



## Why you should get involved in politics

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We all care about political issues, whether we know it or not, because politics has such an impact on our daily lives. Now we need to become part of the democratic process.

In the past two weeks, two studies were released that look at Canadians' political knowledge and our level of political engagement. And the news is not good. These reports suggest that when it comes to politics, not only are we uninformed, we have little interest.

The first study, led by a University of London researcher, looked at media systems and political knowledge in 10 countries. The researchers tested men and women about domestic and international news. In a surprising finding, the researchers concluded that regardless of the country and its level of gender equality, women knew less than men about politics. In Canada, the gap between men and women, at 30 per cent, was particularly high. This generated national media attention and a vigorous discussion about why Canadian women are less informed about politics and current affairs and whether it matters. Although gaining less notice, the study also found that Canadians scored lower on political knowledge than every other country surveyed except for the U.S. and Colombia.

Unfortunately, it seems that Canadians are making a distinction between politics with a big 'P,' or the formal political system, and the more prosaic, day-to-day politics that we really care about.

The second study, conducted by the Canadian think tank Samara, looked at the rate of political participation by Canadians in 20 different areas, outside of voting. They found that Canadians engaged in very few of the activities, which ranged from discussing a political issue to party politics. Samara concluded that while Canadians are actively building better communities, they are much less likely to get involved in the formal political system.

The results of both surveys are a wake-up call, but we should be far more concerned by the lack of participation in politics by Canadians.

While having a population that is knowledgeable about politics is important, the British survey tested a very specific type of knowledge. The questions focused on political and current issues of national and international importance rather than local politics or local issues. And the fact that the study found that people who watched news on TV tended to be better informed - which in the case of Canada meant older men - leads to the conclusion that we would all do better in the study if we just found time to

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catch the nightly newscast. It's not clear that this study says much about the state of Canada's democracy or our active participation in it. As Equal Voice National Chair, Raylene Lang-Dion puts it: "What does measuring who-knows-the-name-of-a-president in a certain country have to do with making a contribution to your country, either for men or women?" On the other hand, the findings of the Samara survey are much more troubling. The survey concludes that many Canadians are opting out of the political process. This matters because every day our politicians make decisions about what issues take priority and how our tax dollars should be spent. By deciding not to participate, most Canadians are opting out of helping to shape Canada and its future.

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