

Issues & Ideas

U.S. system inspires more confidence

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Canadians feel less empowered by their political system than Americans do, according to a new poll.

When asked the question: "If there was a political issue I really cared about, I think I could make a difference by participating in the political process," 73% of Americans agreed, compared to 58% of Canadians, said a poll released today by the **Dominion Institute**.

"In Canada, we look to the United States and see the ... president and we often assume the Americans have a much more executive driven government ...; that the American system may not be as open to citizens making a difference through formal participation in the political process," said Rudyard Griffiths, executive director of the **Dominion Institute**.

"This poll reveals the immense powers of the office of the prime minister. His control over the process of appointments within the government and as both the prime minister and leader of a party, his ability to introduce legislation and drive the legislative agenda That process over a decade, before this minority government [was elected in 2004], really gave Canadians the sense that their participation didn't mean that much."

The poll conducted by Innovative Research Group also surveyed the intensity of people's feelings: 38% of Americans strongly agreed compared to 21% of Canadians. It also showed that one-in-three (36%) Canadians and a quarter (22%) of Americans refused to believe that they would not make a difference.

In Canada, the most optimistic residents are found in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (69%) while Quebecers are the least optimistic (51%).

Nelson Wiseman, who teaches political science at the University of Toronto, believes Americans may feel more empowered because they actually have more power.

"That's why people in the States say write your Congressman," he said. "In the U.S., Congressmen can vote and they do vote across party-lines all of the time." When do Canadian MPs do that? asked Prof. Wiseman.

Canada's system is based on party government and members of parliament tend to side with their party's policies, he said.

"If George Bush proposes something to Congress and it loses, he doesn't have to resign. But [the prime minister] would have to here. That's the tight party discipline that keeps MPs glued to their parties. They may hate the policy, but they daren't vote against it."

He added: "In the U.S. if you want to run for Congress, you can run for the Democrats or the Republicans if you win the primary. In Canada, if you want to run for the Liberals, Paul Martin has to sign your nomination papers."

Mr. Griffiths noted that there may be a correlation between Canadians feeling less relevant to the political process and the declining number of voters going to the polls.

"If we're going to continue to have the benefits of a democracy, then we've got to be looking for opportunities for political reform to address the kinds of cynicism that Canadians share."