

SAMARA DEMOCRACY REPORT #6

Lightweights?

Political Participation Beyond the Ballot Box

KEY MESSAGES

1. Samara measured 20 ways to get political beyond voting and found Canadians capitalize on few of these activities. In particular, Canadians are least likely to perform activities that involve party politics.
2. Youth (18–34) participate in most activities at the same or higher rates than non-youth, with the exception of those activities that involve interacting with a party, candidate or elected official.
3. Canadians rarely discuss politics, online or off. Only 40% discussed a social or political issue in person or by phone and only 17% shared political content on social media.
4. Those involved with party politics perform twice as many activities as Canadians do on average—and are involved well beyond traditional partisan activities.

Volunteering and donating to charitable causes are considered important parts of being Canadian, rightfully celebrated and encouraged as a means to improve this country. However, when it comes to strengthening our country through political life,

many Canadians are opting out. This stands in stark contrast to the power of politics: after all, it is through politics that we allocate vast amounts of public dollars, and ultimately, how Canadians decide to live together.

To take one high-profile example, 50 years ago nearly 80% of Canadians voted in federal elections. Today voter turnout is at about 60%, and provincial and municipal turnouts are often far lower. The most dramatic declines have occurred within the last 25 years.

While turnout is well researched, what's less regularly examined is how Canadians participate in politics beyond the ballot box, and what this might signal about the vitality of political life in Canada.

This past year, Samara commissioned public opinion research that measured different ways Canadians participate politically between elections. Samara identified 20 activities across five broad categories of engagement where Canadians are “being political”: Online Discussion, Off-line Discussion, Activism, Civic Engagement and Formal Engagement (see page 3 for a complete list of activities).

The results show that while Canadians give time and money to making communities better places

to live, we're far less likely to apply those same energies to politics.

Consider this:

- While 55% of us volunteer our time, only 10% volunteer in an election.
- While 84%¹ donate money to a charity or nonprofit, only 10% donate to political candidates or parties.
- While 58% are active in a group or association, only 10% are members of political parties.

In selecting which political activities to include, Samara chose actions that connect citizens with each other or allow them to express an opinion in public, rather than more solitary activities, such as following political news. Some activities require very little time or energy, such as tweeting a political story or discussing politics. Others, like volunteering in a community organization, are often considered civic activities rather than political ones, but they are an important part of Canadians' political life, allowing citizens to express concerns about policy as part of a group, and deserve attention.

RESULTS IN BRIEF

As this report outlines, Canadians, on average, are involved in only five out of the possible 20 activities, and a full 10% of us don't do even one political activity. Canadians reported the lowest overall activity in the Formal Engagement category, which measures their direct interaction with formal politics. On the other hand, about half of us participate in activities such as petitioning, boycotting and joining a group.

This report also examines the 18–34 age group and finds that this younger cohort is participating at higher levels than the older cohort in nearly every area, except when it comes to formal politics.

Finally, this report also reveals that those who do participate in formal politics are the real heavy lifters when it comes to our political life. They report completing at least half the activities, and their engagement goes well beyond partisan interests, crossing all categories.

Overall, these data underscore what Canadians suspect implicitly, and what falling voter turnout has signalled for decades: if a healthy democracy requires active participation, then Canada is on pretty shaky ground. This is most pronounced when it comes to formal politics, which appears to have lost—or failed to build—cachet with most Canadians, and most critically our young people.

If a healthy democracy requires active participation, then Canada is on pretty shaky ground.

“Lightweights?: Political Participation Beyond the Ballot Box” is Samara's effort to capture a snapshot of political activity levels in Canada, provoke a discussion on engagement and gather suggestions on how to draw attention to the issues of lagging political participation that have languished unchallenged for far too long.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ACTIVITIES

Activities included connect citizens with each other or allow them to express opinions or views publicly. The percentage noted after each activity represents the rate of Canadians' participation*.

