

Future of the Senate: majority of Canadians split between abolishing, reforming the Red Chamber

As suspended senator Mike Duffy goes to trial, just one-in-seven say Senate should be left alone

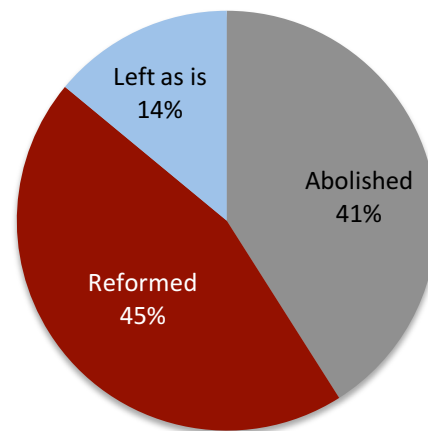
April 07, 2015 – With the criminal trial of suspended Senator Mike Duffy set to begin, the majority of Canadians agree that when it comes to the future of this country's upper house, its existing form has to change. They are split however, on whether change should come in the way of reforms to, or an outright end of this 148-year-old institution.

These are among the findings of the latest Angus Reid Institute public opinion poll canvassing Canadian attitudes about the senate, its ongoing scandals, and to what extent, if any, these issues may play a role in an expected fall election.

Key Findings:

- Almost half (45%) of Canadians polled say the Senate should be reformed
- About as many (41%) say it should be abolished
- The rest (14%) say the Red Chamber should be left as is
- Despite the intense media scrutiny surrounding [Duffy's trial](#) and the police investigations into suspended Senators [Pamela Wallin](#) and [Patrick Brazeau's](#) housing and expense claims, fewer than one-fifth of respondents (16%) say Senate issues will be a deciding factor as they cast their ballots in this fall's expected election

Should the Senate be:



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from March 11-12 among a representative randomized sample of 1,500 Canadian adults who are members of the [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release

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What to do with the Red Chamber?

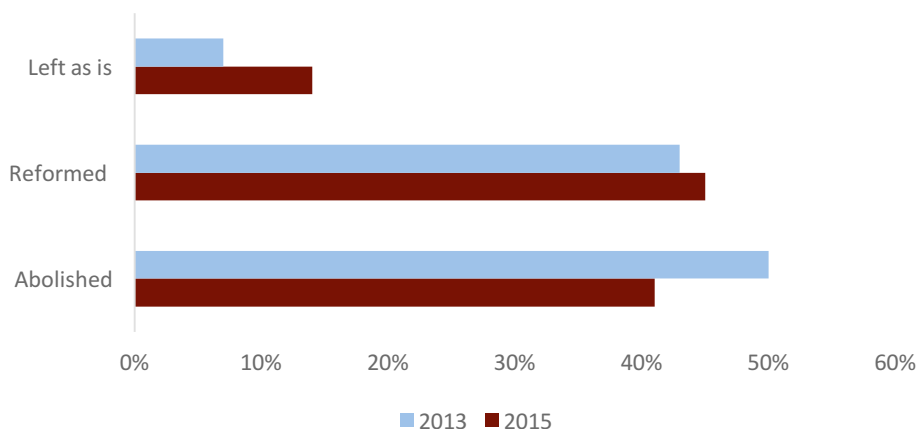
Regardless of how closely they're watching the issues that have been plaguing the Red Chamber for almost two years, Canadians are unequivocal in how they feel about the future of the Senate: the status quo is not an option.

Opinion is split between outright abolishing the Red Chamber (41%) and reforming it (45%). One-in-seven (14%) say the Senate should be left as is. Most differences in opinion by region and past political affiliation center not on whether to abolish or leave the senate as is - but on whether to abolish or reform. The Senate is most dead to respondents in Quebec and Manitoba and Saskatchewan, half of whom advocate to abolishing the Senate (51% QC, 52% SK/MB).

Overall opinions on the future of the Senate show a slight softening in attitude toward the upper chamber since the same question was asked in [November 2013](#), a period by which Canadians had sustained almost one full year of new and increasingly sensational [revelations](#) about senators' questionable housing expenses, travel costs, and the departure of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's then-chief of staff, [Nigel Wright](#).

