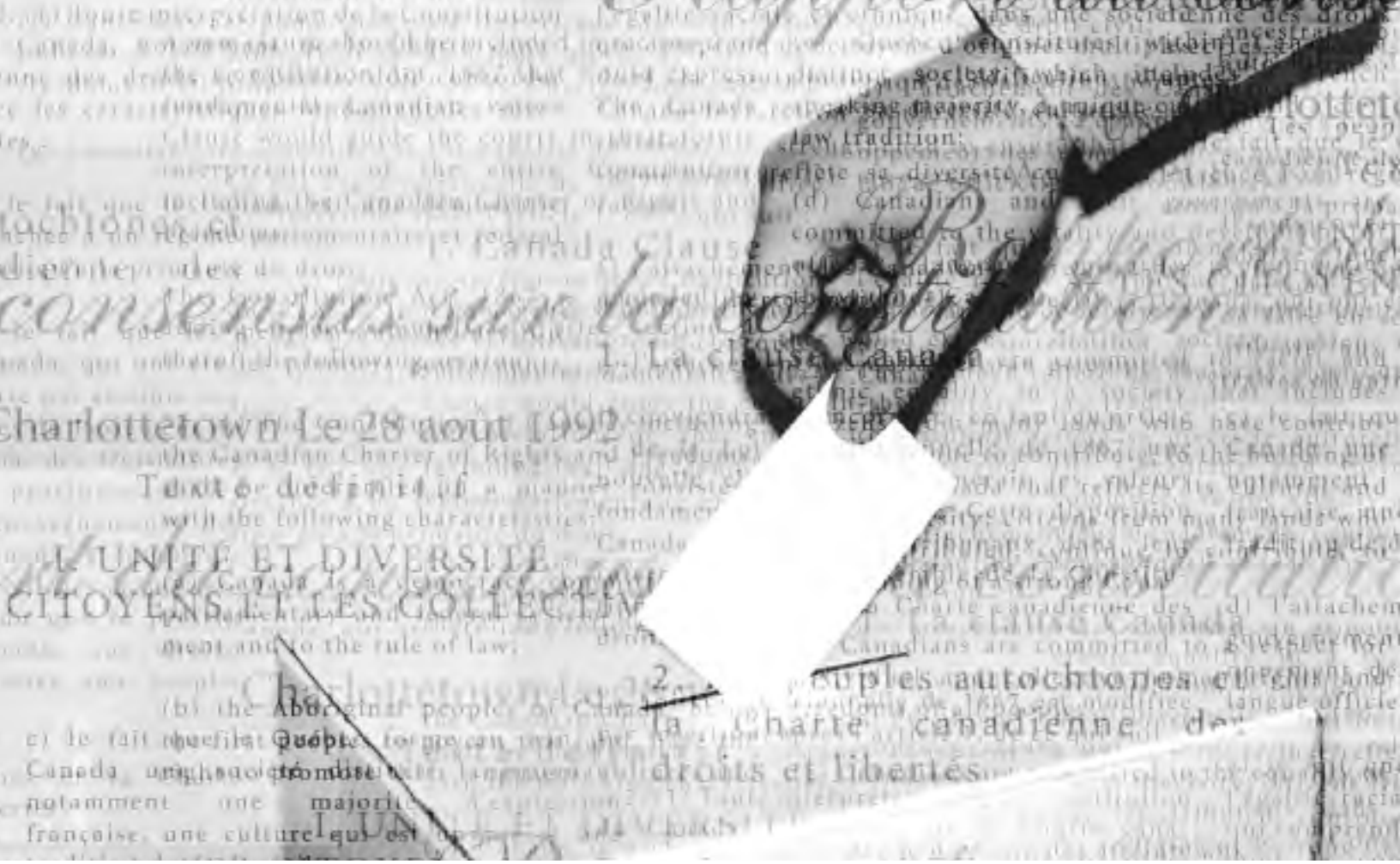


Informed Citizenship: Canada in a Comparative Context

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Without the knowledge to act meaningfully, citizenship is empty. This is true for individuals. It is also true for communities. In *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work*[1], I compare 15 Western democracies as to the proportion of their citizens possessing the knowledge to effectively exercise their citizenship through casting an informed vote. Surely democracy is less than what it could be if half the adults lack such knowledge – as in the United States?[2]

