

Democracy in North America: Significant segments in Canada, U.S. open to authoritarian leadership

Age, isolation, and disillusionment with government contribute to anti-democratic sentiments

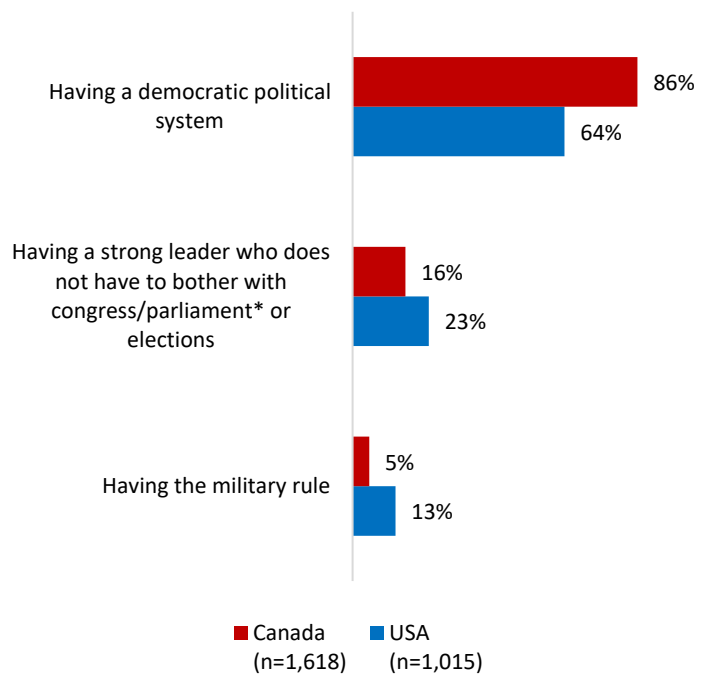
November 7, 2022 – With mid-term elections looming in the U.S. and Canadians learning new details daily about the circumstances that led to the first-ever use of the Emergencies Act, people on both sides of the border are steeped in conversations – and often, heated debates – about democracy, systems of government, and rule of law.

Against this backdrop, a cross-border study from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds Canadians still mostly fond of the democratic political system, but with a significant minority showing enthusiasm for non-representative forms of government. This sentiment is even more pronounced in the United States.

Overall, the vast majority in Canada – 86 per cent – say a democratic political system is a good way to govern, while six per cent disagree, and eight per cent are not sure. In the United States, just two thirds (64%) say the same of democracy while one-in-five (19%) say this is a bad form of government, and 17 per cent are unsure.

When it comes to the idea of authoritarian leadership – having a strong leader who does not bother with parliament (congress in the U.S.) or elections – 16 per cent in Canada say this would be good or great, while 12 per cent are unsure. In the U.S., 15 per cent are unsure and 23 per cent are enthusiastic about the idea of strong leader who does not bother with elections. This adds up to 27 per cent of Canadians and 38 per cent of Americans who do not reject the idea of authoritarianism for their country.

When it comes to your country, do you believe each of these would be a good or bad way to govern? Percentage who say "good" or "great" way to govern shown:



**Respondents asked about congress in U.S., parliament in Canada*
METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from Oct. 11-13, 2022, among a representative randomized sample of 1,618 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. A second survey was conducted among a representative randomized sample of 1,015 American adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum USA](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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Disenchantment with government drives such views. In Canada, among those who feel they are unable to have a real influence on the political decisions made around them, enthusiasm for this authoritarian concept rises to 19 per cent, with 11 per cent unsure. South of the border, three-in-ten (28%) of those expressing this helplessness show a fondness for authoritarianism, while another 12 per cent do not reject it.

More Key Findings:

- A majority of Canadians (56%) say they don't trust government in general to act in their best interests. This proportion has increased from 47 per cent when asked in 2016. In the United States, distrust rises to seven-in-ten (72%).
- Two-thirds of Canadians (64%) say they don't believe they can influence political decisions that influence their life. This sentiment is much more common among men aged 18 to 34 (77%) than other demographics.
- In Canada, 18- to 34-year-old men are three times as likely as any other demographic to say, "some countries are better off with authoritarian rule".
- Belief in the superiority of democracy over authoritarianism is consistent across political lines: at least nine-in-ten past CPC, Liberal, NDP and BQ voters say democracy is always better than authoritarianism.
- Socially isolated Canadians show less faith in the government and more disenchantment with the system. More than three-in-five (63%) of the most socially isolated Canadians say they do not trust in the government to act in their best interest. Half (49%) of the most socially connected Canadians say the same.

About ARI

*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 foundation 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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Part One: Democracy and representation in Canada

As Canadians and Americans alike are set to remember veterans of the two World Wars, the democracy that was fought for and cost so many lives is falling out of favour with a significant segment of each population.

To put it mildly, democratic systems in North America have been put to the test in the last two years. In January 2021, rioters stormed the United States capitol in an attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election in which Donald Trump lost to Joe Biden. Canada's own capital was then beset by an occupation by protesters in early 2022. The so-called Freedom Convoy travelled to Ottawa ostensibly to convince the governor general to [dissolve parliament](#) in response to COVID-19 public health measures.

