Democracy and Public Service in Changing Times: Citizen Interaction with the Evolving Centre of Government

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November 21st, 2018

Institute on Governance
LEADING EXPERTISE

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Introduction

In October 2017, Jagmeet Singh was elected leader of the federal New Democratic Party (NDP). This victory would make Singh a serious contender for the Prime Ministership in the 2019 federal elections, with the NDP having begun to buck the image of being a non-contender for forming a federal government. Yet these events were remarkable for another reason: Jagmeet Singh would not seek a federal seat until immediately before next election, announcing a record-breaking two and a half years where the leader of a major political party would not be represented in the legislature.

While Jagmeet Singh's statement of refusal to run for a seat for such a long period was a watershed event in 2017, this seems to be merely the next stage of a continuing trend. Indeed, the last record broken for the length of time that a leader of a major federal party would lack a seat in the legislature occurred in 2003. The standing record before that was set in 1995. The record before that was set in 1990. In all of these cases, the delay was supposedly due to the party leader being presented with logistical obstacles to running for a seat in short order and the delay in obtaining a seat was peppered with profuse apologies and deference to the legislature.

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For example, in 1990 the Liberal party leader Jean Chretien was absent from the House of Commons for a 6 month period. During this time, Liberal MP Fernand Robichaud was asked to fall on his sword and resign his seat in the House so that Jean Chretien could enter the House of Commons through a safe byelection. Chretien held what was effectively Robichaud's seat until the 1993 election where he won re-election in his own seat and returned the seat to Robichaud. Fast forward to 2017 where a newly elected party leader can justify a 30-month absence from the legislature by simply stating "I'm comfortable right now with the fact that I don't have a seat."

This is not to pick on any one party, but rather, to take note of the apparent trend toward a declining importance of the legislature to Canadian statecraft. We are not the first to note this trend. Donald Savoie is likely the best-known scholar of this issue, arguing in his 1999 book *Governing from the Centre*, that the Prime Minister, traditionally "primes inter pares" or first among equals in the Cabinet, no longer has use for the "inter" or "pares" of that expression. Before that, similar arguments had been made in 1977 about the creeping concentration of power at the "centre" of government by Thomas Hockin. This debate has erupted again in 2018, with Ian Brodie, former Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Harper, outright challenging the idea that the Prime Minister has too much power in an intellectual broadside against the established wisdom championed by Savoie.

Perhaps Pierre Trudeau made the case most bluntly in 1969 when, as sitting Prime Minister, he dismissed individual MPs as "nobodies", inadvertently inspiring research into the concentration of power in "the centre." Trudeau the younger has also made an issue of the creeping concentration of power, stating in the 2015 election campaign: "There's a nice symmetry to that fact that the concentration of power that started under my

father…will end if I become prime minister." This trend may ultimately be outside of the current Prime Minister's ability to change, but as reported in recent work by the Institute on Governance, it seems as though the government has been attempting certain reforms to "the centre" in earnest.

This is of course not the first effort to put the brakes on the concentration of power in "the centre." Paul Martin for one had made the reversal of the concentration of power in the centre part of his electoral campaign in 2003. More recently, efforts have circled around conservative MP Michael Chong, who throughout the 2000s and 2010s proposed multiple bills that would curtail the power of the Prime Minister, including the leader of his own party. One of these initiatives died on the order paper in 2011, and the other, *The Reform Act*, was passed in a significantly diluted version in 2015 and what can ultimately be considered a noble failure.

Academic debates and technocratic efforts at reforming "the centre," however, leave out an important constituency in legislative reform: the public at large. For all the high-minded debates and pundits with pointy heads (ourselves included), few are asking if the power of the legislature and its hypothesized relative decline in favour of concentrated power in the executive centre, is reflected in the views of who are ultimately represented by individual MPs? How much does the concentration of power in the centre and related decline in the legislature have to do with the decline in trust in government overall?

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Methodology

To investigate these questions, we have probed public opinion in Canada for perceptions of "the centre" in relation to trust in government, the legislature, the role of MPs, and the health of democracy in general. In partnership with Advanced Symbolics, we used cutting-edge artificial intelligence (AI) polling software to gauge opinions about "the centre" and related issues that were shared online by the Canadian public. This use of public opinion data is not meant to substitute for meticulous analysis of relations between departments and the centre, but rather to provide insights into the degree to which the public finds their ability to properly function within a democracy has been eroded by these kinds of behind-the-scenes activities.

AI software polls public opinion differently than traditional methods and thus the operations of the AI research methods at use in this study require some explanation. AI software does not "ask" individuals different questions to collect information, rather the AI software is "trained" so that it is able to recognize patterns in online forums which can be used to gauge opinions. This new method comes with several clear advantages over traditional research methods including that it removes the possibility of introducing bias through research questions. Since this method is based on the recognition of textual patterns and collects data on these patterns without interfering in them, the information collected is more objective than data collected by other methods.

The second major advantage of AI polling software is that it allows for very large sample sizes which would be prohibitive for most organizations and research initiatives. These large sample sizes in turn permit greater certainly in results and more granularity in analysis than is normally within the capacity of researchers. This study uses a core sample of 162,700 Canadians to gauge the natural level of engagement in the population, but the sample size employed ultimately varies by the question at hand and the level of engagement in this question. The questions with the highest level of engagement garnered responses from up to 4,857,600 Canadians while the question with the lowest engagement garnered responses from 43,900 Canadians.

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The number of responses and individuals included thus varies question by question, and will be reported in the footnotes of the relevant text. Data was collected from December 2017 to January 2018 and covers discussion of these topics from October 1st 2015 until January 1st 2018, a 27-month period covering a Canadian federal election, the 41st BC general election, the 28th Saskatchewan general election, the 41st Manitoba general election, the 40th Nova Scotia general election, and the leadership races of the Conservative Party of Canada and NDP. These results represent only those views as shared in the English language due to some of the challenges that arise from establishing meaningful linguistic equivalences.

AI software of course comes with new challenges as well, namely related to the calculation of a margin of error. Binomial distribution methodology for determining the uncertainty factor where large N values (sample sizes) are used to extrapolate a degree of certainty about the representativeness of a result. In other words, the margin of error in results stems from the variance of the opinions collected throughout the sample size, rather than due to the size of the sample itself.

Training data for the AI software was selected from a wide range of publicly available materials addressing the core themes of the research. This included government publications, journalistic pieces from across the political spectrum, press releases of direct relevance to the subjects at hand (i.e. regarding *the Reform Act*) and some academic articles with sufficient linguistic clarity for the software. The training data well exceeded 1000 pages of material and was complimented with human decision-making, manual linguistic precisions, and the addition of new materials to reduce ambiguity throughout the machine-learning process.

Public Opinion about "The Centre"

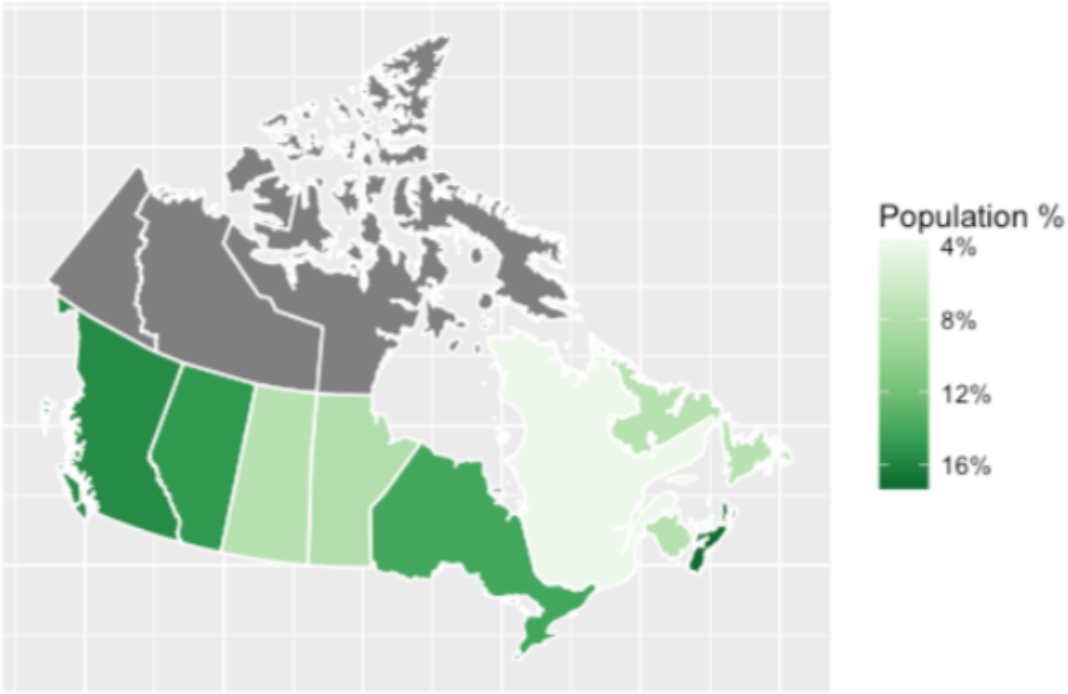
Importance of Parliament

Canadians generally felt that parliament is important and were engaged in the subject of parliamentary importance in government, with between 3,717,400 and 3,883,600 engaging with this subject in the period under study. Most respondents, (62%) expressed

support for the idea that parliament is important, females being slightly more supportive of this idea than males (64% versus 61%). By age group, those over the age of 65 were least likely to support the idea that parliament is important (59%) and all demographic groups under the age of 44 (i.e. 44-35, 34-25 and under 25) were all equally likely to support the idea that parliament is important, at 63% support.

