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Democratic Engagement

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Prairie Wild Consulting Co.
Together with HOLDEN & Associates

 **nstitute**
OF WELLBEING
Measuring what matters

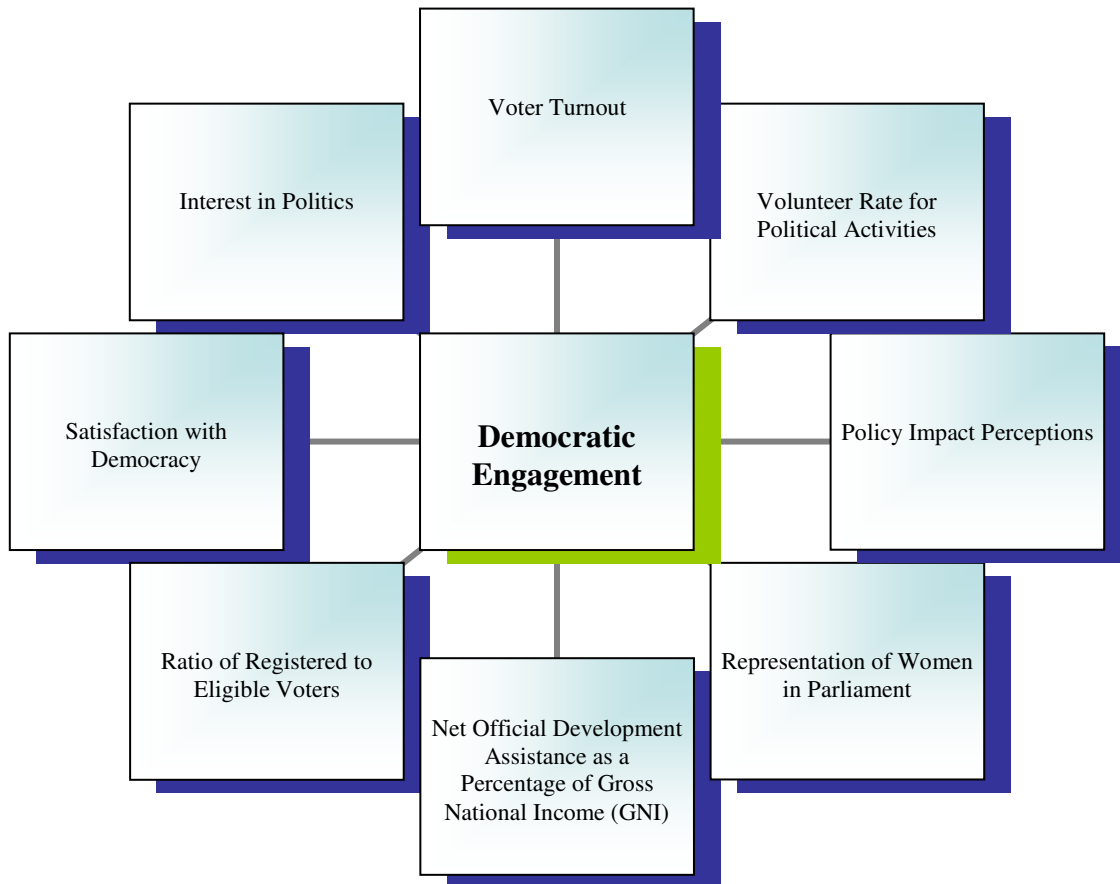
Democratic Engagement is the state of being involved in advancing democracy through political institutions, organizations and activities. A society that enjoys a high degree of democratic engagement is one where: citizens participate in political activities, express political views, and foster political knowledge; governments build relationships, trust, shared responsibility and participation opportunities with citizens; and democratic values are sustained by citizens, government and civil society at a local, national and global level.

The research presented in this report shows that a healthy democracy requires more than participation in elections. A healthy democracy requires ongoing democratic engagement both during and between elections. The Democratic Engagement Domain measures three aspects of democratic engagement:

- **Individual engagement** – the engagement of citizens in public life and in government;
- **Government engagement** -- the function of the Canadian government with respect to openness, transparency, effectiveness, fairness, equality and accessibility in efforts to engage citizens; and,
- **Global engagement** – the role of Canadian citizens, governments and civil society as good global citizens.

The Democratic Engagement Domain measures eight headline indicators:

The Democratic Engagement Model



Trends

- Fewer Canadians are voting in elections for all levels of government.
- More people may be interested in politics, but there doesn't appear to be any direct relationship between voter interest and voter turnout.
- The volunteer rate for formal political activities such as participating in law advocacy and political groups, has been low, but for informal ones such as protesting, signing petitions and boycotting, has been relatively high.
- Many Canadians are not satisfied with the state of their democracy.
- An overwhelming majority of Canadians feel that the policies of the federal government have not made their lives better.

