

Citizens are at the core of any meaningful definition of democracy. For this reason alone, they must be included in an audit of Canadian democracy. In the pages that follow we ask two key questions about democratic citizenship in Canada: how engaged are Canadians in the country's democratic life, and which Canadians are most – and least – engaged? The answers to these questions bear very directly on the benchmarks of responsiveness, inclusiveness, and participation that define the Canadian Democratic Audit project. These three benchmarks are indissolubly linked. Knowing who participates in public life and, more significantly, who does not, provides critical insights into the inclusiveness of Canadian democracy. And knowing who is included in Canada's democratic life and who is left out tells us, in turn, whose needs and wants are most likely to be addressed by government and whose may get ignored.

Equally important, an audit of democratic citizenship can illuminate the performance of our democratic institutions. Fewer Canadians than ever are exercising their right to vote. If citizens are uninterested and uninvolved in democratic politics, it is tempting to blame the citizens themselves. However, we should be prompted to ask *why* these citizens are apathetic about politics. Do the political parties fail to provide meaningful choices? Do the media fail to convey the parties'

messages to the voters? Do the political parties and the media contribute to a climate of cynicism and disaffection with politics? Or does the problem lie with “representative institutions” that systematically underrepresent some segments of the population? Providing a comprehensive answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this audit, but raising them underlines the fact that an audit of democratic citizenship must be seen as an integral component of the larger project of auditing Canadian democracy.

Finally, an audit of democratic citizenship can cast light on the deeper roots of democratic malaise. Canadian society is marked by disparities in income and education and by differences in the power and status of groups like women and racial minorities. We cannot overlook the potential impact of these structural inequalities on the level and nature of citizens’ political engagement. We have to ask whether structural inequalities create democratic divides. In other words, are some citizens less engaged than others because they have fewer resources at their disposal?

Assessing Democratic Divides

In order to explore the possible links between structural inequalities and political (dis)engagement, we focus on five dimensions: age, education, income, sex, and race. Throughout the text, we make comparisons across generations and educational levels, between rich and poor and men and women, and between members of visible minorities and Canadians at large. The goal is to determine whether there are systematic differences in the level and nature of political engagement across these societal divides.

Ronald Inglehart (1971; 1990) has been a particularly forceful proponent of the view that generation matters. He has highlighted the differences in the formative experiences of those born since the end of the Second World War and those born earlier. According to Inglehart, this generational divide has been characterized by a shift from materialist to postmaterialist values. The postwar generations have enjoyed a

period of relative peace and unprecedented prosperity. Where their parents and grandparents had to contend with the privations of the Depression and world war, many of those born since 1945 have been able to take their economic and physical security more or less for granted. As material needs have been satisfied, needs for self-actualization have taken on a new importance. Along with this cultural shift has come structural change. Canada's transformation from an industrial to a postindustrial society has been accompanied by greatly expanded access to higher education, the emergence of a new middle class of managers, professionals, and technocrats, and the increasingly rapid spread of new information and communications technologies. As a result more citizens than ever before have ready access to information, along with the cognitive skills and the motivation to put that information to work for them (Dalton 1984).

Taken together, cognitive mobilization and the rise of postmaterialist values have potentially far-reaching implications for democratic citizenship (Nevitte 1996). Postmaterialist values fuel a desire for more autonomous forms of political engagement; cognitive mobilization allows that desire to be realized. Citizens who share these attributes are likely to want more meaningful forms of political involvement than the traditional, hierarchically organized institutions of democratic governance typically allow. This raises a critical question: are these citizens abandoning the traditional vehicles of political participation, like political parties and interest groups, in favour of community involvement and more unconventional modes of political action, or are they simply broadening their repertoire of political activities?

In order to pursue these questions, we distinguish four generations: the pre-baby boomers (born before 1945), the baby boomers (born between 1945 and 1959), generation X (born between 1960 and 1969), and post-generation X (born since 1970). The baby boomers are the postmaterialist generation par excellence. These are the Canadians who have been the major beneficiaries of the long period of peace and prosperity that followed the end of the Second World War. Circumstances have not been so propitious for those born since 1960. They have had to contend with recession and with the restructuring that

accompanied the spread of globalization. And it is not just the economic times that have changed. When they were beginning to reach adulthood, disaffection with politics was growing. This disaffection reflected a combination of factors: the rise of a neoconservative ideology that advocated a smaller role for the state, a perception that national governments were relatively powerless in the face of global economic forces, and a series of constitutional crises and failed accords. According to some popular commentary, these circumstances have produced a disengaged generation that often tunes out politics altogether.