Interest in the subject of parliament's importance varied greatly by region. Interest in the subject was by far the highest in Nova Scotia and lowest in Quebec. Ontarians and Albertans also tended to be interested in this subject while those in Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Manitoba and Saskatchewan tended to be more ambivalent than average.

Figure 1: Estimated Percentage of People Discussing "Is Parliament Important" by Province

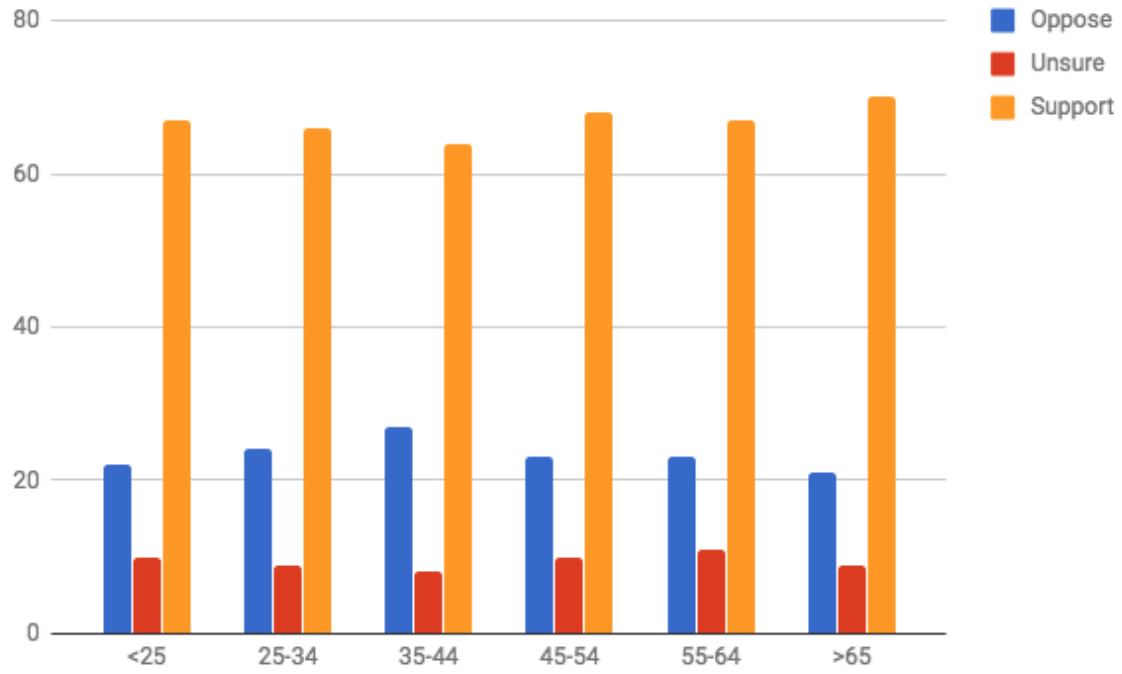


To a much lesser extent, Canadians engaged in discussion about the degree to which parliament is an effective institution. Support for parliamentary effectiveness was fairly high at 67%, although there was more variation between demographic cohorts than was the case in questions of parliamentary importance. Perhaps contrary to the conventional wisdom that older people have more respect for and deference to longstanding traditional political institutions, this trend was not found in the data. In fact, the data contradicts this hypothesis, or at least suggests that the trend is not a secular one but rather an over-extension of observations about generation X's decline support for these institutions.

The importance of these political institutions was found to be roughly identical among younger cohorts and older cohorts, both of which were equally supportive of the idea that parliament is effective. Specifically, from the under-25 millennial cohort, 68% supported the idea of parliamentary effectiveness, and in the over-65 cohort this idea had a roughly comparable 70% support. Those who were the least supportive of the idea that parliament

is effective were the 35-44 cohort at 64%; this group was also most likely to have a firm opinion in either direction with only 8% undecided.

Figure 2: Support for "Is Parliament Effective" Across Age Groups



When it came specifically to the issue of whether or not a party leader or Prime Minister should have a seat in parliament (i.e. also be an MP), Canadians generally felt that these individuals should have a seat. Overall, 70% of Canadian support the idea that leaders should hold a seat in parliament, 22% generally disagreed that this is a necessary requirement while an additional 7% were undecided. While this is a clear statement of support for leaders to hold a seat in parliament, it is difficult to judge this in terms of an objective trend line due to a lack of longitudinal data. With that said, 70% approval does seem low when compared to the media coverage of this issue, which would seem to indicate a general opposition to the trend.

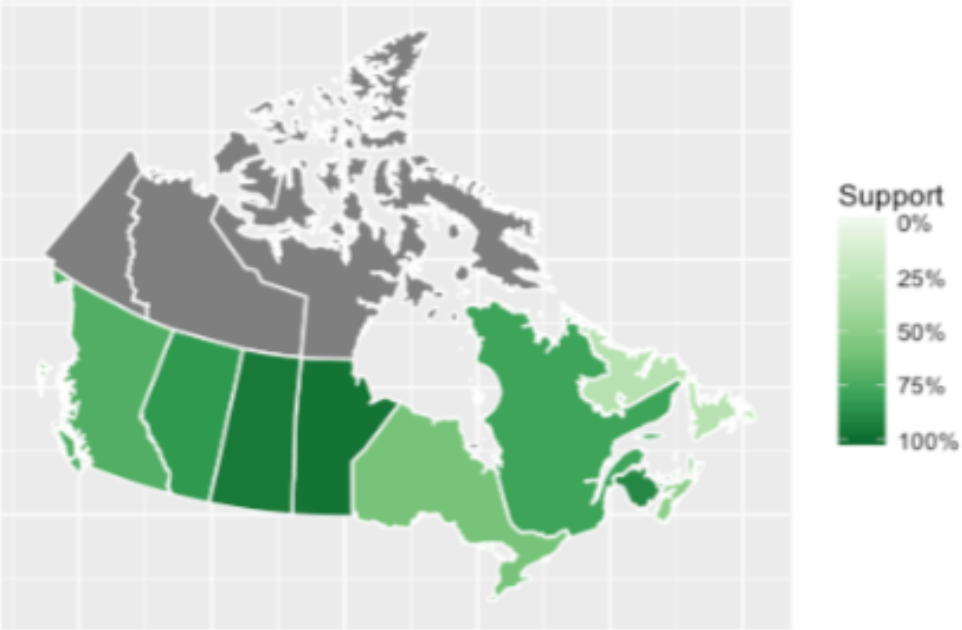
Overall, this theme had some of the lowest levels of engagement across all the themes surveyed, with only between 55,900 and 67,800 Canadians discussing the topic. Given the fairly specific nature of this subject, this amount of participation may seem larger than one might expect. However, it is worth keeping in mind that the time period of the poll covers several significant events that brought an uncommon amount media attention to this issue, namely Michael Chong's publicity for the *Reform Act* and leadership bid for the Conservative party of Canada, Justin Trudeau's statements regarding reform to the centre of government and parliament, and the aforementioned statements by Jagmeet Singh.

This question did encounter some regional variation worth noting. Perhaps unsurprisingly, support for importance of legislative functions was highest in the Prairie provinces where the political culture is tinged with so called agrarian populism, relatively flat social hierarchies and support for equalizing trends in political reforms, such as the triple-E senate. However, it is interesting to note that Albertans are slightly less enthusiastic about these issues than Saskatchewanians and Manitobans. This may indicate that the "prairie

populism" hypothesis is beginning to lose its explanatory power as the social context of Alberta begins to diverge from that of the other prairie provinces.