Is this also true of Canada? In the last federal election, barely sixty percent of potential voters made it to the polls, and, as a recent study for Elections Canada revealed, only 26 percent of those 18 to 24 turned out.[3] There are many reasons for this, but one – too often neglected – has to do with political awareness. Can we expect people who do not keep up with political events to vote? In this article I assess the situation in this country drawing upon my research on the high civic literacy countries of northern Europe.

The High Civic Literacy Society – and how it gets to be that way

Political knowledgeability is not automatic: even for the citizens of advanced industrial societies it needs the coordinated and funded support of the community and its institutions.[4] In countries where more newspapers are read, people vote more. Total daily newspaper circulation in Canada is the equivalent of well under 20 per cent of the population, below even that of the US. In Scandinavia, where newspapers that are not dominant in their markets are subsidized,[5] newspaper circulation equals almost 50 percent of the population. In addition, public-service television and radio are generously funded to reduce dependence on commercial electronic media, which results in their remaining dominant, if not always in audience share, at least in setting the standard for news and public affairs.

There is even a widely distributed daily special newspaper, *8 Sidor*, containing national and international news articles written in easy Swedish for those with learning difficulties or new to the Swedish language.[6] Such initiatives should be seen in the context of a societal priority on continuing education. Every indicator we have points to the high levels of participation in various forms of adult education in Scandinavia, in what Olof Palme once termed "study-circle democracy." Palme had in mind most of all the efforts of the Workers' Educational Association (ABF),[7] affiliated with the trade unions and the Social Democratic Party, the largest of 11 adult education associations, which together organize state-supported activities in which over 50 percent of Swedish adults participate each year. The Nordic countries lead (with annual participation rates over 50 percent) in the only available comparative survey, one which combines participation in adult education and training programs, with Canada at 39 percent. These data come from the International Adult Literacy Survey,[8] the main results of which showed that among Scandinavian adults, well below 10 percent were functionally illiterate, compared to 18 percent in Canada and 22 percent in the United States.

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The Political Awareness of Young People

The low electoral turnout reflects low levels of political knowledge, and, therefore, the failure of Canada's educational system to inculcate civic literacy. This is surprising given that according to the OECD's recent PISA survey,[9] after Finland, Canada has been producing the best overall results among Western 14 and 15 year olds in science, math and reading. Yet the facts are clear. The National Geographic-Roper 2002 Global Geographic Literacy Survey assessed 3,250 young adults in nine countries, as to how aware they are of geography in the context of current events. Out of 56 questions that were asked across all countries surveyed, on average young Americans answered 23 questions correctly, with young people in Canada (with 27) and Great Britain (28) faring almost as poorly.[10] Sweden led with 40, followed by Germany, Italy, France and Japan.[11]

Moreover, there appears to have been a significant decline in the level of political knowledge especially among young Canadians in the last 10 to 15 years. In a 1990 survey carried out for the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 56 percent of 18 to 29 year olds were able to answer at most one of three political knowledge questions correctly (Who is the PM? Who is the Liberal leader? Who is the NDP leader? For the survey sample as a whole, the figure was 40 percent.) By 2000, the younger group was lagging further still: when asked to identify the prime minister, finance minister and official opposition party, fully 67 percent of 18 to 29 year olds scored no more than one out of three compared to 46 percent for the sample as a whole.[12]

In another paper, Paul Howe compared responses to the political knowledge questions in the 2000 Canadian Election Survey with those to two Gallup polls from 1956.[13] Age differences turn out to be important in both periods, but significantly more so in 2000. As he concludes, "not only are the young less informed about politics today than they were forty-five years ago, they are also more likely to allow this condition to influence at least one important element of political behaviour, the decision to vote or not to vote."

