

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

# OUR NATIONAL MOOD HAS TURNED DOUR

When citizens look at our institutions, they are increasingly skeptical that they contribute to Canada being a better place

OPINION

Nik Nanos is the chief data scientist at Nanos Research, research adjunct professor at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University, a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, and the official pollster for The Globe and Mail and CTV News.

Is Canada broken? Maybe. A new tracking study by Nanos that rates the satisfaction people have with the country and our institutions points to a clear negative trajectory of opinion, with very few bright spots.

This coupled with the latest ballot tracking sets the table for what will be a very tough year for elected officials of all stripes. Canadians will be holding incumbent governments to account. At the same time opposition parties will need to present solutions for a brighter future. We are headed for a collision between the electorate and the elected.

Imagine getting a grade of D on a test in school. Not great, right? That is where people currently score their satisfaction with Canada. We have hit a new low of 5.9 on a 10-point scale – down from 7.2 in 2021. To make matters worse, the score drops to 5.3 for those under the age of 35. Over all, only 52 per cent of Canadians say they are satisfied with Canada as a country – down from 74 per cent in 2021 – while 21 per cent say they are unsatisfied, a figure that has more than doubled since 2021.

Canadians are not quite at the point of giving the country a failing grade, but if the trajectory continues there will be a political reckoning.

It's not all doom and gloom. Nationally about one in three (33 per cent) Canadians (and 43 per cent of Canadians over the age of 55) give a rating of eight, nine or 10 out of 10 (equivalent of an A in school).

When it comes to Canadian institutions, most are on a negative trajectory as well.

Although our universities and colleges top the list in terms of their positive impact on the country, even they have seen a decline – from 7.9 out of 10 in

2021 to 7.1 currently. The steepest drop concerns the health care system. Back in 2021 it scored an 8.0 out of 10. Three years later it's only 6.7. Even the venerable Supreme Court of Canada has slid

in terms of the perceptions it contributes to making Canada a better country – from 7.4 out of 10 in 2021 to 6.6 in 2024.

Some institutions have held their ground over the past four

years, including the Canadian Armed Forces, Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Senate. While some were not exceptionally strong to start, they have not registered dramatic declines.

Of the 11 institutions tracked, only one has registered a year-over-year improvement: Canada's Prime Minister. Back in 2021 the rating was 5.7, then dropped to 4.9 in 2023 and is now 5.5 out of 10.

The key takeaway is that when citizens look at our institutions, they are increasingly skeptical that they contribute to Canada being a better place.

Within that context, it should come as no surprise that since last summer, Pierre Poilievre's Conservatives have opened and maintained a comfortable lead over the Liberals, according to Nanos tracking. With the Conservatives at 40-per-cent support, the Liberals at 25 per cent and the NDP at 21 per cent, Mr. Poilievre is poised to win a majority government when an election is called.

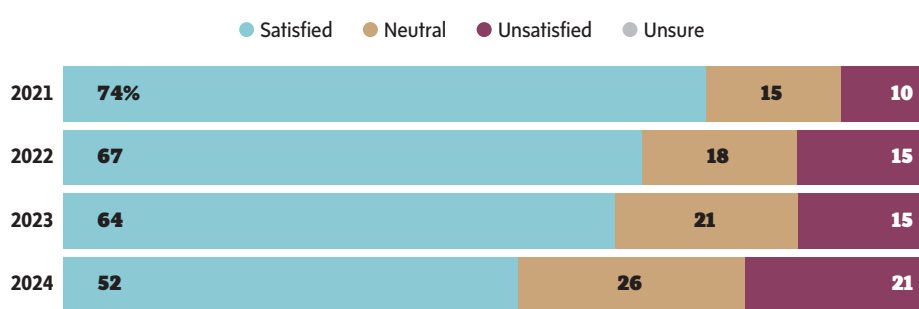
The preferred prime minister numbers are not much better for the Liberals. Justin Trudeau trails Mr. Poilievre by 14 percentage points. Usually, incumbent prime ministers enjoy an advantage merely by sitting in the PM's chair – not so for Mr. Trudeau.

As Canadians struggle to pay for housing and groceries, their sights are firmly focused on the Liberals. After all, if one is struggling to pay for housing and groceries, do you really have much to lose by voting for the opposition? For now, those Canadians have put Mr. Poilievre in the political driver's seat. As the Conservatives look like a potential government-in-waiting, Canadians deserve details on his vision and what his plan is to make Canada a better place. His failure on that front will put him on the political hot seat.