- Most eligible voters are registered, although there has been a small decline in the percentage.
- The percentage of women in Parliament has remained relatively low and flat.
- Canada’s global engagement record is poor.

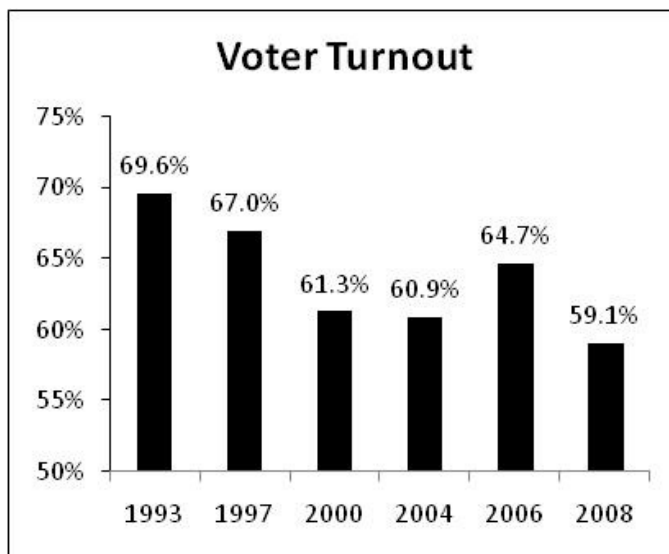
Report Highlights

The following are the key highlights of the report:

Fewer of us are Voting

- From a high of 69.6% in the 1993 federal election (the starting point for this research), voter turnout has declined significantly.
- In the 2008 federal election, voter turnout – 59.1% – was more than 10 percentage points lower than in 1993. It was the lowest voter participation in Canadian history.
- Federal elections generally have the highest voter turnout, with provincial elections lower and municipal elections lower still.
- The 2006 Canadian Election study reported that 86% of respondents considered it their duty to vote, yet only 65% of Canadians actually voted that year.

Chart I. Voter Turnout

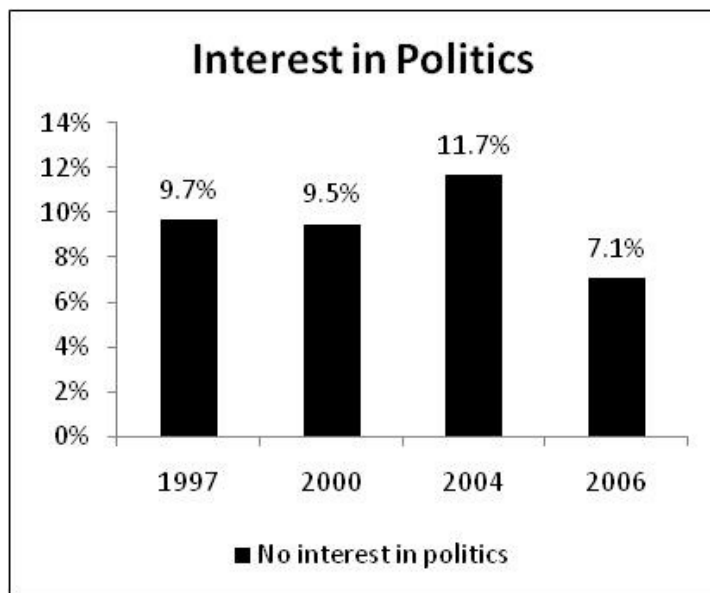


Source: Elections Canada

Voter Interest Doesn't Mean Voter Turnout

- The percentage of Canadians who say they are “not interested in politics” went from 9.7% in 1997 down to 7.1% in 2006.
- But there is no correlation between voter interest and voter turnout. In 2000, voter interest increased from the previous election but voter turnout decreased. Yet in the 2006 election year, both voter turnout and voter interest increased.
- Data on voter interest is not yet available for the record low voter turnout in 2008.