The term “generation X” is taken from Douglas Coupland’s (1991) book of the same name. Some apply the label to anyone born since 1960, but it is more revealing to distinguish between those who had already reached adulthood when *Generation X* was published and those who came later. The latter may also be turning their backs on electoral politics, but there is an optimistic belief that they are turning to other, more meaningful forms of political engagement instead. Media images have shown young people protesting against globalization at a series of meetings of world leaders: the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Vancouver in 1997, the World Trade Organization Summit in Seattle in 2000, and the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001. But we need to ask just how representative these images are and whether young Canadians are indeed embracing protest activities in greater numbers than their parents or grandparents. In order to do so, we treat post-generation X Canadians, those born since 1970, as a separate group.

One factor that could be expected to counteract disengagement is education. Education seems to be good for democracy, because it helps people to understand how democracy works (Dewey 1916). The democratic process is inherently messy, necessitating complex compromises that take time and effort to achieve. This can cause frustration – and withdrawal from democratic politics – on the part of those who do not appreciate what is entailed (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Education not only makes people more sophisticated about politics but also makes them more open-minded and tolerant of opposing viewpoints

(Stouffer 1955; Selznick and Steinberg 1969; Hyman and Wright 1979). In addition, education seems to foster civic spirit and norms of civic engagement. These are important because they can motivate people to participate even when they might otherwise be disinclined.

Education also equips people with the cognitive skills that are required for meaningful participation. Reading about politics in the newspaper or going on-line to access political information on the Internet requires basic literacy, as does marking a ballot paper or signing a petition. Political participation also presumes an ability to deal with complexity. Citizens are bombarded with a mass of information on issues that may seem remote from their day-to-day concerns. Not only do they have to sift through this information, they have to try to “read between the lines” and to separate fact from rhetoric. Education helps people to meet this challenge. Finally, education is associated with social networks in which politics is likely to be a topic of conversation. This gives people an incentive to pay attention to politics so that they can join in the discussion, and these discussions, in turn, can be a source of new information about politics.

If this is all so, we have a puzzle: unprecedented numbers of Canadians are graduating from university, and yet turnout to vote has declined precipitously since the 1988 federal election. Could it be that the link between education and political engagement is weakening? In order to explore this question, we focus on four educational groups: those who have not completed high school; high school graduates; those who have some postsecondary education; and university graduates.

Lack of education is one reason why poor Canadians might be less politically engaged than their affluent counterparts. But political engagement also requires time, energy, and money. The daily struggle to put food on the table, to pay the bills, and to find money for the rent may sap any desire to follow politics closely. This is especially likely if the daily struggle feeds a perception that the system is not very responsive to the needs and wants of the poor. And even if the will is there, there may not be the money to pay for a babysitter or to travel to party meetings or even to the polls. As for subscribing to a daily newspaper or accessing political information on the Internet, these are luxuries

that the poor can ill afford. In order to see just how much difference household income makes to people's level of political engagement, we divide the population into quintiles. This enables us to compare people with household incomes in the bottom 20 percent with those in the middle 20 percent and those in the top 20 percent.

The average Canadian woman continues to have less education and a lower income than the average Canadian man, so we might expect gender differences in political engagement on those grounds alone. However, there are reasons to expect gender differences even when women and men have the same educational qualifications and comparable incomes. Politics remains very much a man's world in Canada. As late as 1980, only 5 percent of MPs in Ottawa were women (see Docherty 2004). That meant just fourteen women. The numbers began to increase in 1984, but in 2000 only 20 percent of those elected to the House of Commons were women. This figure was unchanged from 1997, suggesting that the growth in the number of women MPs may have stalled. The numerical underrepresentation of women in the House of Commons means that women simply do not see themselves when they watch the news or read the newspaper. Only one woman – Kim Campbell – has succeeded in becoming prime minister, and her tenure was brief. Like her New Democrat counterparts, Audrey McLaughlin and Alexa McDonough, Campbell may have been a sacrificial lamb, chosen to lead a party that was doomed to defeat.

Not just the lack of women in politics but the norms that govern political behaviour and media coverage reinforce the notion that politics is a predominantly masculine activity. The news remains very much a “masculine narrative” (Rakow and Kranich 1991, 8). Political coverage is dominated by stereotypically masculine images of the battlefield and the boxing ring (Gidengil and Everitt 1999; 2002; 2003). These images subtly convey the message that women do not really belong in politics. One result may be that many women see politics as just another game that is played – and followed – by men.

