

HOW WELL IS CANADA'S PUBLIC SERVICE DOING?

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Introduction

Amidst an accelerating period of change, Canada has reached an inflection point. A new government with new objectives and new approaches is in power, amidst a new crisis reshaping the country's relationship with its closest neighbor. It is a time of change for the country, and part of that change will be to the public service.

Ideas for what can be done and what must be done are many and varied. Sorting through them requires a clear idea of the state of Canada's public service. How well is Canada's public service doing? This paper is an examination of, to the extent it exists, longitudinal data on Canada's public service and public sector performance over time, ranked against other countries where possible to start to answer that question. The Canadian public service continues to be held in high standing and seen as one of the best in the world,¹ but there are signs of trouble, weakening perceptions of key services and disappointing performance in key areas. While perceptions are still broadly good, while Canada is seen as having a strong starting point, there are clear signs that course correction is needed.

A Top Position

At a world scale, Canada is considered a leading example of strong public administration and an effective public service. It rates highly in comparative indices of public administrations and public service outcomes, seen as a shining example to follow, and generally holds a steady position there over time.

The inaugural 2024 *Blavatnik Index of Public Administration*, a project of Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government aiming at benchmarking public administrations and civil services (rather than public sector outcomes) around the world, placed Canada third best among 120.² Its 2019 predecessor *International Civil Service Effectiveness Index*, covering only OECD countries, gave Canada a similar showing of third.³ The *Blavatnik Index* ranks Canada fourth in all four of its domains - strategy and leadership, public policy, national delivery (the ability to oversee the delivery of public services), and people and processes. Meanwhile, the *Chandler Good Government Index*, aimed more broadly at public sector performance and with an eye towards outcomes, ranks Canada 14th of 120 as of 2025, with a stable score and little change in place since the index's 2021 launch. In all five years, it has tied for first on the quality of bureaucracy subindicator.⁴

More focused indices show Canadian strengths as well. The most public administration-focused dimension of Bertelsmann Stiftung's *Sustainable Governance Indicators*, *Governing with Foresight* (measuring "the extent to which internal government instruments, processes and structures enable anticipatory governance"⁵), places Canada high as well: tenth of thirty OECD and EU states as of 2024.⁶ In the World Bank's *Statistical Performance Indicators*, focused on

1. As noted four years ago; see Nisrine Dandache, *Is Canada Fit for the Future? A PGI Working Paper* (Ottawa, ON: Public Governance International, 2021), p. 5

2. Data can be found at <https://index.bsg.ox.ac.uk/index-results-2024/>

3. The International Civil Service Effectiveness (InCiSE) Index Results Report 2019 (Oxford, UK: Blavatnik School of Government, 2019), p. 79

4. See the *Chandler Good Government Index 2025* (Singapore: Chandler Institute of Governance, 2025); Canadian data can be found at <https://chandlergovernmentindex.com/countries/canada/>

5. "Governing with Foresight," *Sustainable Governance Indicators*, 2024. https://www.sgi-network.org/2024/Governing_with_Foresight

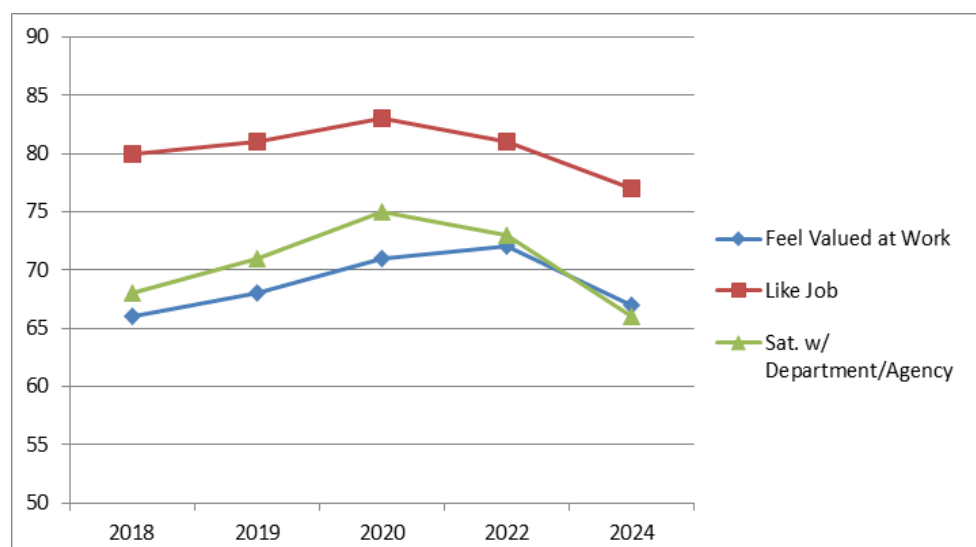
6. Due to a complete overhaul of the SGI for 2024, longitudinal data is not available.