1. THE TWITTERING CLASSES: ONLINE DISCUSSION

- I circulated or reposted political information on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter
17%
- I used email or instant messaging to discuss societal/political issues
30%
- I blogged about a political issue
15%
- I participated in an online group about a societal/political issue
25%

★ 58% of Canadians do none of these activities
5% do all four

2. SOMETHIN' TO TALK ABOUT: OFF-LINE DISCUSSION

- I discussed a societal/political issue face to face or on the phone
40%
- I wrote a letter to the editor about a political issue
17%
- I made a public speech on a political issue
15%
- I organized a public event or meeting about politics
12%

★ 53% of Canadians do none of these activities
6% do all four

If we missed a political activity that you think we should track, please let us know. Samara will use these questions to take the pulse of Canadian political life in a forthcoming Samara Index, which measures the connection between citizens and politics, including how citizens participate.

3. TAKING IT TO THE STREETS: ACTIVISM

- I signed a petition
51%
- I boycotted/"buycotted" a product
49%
- I was part of a protest
14%

★ 34% of Canadians do none of these activities
10% do all three

4. COMMUNITY REVIVAL: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- I worked with others on an issue in my community
30%
- I was active in a group or organization
58%
- I donated to a political/societal cause
26%
- I did voluntary work
55%

★ 27% of Canadians do none of these activities
12% do all four

5. IN THE SYSTEM: FORMAL ENGAGEMENT

- I contacted an elected official about an issue that concerns me
31%
- I attended a political meeting
20%
- I volunteered in an election
10%
- I donated to a political party or candidate
10%
- I am or have been a member of a political party
10%

★ 59% of Canadians do none of these activities
2% do all five

*Survey respondents were asked whether they performed these activities *in the last 12 months*, except for the following questions: volunteering in an election, donating to a party or candidate or being a member of a party, for which they were asked whether they'd participated *in the last five years*.

ONLINE AND OFF-LINE DISCUSSION

We expected that Online Discussion would be an important new space for political activity, but with only 17% of Canadians reporting that they circulate political information on networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, politics does not seem to have moved online in a substantial way for most citizens. Although more Canadians indicate they discuss political and societal issues over email, instant messaging and via online discussion groups, even these activity levels do not eclipse rates of reported off-line conversation.

In fact, compared to networking sites, Canadians are more than twice as likely (at 40%) to report having had a conversation on the phone or in person about a political or societal issue in the previous year. However, this still suggests that most dinner tables, coffee shops and other gatherings are unlikely to host a conversation that touches on politics or social issues. And only a small percentage of Canadians are willing to get up on the dais and give a political speech (15%) or organize a public event or meeting about politics (12%).

ACTIVISM

Recent examples of the take-to-the-street Activism category, such as Quebec’s Maple Spring and Idle No More, show how some Canadians seek change outside more formal institutions like Parliament and political parties.

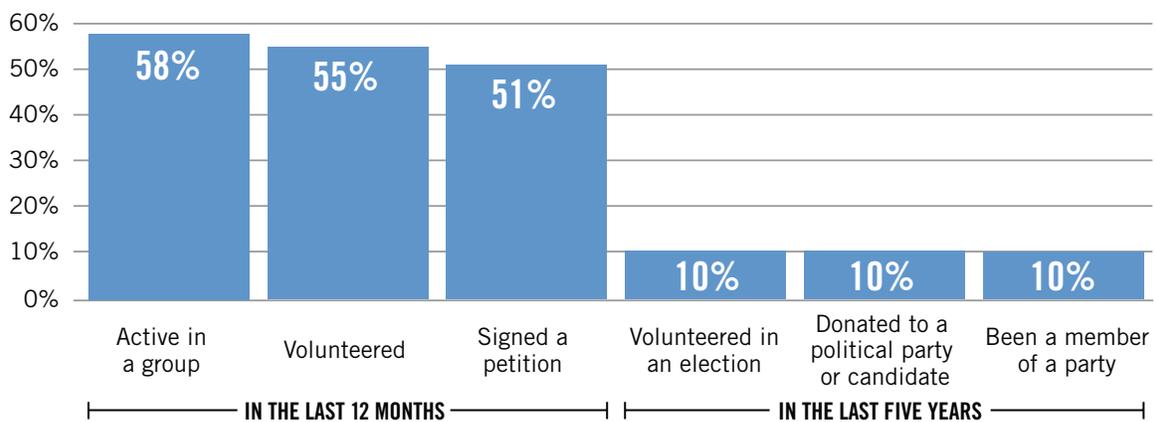
Despite an increasing public profile in recent years, protesting ranks among the lowest levels of all activities at 14%. Compared to any discussion activities, Canadians report much greater rates of participation across petition-signing (51%) and boycotting or “buycotting” (49%), purchasing goods (or not) for environmental or political reasons.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Across the five categories of participation, Civic Engagement is the one in which the most Canadians report activity, even though these activities can be the most time-intensive. For example, a majority of Canadians—nearly three out of every five of us—report being active in some form of group or association.²