At the time, half of Canadians (50%) wanted to see the Senate abolished – and fewer than one-in-ten said it should be “left as is” (7%). About the same number then as now (43% in 2013 versus 45% now) opt for reformation. With the Duffy trial commencing, it will be of note to watch how public sentiment shifts.

Should the Senate be:



Today, past CPC voters are evenly split on the abolish-versus-reform question (44% vs 45%) while past NDP voters are most hardened towards to eliminating the Red Chamber (49% abolish, 40% reform). Past

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LPC voters, on the other hand, are most inclined to change the institution, rather than get rid of it (35% abolish, 52% reform).

Indeed, Senate reform has been attempted, and has failed at various times in the history of the 105-seat chamber – most recently – [last year](#). At that time, the federal government proposed non-binding elections to select senators, term limits of nine years, and a mechanism to abolish the Senate altogether. In a unanimous decision last April, however, the [Supreme Court of Canada ruled](#) the Harper government required substantial provincial consent to introduce such changes. Harper has subsequently said Canadians are “essentially stuck” with the Senate as it is.

Notably, there are significant differences along age and gender lines when it comes to leaving the Senate alone. Women are twice as likely as men to want to maintain the status quo (20% versus 9%). Younger Canadians (aged 18-34) are three times as likely to want to maintain things the way they are (23%) as those aged 55+ (7%). Conversely, older Canadians are twice as likely as younger ones to want to abolish the Senate (53% versus 26%).

Best leadership on this issue? None of the above:

The Senate of Canada has been a political hot potato for almost as long as it has existed, bringing migraines to whichever party is in power at a given time.

Indeed, it was outgoing Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau’s [stacking of the Senate](#) with 20 appointees during the last two years of his term that ultimately left his successor John Turner grasping for answers when challenged by then-Conservative Leader Brian Mulroney during what would turn out to be a disastrous 1984 election campaign for the Liberals.

The Progressive Conservatives under Mulroney weren’t immune to Senate troubles, eventually seeing their own political fortunes plummet in Western Canada when the Reform Party campaigned on (among other things) an “elected, effective and equal” Senate in the 1990s.

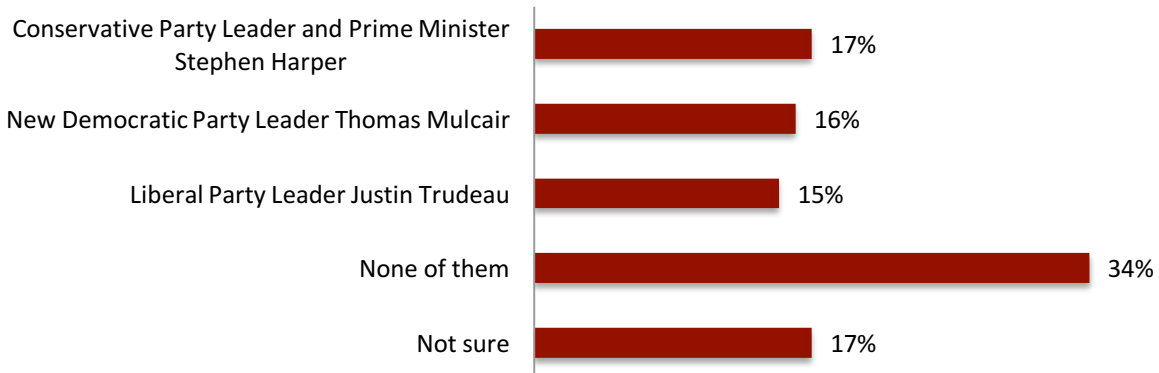
While much of the public scrutiny and furor over these latest Senate scandals brings troubles to the Harper government (and in the case of Wright, to Harper himself), Canadians are skeptical that *any* federal leader is capable of owning the high ground on the Senate.

Asked “whom do you trust the most to effectively deal with Senate issues”, the most likely answer from Canadians was “none of the above”. Fully one-third (34%) of respondents chose this response. That’s twice as many as those who chose Harper (17%), NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair (16%) or Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau (15%). The rest (17%) said they weren’t sure.

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Whom do you trust the most to effectively deal with Senate issues?