the strength of countries' national statistical systems - broadly, "how well, how broadly, and how frequently national statistical systems collect, produce, and disseminate high-quality data in a publicly accessible manner"⁷ - Canada ranks 11th in the world as of 2023. Canada's relative ranking has been somewhat erratic since the index took its modern form in 2016, anywhere from 6th (2021) to 17th (2018), but it has stayed high and its absolute score has steadily improved.⁸ The World Justice Project's *Rule of Law Index* places Canada at a steady high point; of particular relevance, twelfth in the world for fair and effective implementation and enforcement of regulations, and twelfth for openness of government, largely steady from 2015 through 2024.⁹

Perceptions and Expectations

However, there are troubling signs of declining perceptions of Canada's public service - by public servants themselves, by outside observers, and most problematically by the people the public service serves. Perceptions may seem easy to dismiss as matters of appearance alone, but they are often one of the first warnings of emerging problems. They represent the experiences of people in the public service and people engaging with the public service, the impressions Canadians have of service to Canadians - of service they received. Declines in these perceptions are signs of trouble, and are problems that should be solved.

Figure 1 - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree, Public Service Employee Survey



Source: *Public Service Employee Survey*

Up through the 2020 *Public Service Employee Survey*, internal surveys indicated that Canadian public service morale was high and rising. Results had improved since 2018. Among many findings, 72% strongly or somewhat agreed that they felt valued at work, 81% that they liked their job overall, and 73% that they were satisfied with their department or agency.¹⁰ From there, however, a decline began. By 2024, only 67% reported feeling valued at work. 77% said

7. "Learn about the SPI," *World Bank Statistical Performance Indicators*, n.d., <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/statistical-performance-indicators/about-spi>

8. Data can be found at <https://datanalytics.worldbank.org/SPI/>

9. Canadian data can be found at <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2024/Canada/>

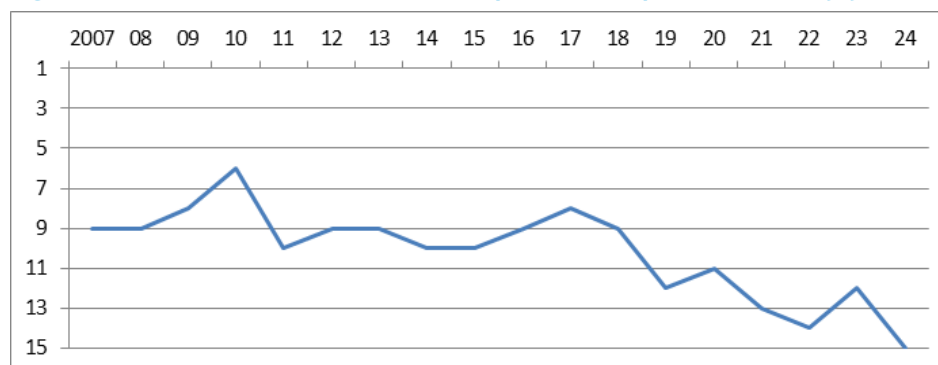
10. "2022 Public Service Employee Survey Results by Theme for the Public Service," *Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat*, <https://www.tbs-sct.canada.ca/ps-es-saff/2022/results-resultats/en/bt-pt/org/00>

they liked their job overall. 66% said they were satisfied with their department or agency.¹¹

