One in three non-retired 19- to 64-year-olds was politically active in 2003. They searched for political information, volunteered for a political party, joined a political party, and/or wrote a newspaper or politician to express their views. These forms of non-voting participation in the democratic process are often examined to assess the health of a democracy and the civic engagement of its citizens.

Researchers argue that the factors which influence whether or not an individual will participate in the political arena can be classified into four main categories: socio-demographic characteristics such as age and education; attitudes towards the extent of perception of control over life chances (mastery); direct experiences with the democratic and political process as a youth (often called political socialization); and whether one actively follows news and what medium is used to do so.

This article uses the 2003 General Social Survey to consider what factors influence Canadians to take part in non-voting political activity. In order to identify the relative importance of these different factors on the probability of engaging in this type of political activity, a multivariate statistical analysis was conducted.

This analysis allows the unique contribution of each factor on the likelihood of participating to be identified. Only non-retired Canadians between the ages of 19 and 64 were included in the study.

**Most common form of non-voting political activity is searching for information**

This article considers four forms of non-voting political participation. These include searching for political information, volunteering for a political party, joining a political party, and/or writing to a newspaper or politician to express one’s views. Overall, one in three Canadians engaged in at least one of these four activities (Chart 1). The most common activity was searching for political information. Volunteering for a political party or being a member of a political party were less common, perhaps because these kinds of activities are more common when nominations for candidates are underway or an actual election is being held.

**Younger adults and men are more likely to participate in the political domain**

Several socio-demographic characteristics have a significant impact on whether or not someone is more likely than another person to participate in the political arena. Age is important, once other factors in the model are held constant (Table 1). Younger adults aged 19 to 24 were 1.2 times more likely to engage in non-voting activity than older Canadians aged 45 to 64.1 Those aged 25 to 44 were the least likely to participate, with their odds of involvement being 1.3 times lower. This finding is somewhat different than results of other researchers and may simply reflect the choice of activities being considered in this study.2

Gender was also a significant indicator of political involvement among non-retired Canadians aged 19 to 64. Men were 1.5 times more likely to engage in non-voting activities than women. This is not surprising given the higher involvement of men in the formal arena of electoral politics.

The language most commonly spoken at home is also influential. Speaking English produces odds about 1.3 times higher than speaking a language other than English or French. There was no significant difference in the likelihood of non-voting political participation between those who spoke English and those who spoke French, once other factors in the model were controlled for.
Postsecondary education is the most important influence on participation in the political sphere.

However, the most important personal characteristic to influence involvement in non-voting political activity is level of education. Over half (51%) of those with a university education had been active in the political arena in the previous year whereas fewer than one-fifth (18%) of those with no more than high school indicated they had engaged in such activity (Chart 2).

So, after taking account of the effect of other influences, it is not surprising that non-retired 19- to 64-year-olds with some postsecondary education or a college diploma were 1.9 times more likely to engage in political activity than those with a high school education; meanwhile, those with a university degree were 3.2 times more likely to do so. Researchers think that higher levels of education influence the likelihood of political activity because well-educated individuals are assumed to be more familiar with the workings of the democratic system and therefore to be more comfortable operating in the political environment.

Religious attendance also influenced political activities, with frequent attendees at religious services significantly more likely to participate in political activity (Table 1).
One in three non-retired Canadians participate in some non-voting political activity

1. Overall non-voting political participation
   - 34%
2. Search for political information
   - 27%
3. Write politician/newspaper to express views
   - 13%
4. Member of a political party
   - 5%
5. Volunteer for a political party
   - 3%


Postsecondary education encourages participation in the non-voting political arena

1. High school or less
   - 18%
2. Some postsecondary/College Diploma
   - 34%
3. University
   - 51%


Marital status, income, place of birth, region of residence, and living in a rural or urban area were not significant influences on non-voting political behaviour, once other factors were controlled for.