Unsurprisingly, the greatest endorsements for each of the individual leaders of the big three parties came from those who had cast ballots for them in the last election. That said, one-third of past CPC, LPC and NDP voters each chose “none of the above” on the question of best leader to deal with the Senate (see detailed tables at the end of this release).

Notably, the unwillingness of respondents to endorse any of the major party leaders over another on the issue of Senate leadership comes a little more than a year after Trudeau’s surprise move to “expel” Liberal senators from his caucus. [Canadians were polled](#) immediately after the decision, and at the time, just over half (53%) either strongly or somewhat approved of the decision, while nearly one-third (31%) were still digesting the news and didn’t know how they felt about it. Less than one-fifth (16%) disapproved of the move.

Is it really an election factor?

According to collective wisdom inside the political beltway, the Senate scandal and Duffy trial are so potentially devastating to the political fortunes of the Harper government that they derailed plans for a spring election this year. Taking into account that the events of the next several months may well change future public opinion, our current data does not necessarily bear out this assumption. Indeed, as it stands today, Canadians report that they do not expect the scandal to shift their voting inclination much one way or another ahead of an expected election this fall.

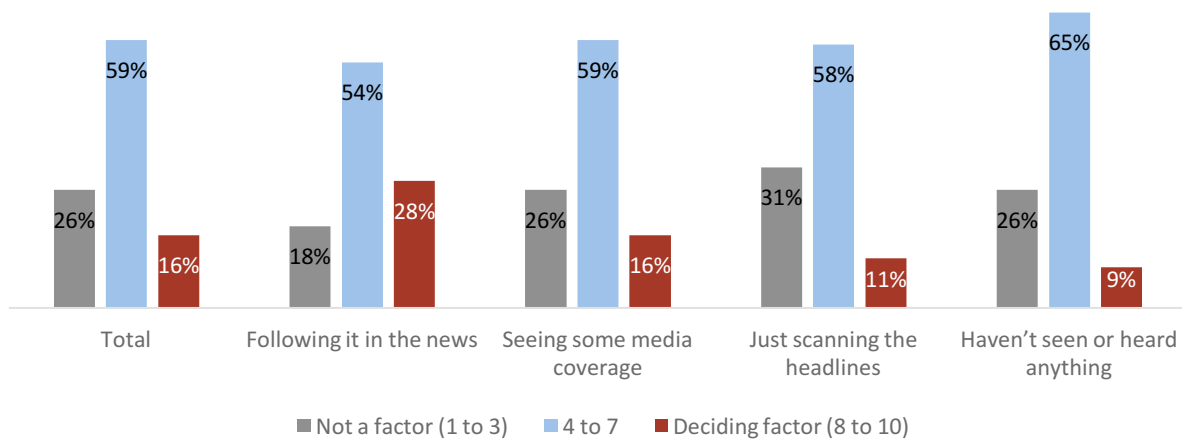
Those surveyed were asked to describe how much of a voting factor the issue will likely be for them using a 10-point scale where one represented “not a factor at all” and ten represented “it’s the deciding factor”.

Overall, one-in-six (16%) surveyed chose an 8, 9 or 10 compared to one-quarter (26%) who indicated it would be, at best, a minor issue in their vote formation process.

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How much will the Senate debate be a factor in this year's federal election? [By awareness]



Motivations around the future of the Senate and awareness of the issue are more likely to decide the extent to which this is an election factor for respondents. Canadians who wish to see the Senate abolished are twice as likely to say it's a deciding factor for them (22%) as those who are inclined to reform the Red Chamber (12%) and those who think it's best to leave the Senate alone (10%). In addition, those who say they are following Senate issues most closely are three times as likely to say it's a deciding factor (28%) as those who haven't heard or seen anything about these issues at all (9%).

Past voting patterns appear to be less influential when it comes to the significance of Senate issues in the coming election. Slightly more people who voted for the CPC in the 2011 federal election say the scandals aren't a factor for them (31%) compared to those who voted Liberal or for the NDP (25% and 21% respectively). Conversely, those who voted for the NDP and LPC in the last election are slightly more likely to say the issues will be the deciding factor for them (19% and 18% respectively) than those who voted for the CPC (13%). That said, none of these differences are significant.

Who's scrutinizing the Senate?