Women are not the only group that is numerically underrepresented in Canadian politics. The same is true of visible minorities. Only 17 of the 301 MPs elected in the 2000 federal election belonged to

visible minorities (Black 2002). This number was down from the 19 elected to the previous Parliament. According to the 2001 census, visible minorities made up 13.4 percent of the population, and yet they accounted for only 5.6 percent of the MPs elected in the previous year's election. Members of visible minorities may see this small number as emblematic of the racial biases that still permeate Canadian society (Gidengil et al. 2004). The question is whether this makes for a reduced level of interest and involvement in politics on the part of members of visible minorities.

In pursuing this question, we have to be mindful of the fact that the proportion of Canadians who are members of visible minorities has increased substantially over the past thirty years as a result of shifting patterns of immigration. Consequently we need to take account of birthplace as well. If members of visible minorities do prove to be less politically engaged than other Canadians, this could simply reflect the fact that they are more likely to have been born outside Canada. Recent arrivals, in particular, must make significant adjustments in settling into a new environment and in orienting themselves to an unfamiliar political system, and this may depress their involvement in politics. Identifying members of visible minorities from survey data is a difficult task since surveys typically ask about ancestry rather than race. We count anyone who is of non-European origin as being a member of a visible minority. The fit is not perfect, but this approach provides a reasonable approximation.

In a highly regionalized country like Canada, the political importance of place cannot be ignored. We take account of place in a number of ways. First, we document differences in political engagement across the provinces (though caution is warranted when considering figures for Prince Edward Island, given the small sample size). Documenting such differences is easy enough; deciphering their meaning is much trickier. For example, if some provinces have lower levels of political engagement than others this could simply reflect the makeup of their population. According to this type of interpretation, we could expect a less engaged populace in the Atlantic provinces or in Saskatchewan because the residents of these provinces tend to have less education

and lower incomes than average. On the other hand, “have” provinces, like Alberta and Ontario, could have lower levels of engagement than the “have-not” provinces as a result of their respective political traditions and political cultures.

Second, we examine whether the type of community in which people live makes a difference to their political engagement. Canada has become an increasingly urban society. According to the 1961 census, almost 40 percent of Canadians lived in rural areas; by the time of the 2001 census, that figure had been cut in half. We need to ask how this has affected the country’s democratic life. People who live in small communities are more likely to know their neighbours, and these close social contacts could serve to mobilize them to participate in politics (Oliver 2000). If so, rural Canadians may prove to be more engaged than their urban counterparts.

Finally, we take account of the territorial dimension of Canadian politics by comparing, wherever possible, across levels of government. The extent to which we can actually do this is constrained by the lack of survey data and published studies on political engagement at the provincial and municipal levels. Nonetheless, it is important to make use of whatever data are available because cross-level comparisons bear on a question that has long exercised political thinkers, namely, what is the best size for a democratic polity? As Robert Dahl (1967, 960) noted, there is a tension between the need to foster political engagement and the capacity to attain significant collective goals. While the first consideration seems to argue for smaller political units, the second might suggest larger ones. For their part, provincial governments in Canada have traditionally argued for greater powers by claiming that they are closer to the people. Meanwhile, feminist scholars have pointed to municipal politics as a site that may engage greater interest on the part of women than the traditional arenas of federal and provincial politics. The assumption here is that municipal politics deals with issues that are of more immediate relevance to women’s daily lives, such as public safety, recreation, street lighting, and sanitary services. Thus we need to ask whether there are signifi-

cant differences in political engagement at the federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal levels.

Disaggregating Democratic Engagement

Political engagement presupposes political interest. Unless citizens have a modicum of interest in politics, they are unlikely to devote much time and energy to keeping up with public affairs, and still less to taking an active part in the country's democratic life. Accordingly, Chapter 2 assesses how much interest Canadians have in politics and how much attention they pay to what is going on in the news. This chapter also examines where Canadians get most of their information about politics. Do they rely primarily on the media or do they get most of their information from friends and family? And if they depend on the media, is their primary source television, newspapers, or radio?

This chapter also provides some assessment of how the revolution in communication technologies has affected the amount of attention that Canadians pay to politics. The Internet in particular has been heralded as providing citizens with a new avenue for political engagement. Citizens vary, though, in their capacity and in their motivation to take advantage of the new technologies. The result may be a "digital divide" (Norris 2001) that actually widens the gap between the most engaged and the least engaged citizens. We need to determine whether a digital divide is emerging in Canada.