The protest in Ottawa, and border blockades across the country, were brought to an end after the Trudeau government invoked the Emergencies Act for the first time since it was passed by parliament in 1988. The use of the act is under intense scrutiny. The Canadian Civil Liberties Association believes the use of the act was [unlawful and unconstitutional](#). Ottawa police superintendent Robert Bernier [told the ongoing inquiry](#) into the Emergencies Act that the extra powers the act provided were not necessary, though government lawyers noted that it [was in fact utilized](#) by the Ontario Provincial Police to tow trucks in order for police action to take place. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has contended that the act was ["necessary to restore order."](#)

All this comes during a period of intense challenges across the world brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of COVID-19 – and the fight against it – have had a divisive effect on Canada. Earlier this year, at the [two-year anniversary](#) of the World Health Organization declaring COVID-19 an outbreak, four-in-five Canadians said the pandemic pulled people further apart.

Related: [COVID at Two: Vast majorities say the pandemic has pulled Canadians apart](#)

Trust in government dropping

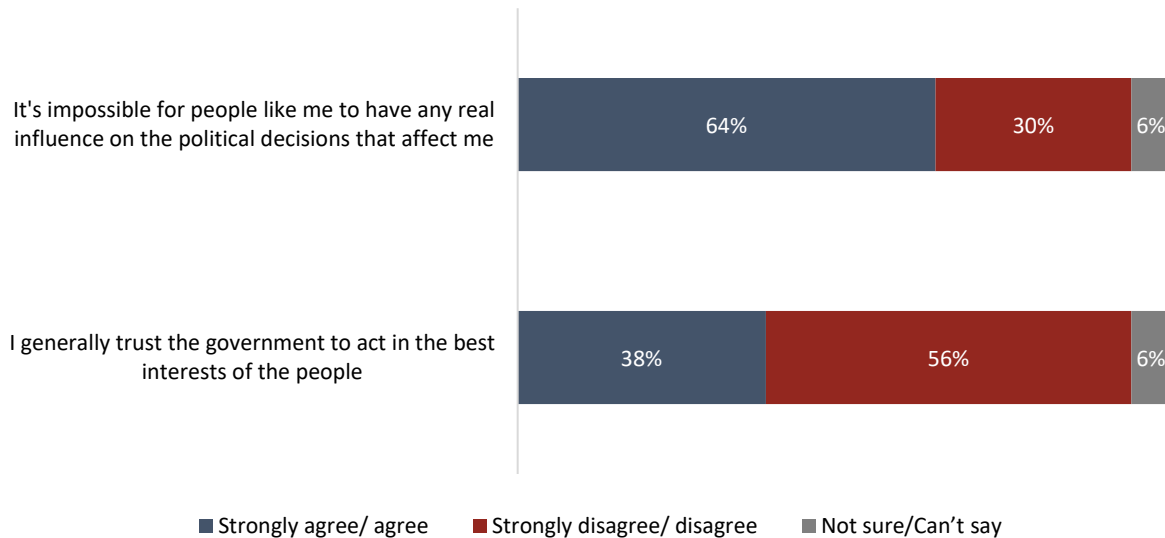
Elements of the political system are a source of frustration. Asked how they feel about their ability to influence the political decisions that affect them personally, two-thirds (64%) respond negatively. Further, just two-in-five (38%) say they trust the government to act in the best interests of the people:

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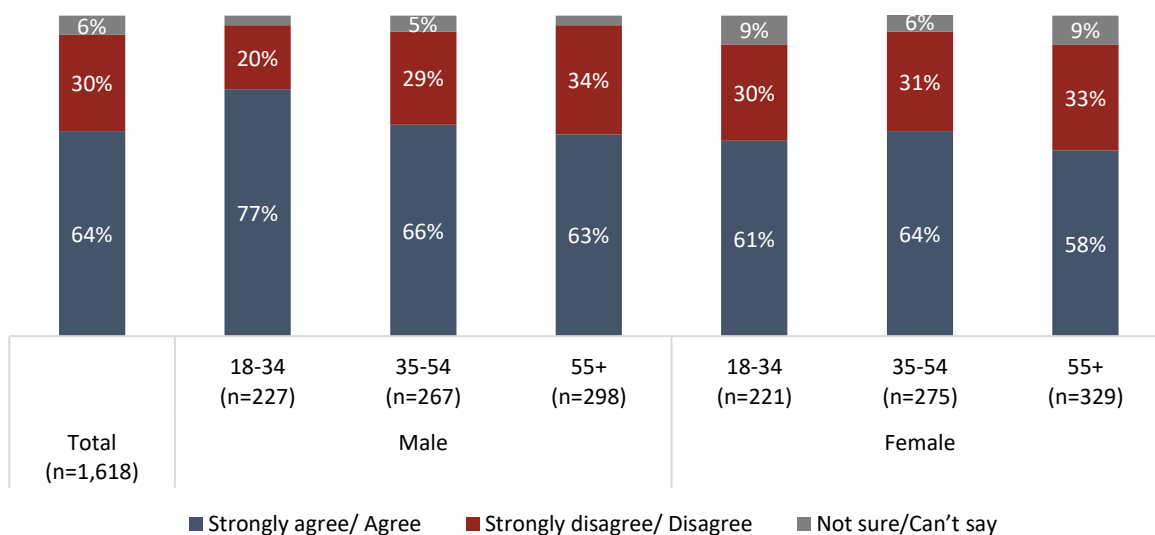
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**Agree vs. disagree
(All Canadian respondents, n=1,618)**