A probable explanation comes from the rapid rate of change in Alberta compared to the other prairie provinces which could well lend to a change in political culture. For one, Alberta has the highest rate of population growth in Canada at 2.3% (nearly double the national average). This can be expected to impact the core political culture of the province, or at least to impact it more in Alberta than in the other prairie provinces. Alberta has also leaped ahead the other prairie provinces in terms of urbanization. An important consideration since the political culture of the Prairies that is deemed to lend to support for the legislature and individual MPs, has traditionally been closely tied to farm communities. With an 83% urban population, urbanization rates in Alberta today have more in common with Ontario (86%), BC (86%), or Quebec (81%) than they do with the other two prairie provinces (SK 67%, MN 73%).

Figure 3: Support for "How Important is it that the party leader or Prime Minister have a seat in parliament as an MP"

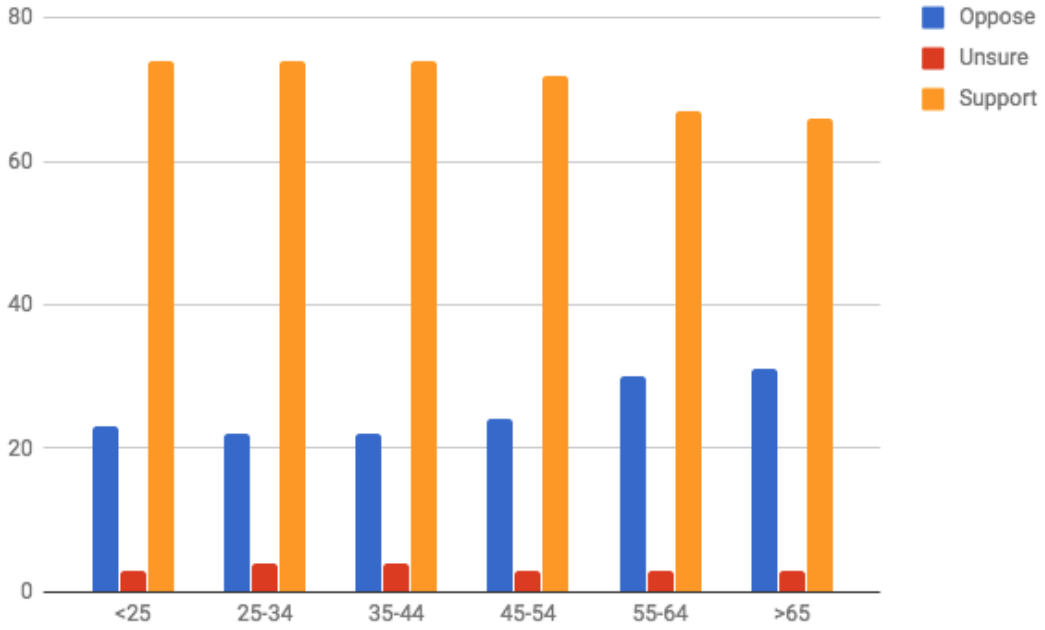


The provinces least likely to support the idea that the party leader should have a seat in parliament were in Ontario, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Prince Edward Island. One possible explanation for the prominent views held in Nova Scotia, PEI and Newfoundland and Labrador is the comparative lack of national party leaders to have held seats as MPs in these jurisdictions. Aside from the brief and unconventional example of Jean Chretien in 1990, the last Prime Minister to hold a seat in any of the Atlantic provinces was Robert Borden, roughly 100 years ago.

When it comes down to importance of the Prime Ministership, Canadians were highly engaged in this subject, with between 4,763,800 and 4,857,600 discussing the subject of the Prime Minister's importance in the time period under investigation. Canadians are very supportive of the idea that the Prime Minister is important (71%). There was some slight variation between genders, with men being slightly more supportive of this idea than

women (73% versus 70%), but by far the greatest variations occurred across age cohorts. The trend across age cohorts was for older Canadians to be steadily less likely to support the idea that the Prime Minister is important.

Figure 4: Support for "How Important is the Prime Minister" by Age Cohort



Ethnic minorities were significantly more likely to support the idea that the Prime Minister is important, with 76% supporting this idea compared to 69% among Caucasian Canadians, compared to a Canadian average of 71%. This may inadvertently speak to the difference in values between Canadian-born and naturalized Canadians, rather than any particular commentary on minority or ethnic politics.

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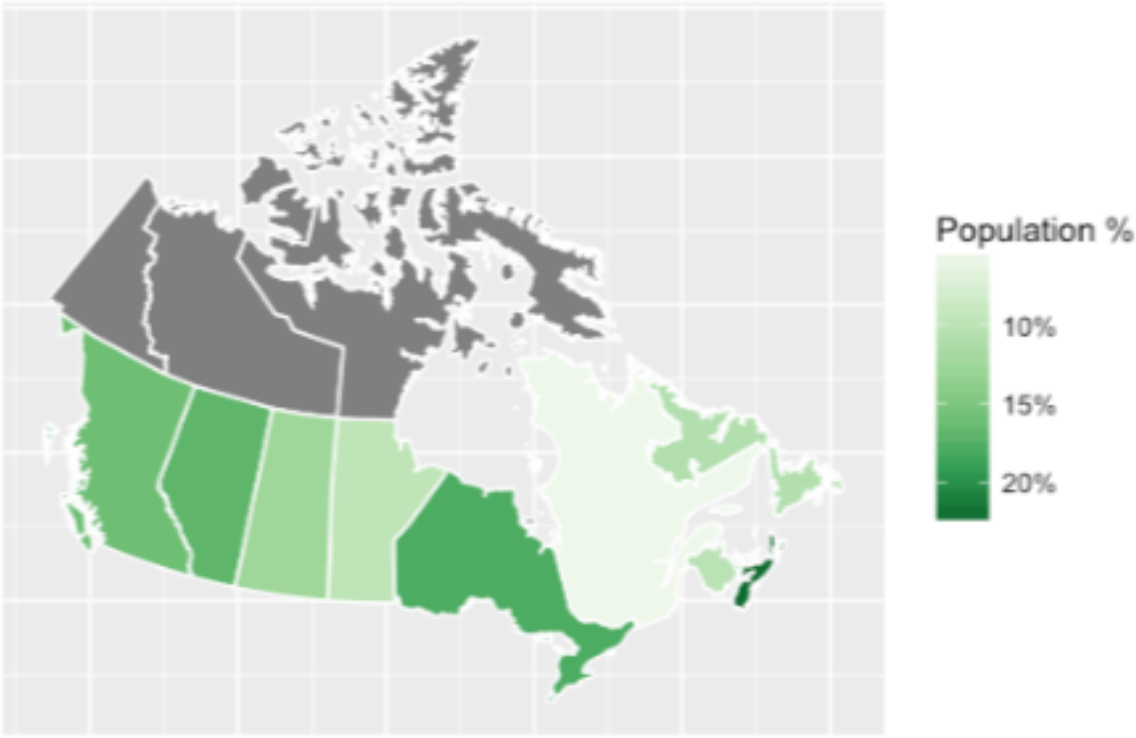
Interestingly, there was little noteworthy variation across provinces and regions about the importance of the Prime Minister. Yet there was regional variation in terms of the interest garnered in the subject itself. Mirroring other results that touch on the phenomena of prairie populism, Manitoba and Saskatchewan both had comparatively low levels of interest in the subject of the Prime Minister. Quebec however had the lowest level of engagement in the subject.

Part of this is no doubt due to years of state-building in Quebec that parallels the institutions of the federal government, alongside the convention of federal programs being branded as Quebec programs. Another compelling explanation however is a linguistic one; Quebec is the only province that maintains the tradition of naming both the leader of the provincial legislature and the federal legislature Prime Minister. This means that Quebeckers are accustomed to thinking of both a "Prime Minister of Canada" and a "Prime

Minister of Quebec", a linguistic custom which likely contributes to a diminished sense of relative importance about the Canadian Prime Minister and falsely lends support to the idea that Quebec has fully separate institutions and is immune to the power of the federal government.

