

At last, encouraging news about democracy:

Two report cards this week indicate Canadians can tell the difference between politics and government

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Is it possible for Canadians to hate politics but still believe in government?

Two different report cards have been issued this week on Canadian democracy. One, from the Samara organization and a subsequent CBC debate, found that our [politics are dismally “broken.”](#) [But a large new study](#), released Friday by the Broadbent Institute, shows that most Canadians still believe in government and the use of its powers to tax and build connections between citizens. Even more heartening: the belief in government is higher among younger Canadians.

It may seem like a contradiction, but it is actually a distinction — one that is not just interesting, but important in an election year for Canada.

The two report cards serve as a combined warning about what kind of election the citizens want this year. If it’s all about silly politics as usual, Canadians aren’t interested. The Broadbent Institute study, however, shows that it may be possible to pull Canadians into a conversation about how they want to be governed.

Politicians on the campaign trail — and we in the media — might be wise to remember that distinction.

So here’s the encouraging democratic news in the Broadbent Institute’s new study, which is being released at the same time as its [annual conference hosted this weekend in Ottawa](#).

- A full 62 per cent of respondents say personal taxes should remain the same or be increased. Only 22 per cent said taxes should be reduced to cut the size of government.
- More than two-thirds of respondents over 35 said it shouldn’t be only up to the private sector to create jobs; that government has a role too. That proportion climbs among the under-35 age group, in which 77 per cent say the private sector alone can’t be responsible for job creation.

The study was carried out by University of Saskatchewan political scientist David McGrane, using post-election surveys from provincial elections held from 2011 to the end of 2014. A total of 8,121 Canadians took part in these surveys.

<http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2015/03/27/at-last-encouraging-news-about-democracy-delacourt.html>

The findings, hailed as good news for “progressives” in Canada, are a counterweight reply to a poll released earlier this month at the big Ottawa conference of the Manning Centre. No surprise, really — the Manning Centre gathering convenes right-wing thinkers; the Broadbent Institute, named for former NDP leader Ed Broadbent, [is the mirror image](#) on the left.

The Manning Centre’s poll, as I wrote here a few weeks ago, asserted that when Canadians are asked whether they favour tax cuts or spending, an overwhelming majority preferred tax cuts. I suspected at the time, though, that the answer might have been different if people were asked about specific spending — investments, say, in protecting or enhancing Canadians’ quality of life.

It’s not that easy to draw a straight line between politics and government, especially in hyper-partisan Ottawa these days, when government ads double as pre-election advertising and every foreign-policy utterance from the prime minister is sent out as a fundraising letter to donors. Governments are formed by politicians, after all.

The blurred lines between politics and government were on display too when [CBC staged its big debate](#) on Thursday night around the question: “Is Politics Broken?” (The result was a resounding Yes, based on the 79 per cent of the audience who rendered their verdict after the 90-minute debate.)

On the Yes and the No side, however, there seemed to be agreement that partisan excesses were getting in the way of good government. Like most Canadians, it seems, the debaters were optimists about governing, and pessimists about politics.

There is one more reason, looming just past this year’s election, that we may want to wrap our minds around where politics stops and government starts. It’s the very real prospect of an unclear result — with none of the parties having a clear majority to govern after the ballots are counted.

If that discussion descends into pure politics — as it did during the “coalition crisis” after the 2008 election — then the serious matter of government formation will turn into a circus, complete with protesters and placards and whipped-up political-marketing campaigns.

Other countries, notably Britain, have avoided this nonsense with soberly negotiated manuals on how to form governments after unclear results. While there has been talk of building such a how-to book in Canada, we don’t have such a manual. We should have one, and all the political party leaders should make that a summer project before the fall campaign.

Judging from the two report cards issued this week, Canadians can still tell the difference between politics and government. The final exams are coming though, in the election and its potential aftermath. A failing grade looms for those who will use those events to turn broken politics into broken faith in government.