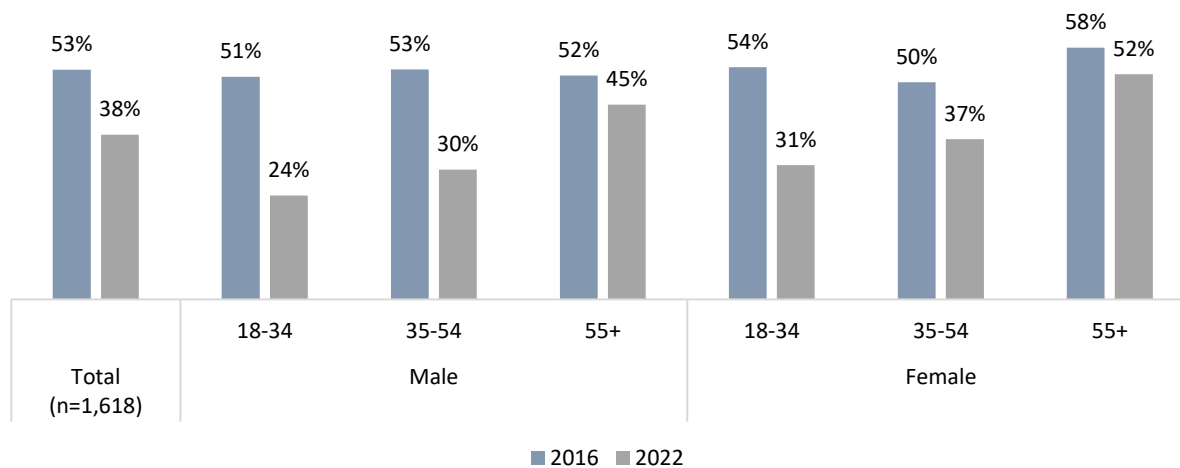
The proportion of Canadians feeling helpless to influence the politics that affect them has not changed over the past six years and this is a sentiment held by a majority of all age and gender groups. Young men are, however, by far the most likely demographic group to feel disempowered by the current political climate:

**Agree vs. Disagree -
"It's impossible for people like me to have any real influence on the political decisions that affect me"**



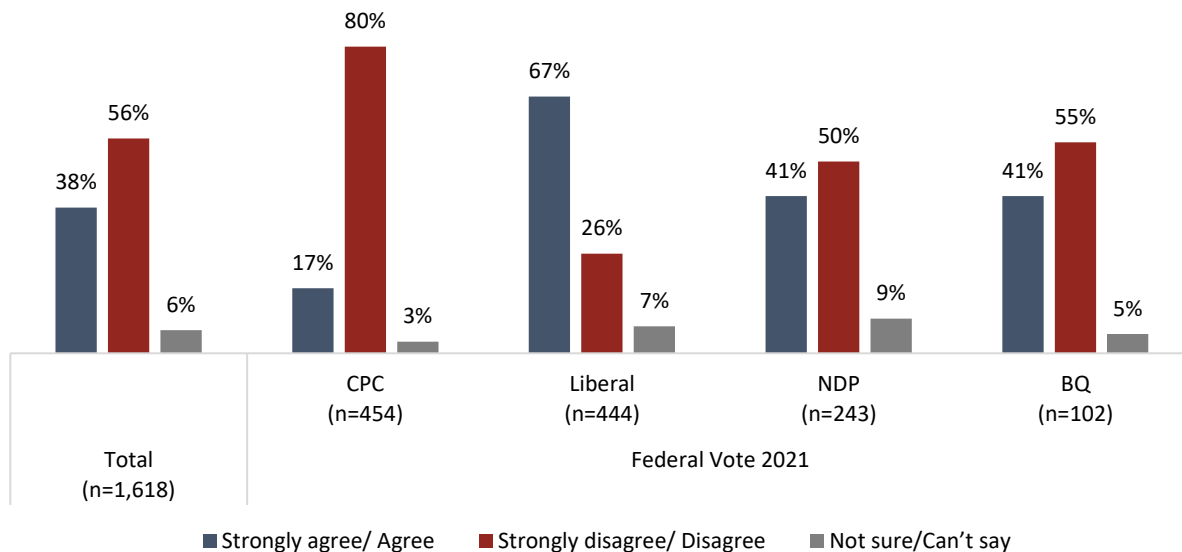
Levels of trust in government after the onset of COVID-19 appear to be a growing challenge for decision-makers. Asked this same question in 2016 after a Trudeau Liberal majority was elected, fully half (53%) of Canadians said they trusted the government to act in the best interests of the population – indicating a 15-point drop from then until now. Trust has dropped precipitously among younger Canadians over this period, but has fallen among all age and gender groups:

**Percentage who agree that:
"I generally trust the government to act in the best interests of the people"**



Trust is, in some ways, driven by an individual's relationship to the party in power and their representatives. This is evident in high levels of trust among 2021 Liberal Party voters, less trust among those who voted for the Bloc Québécois and NDP, and deep mistrust among those who supported the opposition Conservatives:

**Agree vs. Disagree -
"I generally trust the government to act in the best interests of the people"**



Isolation and disengagement

While disenchantment with the political system is of note, so too is the isolation and frustration that some individuals feel in their day-to-day lives. Isolation as [long been posited](#) to contribute to sympathetic views toward, or even enthusiasm for, authoritarianism. Social isolation has also been identified as a potential vulnerability that is exploited [by recruiters for extremist groups](#).

