The Centre for Civic Engagement



Measuring the Politics of Normalcy

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Introduction

For the past month I've been writing about what might be referred to as the politics of normalcy—or what I've called "normalism."[1]

At its core, normalism is an attempt to articulate a set of practical intuitions about work, belonging, and citizenship that most ordinary Canadians hold instinctively, even if they've never thought of them as a coherent political philosophy—intuitions that are, I'd argue, increasingly underrepresented in our political life.

Taken together, those intuitions point toward a simple proposition: a free society depends upon both openness and responsibility. Openness creates prosperity, innovation, and renewal. Responsibility supplies the trust, reciprocity, and civic habits that allow openness to endure. Neither works well without the other.

The purpose of this essay is to test that claim rather than simply assert it. Is normalism merely a conceptual framework I've constructed, or does it describe a moral and political outlook that already exists among millions of ordinary Canadians?

The World Values Survey cannot answer that question completely. But it can tell us whether the constituent intuitions are real—and whether they tend to belong together.

[1] Sean Speer, "The Politics of Transgression versus the Politics of Normalcy," *The Hub*, June 26, 2026, https://thehub.ca/2026/06/26/the-politics-of-transgression-versus-the-politics-of-normalcy/; Sean Speer, "In Search of a Normal Politician," *The Hub*, July 27, 2026, https://thehub.ca/2026/07/27/in-search-of-a-normal-politician/.

Openness and Responsibility

Before turning to the evidence, it's worth being clear about the kind of claim that normalism makes.

The language of openness and responsibility isn't something the data produced. It's a conceptual and normative claim rather than an empirical one. Earlier generations would have recognized it as a contemporary expression of the older argument for ordered liberty.[2]

Openness without responsibility eventually collapses into disorder: a market nobody trusts, a border nobody governs, a pluralism that asks nothing of anyone. Responsibility without openness gradually hardens into stagnation: a society that stops admitting talent, welcoming newcomers, correcting its mistakes, or renewing itself. Each is what keeps the other from failing.

The World Values Survey is therefore not being asked to prove the philosophy. Philosophical arguments stand or fall on their own merits. The survey is being asked whether this way of understanding a free society corresponds to anything recognizable in how ordinary Canadians actually think.

That still leaves a fair question: Why these two ideas? Why not liberty and equality, freedom and order, or some other pairing?

The answer is that, in my judgement, they best describe the recurring pattern that runs through the practical judgments that normalism brings together. Markets reflect openness; helping those in genuine need expresses responsibility. Immigration reflects openness; governing it through rules reflects responsibility. Pluralism reflects openness; shared norms reflect responsibility. Democratic government depends upon openness to disagreement, but also upon citizens willing to exercise freedom responsibly.

Taken individually, these judgments are familiar enough. What's distinctive is recognizing that they share the same underlying structure. I use the language of openness and responsibility because it best captures that recurring pattern.

Most ordinary Canadians probably wouldn't describe their outlook in those terms. But the premise of normalism is that these intuitions are key to how they understand successful institutions and societies.

That's what this essay sets out to examine. Not whether Canadians can define normalism, but whether the practical intuitions that compose it are genuinely widespread and whether they tend to coexist in the same people. As we'll see, the evidence suggests that they do.

[2] Ken Boessenkool and Sean Speer, "Ordered Liberty," *Policy Options*, December 1, 2015, https://policyoptions.irpp.org/2015/12/harper/.

Putting Normalism to the Test

The World Values Survey (WVS) is one of the world's largest and longest-running studies of human values.[3] Since 1981, it has surveyed people in what is now 64 countries and territories—more than 90,000 respondents in its most recent round—about their underlying beliefs concerning work, family, trust, authority, immigration, democracy, science, and social life. The core questionnaire runs to nearly 260 questions, grouped into subjects ranging from social trust and corruption to migration, security, religion, and political culture.

Unlike most political polling, the WVS asks not how people vote but how they understand society. Its seventh Canadian edition interviewed just over 4,000 respondents in 2020, with the results weighted to reflect Canada's population by age, sex, region, and education.

That makes it unusually well-suited to this exercise. Normalism is built less from policy preferences than from underlying intuitions, and the WVS is one of the few large-scale datasets designed to measure precisely those kinds of beliefs.

At the same time, its limitations should be acknowledged. The survey was designed to compare broad social values across countries, not to test a political philosophy. Some of normalism's defining intuitions, therefore, have close counterparts in the questionnaire, while others can only be approximated or are not measured at all.