One reason political interest is important is that it motivates people to acquire information about politics. Information is essential for democratic participation: "Political information is to democratic politics what money is to economics; it is the currency of citizenship" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 8). If citizens are to hold the government accountable and to authorize a direction for the future, they need information that can help them to ascertain what they want from the government, evaluate the performance of the incumbent, and weigh the respective merits of the alternatives. Its relevance is not

limited to forming political preferences, engaging in political debate, or casting a vote; it also underpins such democratic virtues as toleration and mutual respect. Moreover, information seems to soften people's judgments of those who govern, and thereby fosters political trust (Popkin and Dimock 1999). This is because "more knowledgeable citizens tend to judge the behavior of public officials as they judge their own – in the context of circumstances and incentives, with due regard for innocent oversights and errors as well as sheer chance" (Galston 2001, 224).

So Chapter 3 focuses on how much Canadians know about politics. It assesses knowledge of key political actors such as the federal party leaders, the federal finance minister, and provincial premiers, as well as past prime ministers. It also looks at knowledge of party positions. Do Canadians know some of the basic facts that they need to make an informed choice on election day? This chapter also examines how much Canadians learn as a result of election campaigns. In theory, at least, election campaigns provide people who do not pay much attention to politics on a day-to-day basis with the opportunity to acquire information. But do election campaigns really enable the poorly informed to fill in the gaps in their political knowledge? And if they do not, where does the responsibility lie: with citizens who do not care enough to pay attention, or with campaigns that fail to inform?

Some authors have argued that citizens do not need to be well informed: many of them are quite capable of making reasonable political choices even when they do not know the details of the issue at hand. This is because they can make use of information shortcuts (Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). For example, they may choose to take the same side as a trusted friend who is more knowledgeable. Assuming that the friend shares their interests and values, they will end up making the same choice they would have made if they, too, had taken the trouble to inform themselves. Meanwhile, the "aggregationist" thesis maintains that *collective* public opinion is stable, coherent, and responds predictably to changing conditions, even though many individual expressions of opinion lack those qualities (Page and Shapiro 1992).

Chapter 4 examines whether the use of information shortcuts and aggregation really do compensate for shortfalls in information. Do the poorly informed benefit the most from information shortcuts, or do information shortcuts mainly help the well informed to make better use of their store of knowledge? Would collective opinion really look much as it does now if all Canadians were well informed about politics? This chapter also explores the implications of the uneven distribution of information. Does collective opinion do a better job of reflecting the values and interests of some social groups rather than others? And finally, Chapter 4 asks: what if some Canadians are not simply *un*-informed, but *mis*informed? How are policy preferences affected when people get the facts wrong?

Chapter 5 focuses on the benchmark of participation. When we think of participating in politics, we typically think of voting or maybe working on a campaign or joining a political party or interest group. These are all very traditional ways of participating in politics. There are also less conventional modes of participation to consider, such as signing a petition, joining in a boycott, or attending a lawful demonstration. In contrast to the traditional forms of political participation, these activities are not necessarily state centred. Although some may question whether a consumer boycott, say, is truly a political act, it bears on the issue that is at the very core of politics: “who gets what” (Lasswell 1936). Globalization, privatization, and the “shrinking of the state” (Feigenbaum, Henig, and Hamnett 1998) mean that the targets of political engagement now extend well beyond the state to multinational corporations, international agencies, and intergovernmental organizations. Evidence from a range of countries indicates that protest activities are now part of the mainstream (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2001; Norris 2002). Chapter 5 asks whether this is true in Canada, as well.

The steep decline in turnout in federal elections since 1988, examined in Chapter 5, raises an important question: are Canadians turning to other, more meaningful forms of political engagement? Are they abandoning political parties in favour of interest groups? Or are they giving up on traditional vehicles of participation altogether and engaging in various forms of protest politics instead?

Chapter 6 keeps the focus on this question, but looks at participation in civic life more broadly conceived. In doing so, it takes up Robert Putnam's (2000) argument that a healthy democracy requires large stocks of social capital in the form of networks of connection among citizens and norms of trust. The chapter examines involvement in voluntary associations, volunteering, and philanthropy, and asks whether associational activity is indeed related to political engagement.

Establishing Benchmarks and Obtaining Information

Auditing all of these facets of democratic citizenship in Canada cannot take place in a vacuum. We need to have some ways of judging the levels of engagement in civic life. We use two sets of benchmarks wherever possible. First, we compare levels of engagement across time. Are Canadians more or less engaged than they were in years past? Second, we compare levels of engagement in Canada with those in other established Western democracies. Are Canadians more or less engaged than the citizens of comparable countries?