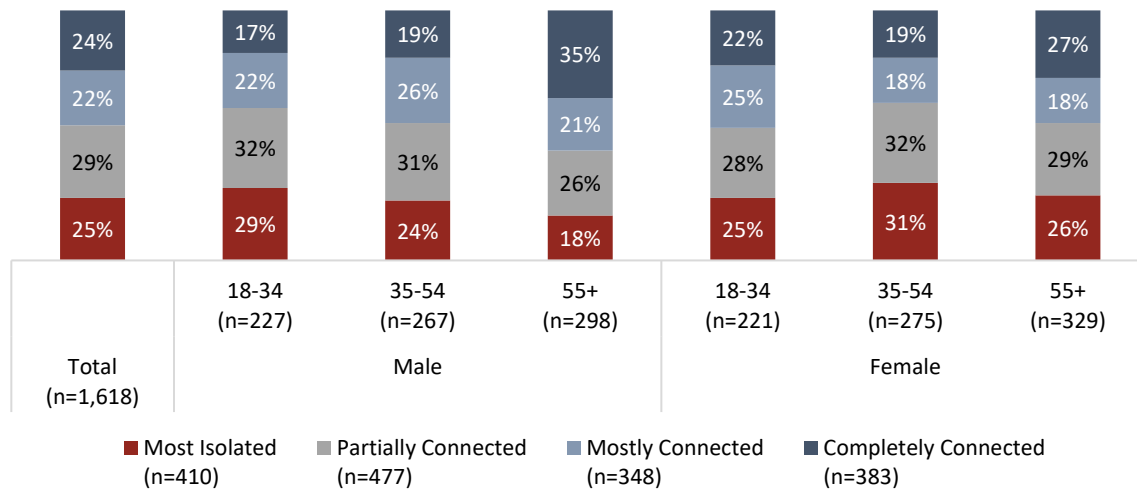
With this in mind, the Angus Reid Institute created an Isolation and Connection Index with which these concepts may be explored. The index incorporates the responses from Canadians on 10 different questions about their social lives, community engagement and social support network. For full details and delineation on the Index please [click here](#).

Overall, one-quarter of Canadians are categorized among the Most Isolated. There is a close to even distribution of social connection across age and gender demographics.

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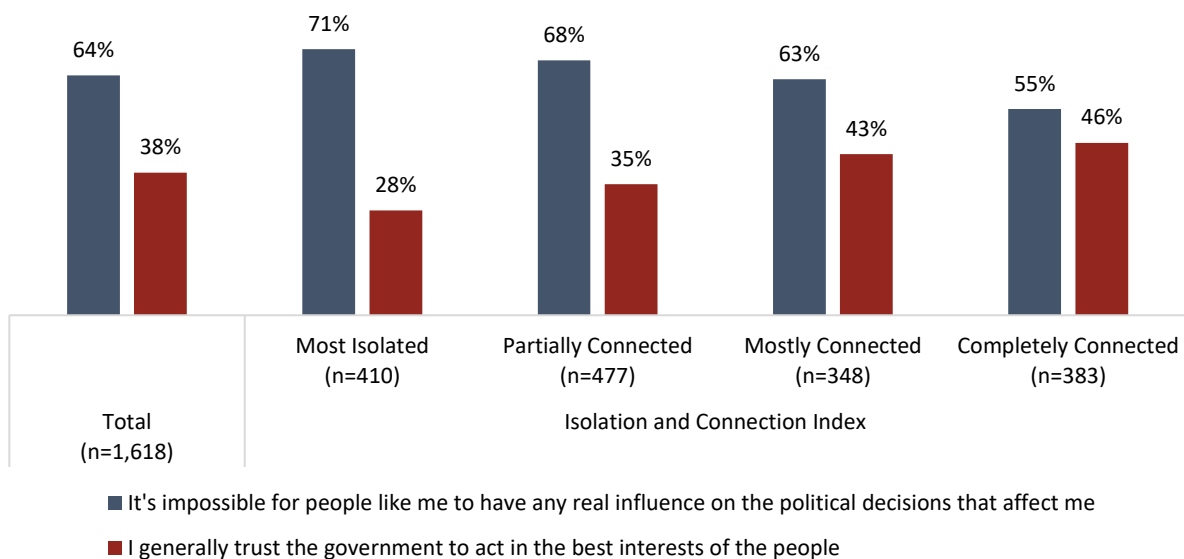
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Isolation and Connection Index



Isolation correlates strongly with statements about faith in government and equality in Canada. Those individuals who are Most Isolated are far more likely than those who are Completely Connected to feel that there is no way for them to impact the political realities surrounding them, and to feel that government is untrustworthy.

