Strategies, 2023a, pp. 13, 15, 30), those who believe that “most people can be trusted” (Proof Strategies, 2022a, p. 15), those with a high level of “life satisfaction” or a “hopeful view of the future” (Statistics Canada, 2023e), and highly socially connected people (Korzinski, 2022b). Edelman (2020) found that high income, formally educated Canadians had much higher institutional trust (p. 7). Life satisfaction was found to correlate with trust in other people and the media (Statistics Canada, 2023d).

^{xix} In one survey, Conservative Party of Canada supporters saw the largest decline in confidence since 2006 for business leaders, governments, and journalists, whereas Liberal and NDP supporters saw less dramatic changes in confidence (Environics, 2023, p. 12). Recent declines in trust were also found to be largest in politically right identified Canadians in other surveys (Korzinski, 2022a; Monopoli, 2022, paras. 4, 7.)

^{xx} See Rousseau et al. (1998). Some researchers have criticized the effectiveness of trust measurements such as those used in the surveys explored in the report (Mangold, 2023; Reif & Guenther, 2021). Others have even questioned if trust can be quantified at all (O’Doherty, 2023). It is also worth considering how the way these surveys convert trust into a binary (trust or do not trust) ignores distrust entirely, and hides important trends such as polarization, which is of particular importance in today’s sociopolitical climate.

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