Is it possible that young people who believe in democracy but are disengaged from mainstream politics translate that belief into some form of non-traditional political activity or even attentiveness? Evidence of any such a generalized trend is, however, skimpy. Though some young people today have replaced engagement in mainstream politics with involvement in non-conventional political activities, this is still marginal. The key development is simply disengagement. Canadian data shows that young people, though less attentive and informed, are in fact more supportive of "politics as usual" than older Canadians O'Neil (2001) found 18-27 year-olds to be roughly 10 percent more satisfied with Canadian democracy and elections than other age groups, and comparatively even more willing to view the federal government as fair and effective.[14]

Moreover, it is one sub-group, poorly educated young males, that most accounts for the change. Young women were less engaged and less educated than young men previously. They have now significantly surpassed males in educational levels. So the civic drop outs are typically poorly educated young men, who, in previous generations were sufficiently attentive and informed of politics to vote.

Civic Literacy and Political Institutions

Could political institutions be a factor? The fact that our winner-take-all electoral (First-past the-post) FPTP system makes it hard for parties reflecting an alternative political current to get a foothold surely has a discouraging effect upon turnout, perhaps disproportionately among young people. The report on Youth Voter Participation from IDEA (The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance[15] noted that while the average turnout level for voters between 18 and 29 years old was 8 percent below the overall participation rate, in Sweden, it was only 4.3 percent. The most significant factor accounting for differences appears to be a proportional (PR) electoral system facilitating access to representation in parliament for small parties. In such countries, there is a youth turnout rate almost 12 percentage points higher than in countries where access for small parties is not present. We know that because PR systems are fairer at translating votes into seats they can, and do, bring excluded sectors of the community in under the umbrella of electoral institutions.[16]

This is not to suggest that PR will bring 12 percent more young Canadians to the polls; the problem of civic drop-outs is deeper than can be got at through the reform of political institutions. But we do know that proportional

electoral systems create an environment that brings those at the margins of non participation into the political process, manifested in the turnout boost established by the literature to be associated with electoral systems based on PR.[17] This is due, first, to the fact that with every vote counting under PR, every voter in a PR election is like a resident in a highly contested single-member district which we know to experience higher turnout.[18] But it is less a matter of the individual's increased chance of affecting the outcome, which, in reality, is still minuscule, than the different incentives placed on political parties. In an FPTP election, parties ignore many voters, investing effort and money to get the attention of voters in close contests.[19] Moreover, there is less incentive for political leaders under PR to distort facts – and thus inhibit the awareness of the electorate of alternative positions on the issues of the day – than for FPTP-based ones, who know that the choices of a small number of voters can make the difference between monopolizing political power and having none whatsoever.

Beyond this, PR raises civic literacy by simplifying the political map and reducing the incentives for politicians to distort information. Under PR, since every vote counts equally toward electing representatives of one's preferred party, parties have an incentive to inform all voters of their programs, rather than target the median voter through stressing personality at the cost of issues as under a first-past-the-post (FPTP). Moreover, compared to PR, FPTP exaggerates a party's weakness, creating a disincentive against being involved locally in regions where it is weak. Over time, this tends to remove parties from effective presence in local politics – as is the case in Canada. As a result, voters cannot easily apply political knowledge from one level to another. In addition, the representational logic of PR-based multi-party systems is to inhibit precipitous changes to a party's principles and identity, that is, the elements that constitute its place on the political map. Political actors, and the voters themselves, can thus count on a relatively clearly drawn and stable political map on which to plot their own paths.

In the high-civic literacy Scandinavian countries, proportional electoral systems at all levels are linked to measures supporting the informational activities of political parties. There is a generous system of direct subsidies to the informational activities of political parties. Scandinavian newspaper subsidies were established not simply to foster diversity in the media, but also to facilitate the political parties publicly presenting their views. There is also a direct relationship with adult education. In Sweden, each of the parties is associated with one of the eleven adult educational associations. Especially in the period before an election – or a referendum, like those that have place over nuclear power and EU membership – the associations organize state-supported study circles for their sister parties to familiarize members and sympathizers with programs and strategies.