Percentage who agree with each statement:



Part Two: One-quarter do not reject authoritarianism

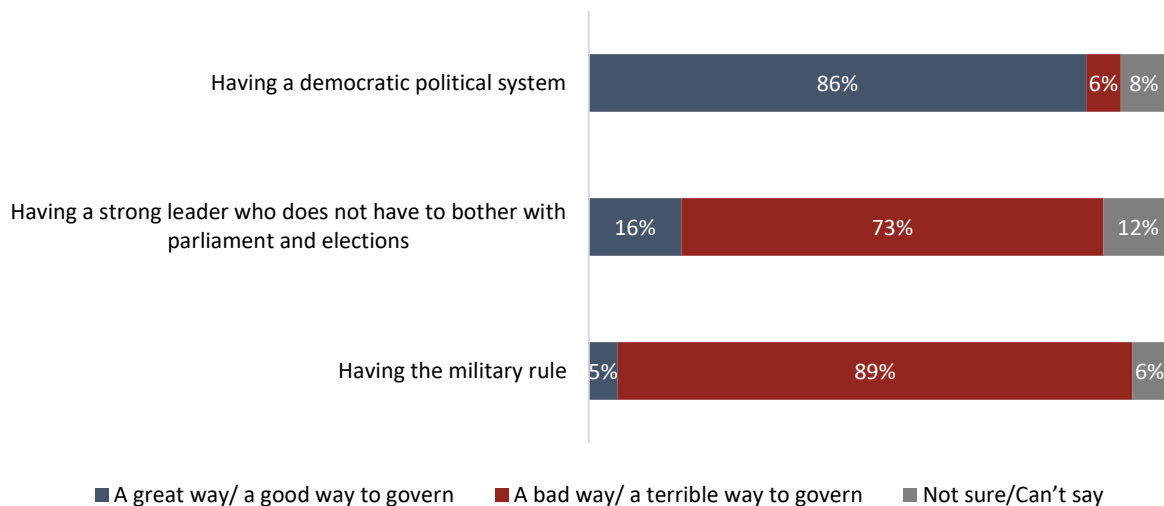
Asked if having a democratic political system is good or bad way to govern society, nearly nine-in-ten (86%) Canadians affirm its value. Six per cent disagree and eight per cent are unsure.

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Perhaps more notable, however, are the 16 per cent of Canadians who say that having a strong leader who does not bother with parliament or elections is also a good way to govern. An additional 12 per cent do not disagree but say that they are not sure if it is good or bad. This adds up to approximately one-quarter (28%) of Canadians who do not eschew the idea of authoritarianism as a form of good governance. Few have any appetite for military rule:

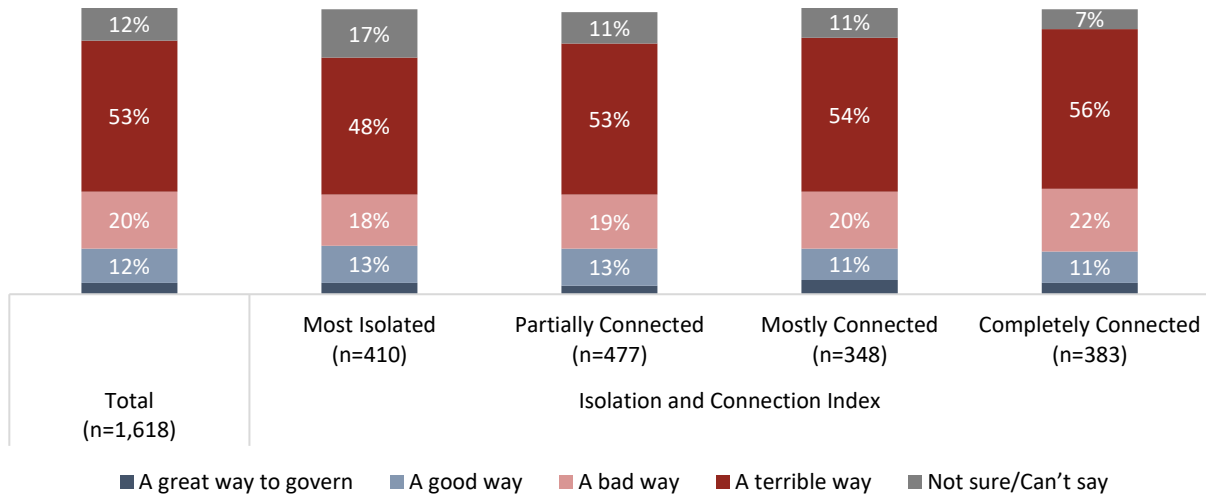
**When it comes to Canada, do you believe each of these would be a good or bad way to govern?
(All respondents, n=1,618)**



Those who are Most Isolated also most likely to see value in undemocratic leadership: with equal numbers saying they think it would be a good or great form of governance (17%) or that they are not sure how they feel about it (17%).

When it comes to Canada, do you believe each of these would be a good or bad way to govern?

