

Canadians and their non-voting political activity

by Leslie-Anne Keown

The job of a citizen is to keep his mouth open – Günter Grass

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.

Table 1 Education and a history of civic involvement influence participation in political activity

| | Odds ratios | | Odds ratios |
|------------------------------------|-------------|---|-------------|
| Demographic characteristics | | Attendance at religious services | |
| <i>Women</i> | 1.00 | Not regular attendee | 0.86* |
| <i>Men</i> | 1.49* | <i>Regular attendee</i> | 1.00 |
| Age group | | Mastery (perceptions of control over life's chances) | |
| 19 to 25 years | 1.22* | Low level | 0.73* |
| 25 to 44 years | 0.76* | Average level | 0.76* |
| 45 to 64 years | 1.00 | <i>High level</i> | 1.00 |
| Marital status | | News and current affairs information | |
| <i>Not married</i> | 1.00 | Regularly follow news and current affairs | |
| Married (including common-law) | 0.96 | <i>No</i> | 1.00 |
| Household income | | Yes | 1.75* |
| Less than \$30,000 | 1.09 | Use only TV to follow news and current affairs | |
| <i>\$30,000 to \$60,000</i> | 1.00 | <i>No</i> | 1.00 |
| More than \$60,000 | 1.08 | Yes | 0.56* |
| Refused, not stated | 0.97 | Parental Influence | |
| Place of birth | | Father's education | |
| <i>Born in Canada</i> | 1.00 | <i>Less than university</i> | 1.00 |
| Born outside Canada | 0.84 | University degree | 1.33* |
| Language of preference | | Mother's education | |
| <i>English</i> | 1.00 | <i>Less than university</i> | 1.00 |
| French | 0.91 | University degree | 1.26* |
| Other | 0.76* | Parents did volunteer work when respondent was in secondary school | |
| Region of residence | | <i>No</i> | 1.00 |
| Atlantic | 0.84 | Yes | 1.34* |
| Quebec | 1.01 | Political socialization in school | |
| <i>Ontario</i> | 1.00 | Respondent belonged to youth group when in secondary school | |
| Prairies | 1.07 | <i>No</i> | 1.00 |
| B.C. | 1.01 | Yes | 1.21* |
| Urban/Rural | | Respondent participated in student government when in secondary school | |
| <i>Urban</i> | 1.00 | <i>No</i> | 1.00 |
| Rural | 0.91 | Yes | 1.67* |
| Level of education | | | |
| <i>High school or less</i> | 1.00 | | |
| Some postsecondary/College diploma | 1.89* | | |
| University degree | 3.19* | | |

* Significantly different than reference group shown in italics at $p < .05$.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

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

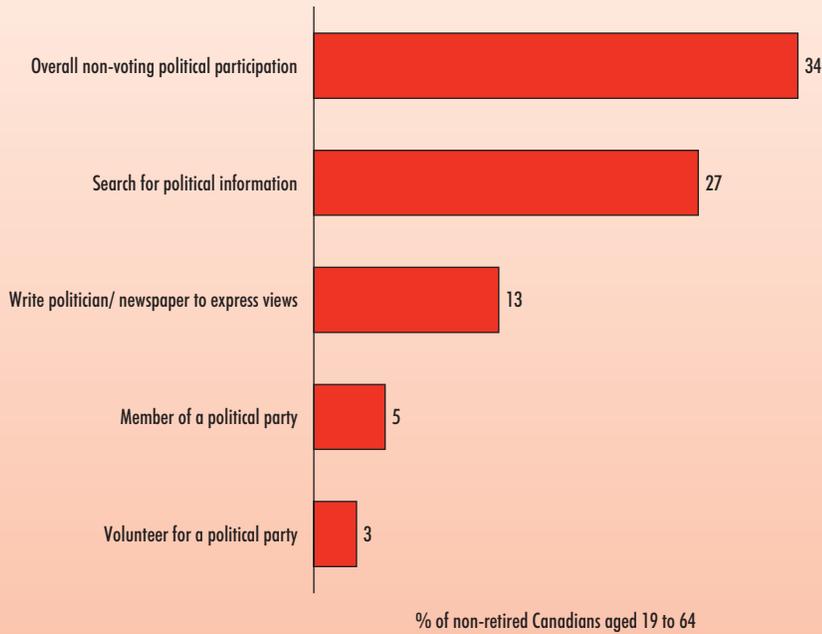
those with no more than high school indicated they had engaged in such activity (Chart 2).

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.³

Religious attendance also influenced political activities, with frequent attendees at religious

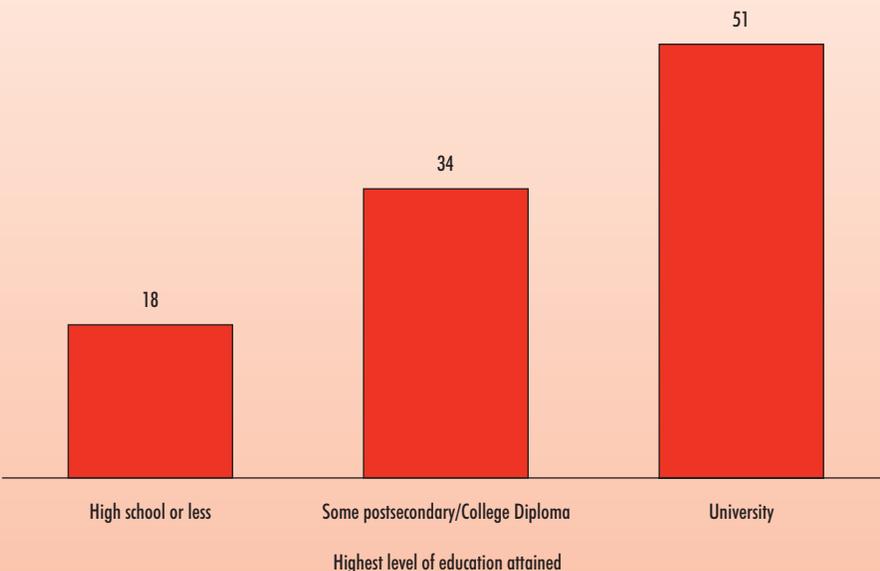
Chart 1 One in three non-retired Canadians participate in some non-voting political activity