MOST POPULAR AND LEAST POPULAR ACTIVITIES

Formal politics ranks at the bottom



Fifty-five percent of Canadians also indicate they have volunteered in some way in the past year. And when we asked Canadians if they had donated to a “political or societal” cause, 26% of Canadians³ indicated that they had. Many Canadians, through generosity with their “time, talent or treasure,” espouse civic values and contribute to their country through their communities.

FORMAL ENGAGEMENT

Canadians are much less involved in the Formal Engagement category. Despite high rates of reported dissatisfaction with governments and politicians,⁴ only about 31% of us report contacting an elected official about an issue of concern in the past year. A fifth of Canadians indicate they attended a political meeting, such as a government consultation or town hall.

When it comes to participation that entails supporting a party or an individual candidate,

Canadians’ participation drops off even more dramatically. For each activity—volunteering for a campaign, donating to a political party or candidate or joining a party—only 10% of Canadians report they’ve been involved in political life in this manner over the past five years at any level—federal, provincial or municipal.

Looking at this from another angle, a majority of Canadians (59%) indicate they haven’t participated in any of the five activities in the Formal Engagement category. This sends a strong signal that formal political participation is not an activity that Canadians view as worthwhile.

PARTY PEOPLE

As noted earlier, Canadians, on average, pursue only one quarter of the possible 20 activities. While it’s a very rare individual who can check off every activity on the list—less than 1% of

GEN Y: APATHETIC OR EMPATHETIC?

Despite the perennial characterization of young people as apathetic, their reported levels of participation are the same or higher when compared to the older cohort, with the notable exception of Formal Engagement. In fact, youth (defined as those between the ages of 18 and 34), on average, perform six out of 20 activities, compared to Canadians age 35 and over who average five out of 20 activities.

Rates of Civic Engagement activities for youth closely mirror those of the older cohort, although they are slightly more likely to have volunteered. In terms of Activism, rates of petition-signing and boycotting are also similar, though youth are more likely to have protested. In other areas, they are even more active. Younger Canadians use online technologies to discuss politics in much greater numbers—about 15 to 20 percentage points more. This isn’t unexpected, given that this

cohort has come of age with the Internet and social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Notably, such activity does not drop off when this group goes off-line: youth report higher levels of face-to-face and public discussion about issues, too.

However, even more so than the older cohort, youth avoid the Formal Engagement category of political activity. They appear less likely to contact an elected official (25% compared to 33%). Youth are also less likely (by two to three percentage points) to report volunteering for a campaign or joining or donating to a political party. Should these low rates of Formal Engagement remain steady or decline over time, they may be an unfortunate harbinger for the future of political renewal in parties and Canadian politics.

To see the full data on youth political activities, please see the Appendix on pages 11 and 12.

Canadians are up to this Herculean task!—there is a small group of people involved in party politics who are engaged in very high levels of activity.

Approximately 20% of Canadians responded that they did at least one of these three activities: joined a party, volunteered on a campaign or donated to a party or candidate. Traditionally considered to be partisans, for this report we’re more expansively referring to these respondents as party people.