Could the Liberals turn things around? Yes. It has happened before. But a turnaround is more the exception than the rule. You need to run a near-perfect campaign and hope your opponents stumble at the same time – no easy feat for the Liberals. It is not enough for the Liberals to smear their opponents, they need to articulate why Canadians should give them another mandate.

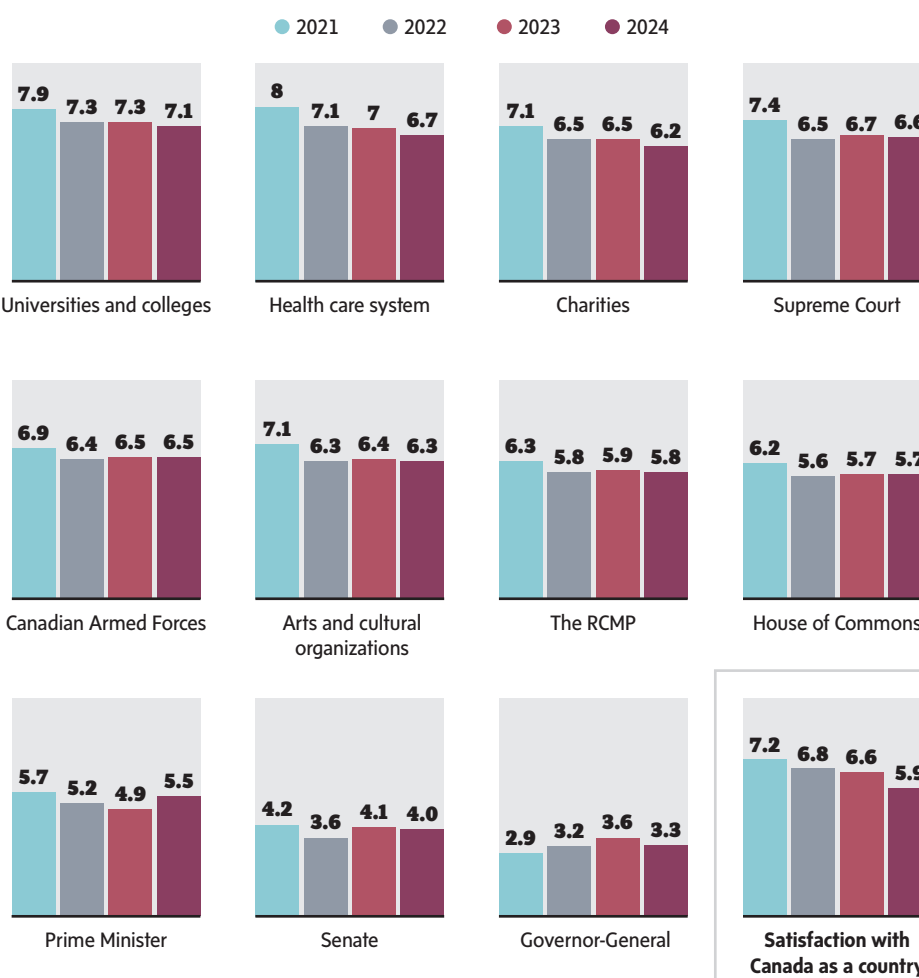
The good news for the Conservatives is that they enjoy a significant advantage over the Liberals. The bad news for the Conservatives is that the election is not today.

## Satisfaction with Canada



Note: Numbers may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

### Institutions that contribute to making Canada a better country (mean rates out of 10)



MURAT YÜKSELİR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH

# Indonesia may face new era of democratic decay

MICHAEL VATIKIOTIS SINGAPORE

OPINION

Author who has written about Indonesia for more than four decades and has published three books on Southeast Asian politics, including, most recently, *Blood and Silk: Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia*

Pop music blared and a pair of blow-up dummies waddled on stage in a downtown Jakarta theatre complex in early February accompanied by a troupe of gyrating young dancers. The crowd of mostly twentysomethings went wild.

The dummies bore a passing resemblance to the two leading candidates in this year's Indonesian presidential election – Prabowo Subianto, the Defence Minister and a former army general standing for president, and Gibran Rakabuming Raka (the incumbent President's son) running to be his vice-president.

There is some 40 years' age difference between them, but their blow-up avatars depict them as a pair of cute and cuddly figures. A light-blue jacket worn by many of the young crowd of several hundred identifies them as the "Cute Squad."

The symbolism is beguiling but misleading.