A related set of policies from which we can learn concern transparency in political information dissemination, namely the regulations that govern the availability and accessibility of information related to the public interest. One relevant such regulation concerns the Nordic countries' requirement - with ombudspersons appointed to ensure that this is done – that public institutions open their books to interested citizens (Axberger, 1996). More important, though typically more informal, are arrangements giving an important role to political parties in nominating members of school boards and representative councils in various sectors, even the Church. You simply do not see – as is universal in the United States – and common in Canada – demands to "keep politics out of…" It is normal for elected politicians to be invited to Swedish high schools, for example. In the US, in contrast, politics is kept out of schools, and young people are encouraged to volunteer for community groups on the clear understanding that such activity has nothing to do with politics, with the result that such volunteers are no more likely to vote or otherwise participate in policies.[20]

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The Socioeconomic Outcomes of Civic Literacy

Informed political participation is a worthy end in itself; it is also a means to an end, that of more egalitarian socio-economic distribution. Canada is regularly among the countries at the top of the United Nations' Human Development Index, which combines per capita income, educational enrollment, and life expectancy. In 2002, it came in third after Norway and Sweden. But they pull away from all the others when the UN Index takes into account the level of poverty and the relative position of women. The Scandinavian welfare state's resilience has much to do with high civic literacy. Informed individuals can better identify the effects policy options have upon their own interests and those of others in their community and make their votes count toward attaining desired long-term economic outcomes. Low civic literacy excludes from informed political participation people with low economic and educational resources, those most dependent on social policies to address their needs.

Canadians take pride in social policies that distinguish us from our powerful Southern neighbour. There, the interests of the economically disadvantaged – who, more than elsewhere, are excluded from informed political participation through lack of civic competence – carry less weight. But Canada risks following the United States down the low civic-literacy road. Unless we learn from the civic-literacy enhancing policies – and institutions – of the Scandinavians, Canadians will increasingly find themselves navigating with a political map from which the high civic literacy road and the kinder gentler society to which it leads is nowhere to be found.

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[1] Published in 2002 by the University Press of New England, distributed in Canada by UBC Press.

[2] For many years the US National Election Survey has been asking respondents which party is more likely to favour a greater role for government in the economy, and which is more conservative. The average answering "Democrats" to the first is less than 30 percent, while just over 50 percent answer Republican on to the second.

[3] John Pammett and Lawrence Leduc. "Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters." Ottawa: Elections Canada, 2003.

[4] This approach taken here is contrasted with the prevailing current in the contemporary literature on declining civic participation, which revolves around the concept of social capital, as developed notably by Robert Putnam (Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). When applied internationally, Putnam's conceptualization is not all that helpful in explaining differences in levels of voter turnout across countries. This is because, I argue, many of the kinds of activities associated with social capital by Putnam do not contribute to civic literacy and, hence, do not enhance political participation. Moreover, the promotion of civic literacy is also, to an important degree, influenced by a country's political institutions and the opportunities and incentives these provide for political actors to engage in the activities needed to nurture and sustain an informed polity, a dimension neglected in the "social capitalists" focus on civil society.

[5] Norway, Finland and Sweden subsidize daily newspapers that are not leaders in their markets. The subsidies traditionally account for 3 to 4 per cent of all newspaper revenues.

[6] This is one of many measures seeking to encourage reading. Also exemplary is that district public-health nurses, at the time of the first post-natal home visit, leave behind The Child's First Book, a compilation of rhymes and stories for children, to underscore that reading, like proper nutrition and hygiene, is vital to the development of a healthy child.

[7] For example, the ABF's fall 1999 program in Umeå (where I teach) offered the usual range of study circles in languages, computers, art, music, and nature appreciation, but also courses in organizing groups and co-operatives, in public speaking, writing and understanding media, as well as study circles on social and civil rights, the United Nations, war and peace, the future of democracy, feminism, various aspects of history, and important contemporary books.

[8] See "Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society: Further Results from the International Adult Literacy Survey. (Paris: OECD, 1997); and Literacy in the Information Age: Final Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey. (Paris: OECD, 2000).

[9] See www.cmec.ca/pisa/2000/rapportcanada.fr.pdf.