Some of the decline is difficult to separate from the context of the 2024 survey - taking place while return-to-office mandates took effect after years of expanded work from home, and amidst a public servant backlash against return-to-office. Notably, from 2022 to 2024, there was a 15% drop in positive answers and doubling of negative answers to “My physical environment (e.g., office, workspace) is suitable for my job requirements,” from 80% positive and 13% negative in 2022, to 65% and 26% in 2024.¹² However, the general trend of decline started prior to the 2024 survey - there is clearly something more to address.

Perhaps more troubling is increasing perceptions that Canada has a public corruption problem. Canada was consistently among the top ten cleanest-perceived states on Transparency International’s *Corruption Perceptions Index*, measuring perceptions of public-sector corruption, from 2007 through 2018. In 2019, it fell to twelfth. As of 2024, the most recent index, it falls fifteenth of 180 states. This is not a strictly relative decline; the underlying absolute score has fallen over time as well as the relative rank.¹³ That being said, in this case, as Transparency International noted when Canada fell out of the top ten in 2019, the initial drop was likely driven substantially by high-profile anti-corruption action, such as British Columbia’s research into money laundering.¹⁴ That the drop has persisted for years afterwards, though, suggests that there is more going on than a moment of anti-corruption activity.

Figure 2 - Canada’s Rank on the Corruption Perceptions Index by year



Source: *Corruption Perceptions Index*

Then there are public perceptions of performance. Public satisfaction with some key public services has, particularly since 2020, been on a notable decline. Per the OECD’s biannual *Government at a Glance* reports, public satisfaction with healthcare drastically dropped after 2020 (perhaps not coincidentally the time of COVID), and satisfaction with education has declined overall over time as well (see Figure 2). Canada is not alone - the percentage of people satisfied with healthcare in particular is declining across the OECD¹⁵ - but it is below the OECD average on healthcare, even if above the average on education satisfaction.¹⁶

11. “2024 Public Service Employee Survey Results for the Public Service,” *Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat*, <https://www.tbs-sct.canada.ca/ps-es-saff/2024/results-resultats/en/bq-pq/org/00>

12. Ibid.

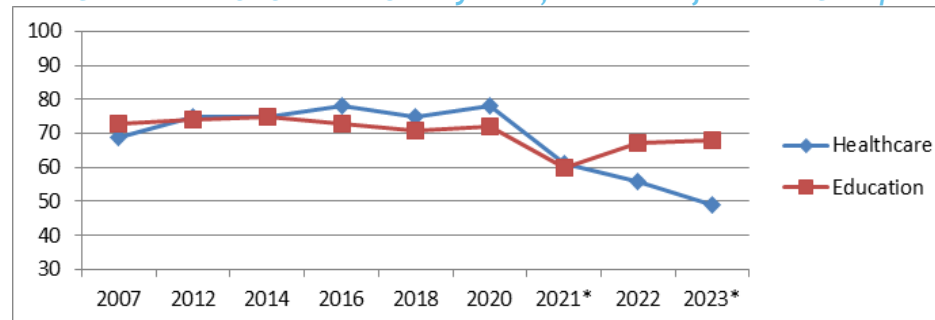
13. General data can be found at <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024>; Canadian data at <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/canada>

14. Transparency International Canada, “Canada Falls from its Anti-Corruption Perch,” *Transparency International*, 25 February 2020, <https://www.transparency.org/en/blog/canada-falls-from-its-anti-corruption-perch>

15. OECD, *Government at a Glance 2025* (Paris, France: OECD Publishing, 2025), p. 68

16. Ibid., pp. 68-71

Figure 3 - Canadian Satisfaction with Healthcare and Education, % Satisfied, OECD Government at a Glance - * = OECD Trust Survey data; otherwise from the Gallup World Poll



Source: Government at a Glance datafiles; * = OECD Trust Survey data; otherwise from the Gallup World Poll