On Feb. 14, almost 205 million people will vote in one of the biggest of the many elections being held across the globe this year. For the past two decades, every five years these mighty electoral contests have celebrated Indonesia's liberation from a long era of autocracy and repression that ended in 1998. But many Indonesians are concerned that this year's vote marks the first since then that could be subject to state manip-

ulation and produce a skewed result, amounting to a democratic regression.

There is widespread reporting of state resources being used to influence voters and the use of law-enforcement agencies to undermine the challenge to Mr. Prabowo and Mr. Gibran by two rival candidates. Specifically, there are allegations that regional election boards are being pressured to ensure victory for Mr. Prabowo and Mr. Gibran, who most polls show maintain a narrow lead of more than 40 per cent, still short of the more than 50 per cent they need to win in a first round.

The main reason this may be happening is that in this election, incumbent President Joko Widodo, who has reached the end of his two-term limit, has thrown his weight behind Mr. Prabowo and his young running mate, who happens to be the President's son. The fact that the President, better known by his nickname Jokowi, still enjoys more than 70-per-cent popularity ratings, means that his preference, and the power of the presidency, can easily skew the race.

Mr. Prabowo is a formidable candidate in his own right. The former general is making his third bid for president and came close to defeating Mr. Joko in 2019. The 72-year-old has benefited from a significant social-media makeover that has transformed the temperamental soldier's soldier haunted by accusations of human-rights abuse into an avuncular figure given to spontaneous outbursts of dancing that have endeared him to the young generation of under-30s, which makes up half the voter base in this country of 273 million people.

Mr. Prabowo is an old-school nationalist. His father was one of the country's pioneering econo-

many young Indonesians are inclined to support the strongman nationalism he projects in his fist-thumping speeches.

He is up against two younger, more sophisticated and mild-mannered candidates. Anies Baswedan, 54, is an overseas-educated former university rector who was elected governor of Jakarta and served briefly as education minister in the Joko administration. He presents a quiet competence, but worries some because of his conservative Muslim support base.

Ganjar Pranowo, 55, was Mr. Joko's first choice to support in this race, but the silver-haired former governor was seen as too close to the party machinery of former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, who has sparred with Mr. Joko because he has refused to submit to party discipline and her will.

Both Mr. Anies and Mr. Ganjar trail Mr. Prabowo by around 20 points in most published polls, though the trend shows they are catching up and many of those polled have not been willing to express their preference.

Here lies the challenge for Indonesia's democratic future. Despite almost three decades of democratic reform, personality and patronage are the main drivers of political power. There are more than two dozen political parties, but they tend to just be vehicles, or escalators, for political ambition and power.

In addition to this, Mr. Joko has effectively concentrated executive power over the past decade, often using authoritarian means. Civil society feels constrained by regulations governing freedom of expression and police intimidation. Student activists who once spearheaded noisy protests against corruption and the abuse of power have had their phones hacked and visits to

mists. He believes passionately in food self-sufficiency and has pledged to address the country's chronic social-welfare needs, something that surveys show young people care about. For all the contrast between his actual age and the caricatured cuteness cultivated by the campaign,

many young Indonesians are inclined to support the strongman nationalism he projects in his fist-thumping speeches.

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their families by police.

There are therefore those who see the seeds of democratic decay in Mr. Joko's bid to retain influence and engineer continuity for his policies. Ahead of this election, Mr. Joko considered ways to extend his term in office.

So why hasn't there been more popular concern about this threat to democracy? Indonesia has enjoyed a remarkably long era of untrammelled freedom. But that hasn't translated into well-being for ordinary Indonesians – rural poverty rates hover around 12 per cent, but the numbers of "precariously non-poor" are much higher. Not surprisingly then, the stress Mr. Prabowo lays on social welfare and top-down policies to build new homes, provide subsidized food and increase access to health care strikes a chord with voters.

If he wins, Mr. Prabowo could pursue the kinds of centralized developmental policies that were favoured by ousted autocrat General Suharto in the 1980s, which came at the expense of democracy. (Incidentally, Gen. Suharto's daughter Titiek, who was Mr. Prabowo's wife for 15 years, is standing for election under the banner of Mr. Prabowo's Gerindra Party in Central Java.)

Behind the slick TikTok videos promoting Mr. Prabowo's cuteness with their disarming disco-music accompaniment lies a potential resurgence of hard power in the name of national development. The hope for supporters of both Mr. Anies and Mr. Ganjar is that voters will deny Mr. Prabowo a first-round victory. Then the question will be whether, in a second round of voting almost four months later, Indonesians will be more alarmed about the threat to their democracy and cast their vote for reform rather than regression.