

Civic Engagement And Public Participation in Strengthening Canadian Democracy

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Andy Clark/Reuters

Democracy is the most representative form of government on all the continents. This is possible because it coexists equally with presidentialist, parliamentary, or directorial republics and with constitutional monarchies. *The Economist* Intelligence Unit's 2014 "Democracy Index" annual report lists 24 countries of the world as full democracies. Among them is Canada, as the world's seventh best democracy, and the foremost in the Americas, with a 9.08 rating. This was its second recent rise on the index: in 2013, it came in in eighth place, and in 2007, it was ninth.

The index is built using variables like elections, pluralism, and political participation and culture; this shows the importance of involving the citizenry for any democratic system to work. In Canada's case, governmental effectiveness, the elec-

toral system, and respect for civil liberties are the underpinnings of its high ranking. Political participation and culture, on the other hand, are where it scores lower, coming in at 7.7 and 8.7 respectively. Despite these results, the October 19, 2015 elections revealed Canadians' growing commitment to public life; voter turnout increased considerably *vis-à-vis* the previous elections, rising 7.1 percentage points, from 61.4 percent in 2011 to 68.5 percent last year.

However, Canada has one of the lowest public participation percentages for elections on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2015 Better Life Index: it comes in as number 28 of the 36 member countries.

Of a total of 11 variables that make up this index, civic engagement is where it ranks second worst, only slightly better than for income, as Table 1 shows.

The civic engagement variable on the Better Life Index is made up of electoral participation, the impact of gender in-

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TABLE 1	
<p>OECD</p> <p>Better Life Index</p> <p>Ranking for Each Variable</p>	<p>Safety:</p> <p>Satisfaction:</p> <p>Health:</p> <p>Environment:</p> <p>Community:</p> <p>Employment:</p> <p>Housing:</p> <p>Education:</p> <p>Life-work Balance:</p> <p>Civic Engagement:</p> <p>Income:</p>

Source: Developed by the author using data from OECD, “Crea tu índice para una vida mejor,” 2015, <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/es/>.

equality and income disparities on electoral activity, as well as the degree of involvement in civic consultations for drafting regulations. According to the 2015 results, men and women participate equally in elections, not only because there is universal suffrage, but also because actual voting patterns show that 1.02 men participate for every female voter. However, the occupation by women of elected posts continues to be low: only one out of every four seats in Parliament is held by a woman. To deal with this disproportion and foster gender equity in public life, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s government announced after his win that his cabinet will be 50 percent women: of 31 ministries, 15 will be headed up by women. Outstanding among them are Carolyn Bennet, for indigenous affairs; Chrystia Freeland, for foreign trade; and Jody Wilson-Raybould, as minister of justice.

The OECD came to the conclusion that income can have a decisive effect on electoral involvement. Among its member countries, the mean difference in the participation of the wealthiest 20 percent of the population compared to the poorest 20 percent is 13 percent. However, in Canada, income is not a determining factor because the difference there is only 3 percent. This reflects a high degree of social inclusion in electoral activities. Finally, the last aspect of the civic engagement variable is the consultation of the citizenry in drafting regu-

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lations, where Canada scores fourth out of 36, surpassed only by the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Poland.

Based on the OECD’s Better Life Index, we can observe that, while Canadians are not exceptional in terms of coming out to vote, they do get significantly involved in civic consultations about issues on the public agenda. For example, in 2007, a consultation was carried out about health services. Listening for Direction: A National Consultation on Health Services and Policy Issues was carried out to identify 10 priorities in health service provision management that would benefit from an investment in research.

Another example is the 2001 National Consultation with Victims of Crime, which aimed to find out the public’s opinion about proposed changes in the Corrections and Conditional Release Act, as well as to reforms in services provided to victims.