Intuition	Representative question	How well measured
Reciprocity/rule-following	Is claiming benefits you're not entitled to ever justifiable?	Strong
Liberal democracy	How important is it to live in a democracy?	Strong
Reform rather than repudiation	Should society be reformed, overturned, or defended as is?	Strong
Immigration governed by rules	Should immigration be open, conditional, or closed?	Adequate
Pluralism with shared norms	Would you object to neighbours of a different race or religion?	Adequate
Technological confidence	Has science and technology left the world better or worse off?	Strong
Work as contribution	Is work a duty toward society?	Strong
Markets with provision for need	Is competition good or harmful? Is aid to the unemployed essential to democracy?	Partial
Bounded yet competent government	Should the state collect information without consent? Do you trust the civil service?	Partial
Family	How important is family in your life?	Measured, but thinly
Personal freedom and freedom of belief	—	Not measured
Growth and living standards	—	Not measured
Building — housing, energy, infrastructure	—	Not measured

[3] World Values Survey Association, "World Values Survey," accessed November 3, 2026, https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/.

The absence of a suitable question tells us nothing about the importance of a particular intuition. It simply marks the limits of this instrument.

Finally, one caution is worth bearing in mind. The Canadian interviews were conducted in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic and before several years of exceptionally high population growth, mounting housing pressures, and a marked shift in public attitudes toward immigration. The pandemic itself may have influenced attitudes toward institutions, science, work, and social life, while the subsequent immigration surge transformed opinion on one of the essay's central subjects. The findings should therefore be understood as a snapshot of Canadian values at that moment rather than as a description of Canadian opinion today.

The Case for Openness

If normalism is right, we should expect Canadians to display a broad disposition toward openness—not only to immigration, but also to pluralism and the market economy. These are different questions on the surface, but they all ask whether people are prepared to embrace the cultural, economic, and social dynamism that characterizes a free society.

The World Values Survey suggests they do. Across virtually every measure it captures, Canadians favour openness—but usually openness tempered by rules rather than either extreme.

Immigration

Despite the intensity of the present debate, Canadians remained broadly positive about immigration when these interviews were conducted. Fifty-eight percent believed immigration had benefited the country's development, compared with just 9 percent who believed it had been harmful. At the same time, almost nobody favoured either completely open borders or a complete halt to immigration. Eighty-seven percent preferred immigration governed by some limit or condition.

The interesting finding isn't either number by itself but the combination. Canadians didn't see openness and rules as competing ideas. Immigration was understood as a source of national strength that nevertheless depended upon orderly administration and public confidence. These figures predate the post-pandemic immigration surge, and attitudes would almost certainly look different today. The underlying intuition, however—open but governed—is precisely the kind of synthesis that normalism seeks to describe.

Pluralism

Pluralism reveals a similar pattern. Seventy-nine percent of Canadians said they'd accept neighbours from every group the survey tested. More strikingly, those who were most accepting of people unlike themselves were also the most likely to regard wife-beating, violence against others, and terrorism as never justifiable—52 percent compared with 39 percent among the less tolerant.

That finding cuts against a familiar caricature. Tolerance is often portrayed as moral relativism, as though openness necessarily weakens a society's willingness to draw moral boundaries. The survey suggests something different. Canadians who are more accepting of difference also tend to draw firmer moral lines against conduct that seriously harms others. Openness and moral seriousness appear to reinforce one another rather than compete.

Markets and technology

The same disposition extends to economic life. Canadians remain broadly favourable toward market competition while expressing strong confidence in science and technological progress. Fifty-eight percent regard competition as beneficial, compared with just 16 percent who see it as harmful, while 63 percent express consistently positive views of science and technology across three separate measures.

Neither finding reflects unqualified enthusiasm. But the key point is that Canadians appear instinctively disposed toward enterprise and dynamism rather than stagnation or protectionism.

Taken together, these findings describe a society that remains quite open. Canadians are broadly favourable toward immigration, pluralism, and economic dynamism.

Yet openness alone cannot sustain a free society. It depends upon another set of moral expectations: that people contribute, play by the rules, and accept obligations alongside rights. Those are the intuitions that make up the responsibility side of the normalist framework.

The Case for Responsibility

On every measure of responsibility that the survey covers, Canadians land closer to obligation than to indifference. On one measure in particular, they land closer to consensus than anything else the survey finds.