Far from being absorbed only in the fortunes of their political parties or candidates, this research suggests that Canada’s party people are active across all categories and report activity rates that are 15 to 41 percentage points higher than non-party people, including in more informal activities like protesting. These people make political choices about purchases, talk to friends and family about the issues that matter to

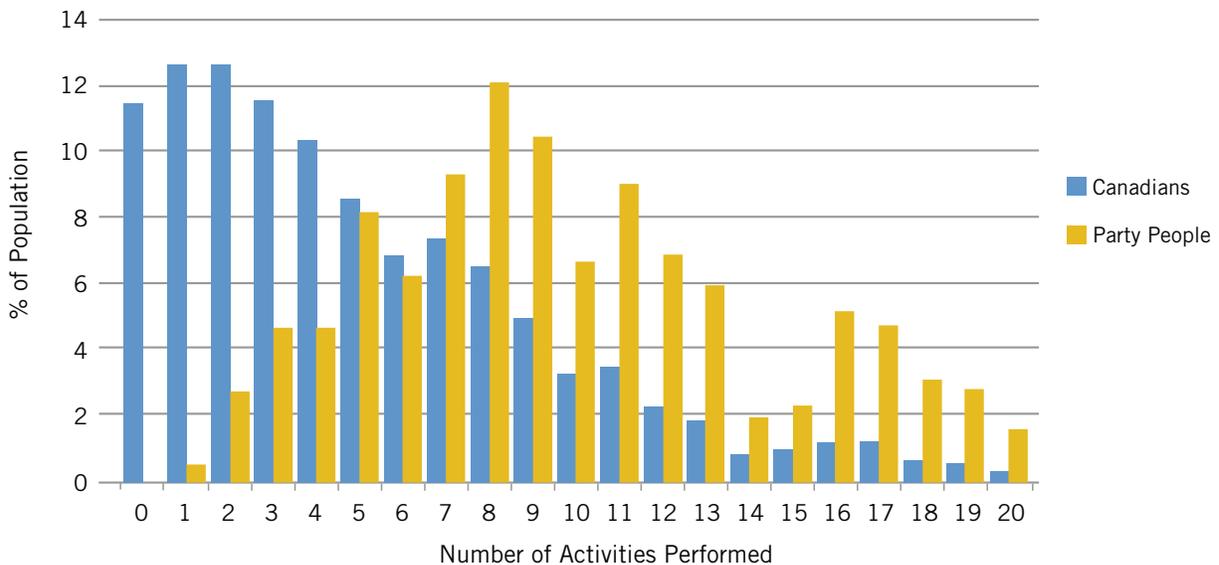
the country, volunteer with community groups, and connect with policy-makers and politicians. On average, they perform ten out of 20 possible activities.

This group of people is taking advantage of the many engagement opportunities available and may also, through higher levels in the Discussion and Civic Engagement activities, work as bridges between their communities and formal political institutions. (To see the full data on party people, please see the Appendix on page 11.)

It is unfortunate that the antagonism in Canada’s party system leads many Canadians to think that if someone is involved in conventional politics, they’re working for the good of the party, not the good of the country. Rather than eschewing partisanship as an ugly affair, could Canadians come to acknowledge, if not applaud, these citizens’ political engagement as essential and valuable work?

THE PARTICIPATION PLUMMET

On average, Canadians perform five activities; party people perform ten.



DEMOCRACY TALKS

These data suggest that Canadians could be doing much better with respect to contributing to a healthy democracy. How we got to these low engagement rates is a tough question, and one not easily answered. But when these numbers are taken in context with rates of dissatisfaction between 64 and 71%⁴, it's worth asking: why are so many Canadians giving up on conventional political engagement?

Although these beyond-the-ballot-box political activities are open to all Canadians—and to permanent residents too—the reality is there are many reasons why Canadians don't take advantage of them. “Laziness” is the answer easily offered by pundits and the politically engaged, but lack of time, interest, finances or understanding all play a part.

“I wrote to my MP and got a letter back that just said ‘thanks for your input.’”