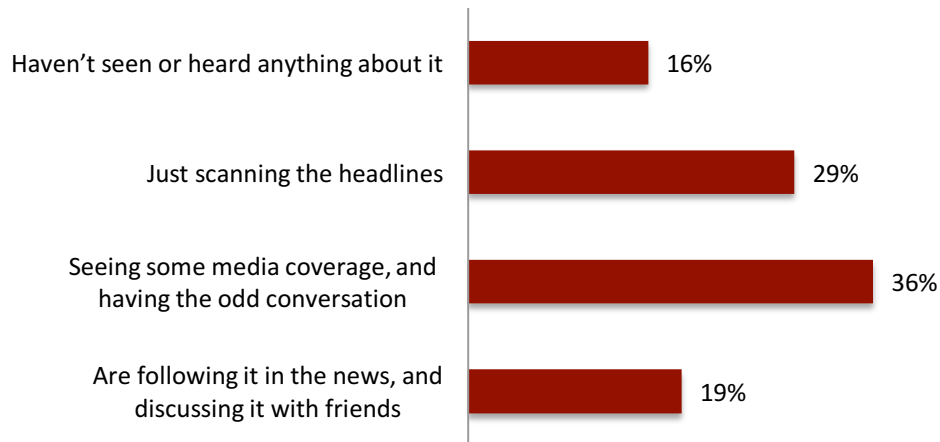
Though the Senate is not necessarily a top-of-mind issue for all Canadians, fewer than one-in-five (16%) say they "haven't seen or heard anything" about recent issues and scandals involving senators.

The rest are split on the level of intensity with which they are following the subject: one-in-five (19%) say they are following Senate stories in the news, and are discussing it with family and friends. One-third (36%) say they've seen some media coverage and have had the odd conversation with others about the issue, while a further one-third (29%) saying they've "just scanned the headlines".

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How closely are you following these Senate issues?



Those living on Canada's west and east coasts – as well as those in Saskatchewan and Manitoba are paying more attention, with about one-in-four respondents reporting the highest level of engagement (23% in BC, 25% on the prairies and 22% in Atlantic Canada respectively). Senate issues appear to have the least amount of traction in the minds of Albertans and Quebecers. In those provinces, fewer report following the issue most closely (15% in Alberta, 12% in Quebec) and more report not having heard anything about the issue at all (18% and 19% respectively).

There are no significant differences in awareness of Senate issues based on how respondents voted in the last federal election, with those who cast ballots for the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) and New Democratic Party (NDP) reporting fairly consistent levels of engagement on this subject. (See detailed tables at the end of this release.)

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research organization established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

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How closely are you following these Senate issues?							
Regional sample size is unweighted	Total (1500)	Region					
		BC (204)	AB (146)	SK/MB (115)	ON (626)	QC (316)	ATL (93)
Are following it in the news, and discussing it with friends	19%	23%	15%	25%	22%	12%	22%
Seeing some media coverage, and having the odd conversation	36%	37%	37%	35%	38%	33%	33%
Just scanning the headlines	29%	23%	31%	25%	26%	36%	37%
Haven't seen or heard anything about it	16%	17%	18%	15%	14%	19%	8%

How closely are you following these Senate issues?						
Weighted sample size	Total (1500)	Gender		Age		
		Men (733)	Women (767)	18 – 34 (429)	35 – 54 (561)	55+ (510)
Are following it in the news, and discussing it with friends	19%	23%	15%	13%	14%	29%
Seeing some media coverage, and having the odd conversation	36%	40%	33%	29%	36%	43%
Just scanning the headlines	29%	26%	32%	31%	35%	23%
Haven't seen or heard anything about it	16%	10%	21%	28%	15%	6%

How closely are you following these Senate issues?				
Weighted sample size	Total (1500)	Federal Vote Last		
		CPC (426)	Liberal Party (259)	NDP (361)
Are following it in the news, and discussing it with friends	19%	22%	25%	20%
Seeing some media coverage, and having the odd conversation	36%	44%	42%	34%
Just scanning the headlines	29%	26%	23%	35%
Haven't seen or heard anything about it	16%	9%	10%	11%

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There are three broad choices in terms of the future of the Canadian Senate. Would you say the Senate should be:

