

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Don't worry, politics could make you happy

Dropping political engagement by Canadians has implications for our overall happiness, science suggests

DOUGLAS TODD, VANCOUVER SUN

Published on: July 11, 2013

Many Canadians are avoiding a scientifically confirmed path to happiness.

Low voter turnout in Canadian elections is not only a warning sign for democracy, but psychological studies suggest it's also harmful to Canadians' happiness.

Prof. Ruut Veenhoven, of Erasmus University in Rotterdam, was commenting this week on a new survey that found six of 10 Canadians have not discussed a political or societal issue face-to-face or over the phone even once in the past 12 months.

The survey of 2,300 adults discovered most Canadians view politics "as a dirty word – something that isn't appropriate or that should be celebrated," said Alison Loat, executive director of Samara, a Toronto-based non-profit organization emphasizing the value of political activity.

Veenhoven, one of the world's foremost specialists on the social conditions for happiness, has reviewed dozens of studies that show a positive correlation between humans' engagement in political activity and their individual sense of well-being.

What kind of advice might the renowned Dutch researcher have for Canadians who avoid talking about social issues in person or on the Internet, let alone volunteering for a political party?

It's in your emotional interest to jump into the political fray.

Most studies show greater happiness among people who are politically involved, Veenhoven wrote in an email.

"One reason is that political participation is rewarding in itself, like other forms of social participation. It provides social contacts, a sense of control and a context in which one can actualize oneself, that is, use and develop one's skills."

The Dutch economics professor's tip for enhancing life satisfaction has special importance for Canada, where federal voter turnout dropped to 61 per cent in the 2011 election from 75 per cent in 1988.

The downturn is even more severe in B.C., where only 52 per cent of voters (one of the worst provincial rates in the country) cast ballots in the May 14 election that brought in Christy Clark as premier. That's down from 67 per cent in 1986.

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In addition, as Sun columnist Vaughn Palmer pointed out Tuesday, veteran pollster Angus Reid found the British Columbians least likely to cast a ballot are those under age 35.

Given dwindling political involvement in Canada, Veenhoven suggests Canadians as a whole may be in danger of dropping lower on the international happiness scales.

“Average happiness is higher in Western nations where citizens participate most in the political process,” said Veenhoven.

According to the World Databank of Happiness, where Veenhoven’s team reviews thousands of academic research projects exploring well-being, Canada ranks as the ninth happiest country on the planet.

Beginning at the top, the countries with the most-satisfied citizens are Costa Rica, Denmark, Iceland, Switzerland, Norway and Finland.

These nations tend to have more politically engaged citizens. In contrast to Canada, 88 per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot in the last election in Denmark. More than 81 per cent did the same in Iceland, 76 per cent in Norway, 69 per cent in Costa Rica and 67 per cent in Finland.

There are many reasons for the general Canadian withdrawal from politics.

The rise of U.S.-style attack ads in both federal and B.C. politics is likely doing damage, according to Drew Westen, author of *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding The Fate of the Nation*.

Westen, a neuropsychologist, says the key purpose of attack ads is not to make people vote for a certain candidate – but to discourage people from voting altogether. Many political scientists agree.

Indeed, that theory is borne out by the Samara study. It showed that “apathy” is not the reason most Canadians are political inactive between and during election campaigns, said Loat.

The Samara survey found Canadians care deeply about issues, Loat said. One in two worried enough about a social development in 2012 to boycott a product or sign a petition.

In other words, Loat suggests most Canadians have strong convictions about the environment, poverty, abortion, income redistribution, euthanasia, traffic patterns and more.

What most Canadians are avoiding is acting on their beliefs through political parties, even while, as Loat says, those parties do democracy’s “heavy lifting.”

Despite what we’ve been led to believe about the dark side of public affairs, the new happiness studies suggest it’s unwise to think of politics as all dirty work and no play.

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Happiness specialists say the bonus for becoming politically involved is you're more likely to wake up with a smile on your face and a spring in your step.