Citizens First, more strictly Canadian, shows a worse pattern more broadly over the same time: after many years of improvement, public satisfaction with government service in general has drastically declined from 2020 to the most recent report in 2023 - federally, from 63% to 48%. The Institute for Citizen-Centred Service, responsible for *Citizens First*, suggests this decline is “part of a larger pattern of social sourness,” pointing to similar patterns of sharply declining customer satisfaction for private-sector services in the United States.¹⁷ Sharp declines in satisfaction from 2020 onwards also suggest the possible influence of the COVID crisis. The message remains clear regardless: many more of the people who need to be satisfied with government services are unsatisfied with government services.

Trouble Underlying

It may be easy, with Canada’s public sector widely recognized as among the best in the world, to dismiss troubling shifts in perceptions, morale, and satisfaction as *just* issues of perception. It may be easy to say that Canada is doing well and thus that there is nothing to worry about. This would be a mistake, and not just because of what those perceptions mean. Canada is broadly a high performer, but it takes work to keep it that way. There are further signs of trouble underneath, additional signs of stagnation or decline, signs that *course corrections are needed*.

E-Government

When the United Nations began benchmarking e-government around the world in 2001, Canada stood out. “Possibly more than any other country,” the inaugural report said, “Canada has demonstrated an uncanny prescience and intrinsic understanding of e-government’s potential and reality” - and if it kept up, it would likely be “a case study on e-gov success for years to come.”¹⁸ By 2003, with the *E-Government Development Index* taking its current structure, Canada placed sixth in the world. In 2010, it reached third place.¹⁹

Since 2010, Canada’s rank on the *E-Government Development Index* has greatly declined, reaching 47th in the world in 2024. This does not necessarily represent a decline in absolute quality - Canada’s underlying score is broadly consistent - but a decline in relative quality

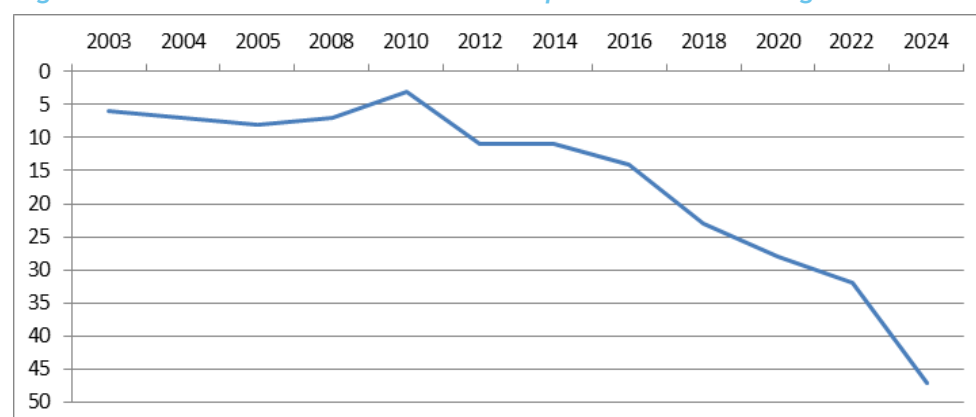
17. *Citizens First 2023 – Highlights of Survey Results*, Citizen First | Citoyens en tête, November 16, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpPafvW6fgY>

18. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Benchmarking E-government: A Global Perspective*. (New York, NY: United Nations, 2002), 36

19. Data from the UN E-Government Knowledgebase: <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Data/Country-Information/id/31-Canada/dataYear/2024>

compared to other states.²⁰ Of the three subindices - the *Online Services Index* on digital services, the *Telecommunications Infrastructure Index* on the underlying national information and communications infrastructure, and the *Human Capital Index* on how well-educated the public is - the *Telecommunications Infrastructure Index* has consistently been Canada's weakest, albeit improving over time.