Regional sample size is unweighted	Total (1500)	Region					
		BC (204)	AB (146)	SK/MB (115)	ON (626)	QC (316)	ATL (93)
Abolished	41%	42%	27%	52%	36%	51%	39%
Reformed	45%	43%	59%	35%	48%	36%	48%
Left as is	14%	15%	15%	13%	15%	14%	12%

There are three broad choices in terms of the future of the Canadian Senate. Would you say the Senate should be:

Weighted sample size	Total (1500)	Gender		Age		
		Men (733)	Women (767)	18 – 34 (429)	35 – 54 (561)	55+ (510)
Abolished	41%	47%	35%	26%	41%	53%
Reformed	45%	45%	45%	51%	44%	40%
Left as is	14%	9%	20%	23%	15%	7%

There are three broad choices in terms of the future of the Canadian Senate. Would you say the Senate should be:

Weighted sample size	Total (1500)	Federal Vote Last		
		CPC (426)	Liberal Party (259)	NDP (361)
Abolished	41%	44%	35%	49%
Reformed	45%	45%	52%	40%
Left as is	14%	11%	12%	11%

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Whom do you trust the most to effectively deal with Senate issues?							
Regional sample size is unweighted	Total (1500)	Region					
		BC (204)	AB (146)	SK/MB (115)	ON (626)	QC (316)	ATL (93)
Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister Stephen Harper	17%	16%	26%	25%	19%	10%	12%
New Democratic Party leader Thomas Mulcair	16%	20%	7%	10%	13%	25%	14%
Liberal Party leader Justin Trudeau	15%	15%	12%	15%	17%	12%	24%
None of them	34%	31%	31%	36%	36%	36%	31%
Not sure	17%	18%	24%	15%	16%	17%	19%

Whom do you trust the most to effectively deal with Senate issues?						
Weighted sample size	Total (1500)	Gender		Age		
		Men (733)	Women (767)	18 – 34 (429)	35 – 54 (561)	55+ (510)
Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister Stephen Harper	17%	21%	13%	16%	15%	20%
New Democratic Party leader Thomas Mulcair	16%	17%	15%	17%	16%	16%
Liberal Party leader Justin Trudeau	15%	17%	14%	16%	15%	15%
None of them	34%	33%	36%	30%	36%	36%
Not sure	17%	12%	22%	21%	18%	13%

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How much will the Senate debate be a factor in this year's federal election?							
Regional sample size is unweighted	Total (1500)	Region					
		BC (204)	AB (146)	SK/MB (115)	ON (626)	QC (316)	ATL (93)
Not a factor (1-3)	26%	22%	30%	33%	26%	23%	27%
4-7	59%	62%	60%	50%	58%	62%	54%
Deciding factor (8-10)	16%	16%	10%	17%	16%	16%	19%

How much will the Senate debate be a factor in this year's federal election?						
Weighted sample size	Total (1500)	Gender		Age		
		Men (733)	Women (767)	18 – 34 (429)	35 – 54 (561)	55+ (510)
Not a factor (1-3)	26%	28%	24%	21%	26%	30%
4-7	59%	55%	62%	65%	59%	53%
Deciding factor (8-10)	16%	17%	14%	14%	15%	17%

How much will the Senate debate be a factor in this year's federal election?				
Weighted sample size	Total (1500)	Federal Vote Last		
		CPC (426)	Liberal Party (259)	NDP (361)
Not a factor (1-3)	26%	31%	25%	21%
4-7	59%	56%	57%	60%
Deciding factor (8-10)	16%	13%	18%	19%

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How much will the Senate debate be a factor in this year's federal election?				
Regional sample size is unweighted	Total (1500)	Should the Senate be		
		Abolished (612)	Reformed (670)	Left as is (217)
Not a factor (1-3)	26%	25%	27%	25%
4-7	59%	54%	61%	65%
Deciding factor (8-10)	16%	22%	12%	10%

How much will the Senate debate be a factor in this year's federal election?					
Regional sample size is unweighted	Total (1500)	How closely are you following these Senate issues?			
		Following it in the news (283)	Seeing some media coverage (542)	Just scanning the headlines (441)	Haven't seen or heard anything (234)
Not a factor (1-3)	26%	18%	26%	31%	26%
4-7	59%	54%	59%	58%	65%
Deciding factor (8-10)	16%	28%	16%	11%	9%

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