Reciprocity

If there's one moral intuition that anchors the Canadian data, it's reciprocity. Asked whether it's ever justifiable to claim benefits they're not entitled to, dodge a transit fare, steal, cheat on taxes, or take a bribe, Canadians answer as though these were variations on the same question. Sixty-one percent say theft is never justifiable, 60 percent say the same of bribery, 59 percent of benefit fraud, and 52 percent of tax cheating. More than half hold all five convictions simultaneously—no other set of attitudes in the survey holds together this tightly.

These aren't really questions about crime. Responsibility, on this evidence, is an expression of fairness and integrity. It's the expectation that everyone plays by the same rules.

Reciprocity also implies equality before the rules. Canadians overwhelmingly reject the idea that civic opportunities or obligations should depend upon immutable characteristics. Ninety-four percent reject giving men priority when jobs are scarce, 93 percent reject favouring a boy's education over a girl's, and 85 percent reject the claim that men make better political leaders. Whatever disagreements Canadians have about equality of outcome, there's broad agreement that the ordinary rules of civic life should apply equally to everyone.

Democracy and reform

Liberal democracy commands the broadest support of anything measured. Eighty-nine percent call it a good way to govern, 78 percent say it's very important to live in one, 76 percent reject a strong leader unconstrained by Parliament, and 87 percent reject military rule outright. These views transcend any particular government or politicians and suggest that Canadians broadly regard the political system itself as legitimate.

That instinct shows up directly when Canadians are asked how society should change. Sixty-six percent believe it should be gradually improved through reform, compared with 16 percent who favour radical transformation and 19 percent who would primarily defend the existing order against subversive forces. Reform—not repudiation or reaction—is the dominant instinct.

The reformers also stand out for their commitment to liberal democracy. Eighty-three percent regard living in a democracy as very important, compared with just 63 percent among those who favour overturning the existing order.

One important qualification deserves mention. Democratic commitment varies sharply by age. Among Canadians over 60, 92 percent regard living in a democracy as very important. Among those under 30, the figure falls to 65 percent, while support for rule by unelected experts and other non-democratic alternatives rises markedly. The survey cannot tell us why. But if normalism is right, the transmission of democratic norms across generations may be one of its most important unanswered questions.

Work

Fifty-five percent regard work as a duty toward society, while 56 percent reject the idea that it should come before everything else. Canadians appear to see work as an important obligation, but not the defining purpose of life. A majority seems to instinctively understand David Brooks' distinction between "resume virtues" and "eulogy virtues."

Government, by the way, is where the survey reaches its limits. It asks about confidence in institutions but is silent on the proper scope of government, which is the actual normalist question—so I won't press evidence the survey doesn't have.

Do Openness and Responsibility Travel Together?

Canadians plainly hold these intuitions individually. The harder question is whether they belong to a common outlook.

The survey doesn't show Canadians consciously reasoning from openness to responsibility or vice versa. Immigration illustrates the point. Whether someone believes immigration has benefited Canada tells us surprisingly little about whether they support immigration controls, largely because support for some form of control is broad-based.

But that isn't really what normalism claims: political philosophies are patterns of judgment, not chains of conscious reasoning, so the relevant test is whether people who're generally more open also tend to be more responsible.

The short answer is they do. Combined into broad openness- and responsibility-oriented indices, the two indices show a moderate association ($r \sim 0.4$). This suggests that the measured attitudes are related at the population level, but the association leaves substantial individual variation and does not by itself describe a ready-made ideology.

That's what an inchoate outlook looks like in survey data. I've come to think of it as a recurring disposition—a pattern of almost subconscious intuitions—about the interplay between openness and responsibility.

Conclusion

Normalism began with an observation rather than a theory: that a recognizable yet largely unarticulated outlook already shapes how millions of ordinary Canadians understand what a free life among others requires.

The framework was conceptually plausible but empirically untested. This essay has attempted to test it against the World Values Survey.

While no survey can prove a philosophy per se, the data show that the constituent intuitions are real, broadly shared, and related to one another more closely than chance would predict.

That doesn't make Canada a normalist country. It suggests, though, that the outlook that normalism seeks to describe indeed exists, even if it has never been articulated as a coherent political philosophy.

A future survey designed with this framework in mind could test the intuitions the WVS only approximates (or doesn't measure at all) and explore how they vary across generations and over time.

Political philosophies are often imagined to begin with intellectuals. More often, they begin with ways of living that intellectuals only later learn to describe. The intuitions came first. Normalism is simply an attempt to give them a name.

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