Chart 2. Interest in Politics

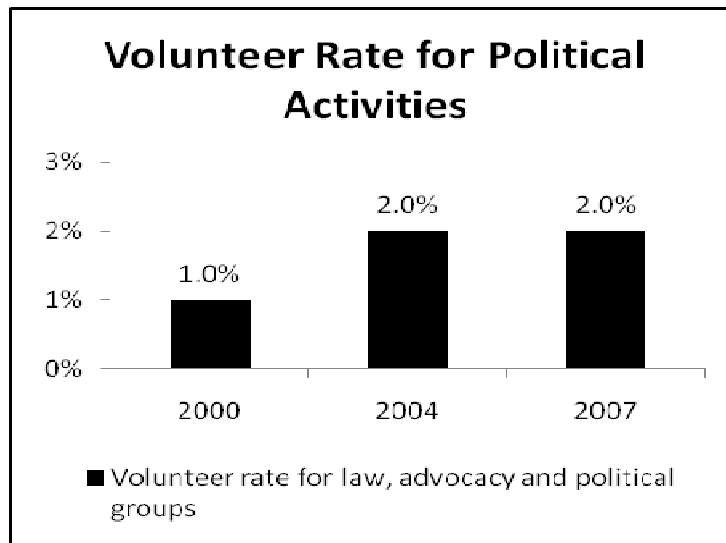


Source: Canada Election Survey

We are Less Involved in Traditional Political Activities than Non-Traditional Ones

- The volunteer rate for traditional political activities – including for law, advocacy and political groups that “work to protect and promote civil and other rights, advocate the social and political interests of general or special constituencies, offer legal services, and promote public safety” – has been consistently very low, hovering at around 2%.
- The average number of volunteer hours for law, advocacy and political groups declined 15% between 2004 and 2007.
- Participation in non-traditional engagement activities such as protesting, signing petitions or boycotting has been high. In 2002, the General Social Survey found that 54.6% of Canadians 15 years and older participated in at least one political activity, either traditional or non-traditional.
- Participation patterns for traditional political activities (specifically, belonging to a political organization) has tended to increase with age: the older a person is, the more likely they are to volunteer with a political organization. With non-traditional political activities, it is the opposite: younger age groups are more likely to participate in non-traditional political activities than older age groups.

Chart 3. Volunteer Rate for Political Activities

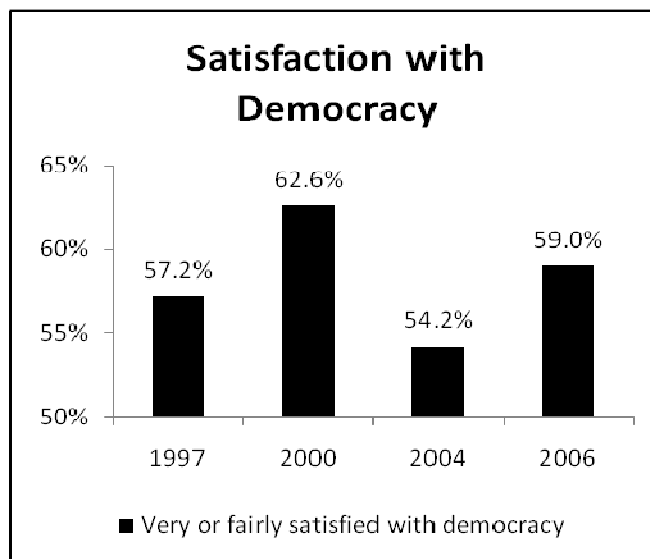


Source: Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating

Many of us are not Satisfied with Canadian Democracy

- The percentage of Canadians who were very satisfied or fairly satisfied with how democracy works in Canada varied from 54% to 63% between 1997 and 2006.
- A 2007 Angus Reid poll of Ontarians showed 52% satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada, with 41% dissatisfied.
- Election “winners” are more likely to be satisfied with the way democracy works regardless of their satisfaction level before the election. This suggests that minority governments may not improve satisfaction levels since there are no clear winners.

