

Measuring political engagement

THOUGHT UNDERMINED (BLOG)

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Samara, a non-partisan charitable organization that works to improve political participation in Canada, released a report measuring Canadians' political engagement. I stand to be corrected, but I do think this is maybe the first real attempt by any organization to gauge this sort of thing, and so I commend Samara for undertaking this task. However, I do have some issues with the report, and when compared to the UK Hansard Society's annual Audit of Political Engagement, the Samara report leaves much to be desired.

My main issue with the [Samara report](#) is the terminology used in the survey conducted to gather data for the report. Survey respondents were repeatedly asked if they'd engaged in "political or societal" discussions, or discussed "political or societal" issues (either online or offline), etc. It's the use of the word "political" that concerns me the most. I wonder if any effort was made to determine how those surveyed were interpreting "political". For example, the survey found that only 40% of Canadians "discussed a political or societal issue face-to-face or over the phone" during the past 12 months, and only 30% had used social media to do the same. I personally think that the number is probably higher because some people might have interpreted "political" to mean that the discussion had to be about a politician or political party or parliament, etc., when a discussion online or face-to-face about how difficult it is to find a family doctor, or about the sorry state of the city's roads are also very much political discussions, even if no politician or political party is mentioned during the course of the discussion.

My point here is that there is very little in our lives that isn't inherently political. Annoyed with all the security measures at the airport? A political response to real or perceived security threats. Higher prices at the gas pump? Often due to global politics. Yet while many people will willingly and often discuss these things, they might not tend to view these as specifically "political" discussions. And as for "societal"

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discussions, the other term used in the survey, I have no idea how that would have been interpreted by many respondents.

While it might be somewhat interesting to learn that only 25% of Canadians participated in an online discussion group about a political or societal issue, I'm not certain if that's the most important thing we need to know. And this is why I think the Hansard Society's yearly (since 2004) Audit of Political Engagement (APE) is a far better, and more informative survey.

[The most recent \(2013\) APE is available for download here](#). Almost all of the questions Samara asked are also asked in the survey conducted for the Political Audit – in one question, Question 2, which you can find in Appendix B, on page 109 of the report. The other questions asked in the Audit are far better gauges of how engaged UK citizens are with their parliament and politics in general. The first question asks how likely respondents are to vote in an immediate general election. Samara asked if respondents had volunteered in an election campaign at any time in the last five years, but doesn't ask once if they'd actually voted, or if they would be likely to vote – surely the strongest measure of political engagement there is? The APE survey then proceeds to ask how interested people are in politics, how much do they feel they know about politics, how much do they feel they know about the UK parliament, what is their opinion of the present system of governing Britain, can they name their local MP, are they satisfied with how Parliament works, etc.

There is a question, Q8 on p. 112, which asks if a series of statements are true or false, and includes items such as “Cabinet ministers stop being MPs when they become a minister”, “Members of the House of Lords are elected by the British public” and “Government and Parliament are the same thing”. I would love to know how Canadians would respond to similar statements.

The series of questions under Q12 (pp. 113-114) measure political engagement by asking if respondents think politics is a waste of time, if the only way to be really informed about politics is to get involved, if they think they would do a good job themselves as a local councillor, or MP, etc. The Q13 series of questions looks at people's impression of the relevancy of Parliament. I could go on, but I urge you all to actually look at the

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survey questions used (at the very least). On the whole, the information gathered by the APE survey tells us far more about political engagement in the UK than the Samara survey does about political engagement in Canada.

Again, I commend Samara for at least attempting to measure this sort of thing, but I would urge them, in the future, to maybe try to do something more along the lines of what the Hansard Society does. I think the APE survey questions are far more relevant, and doing it on a yearly basis provides an invaluable service to anyone interested in how to gauge and try to improve public engagement with politics.