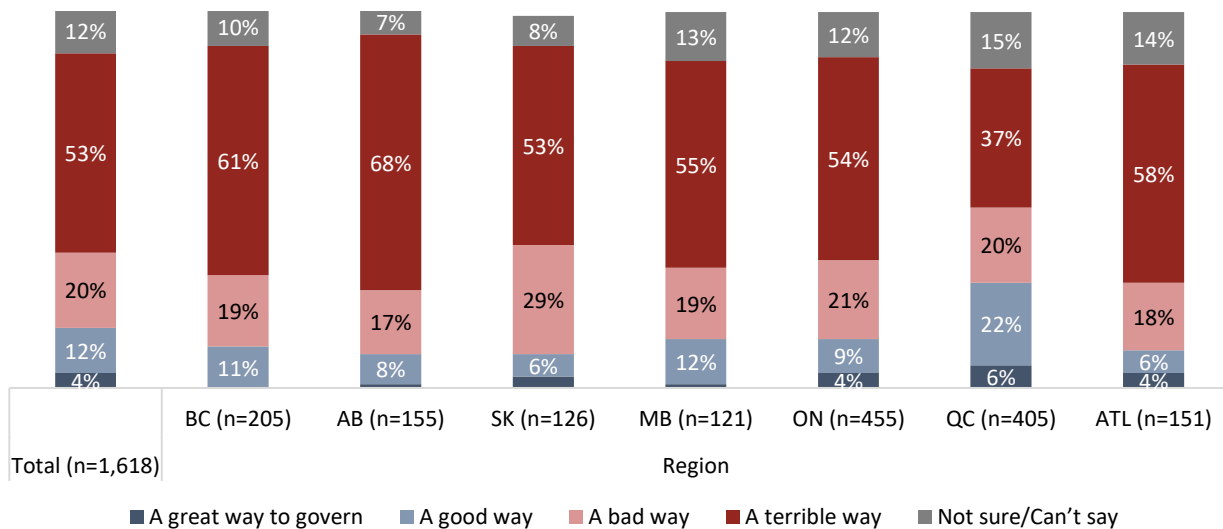
"Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections"



Notably, [some commentators](#) have recently criticized Quebec for its government's [authoritarian tendencies](#) with recent [language](#) and [religious freedom](#) laws. Regionally, that province is most likely to profess and acceptance of this concept, with 28 per cent saying it is a good or great way to govern. Albertans are most likely to say this is a "terrible" form of government:

When it comes to Canada, do you believe each of these would be a good or bad way to govern?

"Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections"

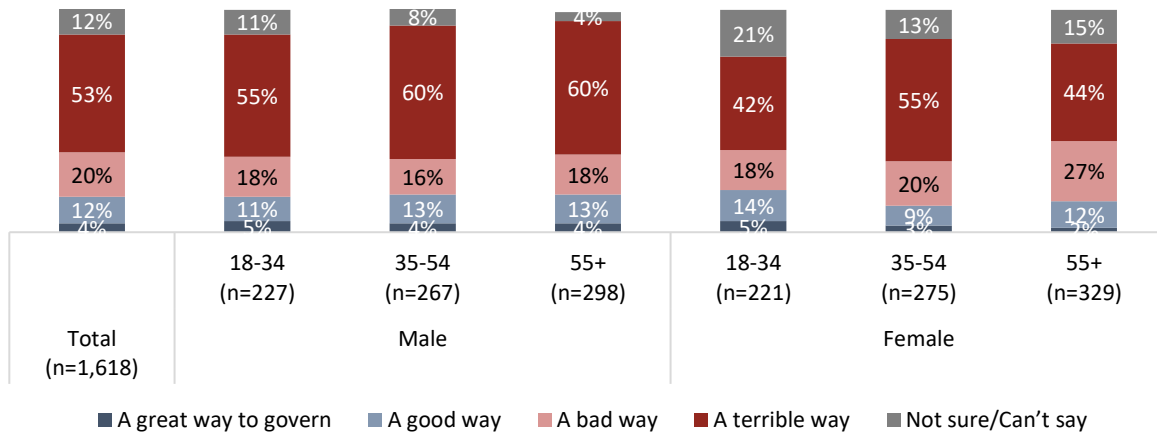


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There are pockets of support for anti-democratic governance across all age and gender groups, though all groups lean heavily toward opposition. Men over the age of 35 are most vehement in their rejection:

**When it comes to Canada, do you believe each of these would be a good or bad way to govern?
"Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections"**

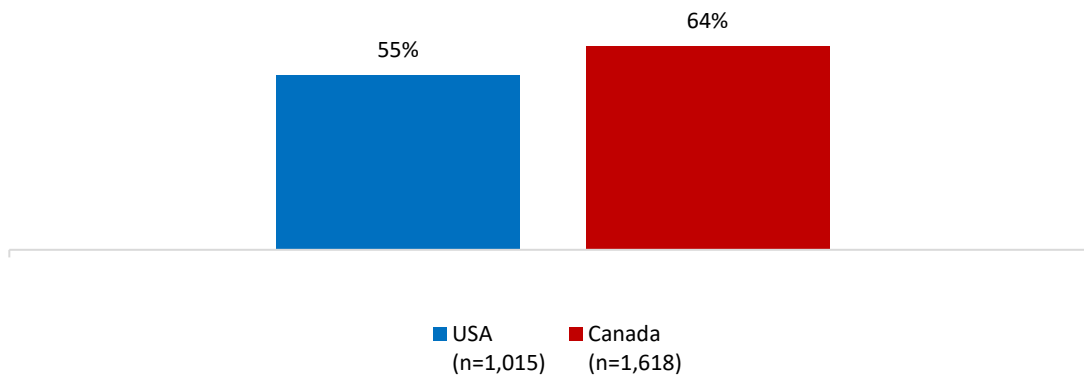


Part Three: Americans down on democratic governance

On Jan. 6, 2021, rioters stormed the U.S. capitol in an attempt to overturn the election of President Joe Biden after being incited by the president at the time, Donald Trump. Hearings to investigate the attack have since subpoenaed Trump after identifying him “as the centre of the first and only effort by any U.S. President to overturn an election and obstruct a peaceful transition of power.” Trump has claimed, without evidence, there was widespread voter fraud in the 2020 election which led to his defeat.

