

Vox populi: Canadians who speak up

by Susan Crompton

Everyone has an opinion about politics — whether about their local councillor or prime minister — and most people are more than willing to share their views with family and friends. However, far fewer people take the time to present their point of view in a more public forum. According to the 2000 General Social Survey (GSS), only 9% of Canadians aged 15 and over had taken part in a public debate that year, to the extent that they expressed their opinion by writing a letter to a newspaper or public official or calling a phone-in show.

Although this is a small minority of Canadians, their voices carry significant weight. Social scientists maintain that because political opinions may lead to political action, politicians, opinion leaders and policy-makers view them more seriously than public opinions about subjects like gardening, astrology or sports.¹ This article seeks to identify the basic characteristics of those Canadians who speak in a public forum.

Writers/callers are better educated and better off

People generally have a core set of political values by the time they are in their 20s; if they change their opinions,

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This article uses data from the 2000 General Social Survey (GSS). The survey was conducted over a 12-month period, and interviewed more than 25,000 respondents aged 15 and over living in private households in the 10 provinces. In a series of five questions relating to their level of interest and involvement in politics, respondents were asked “In the past 12 months, have you written a letter or called a phone-in show to express a point of view?”

Writers/callers: persons aged 15 and over who answered “Yes” to the GSS question quoted above.

it is generally in response to changing personal circumstances.² In other words, a different political opinion at some point in a person’s life probably reflects a new job, a new community or change in social status, not his or her age. GSS data show that, generally, Canadians who write a letter or call a phone-in show are no more likely to be younger or older than the rest of the adult population. They are, however, more likely to be English-speakers than are other Canadian adults.³

As well, writers/callers tend to be better educated. Well over half (58%) have a college diploma or university degree, compared with 40% of their

silent counterparts. Since education is closely linked to income, one would expect writers/callers to be more affluent. Indeed, 27% have personal incomes exceeding \$50,000 (versus 18% of non-writers/callers) and 46% have household incomes over \$60,000 (versus 38%). A person’s

1. Guy, J.J. 1998. *People, Politics and Government: A Canadian Perspective*. Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall Allyn and Bacon Canada. p. 34.

2. *ibid.* p. 29-30.

3. Refers to the language spoken most often in the home.

	Writers/callers	Non-writers/callers
	% of population aged 15 and over	
Men	52	49
Women	48	51
University degree/college diploma	58	40
Personal income over \$50,000	27	18
Household income over \$60,000	46	38
Speak only English at home	84	64

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2000.

	Writers/callers	Non-writers/callers
	% of population aged 15 and over	
Voted in last election (eligible voters only)	74	62
In past 12 months, have...		
talked with other people about politics	87	58
searched for information about political issues	53	20
volunteered for a political party	10	2
volunteered for a group or organization and had...	54	30
done fundraising, canvassing, campaigning	57	48
provided information or helped to educate, influence public opinion or lobby on organization's behalf	50	33
organized or supervised activities or events	67	60
done consultative or administrative work, or were unpaid member of board or committee	53	38

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2000.

socioeconomic status may affect their basic political and social values⁴; it may also influence their confidence in voicing their opinion in a public forum.

While the majority of Canadians like to talk about politics, writers/callers are more passionate about it. Most (87%) say they have discussed politics with other people in the previous 12 months, compared with 58% of other adults. Writers/callers are also five times more likely to have done

volunteer work for a political party in the previous 12 months (10% versus 2%). Not surprisingly, more writers/callers who were eligible to vote had cast their ballots in the last election (74% versus 62%).

These findings are valuable because peer groups influence political values and attitudes to a very large extent, especially if the subject of politics is important to the group.⁵ Peer pressure, however, may produce a certain

uniformity of view. For example, a recent study shows that individuals are much more likely to discuss an issue with a group if they sense that the group supports their own opinions.⁶ And while writers/callers are probably better informed (53% of writers/callers have researched political issues compared with only 20% of other adults), their knowledge may not produce a variety of opinions, since they are likely to conform their interpretations to those of their peer group.