Figure 5: Frequency of Discussing the Importance of the Prime Minister by Province



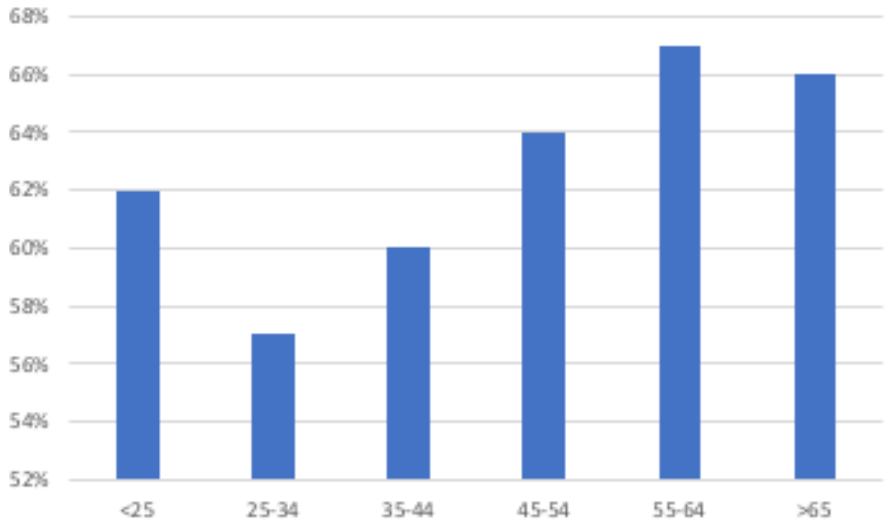
Nova Scotia emerges as an outlier with a significantly higher share of the population discussing the importance of the Prime Minister than anywhere else. There are several hypotheses for explaining such a connection, but no doubt, this issue will require further study. One possibility is that this result is due to the strong connection that exists between the Liberal Party of Nova Scotia and the Liberal Party of Canada, with the abnormality that membership in one party entailing membership in the other. This is the only jurisdiction in Canada where this exists (for the Liberal Party). Especially in circumstances where there is a Liberal government in Ottawa and a Liberal government in Halifax, as was the case between 2015 and 2017, the Prime Minister of Canada does indeed have a disproportionate importance in the province of Nova Scotia, a fact reflected in these results.

Support for "Cabinet is important"

When gauging the level of discussion occurring about Cabinet, Canadians registered a fairly normal level of engagement, with 206,800 and 240,300 Canadians discussing the subject online during the period under study. Yet Canadians were significantly less engaged in subjects related to the Cabinet than subjects related to the Prime Minister. More specifically, discussion surrounding the statement "the Prime Minister is important" occurred nearly 22 times more often than discussion surrounding the statement "Cabinet is important".

The demographic cohort that was least supportive of the idea that Cabinet is important was the 25-35-year-old demographic. This is interesting because the Trudeau government was widely perceived to be targeting voters in the youth demographic in 2015 and had accumulated a particularly photogenic Cabinet to that effect. Perhaps this provides an indication that adopting representationalist policies in Cabinet is not electorally significant for youth voters, or at least, not as much as might be expected.

Figure 6: Support for "Cabinet is Important"



Aside from the exceptional, and likely skewed, example of Newfoundland and Labrador, engagement with the subject of Cabinet's importance fell within normal levels in all regions of the country. Overall, the idea that Cabinet is important received support in 63% of cases, which is less than support for the importance of the Prime Minister, but only marginally so. This contrasts with some of the prevailing wisdom which suggests that the office of the Prime Minister has been "presidentialised", or in other words, that in the public's eyes the Prime Minister vastly overshadows all other elected offices in their importance.

In terms of support for the importance of Cabinet, there was a divergence between genders, with 65% of men supporting the idea that Cabinet is important compared to 59% of women. This is a surprising result considering that 2015 marked the first gender balanced Cabinet in Canadian history; one might expect that this would have produced more female support for this institution. Perhaps it has, in which case female support for the importance of Cabinet has increased from a very low baseline.

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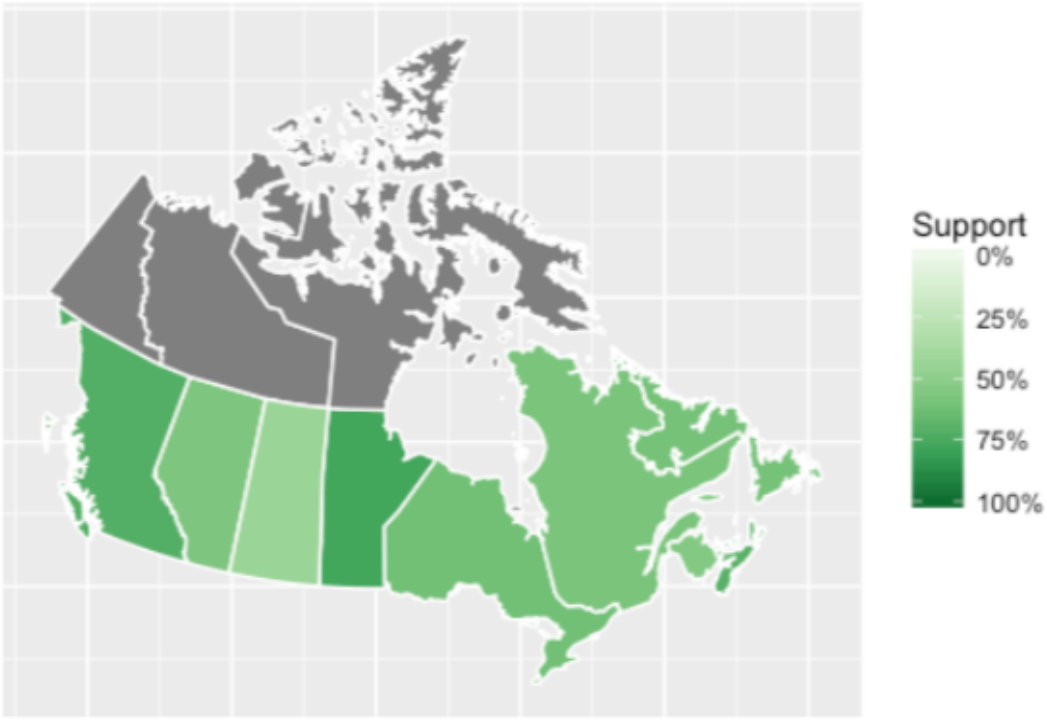
An alternative possibility is that the gender-balanced Cabinet was interpreted as not improving women's lot in political affairs. Indeed, if the Savoiean thesis holds true and power is concentrating in the Prime Minister at the expense of other institutions such as the Cabinet, then achieving gender-balanced Cabinet could represent tokenism more than a sincere distribution of power in equal proportion among genders. Speculation aside, our

data does not provide a definitive explanation for why women's belief in the importance of Cabinet is so significantly lower than that of men.

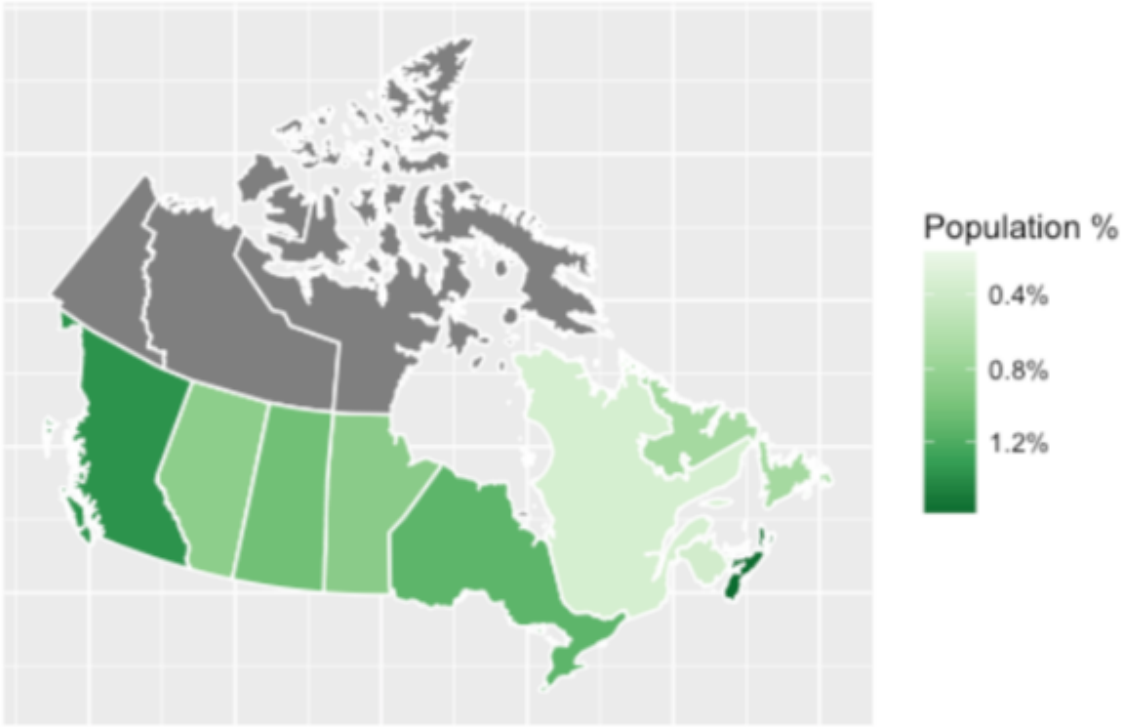
In terms of demographics, age tends to have a positive correlation with support for the importance of Cabinet. That is to say that the overall trend is for the older someone is, the more likely they are to believe that Cabinet is significant. This trend is not perfectly linear; those most supportive of the importance of Cabinet were in the 55-64-year-old cohort (67%) and those that were the least supportive were in the 25-34-year-old cohort (57%), closely followed by the 35-44-year-old cohort (60%). The oldest (over 65) and youngest (under 25) cohorts had more moderate interpretations of Cabinet's importance that veered towards the overall average.

