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Grassroots causes gain support

Morrow, Adrian. **The Globe and Mail** [Toronto, Ont] 21 Nov 2012: A.6.

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Abstract (summary)

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Report finds a dissonance in political discourse, and a restless populace in favour of citizen-led efforts

A majority of Canadians support citizen-driven causes such as British Columbia's referendum on the harmonized sales tax, the Occupy movement and Quebec's student strikes, and believe average people should push politicians into action, a new survey suggests.

The findings - part of a research project by the Environics Institute on the nation's values, which will be presented this week at the Trudeau Foundation's annual conference in Edmonton - speak to an undercurrent of restlessness among Canadians, said Environics executive director Keith Newman.

Canadians, he said, are relying less on governments to solve problems by themselves, and are looking toward other methods of political participation.

"It does suggest there is a bit of frustration. The fact really puts the pressure on governments and politicians to think about how they build public confidence in institutions."

This frustration may be the polite, Canadian manifestation of the sort of angst that has swept the Western world - most notably Greece - in the wake of a weak global economy, he said.

Seventy-six per cent of respondents strongly agreed Canadians should let politicians know what they think. On a separate question, only 20 per cent said that politicians usually do a good job balancing competing interests, while some 50 per cent said governments do so only some of the time.

When asked about specific grassroots movements, 86 per cent said they supported B.C.'s HST referendum, which saw the tax turfed two summers ago; 62 per cent backed Occupy, when people camped out in public squares and parks to protest the unequal distribution of wealth. Support for this spring's student demonstrations over tuition fees in Quebec was softer, but 56 per cent of respondents supported the protests.

The survey also gauged support for 12 different values, ranging from universal health care to protecting the environment. Among these, support was highest for equality between men and women. Surprisingly, the value that scored lowest was cutting taxes, despite its perennial presence as an election issue.

"If you think about the discourse in this country over the last decade, it really has been about taxpayers," said University of Alberta sociology professor Harvey Krahn. "What the politicians are saying is different than what people have been saying."

Pierre-Gerlier Forest, president of the Trudeau Foundation, said the split support on some of the values - taxes and immigration, for instance - suggests the country is more divided than Canadians often think.

On the question of grassroots democracy, he said the country is still generally supportive of governments but, when elected officials fail to take action, they look to citizens to step up. It was telling, he said, that support for the HST referendum, which used an established process, was higher than for student strikes and Occupy, which were more raucous.

"I think it's related to the way a movement presents itself," he said.

The poll was conducted in October, via telephone interview, with 2,001 adult Canadians. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

CANADIAN VALUES

Does government do a good job of balancing competing interests?

Most of the time 19%

Some of the time 48%

Not very often 24%

Almost never 8%

DK/NA 1%

Does the public approve of grassroots citizen action?

Occupy movement

Strongly approve 19%

Somewhat approve 43%

Somewhat disapprove 19%

Strongly disapprove 16%

DK/NA 3%

Quebec student protests

Strongly approve 24%

Somewhat approve 32%

Somewhat disapprove 20%

Strongly disapprove 21%

DK/NA 3%

BC HST referendum

Strongly approve 52%

Somewhat approve 34%

Somewhat disapprove 8%

Strongly disapprove 3%

DK/NA 3%

The environment should be protected, even if this slows down economic development.

Strongly agree 49%

Somewhat agree 39%

Somewhat disagree 8%

Strongly disagree 2%

DK/NA 2%

We should have a public health system that covers everyone and is fully supported through taxes

Strongly agree 66%

Somewhat agree 26%

Somewhat disagree 4%

Strongly disagree 3%

Men and women should be treated equally in all walks of life.

Strongly agree 92%

Somewhat agree 7%

Strongly disagree 1%

All religions should be respected, provided they fall within the law.

Strongly agree 67%

Somewhat agree 23%

Somewhat disagree 5%

Strongly disagree 4%

DK/NA 2%

THE GLOBE AND MAIL / SOURCE: THE ENVIRONICS INSTITUTE

Revision date: Thursday, November 22, 2012

CORRECTION: Environics executive director Keith Neuman's name was misspelled in an article Wednesday on a research project on the nation's values.

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Indexing (details)

Cite

Title	Grassroots causes gain support
Author	Morrow, Adrian
Publication title	The Globe and Mail
Pages	A.6
Publication year	2012
Publication date	Nov 21, 2012
Year	2012
Section	National News
Publisher	The Globe & Mail division of Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc.
Place of publication	Toronto, Ont.
Country of publication	Canada
Journal subject	General Interest Periodicals--Canada
ISSN	03190714
Source type	Newspapers
Language of publication	English
Document type	News
ProQuest document ID	1178329384
Document URL	http://search.proquest.com/docview/1178329384?accountid=33009
Copyright	© 2012 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Last updated	2012-11-22
Database	Canadian Newsstand Major Dailies

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