Figure 4 - Canada's E-Government Development Index Ranking



Source: E-Government Development Index

It is striking that, per OECD data, Canada has consistently been in the upper echelon of OECD countries with regard to how many people visit government web sites, with 82% of adults reporting doing so in 2022, but has fallen near the bottom in terms of people submitting (28% in 2022) or acquiring official forms (25% in 2022, second-lowest in the OECD above Czechia's 23%) - using government web sites.²¹ With web being citizens' preferred method of contact,²² this is a notable gap. Canada has kept many government services offline, and often requires in-person submission of hard-copy forms for otherwise online services.²³ On a matter of service to Canadians, one that is core to many Canadians' interactions with the government, it has fallen behind.

Healthcare

Healthcare is a major part of federal spending and even more so of provincial spending. Canadian healthcare spending, both per capita and as percent of GDP, is very high and has generally been growing higher over time. Per capita, healthcare spending has grown from about \$1988 USD in 2000 to \$6112 in 2023; as percent of GDP, from 8.25% in 2000 to 11.22% in 2023. For the most recent year in which data is available for all G7 states, 2022, Canada's per capita spending of \$6255 was the second-highest in the G7, behind only the distant outlier United States; by percent of GDP, it was a more reasonable third-lowest.²⁴

20. Per the FAQ: "The Survey rates the e-government performance of countries relative to one another, as opposed to being an absolute measurement. This means that a drop in the ranking does not actually mean that e-government development in that country is going backwards. It only implies that there were more countries which scored higher in that edition of the Survey." "Frequently Asked Questions," *UN E-Government Knowledgebase*, n.d., <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/FAQ>

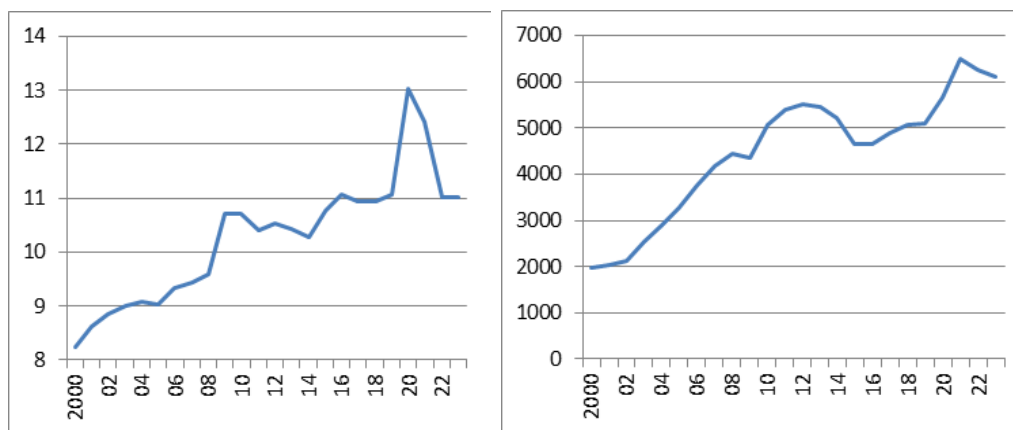
21. "Share of individuals using the Internet to interact with public authorities," *OECD Going Digital Toolkit*, <https://goingdigital.oecd.org/indicator/23>

22. *Citizens First 2023 – Highlights of Survey Results*

23. Craig Lamb, Daniel Munro, and Viet Vu, *Byte-Sized Progress: Assessing Digital Transformation in the Government of Canada* (Toronto, ON: The Dais, 2023), p. 18

24. World Bank data: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.CHEX.PC.CD?end=2023&locations=CA-FR->

Figures 5 and 6 - Healthcare Spending, % of GDP (Left) and USD Per Capita (Right), Canada



Source: World Bank

What is Canada getting for this? Without going into too much detail, there are issues. The second-fewest hospital beds per 1000 people in the G7, consistently low.²⁵ The fewest physicians per 1000, falling behind Japan in recent years.²⁶ Life expectancy right in the middle of the G7, fourth of seven.²⁷ For one of the main foci of government spending, federally and (especially) provincially, the results are not living up to costs and expectations.