Figure 7: Support for the Importance of Cabinet



Surprisingly there is very little regional variation in terms of the share of the population supporting the importance of Cabinet. Since the Senate is not used for regional representation, or least as was originally intended, Cabinet has often performed this function by taking on a regional dimension in appointments. As a result, one might expect that elevated discussions of Cabinet in the areas represented by regional lieutenants, such as in Quebec and Atlantic Canada. Instead, variations between regions are only marginal and do not follow this anticipated pattern; the only major deviations occurring in the prairie provinces, where most MPs have not gone on to form government, and by consequence are most likely to be excluded from Cabinet.

Figure 8: Percentage of the Population Discussing Parliamentary Effectiveness



Parliamentary Reform

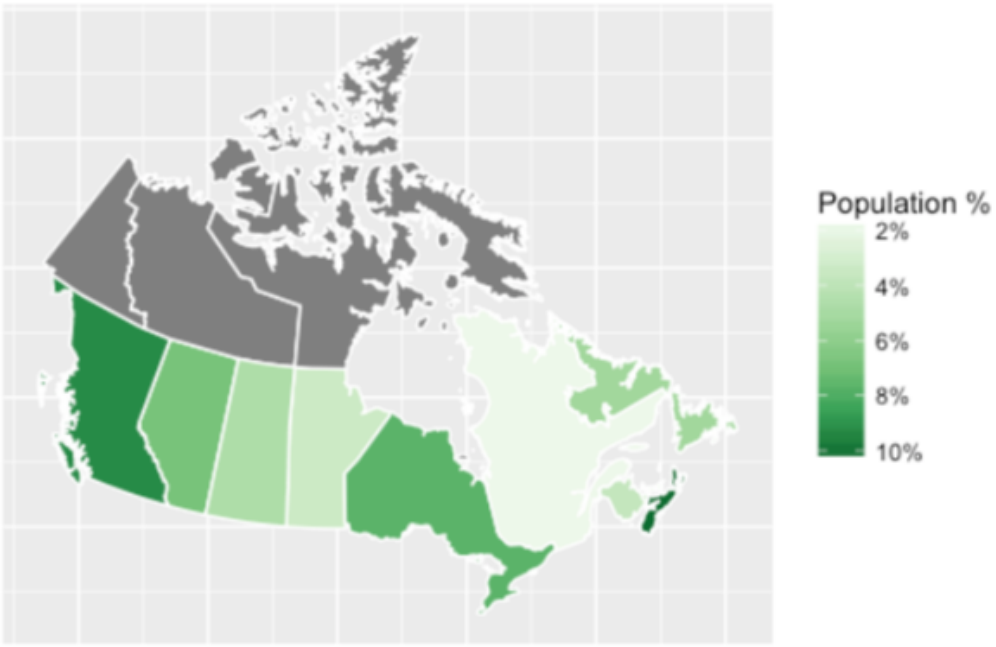
Parliamentary reform, particularly of the variety that had been espoused during the 2015-2017-time period, was often geared to reducing the powers and role of the Prime Minister relative to other elected representatives and democratic institutions. Although the effectiveness of the measures that were ultimately adopted is debatable, the reforms themselves provided a site for discussion. Contrary to the expectation that such a "niche" and specialized matter as parliamentary reform might not garner much public attention, engagement with the topic of parliamentary reform was high.

Discussions indicating awareness of parliamentary reforms (either proposed or enacted) was very high, with between 1,997,300 and 2,116,600 Canadians discussing it during the study period. This indicates that the public is keenly interested in parliamentary reform and the effectiveness of Parliament, although how this precisely manifest in public participation can vary in sophistication; this can indicate everything from intimate understandings of the inner workings of Parliament, all the way to more general feelings that something should be done to make Parliament better.

In total, 51% of Canadians discussed parliamentary reform without clear awareness of the specific initiatives that were in progress, and an additional 8% were unsure about their knowledge of specific initiatives. The leaves of total 41% that indicated that they were aware of proposed or enacted reforms to Parliament. In contrast perhaps to expectations, there was a negative correlation between awareness of parliamentary reforms and age; that is to say that older citizens were less likely to be aware of the specifics of parliamentary reform.

There was a clear dividing line between those older and younger than 45. Of those 45 and older, 38%-39% were aware of reforms while as many as 45% of those 25 and under were aware of reforms. Those in the 25-34 cohort and 35-44 cohort were also more likely to be aware of reforms (42% and 41% respectively), but by a less wide margin than those under 25. This clashes with the narrative that youth are disengaged in politics; it would seem that by measures of awareness and interest in the intricacies of democracy that youth are more engaged then their elders.

Figure 9: Proportion of the Population Discussing Parliamentary Reform

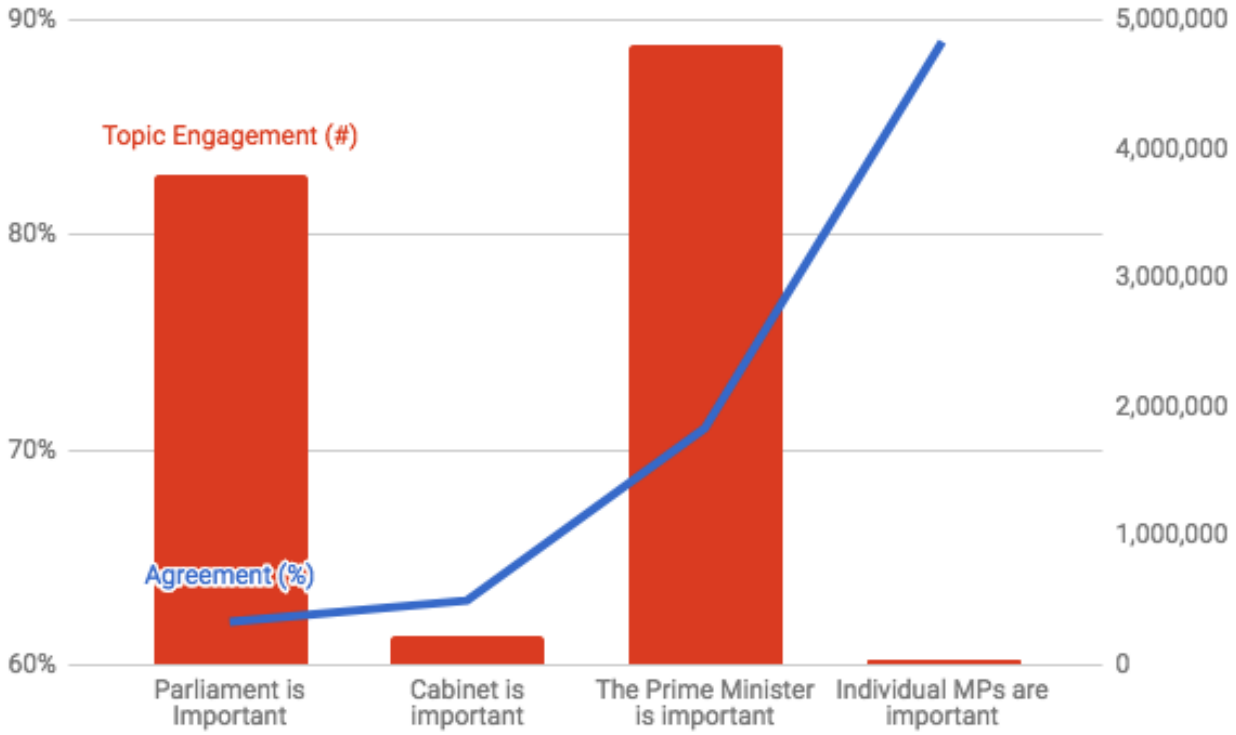


Although there was such high engagement in the subject of parliamentary reform, there was surprisingly low engagement with the issue of how important are individual MPs. In total, there were between 43,900 and 53,700 Canadians discussing this topic in the period under study. While many would consider this a fairly specialized issue, MPs and MP constituency offices are also the principal contact point that citizens have with their government, aside from tax collection. Furthermore, the study period covered periods of high media attention on this and related issues, including media led-discussions about the role of individual MPs, which one could expect to boost online engagement in this subject.

