



Rethinking Citizen
Engagement 2006:
Towards Civic Participation
and Democratic Renewal

**A SURVEY OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rethinking Citizen Engagement 2006: Towards Civic Participation and Democratic Renewal consisted of a 20-minute telephone survey of 1,555 randomly selected members of the public 16 years of age and older, including 504 youth (under 25 years of age). A range of issues pertaining to civic participation were examined, including values and attitudes to civic engagement, rates of civic participation, civic literacy, perceptions of government and society, interaction with the federal government, interest in government consultations, preferred consultation methods and features, Internet consultations and print media consumption.

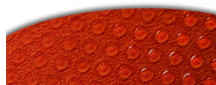
Civic Engagement: Values and Attitudes

Consistent with findings from other public opinion research studies conducted by EKOS, we find that a majority of Canadians (62 per cent) continues to express a preference for an activist government. This role is ascribed in spite of the fact that many Canadians (60 per cent) appear to have little trust in the federal government to “do what is right”. It is important to note, however, that these trust levels are at their highest point in over four years and up significantly in the last 12 months.

Attitudes to civic engagement are generally positive. Most people (71 per cent) feel well connected to their community. Canadians (65 per cent) believe in the power of collective action to effect positive change. They are much less optimistic, however (37 per cent), about the impact that people can have on their community when they act alone (37 per cent believe it is virtually impossible for the average citizen to make a real difference). Most Canadians (75 per cent) believe that citizenship comes with certain “obligations”, but significantly fewer (55 per cent) feel that people have a “responsibility” to work for the common good. These results suggest that a significant proportion of Canadians (particularly youth, people having a lower socio-economic status and Quebecers) believe in a passive form of citizenship, one that is essentially limited to obeying society’s laws, rules and regulations.

Civic Literacy

The civic literacy of Canadians is low. Most Canadians (64 per cent) score no higher than 40 per cent on a civic literacy index composed of five basic questions, with one-third obtaining either one correct answer or none out of five. It also appears that Canadians are much less interested in politics and



public affairs than they were just eight years ago (this despite having been exposed to two fairly recent general elections).

Canadians' consumption of print media was examined in the study in order to shed further light on civic literacy, as well as to contribute to the development of citizen consultation communications/outreach efforts. We find that most people (about two-thirds) often or always read local and community/neighbourhood newspapers. About one-third read MP newsletters at the same rate, while relatively few Canadians (28 per cent) are avid readers of national newspapers.

Taken together, the study's findings on civic literacy suggest that many Canadian might not possess the grounding needed to participate effectively in the development of public policy. This points to a need to provide Canadians with background information as a crucial part of any consultation effort.

Civic Participation and Potential for Involvement

Overall, we find that for many Canadians civic involvement is likely limited to voting. Very few are active in party politics, while about one in four is a member of a volunteer group/association. About one in 10 has participated in a government-sponsored consultation. Involvement is positively related to a variety of characteristics, including age, income, education and regular church attendance. Quebecers are also less involved than other Canadians. Time pressures are identified as the primary barrier to getting more involved in civic life.

Gaps between Canadians' intentions and their deeds are a common feature of the public opinion landscape. Here, we see that while most Canadians appear to not be very civically active, the vast majority say that they would be willing to take some course of action in order to influence government decision-making on an issue they care deeply about. Top among their preferences for action is the relatively effortless act of petition signing. Canadians also exhibit an interest for influencing government through direct action, either by contacting their Member of Parliament directly or by participating in a government-sponsored consultation.

Involvement in Government-Sponsored Consultations

Most Canadians have had at least some contact with the Government of Canada in the past 12 months. Most of it has been through the Internet (about seven in 10 have visited of Government of Canada website) or by telephone. In contrast, most Canadians have not visited a Government of Canada office (61 per cent) or contacted their MP's office (70 per cent). Contact with the Government of Canada is positively correlated with civic involvement.

As noted above, participation in a government-sponsored consultation continues to be a form of civic engagement that the majority of Canadians do not yet participate in. The roughly one in 10 Canadians who have been involved in this type of consultation have tended to share their views primarily through surveys and community meetings. It is also important to note that most of the consultations have been at the provincial and federal levels (34 and 37 per cent respectively). Canadians' level of satisfaction

with government-sponsored consultations has remained moderately high overall since 2000. The Achilles Heel of consultation efforts remains the provision to participants of feedback on results (only 38 per cent express satisfaction with this aspect). Indeed, the salience of providing feedback on consultation results, including how these are to be considered by decision-makers, is substantiated by two other number of study results (discussed below).

With respect to substance, we find that Canadians would like to express their views to the Government of Canada on a very broad range of issues, including foreign and defence policy, health care and other social program issues.

Internet Consultation

The Internet continues to hold a great deal of promise as a government consultation tool. Most Canadians have visited a Government of Canada website in the past year. We also find that eight in 10 feel that the Internet would be a somewhat useful way for them to convey their views to government on a public issue. Internet consultations are seen as fairly credible overall, though less so than in-person consultations. One of the main challenges of Internet consultation appears to lie in marketing and communications (i.e., in letting people know about opportunities for participation that exist). The proportion of Canadians who claim to have ever visited a government web site looking for information on how to participate in a government consultation has decreased significantly in the past 12 months.

The potential features of an Internet-based consultation that are most meaningful to Canadians revolved around transparency (i.e., feedback on results and how they are to be used), objectivity (i.e., hearing from opposing view points) and information (i.e., the opportunity to ask questions to experts and access to background information). Conversely, Canadians appears to be relatively less interested in opportunities to interact with other consultation participants, either by means of bulletin board postings or live chats. The opportunity to see the views of other participants prior to registering one's views is also seen to be relatively less important.

Segmentation of Canadians

Multivariate analysis was performed in order to segment the population into relatively homogeneous groups based on a range of behavioural and attitudinal indicators. The results produced five segments: the **Activists**, the **Cosmopolitans**, the **Ambivalent**, the **Seasoned Observers**, and the **Alienated**. Each segment is briefly summarised below:

The Activists (20 per cent of the population)

- Higher socio-economic status
- High civic literacy
- Trusting, optimistic and enthusiastic
- Most civically involved, particularly with respect to party politics

- Highest level of willingness (by far) to engage with government
- Engaging the Activist is relatively easy: “build it and they will come”

The Cosmopolitans (16 per cent)

- Highest socio-economic status
- High civic literacy
- Overrepresented by first- and second-generation immigrants
- Pressed for time
- Higher than average willingness to engage with government
- Judicious about getting about what they get involved in
- Engaging the busy Cosmopolitans requires messaging that emphasises transparency, credibility and assured listening

The Ambivalent (19 per cent)

- Youngest segment
- Average socio-economic status
- Low civic literacy
- Low civic involvement
- Second highest level of willingness to engage with government (but lack tools/knowledge to do so)
- Internet holds particular appeal
- Engaging this key target group requires that they be provided with easy opportunities to get involved

The Seasoned Observers (23 per cent)

- Oldest segment (half are at least 54 years old)
- Average socio-economic status
- Average civic involvement
- Low contact with government
- Voracious consumers of print media

- Above average political literacy
- Lower than average willingness to engage with government (preference is to deal with MP)
- Engaging this segment is challenging; design of approaches and communications should involve MPs

The Alienated (23 per cent)

- Younger
- Overrepresented by Quebecers and Atlantic Canadians
- Apathetic, cynical, disengaged
- Lowest socio-economic status
- Lowest civic literacy
- Lowest civic involvement
- Least willing to engage with government
- Engaging this segment is extremely challenging; requires targeted outreach and incentives (e.g., financial)