Samara's previous research into disengaged Canadians⁵ and ongoing workshops with youth through its [Democracy Talks](#) program reveal that the reasons are complex. Although these workshops offer only a window into the thoughts of a few Canadians, participants regularly report that they struggle to find a way to feel included and engaged. “I don't think I have an avenue to express my thoughts ... The

way that I've been engaged doesn't work for me,” said one participant. They also don't view many engagement opportunities as worthwhile: “I wrote to my MP and got a letter back that just said ‘thanks for your input.’”

With such experiences or impressions, it is understandable that many Canadians respond by checking out of an unsatisfying system. “We're already passionate and excited and informed ... but it's the linkage between what government does and how we can participate in it [that's missing],” said another.

POLITICS NEEDS YOU

Canada's political parties and elected leaders have created the impression that they're only interested in people at election time. Our survey research reinforces this point, with 75% of Canadians agreeing or strongly agreeing that “candidates for public office are interested only in people's votes, not their opinions.”

There is an unfortunate paradox at play: at a time when technology could make some forms of engagement easier than ever, Canadians are stepping away from formal politics. At the same time, dissatisfaction with Canadian democracy is increasing.⁶ Casting blame—parties and their members, politicians, public servants, media, teachers and citizens themselves can all take a portion—will not clear a path forward.

Politics will only improve when citizens demand change, and when working within politics is better understood and viewed as a critical part of citizenship. However, if current activity levels persist, that is unlikely to happen. It's easy for leaders to ignore citizens who don't speak up, particularly between elections.

WHAT TO DO

Samara hopes the above menu of engagement opportunities reminds you that there are lots of ways to get “a little political” beyond the ballot box. If something concerns you, consider how these options can be used to advance change—especially when you combine your efforts with those of others. Volunteer on a campaign and see how politics works from the inside. Get in touch with your local riding association and attend their next meeting. Speak up at that town hall. Discuss politics in your book club, classroom or at your dinner table.

This report on the state of political activity is part of a [larger Samara project](#) on the state of our politics. A few questions for you to consider:

- Does the activity list capture all the current ways to get engaged?
- Are these activities effective enough for Canadians to willingly give them time and attention? How could that change?
- Is one engagement method particularly frustrating or ineffective, in your view?
- Are there better options for engagement that Canada should consider?

[Get in touch with us and let us know.](#) ^

NOMINATE YOUR POLITICAL ROLE MODELS

Over the past year, Samara piloted a Democracy Talks program that provided opportunities for young people and newcomers to Canada to learn about and get involved in politics. Participants reported that they struggled to see what their involvement or engagement in politics might look like in everyday life, and mentioned that there were no role models and no one in politics to whom they could relate.

In response, and in the same way that volunteerism and charitable campaigns are often celebrated, Samara seeks to showcase Canadians who are everyday “political citizens.” We’re celebrating all the door-knockers, petition-signers, community leaders, candidates and rabble-rousers who work through political systems that are often frustrating, non-responsive and downright confusing in order to change policies and build a better country.

Do you know an inspiring political citizen? If so, we want to hear about them! Send us a photo and a couple of sentences telling us what this person does to strengthen democracy in Canada.

Not only will this give some recognition to Canada’s political enthusiasts, who are contributing more than their share to Canada’s political and community life, but we hope their stories can also help inspire others to keep talking about politics and what can be accomplished through it.

Methodology

SAMARA'S PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

The Samara Citizens' Survey was designed by Samara staff with guidance from a team of academics from universities across Canada. The research was conducted in English and French by using an online sample of 2,287 Canadian residents over 18 years of age living in ten provinces. The survey data was collected between March 19 and April 2, 2012. Responses were weighted to ensure they reflect a national representative sample of Canadians. Samara oversampled young Canadians (aged 18 to 34).

The Appendix table includes the precise survey question wording and the weighted frequencies. The rates of youth and party people are contrasted with the rates of non-youth (35 years and over) and non-partisans (those who did not meet the definition of party people on page 6). Values were rounded.