> "Clearly, MPs are not 'nobodies' when they leave Parliament Hill; MPs continue to have an important role as far as the citizenry is concerned."

With that said, those who engaged with this subject were overwhelming supportive of the importance of individual MPs: 89% in support of the importance of individual MPs with only 6% opposed. Clearly, MPs are not "nobodies" when they leave Parliament Hill; MPs continue to have an important role as far as the citizenry is concerned. With that said, the impact that MPs have seem to have on the public consciousness appears to be much more concentrated in certain populations, while the impact of other institutions is more diffuse.

Figure 10: Perception of Importance (%) compared with Volume of Engagement (#)



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There are many implications of this for democratic reform and for understanding citizen's relationships with the centre of political power. For one, the Prime Minister and parliament are very likely to receive public attention and be imbued with political power accordingly; Cabinet and individual MPs much less so. This data seems to suggest that Cabinet might be a particularly vulnerable institution, with low public engagement in questions of Cabinet government and widespread perceptions of Cabinet having a low importance.

There are also some counter-intuitive divergences in opinion when it comes to the legislature. It is certainly true that individual MPs are the building blocks of parliament; indeed, parliament is little more than a site for the affairs of MPs, yet public engagement with subjects surrounding individual MPs is low compared with the institution of parliament. On one hand, this could be a good sign; the personalities and vagaries of individual MPs hold little sway over the institutions of which they are a part. On the other hand, this could indicate that the public at large views the behavior of political parties in the legislature as important forces of politics but individual MPs as important only insofar as their direct interactions with constituents.

Analysis

Citizens and the Centre

Canadian citizens are well aware of the centre of government, above all of the role and importance of the Prime Minister. Canadians are also significantly more aware of the Prime Ministership than any other governmental institution under discussion, which would seem to reinforce the Savoiean hypothesis about the "presidentialization" of the Prime Minister. While state democratic organs like parliament and Cabinet were also generally considered to be important, they were decisively considered to be secondary in importance to the Prime Minister as measured by the frequency with which these offices and organs were found to be under discussion by the Canadian public.

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In some ways, these observations of public opinion of Cabinet would help to confirm Savoie's thesis about the concentration of power at the centre; Savoie equates the concentration of power at the centre with a decline in ministerial responsibility and Cabinet more generally. While the Trudeau government has cheerfully announced that government by Cabinet "is back", as in all matters of politics we must consider the impact of path dependency. Even assuming the best intentions of the Trudeau government, the values which underpinned Cabinet supremacy in the past do not exist today. Reconstituting government by Cabinet will depend not just on this Cabinet, but on future Cabinets and their ability to gradually effect downstream changes in voter expectations.

Yet, Canadians were surprisingly engaged in the subject of parliamentary and democratic reform. If parliament were truly overshadowed to such a degree by the power of the Prime Minister, one might expect the public at large to have been more decisively pursued of this during the past 20 years during which this idea has been advanced. Although public awareness of other organs and instruments of parliamentary democracy is lower than awareness of the centre and the Prime Minister, opinions about these organs were often quite favourable. The importance of individual MPs for instance was seldom discussed in low frequency in comparison to the frequency with which these other issues were discussed, but the importance of the individual MP to the health of Canada's parliamentary democracy was resolute and more roundly affirmed more than that of any other office (89% in support).

In some ways these are contradictory messages. Canadians are supportive of the importance of democracy, the importance of the legislature, and most of all, the importance of the Prime Minister. Canadians are significantly less engaged in issues pertaining to institutions like Cabinet, or individual MPs, whose roles have been diluted by the concentration of power. Yet they tend to be supportive of these institutions when questioned. To make matters more confusing still, Canadians also tend to feel that Canada's parliamentary democracy is in good health, with all these things considered.

This data is consistent with the alternative hypothesis currently under debate which claims that the powers of the Prime Minister are limited, at least by comparison to the description provided by Savoie and his contemporaries. Ian Brodie, a former Prime Ministerial Chief of Staff (under Stephen Harper) and noted scholar in his own right, champions this idea in his 2018 work on the subject. Among other things, Brodie claims that the Savioean centralization hypothesis largely ignores the role of the legislature, discounting the institution as generally unimportant in spite of clear evidence to the contrary. Brodie contests Savoie and his contemporaries by pointing out that the legislature remains one of the principal pre-occupations of political parties, with the activities of the legislature remaining at the core of the political calendar. This is a crucial point since much of the prior literature only touches lightly on legislative functions, something Brodie's highlights on several occasions.

Brodie also claims that the importance of Cabinet is discounted in government by overstating the degree of real discretion that the Prime Minister has over other ministers. Yes, ministers can be selected and dismissed at the whim of a Prime Minister, but only to the extent that these choices are in accordance with the wishes of the party, the capacity requirements of running the state, and the regional and representationalist functions of Cabinet. As Brodie describes it, given the small size of Cabinet and large number of interests that must be accommodated, "[the Prime Minister] has only a few genuine choices to make in selecting ministers." While a Prime Minister may technically wield a great amount of power to manage, cajole, and choose the composition of Cabinet, Cabinet is still principally guided by whims of forces that are beyond the control of any Prime Minister.

The crux of this disagreement between Brodie and Savoie may ultimately centre of on a differing perception of where power lies in affairs of state. While Savoie is concerned with the Prime Minister's power over the organs of the state, Brodie's focus is the discretion that remains for Prime Minister in decision-making once other forces have been considered. In other words, it is certainly within the realm of the possible that the Prime Minister has inordinate power over public servants and the state, potentially to the detriment of the authority over the public service that can be exercised by the Prime Minister's Cabinet colleagues, while it being true at the same time that the Prime Minister has little true discretion. While the authority of the Prime Minister may trump that over any other single member of their elected government, the Prime Minister's ability to manage the entirety of the government can still remain quite marginal by comparison. In fact, this may suggest that democracy is well at work since as the representatives of the electorates will, the elected government should theoretically have very little agency of its own.

While the authority of the Prime Minister may trump that over any other single member of their elected government, the Prime Minister's ability to manage the entirety of the government can still remain quite

Yet while this public opinion data supports Brodie's hypothesis in many ways against that of Savoie, citizen perception of democratic institutions should not be interpreted as the final judgement of their effectiveness. Savoie's argument rings true that the Prime Minister's impact on affairs of state cannot be under-represented. One important divergence between the Savoiean hypothesis and that advanced by Brodie and public opinion data, is that Savoie speaks from the experience from working from inside the

public service, while as Brodie and our data speak to outsiders who seek to identify the enactment of their choices and values in the affairs of state. Indeed, political insiders are often those who advance most strongly the idea that the Prime Minister and PMO have undue authority while those who represent public opinion view the levers of power as being much more diffuse by comparison.

Cabinet-Making and Representationalist Politics

Cabinet has tended to serve a representationalist function in Canada, a fact that is often attributed to the difficulty of the Senate to take on this role as intended, and to adequately accommodate the regionalist forces in Canada. To compensate, Cabinet evolved with an understanding that these regionalist forces would be accommodated in the selection of Cabinet ministers. Early Prime Ministers relied heavily on a Quebec lieutenant, who— more than the name might imply— tended to be a quite significant force in political affairs and often a *de facto* second in command to the Prime Minister. Each region must likewise be accommodated and, insofar as it is possible, each province. This representationalist mandate has grown to include other segments of society such as industry, recent immigrants, ethnic minorities and, most recently, has included an emphasis on gender parity.

