
Knowledge of Canada: Social Capital, Civic Engagement and Political Empowerment

Jack Jedwab
Association for Canadian Studies

Knowledge of Canada improves democracy?

It is has for some time been contended that knowledge of Canada leads to greater citizen engagement and a greater sense of empowerment. For example much of the attention directed at improving knowledge of Canadian history over the past decade is related to the view that in the absence of such knowledge the capacity to make informed decisions about Canadian issues is undercut. Hence it is presumed that such knowledge will contribute to a greater ability to meaningfully participate in public life and benefit from a greater degree of what leading thinkers describe as social capital-possessing wider networks and having more institutional trust or confidence which are seen as keys to a healthy democracy.

Testing knowledge and testing the hypothesis

- The hypothesis that knowledge of Canada implies greater public engagement, trust and social capital is rarely tested and therefore it is assumed that the relationship is self-evident. Hence much focus has been directed at our level of knowledge of things deemed basic to some when it comes to knowledge of Canada. The survey that follows was conducted by the Carleton University Survey Centre for the Association for Canadian Studies between April and October 2006
-

Knowledge and Capital

- Those knowledgeable about Canada in general also self-evaluate their knowledge of politics as greater and have a wider network of contacts (social capital) and are approached more often to make use of them
-

Least knowledgeable acknowledge others better informed about politics

		very knowledgeable	somewhat knowledgeable	not very knowledgeable
Q11d: Most people better informed than I am	Strongly agree	6 2.9%	16 3.0%	7 7.4%
	Agree	23 11.2%	97 17.9%	41 43.2%
	Neither agree nor disagree	42 20.5%	201 37.2%	26 27.4%
	Disagree	99 48.3%	192 35.5%	13 13.7%
	Strongly disagree	35 17.1%	35 6.5%	8 8.4%
	Total	205	541	95

Not surprisingly those saying they have greater knowledge of Canada also report stronger understanding of political issues

		very knowledgeable	somewhat knowledgeable	not very knowledgeable
Q11c: Good understanding political issues	Strongly agree	61	26	-
		29.9%	4.8%	-
	Agree	117	267	19
		57.4%	49.4%	20.7%
	Neither agree nor disagree	11	159	41
		5.4%	29.4%	44.6%
	Disagree	9	76	25
	4.4%	14.0%	27.2%	
	Strongly disagree	6	13	7
		2.9%	2.4%	7.6%
Total		204	541	92

Most knowledgeable have most contacts

		very knowledgeable	somewhat knowledgeable	not very knowledgeable
Q20: How many people contact	0-4 persons	30	64	23
		15.0%	12.0%	23.7%
	5-9	35	120	22
		17.5%	22.6%	22.7%
	10-19	60	134	19
		30.0%	25.2%	19.6%
	20-49	49	128	25
	24.5%	24.1%	25.8%	
	50 or more	26	86	8
		13.0%	16.2%	8.2%
Total		200	532	97

Most knowledgeable have only somewhat wider network

		very knowledgeable	somewhat knowledgeable	not very knowledgeable
Q14b: People you could ask to influence	No, nobody	73 37.6%	210 41.3%	43 45.7%
	Yes, few people	86 44.3%	219 43.1%	36 38.3%
	Yes, some people	27 13.9%	70 13.8%	11 11.7%
	Yes, a lot of people	7 3.6%	7 1.4%	4 4.3%
Total		194	508	94

Most knowledgeable most often asked to use influence

		very knowledgeable	somewhat knowledgeable	not very knowledgeable
Q14a: How often asked to influence	Never	65	205	46
		31.9%	38.7%	48.4%
Seldom		75	200	30
		36.8%	37.7%	31.6%
Occasionally		50	108	18
		24.5%	20.4%	18.9%
Often		13	14	1
		6.4%	2.6%	1.1%
Total		204	530	95

Knowledge: Engagement and Trust

- Knowledge of Canada does correlate positively with self-reported rates of voter turnout
 - It also correlates with greater trust in government both with respect to civil service and elected officials
-

Most knowledgeable most likely to say they voted in last election

		very knowledgeable	somewhat knowledgeable	not very knowledgeable
R: Vote last election: yes, no	Yes	187	464	76
		92.1%	85.0%	74.5%
	No	15	79	25
		7.4%	14.5%	24.5%
Total		203	546	102

Those most knowledgeable about Canada most trusting of civil servants

Q11f: Trust in civil servants	Strongly agree	9	9	2
		4.4%	1.7%	2.1%
	Agree	68	143	16
		33.2%	26.5%	16.8%
	Neither agree nor disagree	66	187	49
		32.2%	34.6%	51.6%
	Disagree	47	157	25
		22.9%	29.1%	26.3%
	Strongly disagree	15	43	3
		7.3%	8.0%	3.2%
Total		205	540	95

Least Knowledgeable most likely to mistrust politicians

		very knowledgeable	somewhat knowledgeable	not very knowledgeable
Q17: politicians involved in corruption	Almost none	10 5.0%	19 3.7%	4 4.8%
	A few	73 36.7%	149 29.3%	19 22.9%
	Some	66 33.2%	192 37.7%	29 34.9%
	Quite a lot	38 19.1%	116 22.8%	24 28.9%
	Almost all	12 6.0%	33 6.5%	7 8.4%
	Total	199	509	83

Most knowledgeable think voting is most important responsibility of citizenship rest say its helping others

		very knowledgeable	somewhat knowledgeable	not very knowledgeable
Most important Citizenship responsibility	vote in elections	52	101	20
		28.0%	21.0%	23.8%
	help others in the community	52	157	25
		28.0%	32.7%	29.8%
	care for and protect our heritage and environment	40	130	16
		21.5%	27.1%	19.0%
	eliminate discrimination and injustice	42	92	23
		22.6%	19.2%	27.4%
Total		186	480	84

Knowledge and Empowerment

- Those with more knowledge about Canada more likely to think they are heard by government and more likely to think that average citizens are as well
-

Those more knowledgeable about Canada tend to think that the average citizen has

more influence in politics

		very knowledgeable	somewhat knowledgeable	not very knowledgeable
Q11b:	Strongly agree	12	19	2
Average citizen: influence in politics		5.8%	3.5%	2.1%
	Agree	59	94	14
		28.6%	17.3%	14.7%
	Neither agree nor disagree	40	139	27
		19.4%	25.6%	28.4%
	Disagree	74	219	40
		35.9%	40.4%	42.1%
	Strongly disagree	21	71	11
		10.2%	13.1%	11.6%
Total		206	542	95

Knowledge of Canada doesn't appear to provide much greater sense of influence on government

		very knowledgeable	somewhat knowledgeable	not very knowledgeable
Q11a: People like me have no say about what gov. does	Strongly agree	35	91	21
		17.3%	16.8%	21.4%
	Agree	67	189	35
		33.2%	34.9%	35.7%
	Neither agree nor disagree	31	113	24
		15.3%	20.9%	24.5%
	Disagree	56	125	14
	27.7%	23.1%	14.3%	
	Strongly disagree	13	23	4
		6.4%	4.3%	4.1%
Total		202	541	98