The response options to survey questions about participation varied. Some questions asked for a simple yes or no while other questions asked for the frequency of participation (e.g. never, once, more than once). Because this report focused on

the overall participation rates rather than frequency or duration of participation, survey responses were coded into a dichotomous variable (e.g. participated or did not participate). Respondents who answered "don't know" and "refused" were coded as missing and not included in the analysis.

The Samara survey asked respondents two questions about boycotting based on different reasons (see Appendix). The rate of participation cited in this report captures all respondents who had boycotted in at least one of these forms.

The chart entitled "The Participation Plummet" (see page 6) includes the number of activities performed by both Canadians and by party people. Notably, these groups are not directly comparable since the category "Canadians" also encompasses those counted as "party people." However, in the pursuit of visual simplicity, this chart includes both. Party people, by their definition, are already doing at least one activity, which makes it impossible for any party people to have performed zero activities.

Please contact Samara for further details about the survey, methodology or analysis.

ENDNOTES

1. [Statistics Canada, *Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating* \(2010\).](#)
2. Groups mentioned in the survey included: neighbourhood and community associations, seniors' groups, school or parents' associations, women's groups, environmental groups, arts or hobby groups, religious groups, sports or recreation organizations, political action or activist groups and the general term "local organization that helps people."
3. Had Canadians been asked if they had made a charitable donation, this number would likely have been even higher. In 2010, [Statistics Canada](#) reported that 84% of Canadians (aged 15 and over) said they had donated financially to a charity or a non-profit in the previous year. Source: Statistics Canada, *Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating* (2010).
4. This same survey by Samara revealed that 71% of Canadians say they are not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with how government in Ottawa is dealing with the issue that concerns them, and 64% of Canadians say they are not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way their interests are represented by the federal government.
5. "The Real Outsiders", [Samara Democracy Report, 2011.](#)
6. "Who's the Boss?", [Samara Democracy Report, 2012.](#)

Samara Democracy Reports

Samara's Democracy Reports are a series designed to shine a light on Canada's democratic system and increase Canadians' understanding of politics. These reports investigate commonly held assumptions, provoke questions and elevate discussion on the health of political and democratic participation in Canada.

Previous Democracy Reports are available at www.samaracanada.com:

- “[The Real Outsiders](#)” examines the attitudes of less-engaged Canadians towards politics and democracy.
- “[Occupiers and Legislators](#)” analyzes how the media covers politics.
- “[Who's the Boss?](#)” offers a performance review for Members of Parliament.
- “[Lost in Translation or Just Lost?](#)” compares Canadians' priorities with House of Commons discussions.

These reports will culminate in the [Samara Index](#), which focuses on the relationship between citizens and the political process that governs Canadians.

ABOUT SAMARA

Samara is a charitable organization dedicated to improving political participation in Canada. Through research and educational programs, Samara reconnects citizens to politics.

To advance our goals, Samara initiates research, writes reports, runs seminars for journalists, conducts media interviews, speaks at conferences and produces curriculum materials for schools and universities.

The findings from our Member of Parliament Exit Interview project and the Samara Democracy Reports project both received extensive national and local media coverage, and are regularly referenced by columnists and decision-makers.

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APPENDIX:

Political Participation Levels of Canadians

Please see Methodology section for details about survey data collection and analysis.

ONLINE DISCUSSION

	CANADIANS	18 TO 34 YEARS	35 YEARS AND OVER	PARTY PEOPLE	NON-PARTY PEOPLE
Have you done the following things on [Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Blogging Site, Other] in the last 12 months?: circulated, (re)posted or embedded political information or content?	17%	30%	12%	29%	14%
In the last 12 months, have you: used email or instant messaging to discuss a political or societal issue?	30%	42%	26%	49%	25%
In the last 12 months, have you: blogged about a political issue?	15%	26%	11%	27%	11%
In the last 12 months, have you: participated in an online discussion group about a political or societal issue?	25%	40%	20%	39%	22%
Average number of activities (out of four)	0.9	1.4	0.7	1.4	0.7
None	58%	42%	63%	59%	62%
All four	5%	11%	2%	11%	3%

