

## Winnipeg Free Press

# Democracy's strong foundation is citizen engagement

By: Royce Koop

Posted: 07/21/2017 4:00 AM



CHRIS YOUNG / THE CANADIAN PRESS FILES

Canadians have room for improvement when it comes to democratic engagement.

In the year of Canada's sesquicentennial, it's worthwhile to assess the state of Canadian democracy. We're lucky to live in what is clearly an established, stable and peaceful democratic nation.

Still, there is always room for improvement and, for Canada, that is most clearly the case with respect to democratic engagement. Canadians do not engage with politics as often as they could or, ideally, should. Our democracy suffers as a result.

The classic measure of democratic engagement is voter turnout in elections. Engaged citizens turn out to exercise their right to vote when given the opportunity to do so. Turnout in the 2015 Canadian election was 68.3 per cent, a respectable number. Indeed, 2015 marked the highest voter turnout in a Canadian election since 1993, after which turnout rates declined.

Still, voter turnout in Canada is far from a model of democratic engagement: analysis by the Pew Institute comparing turnout in recent national elections shows Canada in 19th place behind other developed democracies.

This picture quickly gets worse at other levels of politics. Only 57.4 per cent of registered voters bothered to cast their ballots in the last Manitoba election. And turnout in the 2014 Winnipeg civic election was a meagre 50.2 per cent.

This last result is striking: local government has more impact on the day-to-day lives of Canadians than either the provincial or federal government. Despite this, only half of eligible Winnipeggers participated in the decision about who would take the reins at City Hall.

If there is good news to be found in the results from the 2015 national election, it is that turnout between the 2011 and 2015 national elections jumped most significantly among young voters. Turnout for those aged 18 to 24 increased from 39 per cent in 2011 to 57 per cent in 2015, a stunning bounce that may augur a future where young Canadians are more engaged in the political process.

Turnout is important, but is not the only indicator of democratic engagement; after all, voting is a simple act that we engage in only once every four years. What about other forms of democratic engagement that get citizens involved between elections?

Samara, a non-profit think tank dedicated to improving Canadian democracy, has recently released its Democracy 360 report card that assesses exactly how Canadians engage in politics. And Samara takes a broad view of democratic engagement, going much further than just voter turnout.

For example: Samara's report finds that only 38 per cent of Canadians have participated in a formal political activity in the past year. These activities include being a member of a party, attending a political meeting, donating money to a party or candidate, volunteering in an election campaign or giving a public speech. Notably, only eight per cent of Canadians are member of political parties. Such a low number has the effect of denying those parties invaluable insight and feedback from grassroots Canadians.

If Canadians are relatively unlikely to get involved in politics, that doesn't mean they're not interested. Samara finds that 67 per cent of Canadians discussed politics in the past year. The most common way they did so was old-fashioned: just over half of Canadians had talked about politics in person or over the phone. Canadians also take advantage of social media to chat about politics online and to gather political information, and even to engage directly with politicians via Facebook or Twitter.

While formal political activity is reserved for a relatively small number of Canadians, the number of people participating in other forms of activism is much higher. Fully 68 per cent of Canadians participated in some form of activism, including signing a petition, boycotting a product or shopping for ethical reasons or protesting. Canadians, it seems, are not shy about acting upon their views and opinions.

And while formal political engagement is limited, Samara finds evidence that Canadians are likely to participate in other forms of civic engagement. A total of 88 per cent of Canadians had participated in some form of civic engagement, including donating money to a charity, volunteering, working in a relevant group or organization and working with others to solve a community problem.

Canadians are civic-minded. They're willing to invest both their time and money into their communities and the charities they believe in. Further, they are often willing to

take action in accordance with their political views and beliefs, including by boycotting products and protesting. And while we often talk and engage in banter about politics, Canadians are less likely to take the leap when it comes to actual, hands-on involvement in the political process.

The foundation for democratic life in Canada is strong, but we are often reluctant to take advantage of this by making our voices heard in the political process. Our politics suffers as a result.

*Royce Koop is an associate professor and head of the department of political studies at the University of Manitoba.*