Moments of Strain

Individual problem areas continually arise, high-profile failures. These are essentially anecdotal rather than systematic evidence, and for all the damage they do to public perceptions of Canada's public service, they are not as evidentially strong a sign as the more data-driven issues above. These are individual issues that attracted media attention, and not necessarily representative of broader problems. However, they are signals nonetheless, signals worth paying attention to in order to anticipate further potential problems and prevent them before they can emerge.

There have been multiple recent high-profile service failures, crises of major government services failing into severe and widespread delays. In 2022, as the COVID crisis was easing, Service Canada was hit with a massive surge of passport requests, and struggled to keep up. Widespread long queues and wait times to apply were followed all too often by post-application processing delays, a failure on a core service that lasted for months.²⁸ That was an extreme,

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25. World Bank data: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.MED.BEDS.ZS?end=2021&locations=CA-DE-IT-JP-FR-GB-US&start=2000>

26. World Bank data: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.MED.PHYS.ZS?end=2022&locations=CA-DE-IT-JP-FR-GB-US&start=2000>

27. World Bank data: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?end=2023&locations=CA-FR-DE-IT-JP-GB-US&start=2000>

28. Elizabeth McSheffrey, "Lineups, wait times for passport renewal soar as pandemic restrictions end," *Global News*, April 19, 2022; "Minister Gould announces a return to steady state on passport delivery and encourages Canadians to renew ahead of 10-year passports expiry," *Employment and Social Development Canada*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2023/01/minister-gould-announces-a->

if foreseeable, circumstance, and only indicates so much. Current Canada Revenue Agency delays and access issues, in particular the inability of call centres to meet demand or give callers humans to speak to, lack a COVID surge behind them. A problem subject to years of prior recognition and reporting has reached what the Secretary of State in charge of the CRA calls “rock bottom.”²⁹

IT (and IT procurement in particular) is also an area of concern, particularly with unimpressive e-government performance in mind. Poorly controlled and overseen projects, often done through layers of external contracts, keep over-costing and under-performing. The decades-long failure of the Phoenix pay system stands out, “an incomprehensible failure of project management and oversight” in the words of the Auditor General,³⁰ vastly over budget and still an obstacle to paying public servants properly. At a smaller scale (albeit shaped heavily by a global crisis), the COVID-era ArriveCAN app, similarly dependent on third-party contractors, cost far more than budgeted and suffered from severe failures in contracting and financial tracking.³¹ Provincially, similar issues can be seen with SAAQclic, a project to bring Quebec’s auto insurer and vehicle registrar’s services together into a single new digital platform whose contracts went vastly overbudget even before a dysfunctional public launch in 2023; a public inquiry is ongoing. While each of these cases is either a massive-scale project (Phoenix, SAAQclic) or one built under extreme circumstances (ArriveCAN), and thus possible to dismiss as unrepresentative, such repeated problems along such similar lines should be cause for concern.

Conclusion - A Chance to Stay on Good Course

Canada has a world-leading public service. Canada’s public service has a well-recognized place among the world’s best. This is a success, and one that should not be taken for granted. At the same time, Canada has a public service that is showing signs of trouble. There have been alarming drops in morale and in satisfaction, suggesting deeper problems. Struggles with healthcare, stagnation in e-government, and a succession of high-profile momentary crises show clear areas to improve. Good performance writ large is something to be proud of, but it must be protected - and there are warning signs that course corrections are needed to protect it. Waiting for problems to grow clearer and worse is not a viable option. Now is the time to take action.

return-to-steady-state-on-passport-delivery-and-encourages-canadians-to-renew-now-ahead-of-10-year-passports-expiry.html

29. Stephanie Ha, “CRA has ‘hit rock bottom,’ but secretary of state noncommittal on future job cuts,” *CTV News*, September 8, 2025

30. Office of the Auditor General, *Report 1 – Building and Implementing the Phoenix Pay System*, 2018 Spring Reports of the Auditor General of Canada

31. Office of the Auditor General, *Report 1 – ArriveCAN*, 2024 Report 1 of the Auditor General of Canada



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