The information comes from a variety of sources. Some is taken from official sources, such as the official election returns filed by the chief electoral officer and by his counterparts in the provinces and the territories. Most of the information comes from surveys, however, including the World Values Surveys, the National Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating, and the various surveys archived at the Canadian Opinion Research Archive at Queen's University (CORA).

The chief source of information is the Canadian Election Studies. These studies have been conducted in conjunction with every federal election since 1965, with the exception of the 1972 election. These data offer distinct advantages when it comes to auditing democratic citizenship. Elections are critical moments in a country's democratic life. In an electoral democracy like Canada, they are the basic mechanism through which citizens select the representatives charged with the responsibility of making public policy. In elections, citizens pass

judgment on the decisions of the past and authorize a direction for the future. Elections are thus particularly appropriate occasions for assessing the democratic engagement of ordinary Canadians. Equally important, elections permit the evaluation of the performance of the other two key players, the political parties and the media. An election can be likened to a high-speed film that enables us to capture the dynamic interaction among political parties, the media, and the citizenry.

The design of the last four election studies has been particularly suited to this purpose. These studies have combined a campaign survey with a postelection panel survey and a self-administered mail-back survey. Interviewing for the campaign survey has typically begun almost as soon as the election writs were dropped. The campaign survey has been based on a rolling cross-section design that broke the sample down into daily subsamples that were as similar to each other as random sampling variation permits. Thus differences in vote intentions, information levels, perceptions, and preferences across the daily subsamples largely reflect the impact of the campaign. When combined with a content analysis of the messages conveyed to voters by the political parties and the media during the election campaign, this makes for an extremely powerful design for studying the effects of election campaigns on democratic engagement.

Democratic citizenship is a vast topic and we cannot hope to do it full justice in this book. Indeed, we have made a conscious decision to limit its scope. In particular, we have decided not to include an analysis of the norms and values that underpin democratic citizenship, such as egalitarianism, tolerance, justice, respect for minorities, and empathy. This is not because we consider these unimportant, but, on the contrary, because they could be the subjects of books in themselves. Fortunately, some of the core democratic norms and values – and the tensions among them – have been examined by Paul Sniderman and his colleagues in *The Clash of Rights* (1996).

Even limiting the focus as we have to interest, involvement, information, and participation, this audit has entailed the analysis of a mass of data. In the interests of accessibility, our results are presented in the form of simple descriptive statistics. It should be emphasized,

though, that our conclusions rest on more detailed multivariate analyses. The descriptive statistics enable us to say, for example, how much rich and poor Canadians differ. This is important information in itself, but we also need to know how much of the difference is attributable to disparities in income per se and how much is due to factors, like education, that underlie the income disparities. This is where multivariate analyses come in. They enable us to assess the impact of income (or some other characteristic) when other factors are held constant. Following conventional practice, results are considered to be statistically significant if their probability of occurring by chance is one in twenty or less.

Concluding Comments

There are those who might question the whole notion of auditing democratic citizenship. Indeed, some might construe it as a fundamentally undemocratic exercise. Assessing Canadians' knowledge of politics, in particular, smacks of tests of citizen competence. Marion Smiley has argued powerfully that the very language of competence is tainted. "I worry," she writes, "that the language of citizen competence is inherently antidemocratic" (1999, 372). In her view, judging competence is "part of a larger practice designed to certify particular individuals and to deny certification to others ... The concept of competence must be understood as part of a process through which the participation of some individuals is legitimated and the participation of others is de-legitimated" (pp. 378-9). Smiley's concern is easy to understand. There is an ugly history of standards of competence being used to exclude whole categories of citizens from democratic participation, notably women, the poor, and racial and ethnic minorities. We only have to think of the competency tests that were used to exclude Afro-Americans from exercising the franchise in the American Deep South.

However, the fact that the language of competence has been "used in ways that are not only inimical to democracy but unfair to particular groups" (Smiley 1999, 379) does not mean that the language itself

is necessarily antidemocratic. On the contrary, our interest in the nature and extent of citizens' political engagement is motivated by concerns about the inclusiveness and responsiveness of Canadian democracy. Assessing civic competence *can* be motivated by a desire to curtail democracy (and, historically, it too often was), but it can also be motivated by a desire to enhance democracy.

This is the first comprehensive assessment of democratic citizenship in Canada. This book is intended to stimulate debate, not just about the interests and capabilities of Canadians as democratic citizens, but also about the performance of our democratic institutions and the nature of Canadian society. We cannot hope to apportion responsibility for democratic malaise among these various parts, and that is not our intent. We hope instead to stimulate an awareness of the complex interactions among citizens, political institutions, and the structure of Canadian society that together shape the functioning of Canadian democracy.