Historical forces and decisions have pushed forward a steady evolution of representationalism, but is an open question as to whether this the present state of representationalism performs a strong function in the present day. Indeed, there are many habits and customs which continue on long after the original impetus has dissipated, and our he data seems to lend support to this idea. In the minds of voters, Cabinet does not seem to perform the strong democratic representative function that it is taken to perform by Cabinet-makers; citizens seem relatively ambivalent to Cabinet's composition. Employing representationalist politics in Cabinet might not be the most vote-rich use of political capital, although it should be noted that this suggestion excludes the possible value of electorate microtargeting in Cabinet decisions.

All the same, the possibility that Cabinet representationalism has lost some of its lustre is a prospect that merits close consideration, especially since this development would represent such a start contrast with Trudeau government's heavy emphasis on representationalism in selecting its own Cabinet. If Cabinet composition is not all that important to voters who seek to see themselves represented in government, then the high watermark set by the Trudeau government in 2015 might remain just that. On the other hand, people are often more concerned about a relative loss than a relative gain, making a strong case for caution.

Prairie Populism Enters a New Form?

Political scientists since the 1950s have taken note of the North American Prairies as an area that manifests a different sort of politics. The archetypical description of so called "prairie populism" posits a social order that is flatter, more resistant to top-down governing structures and that is more opt to oscillate between the political poles. While this study is specifically investigating interactions at "the centre" and not prairie populism more generally, in so far as the data collected has interacted with the thematic fringes of the phenomenon they do confirm the previously noted trend. That is to say that the Canadian prairies, by all relevant indicators available in this data, tend to conform in value to what one would expect from the prairie populism phenomenon.

By these measures however Alberta seems to be diverging from Saskatchewan and Manitoba in terms of its prairie populist tendencies. This would be consistent with the other socio-economic trends that are present in Alberta such as increasing urbanization, increasing wealth and high wealth stratification (by Canadian standards). These metrics have occurred in parallel with other trends that one could posit would decrease the conditions underlying prairie populism, such as increasingly diverse immigration, population increases and a declining share of the agricultural economy. In other words, Albertan prairie populism may find itself blunted by underlying socio-economic trends which take away from its distinctiveness.

Few would dispute that Alberta's political landscape and values remain different than much of Canada. A more recent development is that Alberta's brand of politics is becoming measurably distinct from the other prairie provinces with which it has traditionally shared much in common. In terms of relationships at "the centre," Albertans are less likely than Manitobans and Saskatchewanians to believe that the Prime Minister or party leader should sit in the legislature. They are also markedly more likely to believe in the importance of central institutions such as the Prime Minister and the Cabinet than those in the other two prairie provinces.

Since prairie populism was not the principal focus of this study, there is little more that we can contribute conclusively to this subject from our data collection. We can however note that there would appear to be emerging trends worthy of further investigation, such as a potential schism between varieties of prairie populism. These items will require further investigation into the evolution of prairie populism specifically, and perhaps ultimately an addendum to the original prairie populism hypothesis in light of recent developments and better data.

Youth and Political Institutions: Different not Distant

Much of the work addressing citizen opinion about the importance and effectiveness of state institutions exists in the shadow of Neil Nevitte's well-circulated 1996 work *The Decline of Deference*, which suggests that new generations of Canadians are decreasing deferential to traditional institutions of authority, including political institutions. Much of the data in our study touches on this hypothesis, and is sometimes supporting but often conflicting, with the central hypothesis that the "decline of deference" is a secular trend. In broad strokes, these results should be taken as a complimentary read to Nevitte's work—which addresses trends of the 1980s through methodologies restricted to the technologies available 20 years ago— by providing more data than was available than in 1996.

> "The low voter turn-out among youth is indisputable and although it is often equated with low interest in politics or low engagement in politics more generally, our results indicate that this relationship between turnout and engagement may be a mistake."

Our results find that, indeed, there are some institutions to which older generations are more deferential than younger generations, particularly Cabinet. Support for the idea that Cabinet is important is positively correlated with age. Older generations are also significantly less likely to support the idea that the Prime Minister is important. This could be read as an affirmation of both Savoie's and Nevitte's hypotheses, since a concentration of power at the centre would not manifest as strongly

in the opinions of older generations which have more experience of government by Cabinet and Commons.

The standard narrative surrounding youth engagement in democratic politics likewise proposes that youth are less engaged in political issues their elders, which fits with Nevitte's hypothesis. This observation is generally suggested to be a secular trend, indicating that older people are more engaged and deferential than younger people because that as time progresses, society is becoming steadily less engaged and deferential to institutions of authority. These observations are often supported in the contemporary period by analysis of voter trends which show that younger demographic cohorts are indeed less likely to vote. Political parties are aware of, and entrench, this trend by developing platforms and electoral strategies based on outsized engagement of elderly populations.

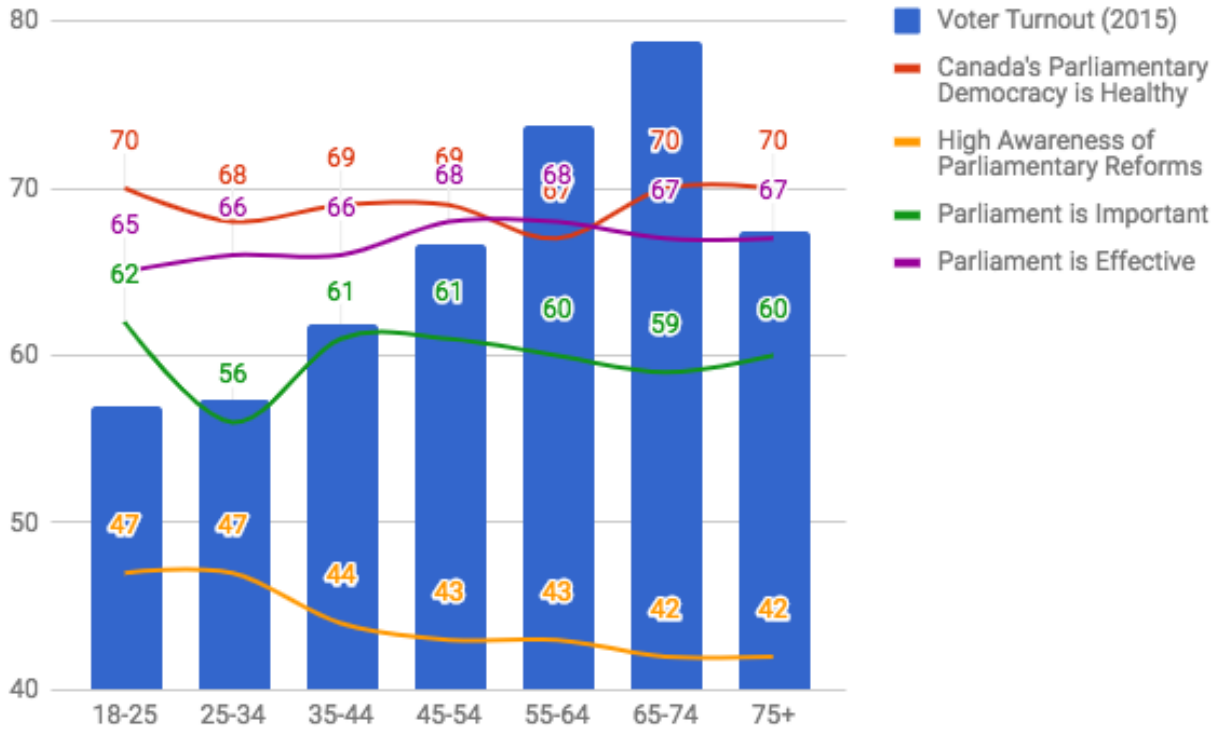
"Is 'a lack of interest in politics' literal, or does it represent a lack of interest in low-tech (and old-fashioned) political interactions like voting?"

The low voter turn-out among youth is indisputable and although it is often equated with low interest in politics or low engagement in politics more generally, our results indicate that this relationship between turnout and engagement may be a mistake. Some research has suggested that the traditional issue of youth engagement in politics is less a matter of interest and more a matter of medium. For example, digital natives who change jobs and addresses much more frequently than people did in ages past or currently do in older age cohorts, are funneled towards an analog voting process that depends on paper ballots, voter address registries, and mutually exclusive electoral choices. This may ultimately make low youth turn-out less a problem of voter apathy and more an issue of outreach, or more specifically, the form that outreach takes.

This assertion is supported by some data from Elections Canada. Youth were those most likely to report not voting due to technical reasons related to the actual process of casting a ballot, such as not being on the voters list or not having the correct proof of address. Roughly 11% of young Canadians reported not voting for these reasons. In the 2015 election, the most common reason for not voting is "not being interested in politics," a response which covered 32% of the electorate. Yet this response cannot necessarily be taken at face value. Is "a lack of interest in politics" literal, or does it represent a lack of interest in low-tech (and old-fashioned) political interactions like voting?