Chart 4. Satisfaction with Democracy

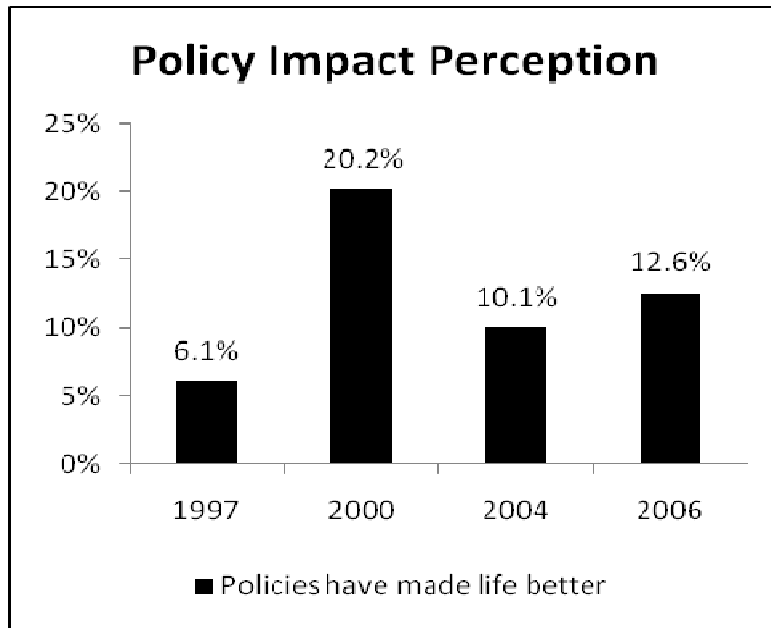


Source: Canada Election Survey

We Don't Believe Federal Policies Have Made our Lives Better

- The percentage of Canadians who feel that the policies of the Federal government have made their lives better (as opposed to making not that much difference) ranged from a low of 6% to a high of 20% between 1997 and 2006.
- This suggests a strong disconnect between the activities of government and how this trickles down to the perception at the individual level.

Chart 5. Policy Impact Perception

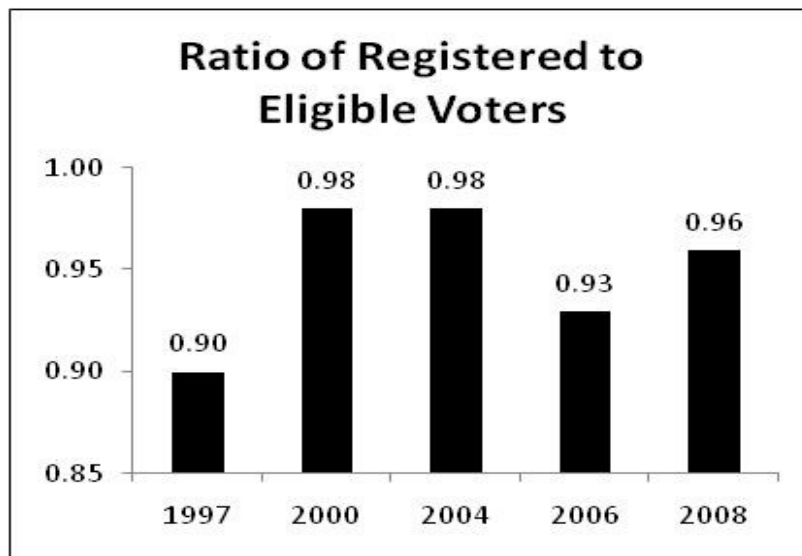


Source: Canada Election Survey

Most Eligible Voters are Registered

- One of the goals of government should be to consistently communicate the details of an election with all its electors. A common method of doing this is through voter registration.
- The ratio of registered to eligible voters in Canada was reasonably high in 2006 (93%) and 2008 (96%), but lower than the 98% achieved in both 2000 and 2004.

Chart 6. Ratio of Registered to Eligible Voters

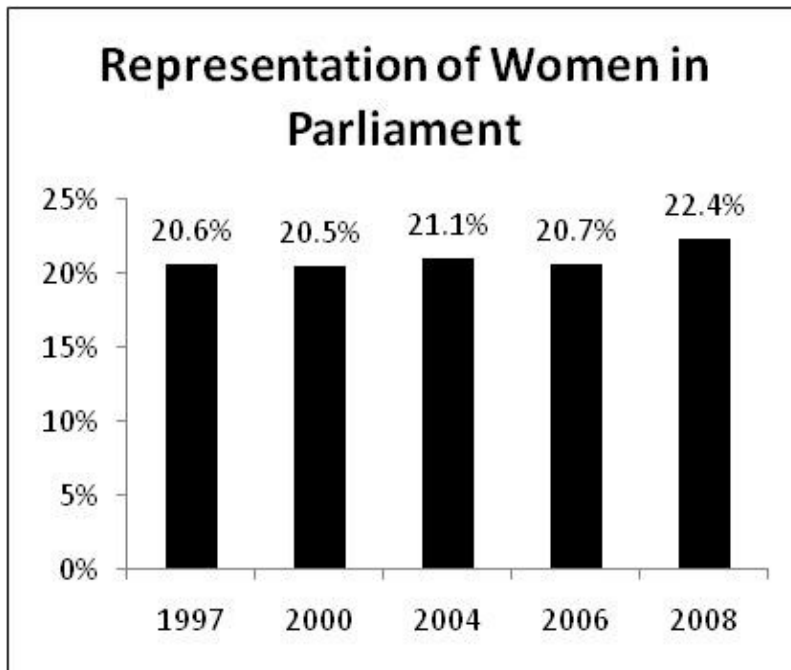


Source: Research Team, using data derived from Elections Canada and the Census.