Writers/callers are more involved in the community

Information can lead to political "mobilization."⁷ This suggests that writers/callers, who tend to be better informed, may have a greater tendency to "get involved" than other people. Indeed, writers/callers are much more active in the community than non-writers/callers, at 54% versus 30%, respectively.

As volunteers, writers/callers were considerably more likely than non-writers/callers to be involved in the educational and administrative sides of organizations, rather than with fundraising, canvassing or supervising events and activities. Half were working to educate, lobby or influence public opinion (50% versus 33% of

4. Luo, X. 1998. "What affects attitudes towards government's role in solving unemployment? A comparative study of Great Britain and the United States." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 10, 2.

5. Guy. 1998. op.cit. p. 32.

6. Hayes, A.F., J. Shanahan and C.J. Glynn. 2001. "Willingness to express one's opinion in a realistic situation as a function of perceived support for that opinion." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 13, 1.

7. Semetko, H.A. and P.M. Valkenburg. 1998. "The impact of attentiveness on political efficacy: Evidence from a three-year German panel study." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 10, 3.

New technologies are connecting citizens to information and to each other. An almost limitless array of newsgroups, discussion groups, chat rooms, and listserves on the Internet allow people the opportunity to express their views in ways unimaginable only a few years ago. People can program their computers to retrieve customized news and information from countless news organizations and databases.

Information exchange is becoming more interactive every day. News networks, for example, regularly ask viewers to e-mail or fax their questions and comments, which are then presented to panelists during the broadcast. In this atmosphere, the interaction of citizens with their politicians and media becomes increasingly important in defining, shaping, and influencing issues. Research generally shows that, in democratic societies, when more people use the media to acquire their political information, agreement about social priorities in the community increases.¹

The fundamental values of both the media and politics are being challenged by the new technologies, accelerating a shift of power away from traditional voices of authority. How the new technologies of mass media information will affect public opinion, political institutions, and public policy remains to be seen.

1. López-Escobar, E., J.P. Llamas and M. McCombs. 1998. "Agenda setting and community consensus: First and second level effects." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 11, 1.

non-writers/callers), and more than half were helping to run the organization, for example, as board or committee members or administrators (53% versus 38%).

The higher level of political interest and community involvement by writers/callers is not surprising. The nucleus of informed political opinion about most issues is usually a "special public" as opposed to a "general public," and the issues in which people become involved tend to be highly specific and local.⁸ Being active in the community generally involves becoming more aware of problems in the neighbourhood — from speeding cars on residential streets to hospital

closings — and local problems may quickly become political issues.

Summary

Over the last few years, both print and broadcast mainstream media have become concentrated among a much smaller number of owners;⁹ observers argue that the variety of views expressed has consequently become more homogeneous. Nevertheless, these remain the most transparent places in which people can express their opinions about public policy. One of the classic methods of applying political pressure remains letter-writing campaigns to the media and as such, the media can assist in

developing groups that share a common goal.¹⁰

However, fewer than one in ten Canadian adults write letters or phone call-in shows to express an opinion in the public forum. Those who do, tend to have higher levels of education and income than people who are more reluctant to present their views. The much higher involvement of writers/callers in community volunteer work and their interest in political issues indicate they are more highly politicized than the average Canadian. They appear to be local opinion-makers whose views may affect the lives of many other people.

8. Guy. 1998. op.cit. p. 34.

9. For instance, Canwest Global owns newspapers (including the *National Post*) in addition to the Global television network; Bell Globemedia owns CTV Inc., the *Globe and Mail* and Sympatico. *Financial Post*. March 11, 2002. FP3.

10. Shaw, D.L., M. McCombs, D.H. Weaver and B.J. Hamm. 1999. "Individuals, groups and agenda melding: A theory of social dissonance." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 11, 1.



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