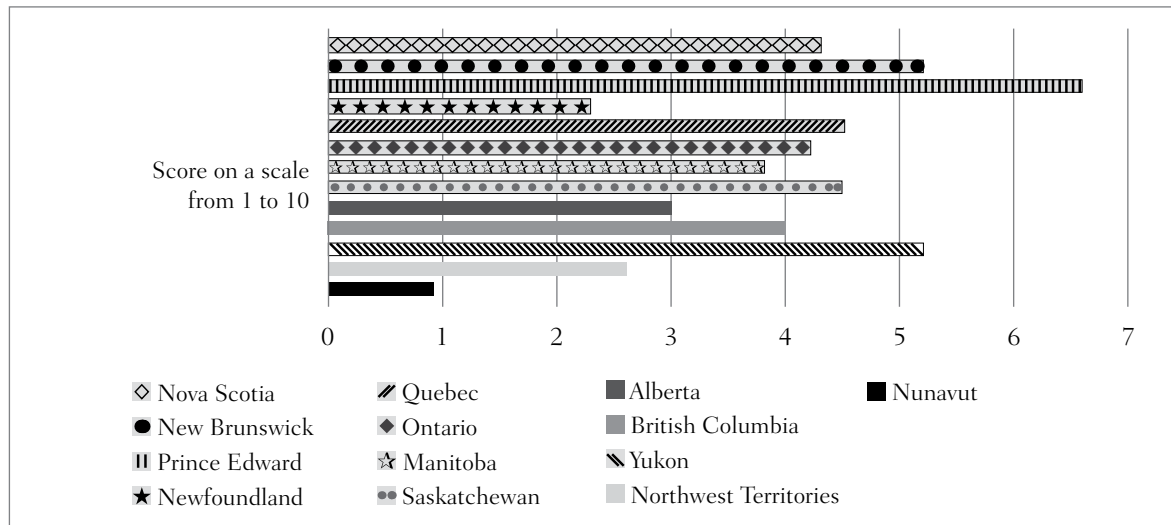
WHAT’S HAPPENING IN THE PROVINCES

Despite the harmonization in terms of civic engagement with regard to income and gender, the same is not the case if we measure civic participation by region. Canada has 13 provinces that are very different in terms of population, geographical size, political practices, and even ways of life, above all in cases like Nunavut, Quebec, and Prince Edward Island. These differences are reflected in the level of civic engagement, which varies from one region to another, as shown in Graph 1.

The graph shows the direct correlation between civic engagement in a region and its geographic location and number of inhabitants. So, for example, Prince Edward Island, the smallest province, located in the country’s Southeast, with a population of 150 000, is the region with the highest level of civic engagement in Canada, with a score of 6.6, which is above the national average. By contrast, Nunavut, the northernmost region, with 31 000 inhabitants, scores the lowest, with 0.9.

These numbers allow us to infer that the bigger the territory, the lower civic engagement, or, inversely, higher demographic density breeds greater participation. We could also deduce that higher degrees of participation can be found in the southernmost provinces. However, although something similar can be observed for the rest of the provinces, exceptions do exist. Quebec is the second-largest province and has more than 8 million inhabitants, but a score of only 4.5, quite a bit below the national average. Another atypical case is the Yukon,

GRAPH 1
CANADIAN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, 2015



Source: Developed by the author using information from OECD, “Crea tu índice para una vida mejor,” 2015, <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/es/>.

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located in the Northwest, bordering on Alaska, with barely 33 000 inhabitants, but comes in second in terms of civic engagement, tied with New Brunswick.

As a result of its geography and the historic evolution of the territory as an independent state, Canada’s population is highly diverse. This is reflected in the lack of cohesion among the provinces. In fact, the Canadian Federation is a complex society composed of provinces that enjoy great autonomy, a diverse population that includes many ethnic groups, two official languages, and 57 aboriginal nations, each with its own national identity.

This diversity and lack of inclusion is very clear in the composition of Canada’s government. Despite having announced the construction of an inclusive government, 17 of the 31 posts in Prime Minister Trudeau’s cabinet are filled by public servants from Ontario (11) and Quebec (6). Three are from British Columbia, two from Alberta, two from Manitoba, and one from each of the rest of the provinces; the Yukon and the Northwest Territories have no cabinet posts.

Despite the fact that Canadians are not characteristically as highly politically active as citizens from other OECD member countries, we cannot conclude that civic engagement is low in Canada. We should remember that this indicator includes involvement in public issues like dealing with needs arising out of community life. In this sphere, Canada is one of the countries with the greatest civic commitment, according to the 2015 World Giving Index. Developed by the Charities Aid Foundation of America, this index classifies civic engagement based on three indicators that measure people’s behavior: helping a stranger, donating to a charity, and spending time volunteering.

The 2015 World Giving Index ranks Canada fourth out of the 145 countries studied, at 60 percent. In addition, the report includes a global ranking for each of the indicators. So, in measuring the percentage of the population who helps a stranger, Canada came in fourteenth, at 69 percent, tied with Zambia and the United Arab Emirates. For the second indicator, donors to charity, Canada is in tenth place, with 67 percent, lower than countries like Thailand and Indonesia. Finally, for the third indicator, the percentage of people who do volunteer work, Canada is in slot number 5, with 44 percent, following only Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Liberia, and New Zealand. Graph 2 shows the global score, as well as each of the three indicators compared to the three countries with the highest global score.

The index findings for all 145 countries are that 48.9 percent of people are willing to help a stranger; 31.5 percent donate to charity; and only 21 percent volunteer. For all three indicators, men participate more than women. Finally, when examined by area of the world, the Americas come in in second place in terms of helping a stranger and volunteering, after Oceania, but in fourth place in terms of donations to charity, surpassed again by Oceania as well as Europe and Asia.