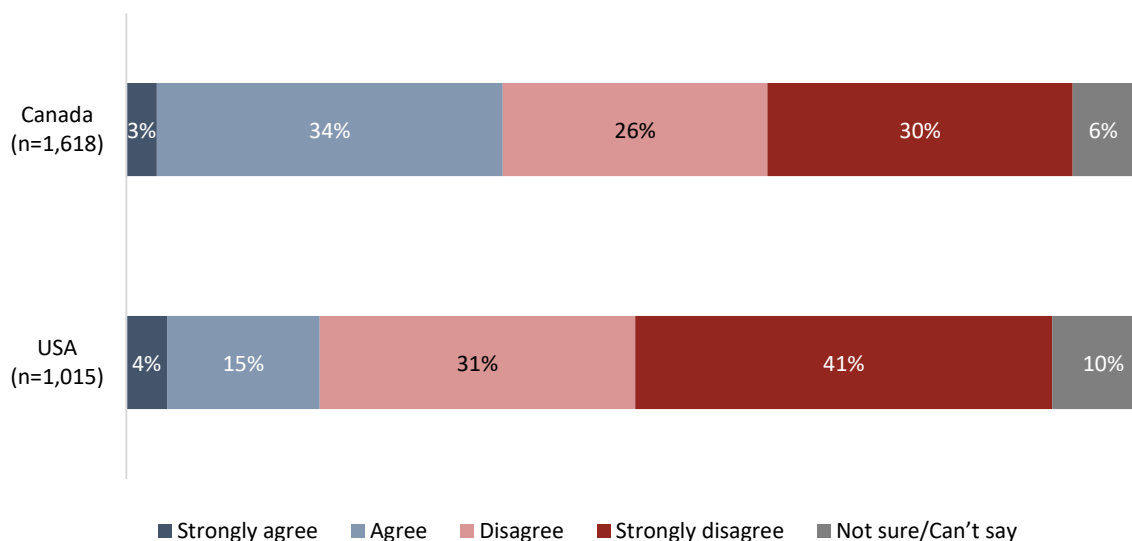
The shaking of the foundation of American democracy comes as many on both sides of the border share feelings of powerlessness and unfairness with the system around them. More than half (55%) of Americans say they feel they have no effect on political decisions that affect them; two-thirds of Canadians say the same (64%).

Agree vs. disagree -
"It's impossible for people like me to have any real influence on the political decisions that affect me"



However, Americans have much lower trust in government than their northern neighbours. One-in-five Americans (19%) say they generally trust their government to act in their best interests, half the rate of Canadians (37%):

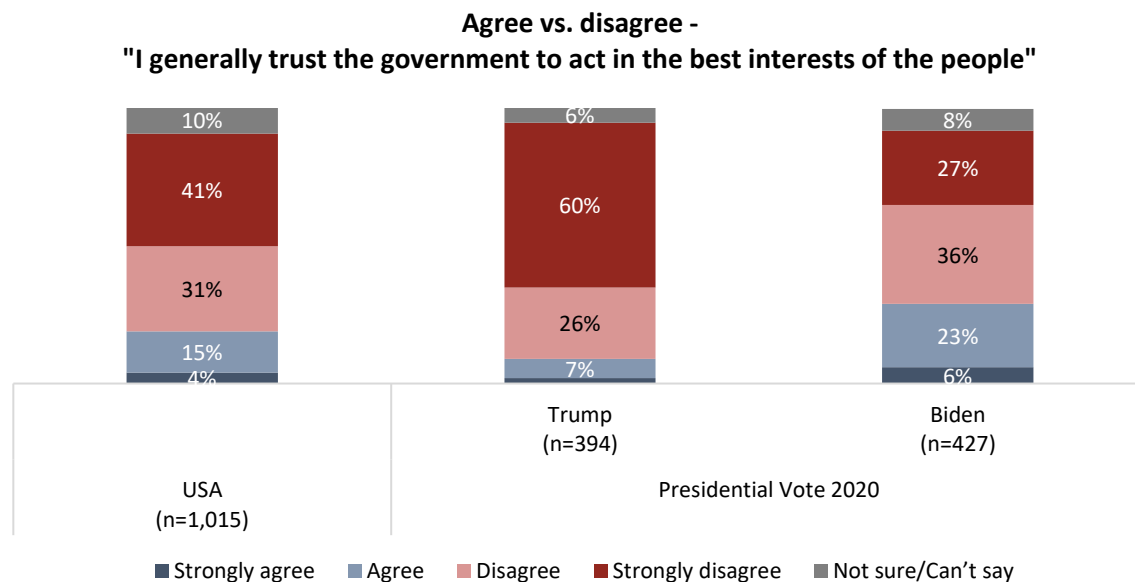
Agree vs. disagree -
"I generally trust the government to act in the best interests of the people"



Distrust in government is the majority view across all demographics in the United States. Men over the age of 54 (80%) are most likely to say they don't believe the government acts in the people's best

interests. Women aged 35- to 54-years-old (24%) are most likely to say they have faith in their government ([see detailed tables](#)).

