

Canadians not all that active politically, study finds

A new report finds that only a tiny slice of the population is politically active in Canada.

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OTTAWA—Politicians, partisans and political junkies may have to confront a harsh truth — Canadians just aren't that into you.

A new report on political participation in Canada shows that only a slim slice of the population is in any way involved in political activities — whether it's volunteering for party duty or even discussing issues online.

Samara, a non-profit organization devoted to improving civic culture in Canada, carried out a national survey to find out how and whether citizens involved themselves in politics in between elections.

The results are sobering for those who believe Canada turns on political debate.

“If a healthy democracy requires active participation, then Canada is on pretty shaky ground,” states the report, titled “Lightweights” — a not-so-subtle jab at Canadians' apparent political apathy.

Only 10 per cent of respondents to the Samara survey had volunteered, donated to or joined a political party in the previous five years. Just 17 per cent said they had taken part in political discussions on social media such as Twitter or Facebook over the past year. The same percentage said they had written a letter to the editor about a political issue in the past 12 months.

In the realm of non-political civic engagement, the results are more encouraging. A full 58 per cent said they had joined sports, religious, community or other groups in the past year and 55 per cent said they had done voluntary work.

The survey was carried out online in spring this year among 2,287 Canadians over 18 years of age, who were asked about their activity in 20 different types of civic engagement — everything from talking about politics to devoting time and energy to a cause.

Samara's researchers were surprised at the low levels of social-media discussion of politics, believing that Twitter, Facebook and other newer forms of online conversation would be “an important new space for political activity.”

However, the survey found that Canadians were still more than twice as likely to do their talking about politics on the phone or in person. Forty per cent reported getting their fix of political conversations this way.

“And only a small percentage of Canadians are willing to get up on a dais and give a political speech (15 per cent) or organize a public event or meeting about politics (12 per cent),” the report states.

The study also confirms that politics is more interesting to people over 35 years of age and that youth, who also show low voter-turnout numbers, aren’t all that into political participation between elections either.

While 33 per cent of respondents over 35 said they had been in touch with an elected official in the past 12 months, only 25 per cent of people aged 18 to 35 said the same.

But younger people were more likely to use the new tools of political conversation when they did participate. Only 12 per cent of respondents over 35 had discussed politics on social media, but 30 per cent of people under 35 had done so. As well, 42 per cent of younger citizens had used email or instant messaging to discuss a “political or societal issue,” compared with only 26 per cent of people over 35.

The report urges Canadians to snap out of their political apathy.

“At a time when technology could make some forms of engagement easier than ever, Canadians are stepping away from formal politics,” it states. “Politics will only improve when citizens demand change, and when working within politics is better understood and viewed as a critical part of citizenship.”