Another element that contributes to measuring the citizenry's involvement in society is private development assistance (PDA). The international organization Civicus: World Alliance for Citizen Participation defines PDA as "finance from private sources given voluntarily through formal channels, including civil society organizations (CSOs), and transferred across borders to promote international development and reduce poverty."

According to Civicus's *2015 State of Civil Society Report*, Canada is the world's fourth provider of private development assistance, after the United States, which represents 67 percent of the global total, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Monies from Canadian companies and organizations go mainly to development projects in Latin America and Africa. The same report states that donations from middle class people have increased due to the directly proportional relationship between increased national rent and individuals' donations. Proof of this is that in Canada, private donations have grown

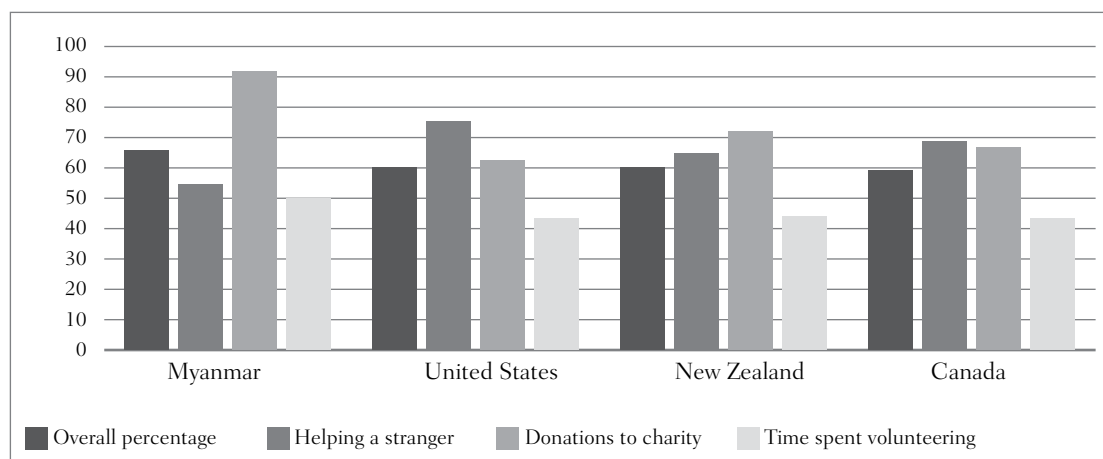
more rapidly than the gross domestic product over the last 25 years.

One interesting piece of data in the report is that countries with high levels of private development assistance have a considerable percentage of Muslims in their populations. This is because one of the pillars of Islam is the annual *zakat*, or alms payment, a fraction of each person's income earmarked for charity and helping the poor. Canada's Muslim population of one million represents approximately 2.8 percent of its total inhabitants. And the Canadian Citizenship and Immigration Resource Center estimates that by 2030, the Muslim population will rise to 2.7 million, or 6.6 percent of the country's total population.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As can be seen throughout this article, the size of electoral participation in Canada is not significant compared to the region and other democracies throughout the world, even though the October 2015 elections did register a considerable increase, with a higher voter turnout than those observed over the last 20 years. However, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) data base shows a downward trend starting in 1958, when it reached a historic peak of 80.5 percent of voters at the polls.

GRAPH 2
WORLD GIVING INDEX 2015
TOP FOUR COUNTRIES RESULTS (% OF POPULATION PARTICIPATING IN...)



Source: Developed by the author using data from *CAF World Giving Index 2015, A Global View of Giving Trends*, November 2015, http://www.cafamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/1755A_WBI2015_Report_WEB_V2_FINAL.pdf.

However, it is only fair to mention that Canada is not the only country that has experienced this trend; plus, at the same time a high degree of social engagement can be observed. Internationally, the trend is toward less political participation and more social participation, as a result of the different political and social contexts that generate disillusionment with government among the citizenry.

Civil society and its level of involvement are fundamental pillars of any state that calls itself democratic. The level of both political and social engagement by citizens says a great deal about the quality of a country's democracy and the degree of maturity of its political and social institutions. From outside, Canada is seen as a state with a strong, participatory civil society due to civic engagement around social issues

and its cooperation for national and international development through civic organizations and associations. However, it still has a long way to go to recover and strengthen the tie of trust between the government and the citizenry. ■■

FURTHER READING

Lenard, Patti Tamara, and Richard Simeon, *Imperfect Democracies: The Democratic Deficit in Canada and the United States* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012).

National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools, "Engaging Citizens for Decision-making," 2001, McMaster University, <http://www.nccmt.ca/registry/view/eng/86.html>.