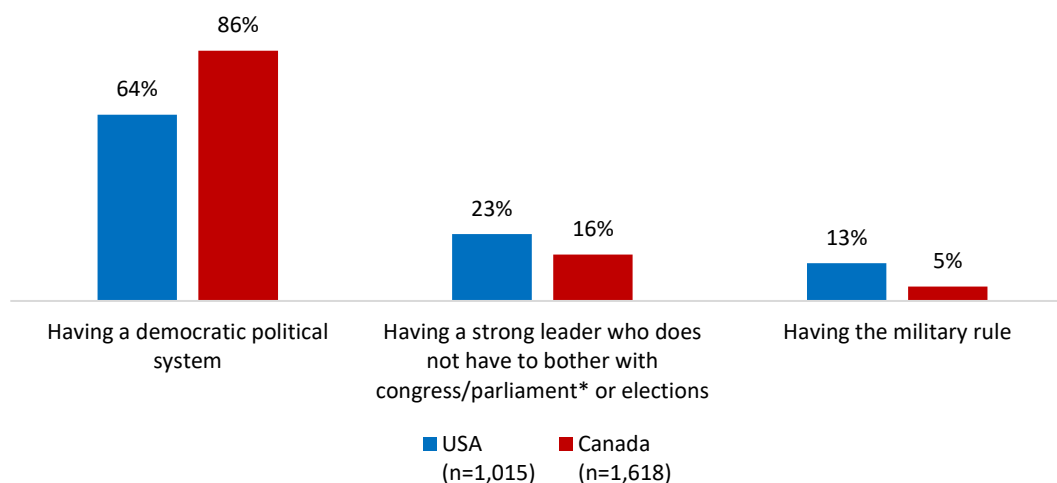
While those who voted for Trump in 2020 are much more likely than those who voted for Biden to say they don't trust in the government to act in their best interests, faith in government is also the minority opinion among past Biden voters:



Nearly nine-in-ten (86%) Canadians say democracy is a great or good way to govern their country. Fewer Americans (64%) agree. Additionally, approaching one-quarter (23%) in the U.S. believe the country would be well served by having a strong leader who does not have to bother with congress or elections.

When it comes to your country, do you believe each of these would be a good or bad way to govern?

(Percent who say 'a great way' or 'a good way to govern' shown)



**Americans were asked about congress or elections, Canadians were asked about parliament or elections*

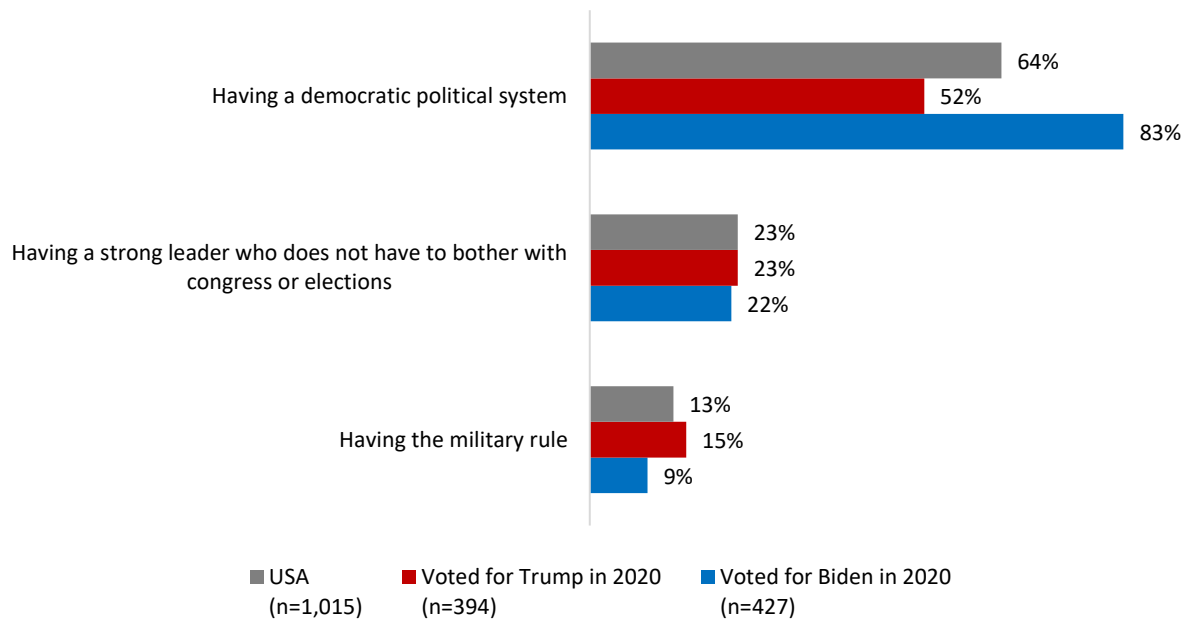
American men over the age of 54 (80%) are the most likely demographic to describe authoritarianism as a bad or terrible way to govern. Women aged 35 to 54 are much less likely to believe that (46%) and the most likely to say it would be a good or great system (32%) for the United States to have [\(see detailed tables\)](#).

Among Republicans, there is less belief in democracy than among Democrats. Half (52%) of those who voted for Trump in the 2020 presidential election say democracy is a good or great system for the United States, a mark much lower than the proportion of past Biden voters (83%) who say the same. However, both groups of past voters (23% Trump voters, 22% Biden voters) are as likely to believe that authoritarianism would be a good system for the United States:

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When it comes to United States, do you believe each of these would be a good or bad way to govern?



For detailed results in Canada by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

For Isolation and Connection Index demos in Canada, [click here](#).

For results by Isolation and Connection Index in Canada, [click here](#).

For detailed results in the U.S. by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

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