[10] In another study, however, at least among first-year university students, the British outclass their North American and Canadian counterparts. On questions about past and present political leaders, the average percentage correct was 25 for both the U.S. and Canada; for Britain it was 42. In ranking foreign countries on the basis of population and GDP, it was 43, 45 and 72 respectively (Steven Holloway, "Through a Glass Darkly: Documenting Asymmetries in Neighbourly Knowledge," in the Bulletin of the Canadian Political Science Association, Spring 1995: 51-56.)

[11] http://geosurvey.nationalgeographic.com/geosurvey/download/RoperSurvey.pdf

[12] Paul Howe, "The Sources of Campaign Intemperance," Policy Options, January-February 2001.

[13] Paul Howe, "Where have all the Voters Gone. Inroads #12, Fall 2002. The 1956 Gallop surveys showed respondents a list of 10 prominent political figures, of which two were Canadian, and asked them to identify the country and position of each, as well as a list of Canada's ten provincial premiers and asked them to identify their province. The 2000 CES included an unprecedented number of knowledge items: the names of the leaders of the Liberals, PC, Alliance and NDP, the name of the federal finance minister, and the name of one's provincial premier.

[14] Nor are they any less distrustful of multinational corporations than older Canadians. In fact, they are less prone to see them as too powerful than all groups except those aged 28-37. (Brenda O'Neill, "Generational Patterns in the Political Opinions and Behaviour of Canadians: Separating the Wheat from the Chaff." Montreal: IRPP, 2001.)

[15] Voter Turnout from 1945 to 1997: A Global Report on Political Participation. Stockholm: IDEA 1997.

[16] In their study of New Zealand after its adoption of PR, Jeffrey Karp and Susan Banducci found that compared to supporters of large parties, supporters of small parties are more satisfied with the political process under PR ("The Impact of Proportional Representation on Turnout: Evidence from New Zealand," Australian Journal of Political Science, 33: 4, 1999.)

[17] See, for example, Arend Lijphart, Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performances in Thirty-Six countries. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

[18] Consider how States where the outcome is not in doubt are ignored in US elections. The Center for Voting and Democracy's statistical analysis of the 1994 elections for the House of Representatives, reports a clear correlation between margin of victory and voter participation, with a 13 percent difference in turnout between the 87 most contested and 54 most lopsided districts.

[19] "The National Journal … reports that … four of the nation's top eight media markets -- Boston, Dallas, New York City, and Washington, DC -- had a grand total of six presidential ads aired, while eight media markets in battleground states each aired more than 6,500 presidential ads." (November 22, 2000, electronic report of the Center for Voting and Democracy - www.fairvote.org.)

[20] See for example "The Civic Mission of Schools." Report from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE (University of Maryland), 2003

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[10] Portes, A. and Landolt (1996), "The downside to social capital". The American Prospect 26 (May-June): 18-21, 94.

[11] Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey: http://www.cfsv.org/communitysurvey/

[12] Rodrik, D. (1998), "Where Did All the Growth Go? External Shocks, Social Conflict and Growth Collapses", NBER Working Paper, No. 6350.

[13] Li, Peter S., (2003) Destination Canada : Immigration Debates and Issues, Oxford University Press.

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[1] Voir, en particulier, L'équité en emploi dans la fonction publique fédérale 2000-2001, Secrétariat du Conseil du Trésor, 2002 [http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/report/empequi/2001/ee-01_f.html]

[2] Le Petit Robert, édition 1988.

[3] À l'occasion, entre autres, de la table ronde du Conseil national des minorités visibles, tenue à Ottawa le 25 novembre 2002.

[4] Allusion au procédé imaginé par Aldous Huxley dans son roman d'anticipation Le meilleur des mondes, qui permettait de produire des individus aux caractéristiques homogènes.

[5] Sondage auprès des fonctionnaires fédéraux 2002 – Voici ce que vous avez dit… Résultats pour l'ensemble de la fonction publique, Ottawa, Présidente du Conseil du Trésor, 2002 [http://www.survey-sondage.gc.ca]

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