OFF-LINE DISCUSSION

	CANADIANS	18 TO 34 YEARS	35 YEARS AND OVER	PARTY PEOPLE	NON-PARTY PEOPLE
In the past 12 months, have you: discussed a political or societal issue face-to-face or over the phone?	40%	51%	36%	59%	35%
In the past 12 months, have you: written a letter to the editor about a political issue?	17%	20%	16%	37%	12%
In the past 12 months, have you: given a political speech in public?	15%	22%	12%	28%	11%
In the past 12 months, have you: organized a public event or meeting about politics?	12%	20%	9%	25%	9%
Average total number of activities (out of four)	0.8	1.1	0.7	1.5	0.7
None	53%	44%	56%	30%	58%
All four	6%	11%	4%	13%	3%

ACTIVISM

	CANADIANS	18 TO 34 YEARS	35 YEARS AND OVER	PARTY PEOPLE	NON-PARTY PEOPLE
In the last 12 months, have you: signed a petition?	51%	49%	51%	65%	47%
In the last 12 months, have you: boycotted or bought products for environmental reasons AND/OR In the last 12 months, have you: boycotted or bought products for ethical or political reasons?	49%	47%	50%	65%	45%
In the last 12 months, have you: taken part in a protest or demonstration?	14%	21%	11%	28%	9%
Average number of activities (out of three)	1.1	1.2	1.1	1.6	1.0
None	34%	36%	33%	17%	38%
All three	10%	15%	8%	20%	7%

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

	CANADIANS	18 TO 34 YEARS	35 YEARS AND OVER	PARTY PEOPLE	NON-PARTY PEOPLE
In the last 12 months, have you: worked with others on a community issue?	30%	31%	30%	52%	24%
Have you been active in any of the following groups or organizations in the past year? [Options include: religious group, local organization that helps people, sports organization or recreation group, arts or hobby group, school group or parents' group, seniors' group, ethnic or immigrant social organization, women's group, environmental group, political action/activist group, neighbourhood, civic or community group, any other type of group or organization]	58%	58%	59%	80%	53%
In the last 12 months, have you: donated money to a political or societal cause?	26%	31%	25%	59%	18%
In the last 12 months, have you: done voluntary work?	55%	58%	55%	78%	49%
Average number of activities (out of four)	1.7	1.7	1.7	2.7	1.4
None	27%	24%	28%	8%	32%
All four	12%	12%	12%	34%	7%

FORMAL ENGAGEMENT

	CANADIANS	18 TO 34 YEARS	35 YEARS AND OVER	PARTY PEOPLE	NON-PARTY* PEOPLE
In the last 12 months have you: contacted an elected official?	31%	25%	33%	59%	23%
In the last 12 months, have you: attended a political meeting?	20%	18%	20%	51%	11%
In the last 5 years, have you: volunteered in an election campaign?	10%	8%	11%	53%	0%
In the last 5 years, have you: donated money to a political party or candidate?	10%	8%	11%	53%	0%
In the last 5 years, have you: belonged to a political party?	10%	9%	11%	53%	0%
Average number of activities (out of five)	0.8	0.6	0.9	2.7	0.3 (out of two)
None	59%	66%	56%	0%	73% (neither activity)
All five	2%	1%	2%	11%	6% (both activities)

	CANADIANS	18 TO 34 YEARS	35 YEARS AND OVER	PARTY PEOPLE	NON-PARTY PEOPLE
Average total number of activities (out of 20)	5	6	5	10	4 (out of 17)

Not all differences between groups can be said to be representative of the Canadian population. Please [contact Samara](#) for significance analysis.

* Non-party people were defined by their lack of activity in three types of formal engagement activities, indicated by 0% in this table. Since non-party people were ineligible to complete these activities by definition, their rate of participation is better contrasted against a total of two formal engagement activities rather than five, and a total of 17 activities instead of 20.