

**Reform of Democratic Institutions:
Institution Most Needing Repair—
The Senate and Not the Electoral System, Media, or
Parties**

**Most Important Reform Goal—
Honesty, Efficiency, Lower Taxes and
Not More Public Participation**

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1.0 Introduction

The COMPAS panel of CEOs and business leaders was asked about their priorities for reform of the Canadian democratic system. The survey follows a period of heightened interest in democratic issues reflected in activities at the Institute for Research on Public Policy (Montreal), the Frontier Centre for Public Policy (Winnipeg and Regina), the Canada West Foundation (Calgary and Vancouver) and Manning Centre (Calgary), and years of research by Canadian political scientists.

The Martin and Harper governments as well as successive PQ governments have been interested in these issues. The biggest recent effort to involve the public in discussions of democratic reform was the British Columbia Citizens Assembly in 2005, mapped out for the provincial government by former Liberal leader Gordon Gibson and chaired by former Simon Fraser University President Jack Blaney.

The business panel takes a somewhat different perspective on democratic process issues from many of the researchers, scholars, politicians, and thinktanks interested in the issue. Those focused on the issue tend to emphasize aspects of participation including engagement, commitment, democratic values, trust, youth, and fairness in participation. The business panel places participation at the bottom of its concerns. It emphasizes instead greater honesty/transparency and efficiency in government as the most important goals of democratic reform.

In the eyes of the business panel, greater voter engagement is the least important of several possible reforms to attain. Transformation of the Senate is the most important in their view.

COMPAS' statistical analysis of the data points to panelists' desire for greater honesty and transparency in government as the major reason for their desire for Senate reform.

These are the principal findings from the weekly business web-survey conducted by COMPAS for the *Financial Post* under sponsorship of BDO Dunwoody LLP. This is number 274 in the weekly CEO survey.

2.0 Senate Reform the Overwhelming Priority

Senate reform is by far the greatest priority for the panel, as shown in table 2A. Modification of the electoral system or electoral rules is the lowest priority. The following verbatims provide a flavour of respondents' sentiments, which tend to be skeptical of the benefits of changes to the electoral system while focused on Senate reform:

Senate reform could and should provide the regional or provincial elected MP's to address the national unity and other balance/fairness issues.

So called "experts" who advocate electoral change are doing a far better job of communicating the benefits of those changes than those who defend the current system. B.C. almost voted to reform its electoral system in 2005 without anyone in authority taking the time to provide accurate comparison of the two systems in question.

I do not think the electoral system is a problem and I am not convinced a change would make an improvement. I am more concerned about the quality of public debate on key issues.

[Abolition of the Senate] needs to be done as soon as possible as Senators serve no real function.

Not all respondents oppose a focus on electoral system issues or favour Senate abolition. Several called for more frequent re-drawing of boundaries to keep up with the west's growth in population. A defender of the Senate had this to say: "The Senate may not be democratic but it is not chosen by an often ill-informed electorate and it brings a great deal of knowledge to an often ill-conceived political party's policies."

Table 2A: (Q2-3) Thinking of specific features of our political system, which of the following works best or least badly; Which of these needs improvement most of all? RANDOMIZE

	% Best	%Worst (needs improvement)	Gap: Best-Worst
The <u>electoral system</u> including the fact that we elect one M.P. per riding instead of choosing several for a province or region of the country, as some people propose	44	16	28
<u>Journalists</u> , including how intelligent and fair-minded they are in reporting how governments make policy and spend taxpayers' money	12	12	0
Our <u>political parties</u> including their role communicating to voters and making policy	14	15	-1
The <u>House of Commons</u> including the ways in which M.P.'s conduct themselves	9	13	-4
<u>Voters</u> , including how much they know about the political system and how engaged they are in the process	8	12	-4

	% Best	% Worst (needs improvement)	Gap: Best-Worst
The <u>Senate</u> including the fact that they are appointed	4	30	-26
Don't know or no opinion	9	2	NA

Support for Senate reform emerges from panelists' concerns about honesty and transparency. As is evident in table 2B, honesty/transparency and efficiency top the priorities while increased public participation trails at the bottom.