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

Chart 2 Postsecondary education encourages participation in the non-voting political arena

% of non-retired Canadians aged 19 to 64



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

services 1.2 times more likely to participate. Previous research has found that regular attendance at religious services both highlights opportunities for political participation as well as providing a place where individuals can connect with their community and help respond to its needs.⁴

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 chances⁵ — 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.⁶

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.⁷ 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.

The 2003 General Social Survey (GSS) on social engagement surveyed about 25,000 Canadians aged 15 and older living in private households in the 10 provinces. It was developed to explore the measurement of social capital and develop a better understanding of how social networks and norms of trust and reciprocity contribute to individual and social outcomes. For this purpose, the survey collected information on a wide range of activities, such as social contacts with family, friends and neighbours; involvement in organizations, political activities and volunteer work; and the informal care they provide or receive. It also explored the values and attitudes and the level of trust in people and in public institutions. Overall, the survey provided comprehensive information on the many ways that Canadians engage in civic and social life.

The target population is based on a sample of just over 13,000 respondents and represents over 13.5 million non-retired Canadians aged 19 to 64. The reasons for restricting the study population are:

- a) those 19 and older, as people in this age group are most likely to be eligible to fully participate in the political process and to do so voluntarily;
- b) those under the age of 65, as seniors have very different patterns of engagement due to a number of factors such as mobility restrictions and extended leisure time;
- c) individuals who are employed, attending school or engaged in household work or caring for family members (that is, not retired from the workforce), as they are subject to more time constraints than retired persons.

Political participation/participation in the political arena: The four forms of political participation considered in this study are searching for political information, volunteering

for a political party, belonging to a political party, and writing to a newspaper or contacting a politician to express your views. An individual had to report engaging in at least one of these activities to be classified as participating in the political arena.

Forms of participation where the explicitly political nature of the activity could not be determined are not included. These excluded activities are boycotting products or services (which may be done for ethical as well as political reasons) and participating in a march or demonstration. For instance, an individual who took part in a walk to raise funds for breast cancer may have reported that they had participated in a march or demonstration.

Voting is considered by many to be the benchmark measure for political participation and civic engagement. However, since elections are only held periodically, measures that look at more constant forms of political behaviour are often chosen instead. In addition, eligibility to vote could not be determined using the GSS, thereby limiting the usefulness of the voting measure.

Of course, there are many forms of political participation that citizens may engage in that are outside the realm of the questions asked in the General Social Survey. These forms of participation are no less important

Multivariate analysis

The statistical analysis uses odds ratios to identify various characteristics associated with the likelihood of participating in the political arena. The results indicate whether there is a statistically significant relationship between the various characteristics included in the model, while holding the effects of the other variables constant.

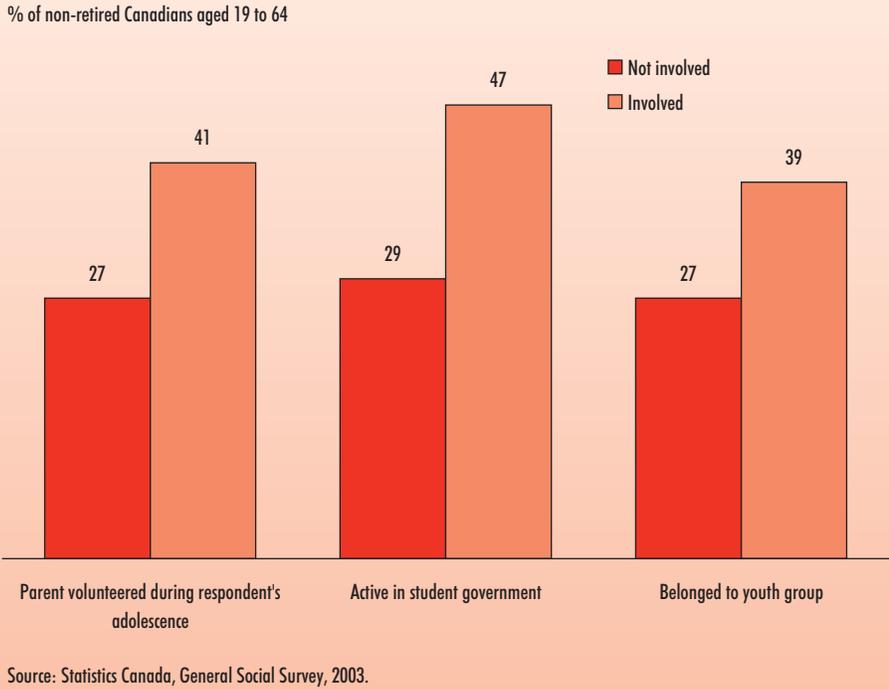
Forty-one percent of Canadians whose parent had been a volunteer participated in the political arena (Chart 3). Controlling for other influences, the model shows that individuals whose parents had volunteered in the community when they were in secondary school were 1.3 times more likely to engage in 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

Chart 3 Almost half of all individuals involved in student government as an adolescent had participated in a non-voting political activity



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 than 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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