Our data seems to point towards the latter conclusion; youth are engaged in political issues even if they are low participators in traditional mediums of democratic interaction. On many of the particular issue areas pertaining to politics, young Canadians are just as engaged as older Canadians, even while younger Canadians do not vote in the same proportion. On issues of requiring an intricate knowledge of public affairs or the machinery of government, the increased engagement of youth was especially marked.

Figure 11: Voter Turnout Compared to Indications of Supporting Democratic Institutions



Source: Study data and Elections Canada.

This contrasts with the traditional perception that youth are less engaged in politics than their elders, and that civic engagement increasing with age but that each subsequent generation is less and less engaged and committed to democracy. When analysing voter-turnout data alone, some traditional engagement statistics would seem to support this youth disengagement hypothesis, since voter turnout does indeed increase with age. Yet when including substantially greater volumes of information about citizen engagement, this correlation with age evaporates; citizen engagement rates with subjects pertaining to democracy are more or less the same across generations. In fact, if there is any generational difference it is that youth cohorts are somewhat more informed and engaged than older cohorts, especially when it comes to niche and detailed subjects like the state of parliamentary reform.

A way to reconcile the positive correlation between age and voter turnout with the steady engagement rates across generations is to note that the propensity to vote may ultimately be a poor indicator of democratic engagement. Although it is often taken for granted that voting should be synonymous with political participation, 21st century technologies offer citizens a multitude of ways in which their voices can be heard. Since the ability to utilize these mediums, and most importantly to understand their impact on the political process, is better realized by the more technologically-savvy youth cohorts than by older generations, youth are more likely to view traditional electoral institutions as disadvantageous.

Furthermore, the digital age has radically increased citizen's expectations of service delivery from the public and private sectors alike. This makes traditional electoral

institutions, which have changed very little by comparison, significantly less appealing in relative terms. Most public opinion surveys today are conducted near instantaneously, online, anytime and from nearly any location. The electoral exercise by contrast may only take place in person, in specific locations, during specific time periods and with the potential for queuing and other forms of discomfort.

Thus, the appeal of the traditional electoral exercise is likely to drop, depending on its relative inconvenience and the perception of alternatives, both of which will be much higher among youth than older cohorts. In this sense, the lower voter turnout among youth cohorts should be taken as a sign that democratic institutions need to be refreshed and redesigned for the 21st century, rather than as a sign that there is something "wrong" with younger generations. Fortunately, reconceptualising the electoral exercise for the 21st century is much more realistic than instigating a volt-face in the values of new generations!

Furthermore, the Millennial generations that were not yet born at the time of Nevitte's study, seem to buck a secular trend of declining deference for institutions of authority. Millennials are engaged in sophisticated and nuanced issues of politics, even more so than the oldest generations, but their forms of engagement are systematically underreported. Admittedly, they do not use traditional democratic institutions as much as older generations and have an altogether different relationship with democracy, but this cannot be taken as confirmation of a secular trend for less deference to institutions of authority, political or otherwise. Indeed, our data confirms that there has been a dip in deference to political institutions with generation X, the generation under observation in Nevitte's study, but that this does not continue to generations subsequent. Other information outside of the scope of this study seems to confirm the idea that declining deference is not a secular trend, with a recent study of suggesting that Millennials do not have the high divorce rates of prior generations either.

A Final Thought on Technological Research Capacity and the Dynamics of the Centre

As highlighted in the methodology section, this research itself has been conducted under novel conditions due to the invention and applications of technologies that did exist just a few years earlier. As present, the research community uses these technologies with hesitancy and they are far from being accepted into academic cannon. Part of this lag in adoption is due to the normal degree of caution associated with any new process, but much is due also to a generational gap in the comfort and comprehension of new technologies. Indeed, the senior researchers atop the research hierarchy- those who are able to exalt a new method as valid- are those least likely to understand the technological capacities at work and the data it has generated.

The kinds of inhibitions that obstruct the full research potential of new technologies within the traditional policy research hierarchy are not universal and seldom extend far beyond the academy. Actors in the private sector, not-for-profit sector, partisan politics and in visionary departments of the public administration are putting these technologies to use already in a piecemeal fashion. As a result, adoption of these new technologies is occurring without a coherent strategy or any overarching guidelines governing the ethical use of these kinds of exponential technologies.

The most significant consequence for the centre of government is empowerment. The exponentially significant capacities of research technologies permit the centre greater and greater independence from the MPs upon which it is supposed to depend for its information on public opinion. For instance, now that technology can afford a single researcher at the centre the capacity to gauge millions of opinions on discrete and nuanced issues pertaining to government, what happens to the representative function of MPs? The data certainly suggests that MPs continue to have a role, but in the broader governance context, technological advances may see the role of elected representatives be limited to retail politics.

The advance of these public opinion technologies at the centre of government comes with the potential of exacerbating the power asymmetries within the public administration. The centre in the Westminster system was with the understanding that the centre would be dependent on line-departments and other organs of the public administration in order to govern. While the steady concentration of power at the centre predates these technologies, it is empowered by them as it reduces the dependence of the centre on other parts of the public service.

"The most significant consequence for the centre of government is empowerment. The exponentially significant capacities of research technologies permit the centre greater and greater independence from the MPs upon which it is supposed to depend for its information on public opinion."

Conclusions

One of the challenges of assessing the relative power of the centre of government – whether the executive vis-à-vis parliament or PMO/PCO vis-à-vis the rest of the executive – is precisely that it's relative. This is true whether we're talking about public perceptions or the experiences of people who are actually part of the system. In other words, ultimately you do not necessarily have to disagree with Ian Bodie's assessment that governments regard caucus and parliament as places where issues must be carefully managed to accept the broad thrust of Donald Savoie's view that parliament is too weak and that individual MPs don't have sufficient independence to do a meaningful job. Similarly, you can accept Brodie's assertion that Prime Ministers have limited discretion in Cabinet formation after all the conventional parameters are observed to nod at Savoie's assertion that most individual ministers are in the habit of taking their cues dutifully from PMO and a close adherence to the Prime Minister's mandate letters. In a sense, as much as these two writers appear to be talking about the same thing, they are talking about different aspects of that thing, and reflecting a different set of frustrations.

Brodie no doubt reflects the sincere experience of people wrestling with the exercise of power in order to achieve intended outcomes. Anyone who has briefed a Prime Minister on Cabinet formation and on aspects of taking the reins of power knows that he or she contends with a long list of protocols, caveats, and colleagues with high expectations. An incoming Prime Minister is typically advised to focus on a few priorities if he/she hopes to get anything done (even Savoie says as much). The current government has adopted with

limited success a “science of delivery,” an approach similar to that applied by Tony Blair in the United Kingdom after deciding that he had been “pulling levers that weren’t attached to anything.” As for parliament, Brodie is certainly right that time is seldom on the government’s side, and that governments pick and manage their legislative battles carefully. In short, every government finds that it can’t accomplish everything it expected to, and this must be taken as a due counterbalance to the conventional wisdom that a Canadian Prime Minister is extremely powerful.

At the same time, the fact that a Prime Minister does not perceive him or herself as having limitless scope to appoint or dismiss ministers does not mean that individual ministers feel great security in their jobs, or that they don’t look more to the centre for direction than they did in decades past. One has only to look at the content of mandate letters to gauge the parameters for ministerial initiative. It’s an exceptional Memorandum to Cabinet that doesn’t pertain to a mandate letter commitment, and the Cabinet process is so front-end loaded that, while proposals do sometimes go sideways, it is considered an aberration and not a norm. And yes, Prime Ministers are sensitive to the views of their caucus, and Government Leaders in the House must stickhandle legislation strategically, but at the end of the day a government with a majority has great capacity to get its way and even bully the legislature.

The dynamic of the media has for decades intensified the focus on the Prime Minister as the embodiment of executive power. As party leader, our Prime Minister has great control over MPs, most whom, as Brodie and others have observed, owe their positions to the party, its platform, and its leader. That doesn’t change the fact that it’s an exceptional MP who doesn’t rigorously toe the party line on every single issue. These things said, the very fact that the role of the centre – specifically as opposed to the role of ministers and Cabinet on the one hand and parliament on the other - has emerged as an issue for broadly based discussions and even a partial focus in an election is striking. The tenor of engagement by hundreds of thousands of Canadians make it clear that they take parliament seriously as a force, which is perhaps the most encouraging basis for belief in its ongoing role.

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