Women are Significantly Under-Represented in Parliament

- Women make up half of the Canadian population and are the largest group of citizens underrepresented in our democracy. Since 1997, the percentage of women Members of Parliament has remained relatively steady – and low – at about 20% of total seats.
- In the World Economic Forum’s *Global Gender Gap Report 2007*, Canada ranked only 18th in gender equality on the Global Gender Gap Index and 36th on the political empowerment sub-index.

Chart 7. Representation of Women in Parliament

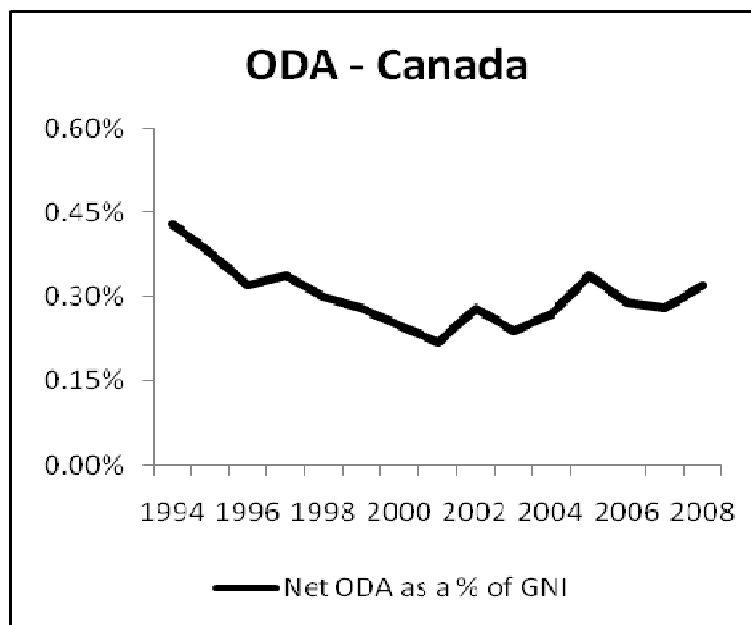


Source: Elections Canada

Canada's Global Engagement is Poor

- The Government of Canada's commitment to global development is measured by the percentage of Gross National Income (GNI) devoted to Official Development Assistance (ODA). The proportion of Canadian GNI devoted to ODA fell from a high of .43% in 1994 to .32% in 2008.
- This commitment to ODA fell short on two fronts: First, there is a long-standing United Nations target for developed countries to devote 0.7% of their GNI to ODA – more than twice the current level of Canadian assistance. Second, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that Canada's percentage of GNI devoted to ODA will only rise from 0.32% in 2008 to 0.34% in 2010. In 2008, Canada ranked poorly in terms of GNI devoted to ODA – 16th out of 22 member countries.

Chart 8. Official Development Assistance - Canada



Source: OECD

New Indicators on Internet Use Needed

- The internet provides an information and communications tool that was most likely unimaginable when the institutions of our representative democracy were developed. It can facilitate the political voice and knowledge of citizens and the engagement, competency, and legitimacy of government.
- The penetration of the internet has driven the development of new media, citizen media, and Web 3.0 where individuals and organizations outside the traditional media develop, maintain, and access information through web-based programs, even using mobile devices.
- It is vital that we enrich our understanding of democratic engagement by developing new indicators that focus on internet use. Currently, there are limited sources of data on internet-based democratic discussion or the extent of our governments' efforts to improve our democracy via electronic technology. Future research and data development must begin to provide data to measure elements of demographic engagement through internet use.

Conclusion

The research undertaken in this report clearly demonstrates that efforts have amassed at the individual, government and global level to respond to changing values, decreased satisfaction, and increased expectations of democracy by citizens. Yet, the results of these efforts have not translated into stronger democratic engagement.

Voter participation reached an all-time low in the 2008 federal election. The participation of women in Parliament is far below the 50 percent of the population women comprise. There is a strong disconnect between the public's belief that it is their duty to vote and actual voter turnout. Some suggest that low participation is a sign of public content, yet satisfaction with democracy in Canada is modest and only 1 in 5 Canadians believe that government policies have made their lives better.

At the global engagement level, Canada ranks poorly in terms of funding devoted to Official Development Assistance – 16th out of 22 OECD countries – leaving much room for improvement on the international stage.