Table 2B: (Q1) Both the previous federal government and the current one have been giving thought to whether and how our political institutions should be changed. Which of the following objectives would be most important for Canada to achieve if our system of government were reformed? RANDOMIZE

	%
Greater honesty and transparency in government operations	27
More efficient spending	27
Lower taxes	21
Better government policy in the policy area (e.g. health, environment, defence) that you value most	21
More public participation	4
Don't know or no opinion	0

Panelists as a whole favour Senate reform as a priority, as shown in table 2A. The desire for Senate reform is especially strong among those who prioritize honesty/transparency as the most important objective of any democratic reform. Among this subgroup, 44% prioritize the Senate as the institution most needing reform. This compares with 31% among panelists as a whole and no respondents among the few most concerned that democratic reform enhance public participation.

3.0. Ministers—Their Role Should Be Larger vis-à-vis Public Servants

Panelists were asked for their views on a longstanding reform issue, the relative influence on policy of elected officials as opposed to professional public servants. Panelists favour a greater role for ministers and their political staffs in policy formation, as shown in table 3A. Panelists believe that Ministers should

have a greater role for reasons of democratic principle, as shown in table 3B. Indeed, the perceived connection between democratic principle and elected officials drives the strong support for an increased authority for Ministers.^[1]

On a separate matter, panelists agree that Ministers should be personally liable for waste through corrupt practices. They are divided on the issue of whether increased influence for Ministers would bring about policy instability (table 3B).

Table 3A: (Q4) It is generally accepted that politicians leave most policy decisions to public servants because Ministers don't have enough time, enough politically appointed advisors, or enough interest to get involved with most issues. Would you say that the influence of politicians compared to public servants is

	%
Too little	53
About right	33
Too much	10
Don't know or no opinion	5

Table 3B: (Q5) Using a 7 point agreement scale where 7 means agree strongly and 1, disagree strongly, please indicate your view of the following diverse opinions on the role of politicians.

RANDOMIZE

	Mean	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	DNK
In a real democracy, Ministers should have a larger role in making policy than they now do	5.1	18	24	23	20	7	6	0	2
The law should make ministers personally liable for money wasted through corrupt practices	4.5	25	14	17	10	6	12	14	3
Canada would be unstable if politicians made a lot of decisions because these decisions could change every time a government changed	3.9	5	17	16	18	21	15	8	2

4.0. The Electoral System—Local MPs' Ties Paramount

Canada's Westminster or first-past-the-post electoral system is accepted by most experts as emphasizing local ties to elected politicians. Variations on

multi-member ridings or proportional representation could reduce such ties, could reduce the possibility of majority governments, and could increase the influence of truly national as opposed to regionally based parties.

Panelists value above all the local linkage aspect of the current electoral system, as shown in tables 4A-C.

Table 4A: (Q6) Some experts say that our present system gives each MP stronger local ties than MPs would have if each riding were a province or region with many MPs, as some people propose. On a 7 point scale where 7 means very valuable and 1, the opposite, how much value do you place on an electoral system that fosters local ties for each MP?

Mean	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	DNK
5.6	34	29	18	9	2	5	3	0

Table 4B: (Q7) Some experts say that our present system makes it easier to get majority governments than it would be in a system where each riding were a province or region with many MPs. On a 7 point scale where 7 means very valuable and 1, the opposite, how much value do you place on an electoral system that encourages majority governments?

Mean	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	DNK
5.0	20	25	21	18	2	6	6	2

Table 4C: (Q8) Some experts say that our present system weakens national unity because regionally-based parties like the Bloc get more MPs elected under our present rules than they would in a system where each riding were a province or region with many MPs. On a 7 point scale where 7 means very valuable and 1, the opposite, how much value do you place on having an electoral system that fosters national unity?

Mean	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	DNK
5.0	26	17	20	17	8	6	6	1

5.0 Methodology

The COMPAS web-survey of CEOs and leaders of small, medium, and large corporations was conducted January 17 – 19, 2007. Respondents constitute an essentially hand-picked panel with a higher numerical representation of small and medium-sized firms.

Because of the small population of CEOs and business leaders from which the sample was drawn, the study can be considered more accurate than comparably sized general public studies. In studies of the general public, surveys 129 are deemed accurate to within approximate 8.7 percentage points 19 times out of 20. The principal and co-investigator on this study are Conrad Winn, Ph.D. and Tamara Gottlieb.

^[1] Agreement with the opinion that ministers should have greater power for reasons of democratic principle (table 3B) is dramatically higher among respondents who believe that ministers have too little influence on policy (mean score of 5.9) than among who believe ministers' influence is about right (mean score of 4.1).