**Having a sense of mastery associated with political participation**

The model results show that sense of mastery — that is, the extent of a person’s perception of control over his or her life chances — is also an important indicator of political activity. A higher level of mastery increases the probability of being involved in the political arena when compared to those with an average or low sense of mastery, even once the influence of education and other factors is controlled for. This is supported by other research which has found that when individuals feel that they can influence certain issues, they are more likely to become involved than when they do not feel the possibilities for change or action are within the realm of their control.

**Children follow in their parents’ footsteps**

The extent of a person’s exposure to civic or political activity when they were young — a process called political socialization — influences whether or not they participate in the political arena as an adult. These youthful experiences include having a parent who participated in community activities. Just as children may follow their parents into the family business or into similar professions, parents lay the groundwork for their children’s political participation through their education and volunteering activities.
Forty-one percent of Canadians whose parent had been a volunteer participated in the political arena (Chart 3). Controlling for other influences, the model shows that individuals whose parents had volunteered in the community when they were in secondary school were 1.3 times more likely to engage in political activities than individuals whose parents did not volunteer.

Level of parental education was also an important factor. If either parent had a university degree, then the odds of participating in non-voting political activity were approximately 1.3 times greater than if parents had less education. If both parents had a university degree the effect was even greater, with the odds of political participation rising to 1.7. Higher parental education is thought to be important because the well-educated are more likely to participate in political activities, to follow and to discuss political issues, thus creating opportunities for their children to observe and model such behaviour.8

Not only do children tend to follow in their parents’ footsteps, but their own experience with extra-curricular activities in secondary school also serve as a form of political socialization that increases...
Almost half of all individuals involved in student government as an adolescent had participated in a non-voting political activity

% of non-retired Canadians aged 19 to 64

- **Not involved**: 27, 41
- **Involved**: 47, 39

**Parent volunteered during respondent’s adolescence**

- 27%

**Active in student government**

- 29%

**Belonged to youth group**

- 27%


the likelihood of participating in the political arena in later years. Almost half (47%) of those Canadians who participated in student government or belonged to a youth group also engaged in non-voting political activities as an adult.

Controlling for other influences, individuals who participated in youth groups such as Guides, Scouts or 4-H clubs were 1.2 times more likely to take part in at least one form of political engagement as an adult. Additionally, they were 1.7 times more likely to participate if they had been involved in student government. Not only do these findings reflect the importance of political socialization but they also suggest that individuals may self-select to participate in political activities at a relatively young age.9

**Being plugged into the news increases the likelihood of political involvement**

A previous study that also used data from the 2003 General Social Survey suggested that there is a relationship between Canadians’ civic engagement and their habits of following news and current events.10 This study confirms that finding. Controlling for other factors, Canadians who follow the news on a weekly or daily basis are 1.8 times more likely to participate in the political arena then those who follow the news less frequently. On the other hand, those whose sole source of news information is television were 1.8 times less likely to engage in non-voting political activity than those who included sources such as the newspaper or Internet in their news media consumption.

This result supports previous work which has found that knowledge of current affairs is one of the most important elements influencing involvement in political affairs because knowledge forms the necessary basis on which to predicate action. In addition, the form in which this information is received is important, since television is the news medium that is least likely to have a motivating influence on future action.11

**Summary**

In 2003, about one third of non-retired Canadians between the ages of 19 and 64 participated in political activities. Those with a university degree were much more likely than others to participate. Likewise, knowledge of current affairs and news facilitated involvement, with the source of news playing an important role in whether or not someone took part. A feeling of control over one’s life chances (mastery) was also associated with the likelihood of political engagement. Finally, adolescent experiences affected whether a person was likely to be politically active. Having parents with a high level of education and a history of volunteer activity influenced a person’s current involvement in non-voting political activities. Similarly, a person’s own history with youth groups and student government while in secondary school were significant indicators of non-voting political engagement in adulthood.

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