Online Political Activity in Canada: The Hype and the Facts

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How do Canadians engage with the political content provided by governments, political parties and parliamentarians in Canada? Employing data from the 2014 Canadian Online Citizenship Survey, this article explores how Canadians use digital communications to become informed about, discuss and/or participate in politics. The results suggest that less than half of respondents use the Internet to engage in Canadian politics and while governments, politicians and parties have made extensive forays into cyberspace, politics is a minor online activity for Canadians.

Over the last two decades, there has been a revolution in communication technology with the widespread adoption of computer networks and digital technologies. There are very few areas of society, economics and culture that have remained untouched by these technologies. Not surprisingly, digital technologies have also infiltrated the world of Canadian politics. They have changed how representative institutions communicate and respond to citizens. In the mid-1990s, government departments, political parties and parliamentarians across Canada began creating websites in order to inform and, potentially, engage citizens. More recently, social media, including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, have become mainstays of political communication in Canada. Indeed, as of October 2014, 80 per cent of federal Members of Parliament were using Twitter. One can also follow tweets of the Senate of Canada and the Library of Parliament. While we know much about the online presences of governments, political parties and parliamentarians in Canada,[1] less is known about the extent to which Canadians engage with the political content provided by these different actors.[2]

This paper seeks to address this gap by exploring the online political activity of Canadians – that is, the use of digital communications to become informed about, discuss and/or participate in politics. We draw on data from the *2014 Canadian Online Citizenship Survey*. This survey, developed by *Online Citizenship/Citoyenneté en ligne,*[3] was conducted by telephone between February and May 2014. The 2,021 respondents were asked a battery of questions regarding their technological habits and capabilities, as well as questions probing both their online and offline political activities and attitudes. All data presented below are weighted to correct for unequal chance of being selected according to the province and the household size. Here we focus on answering one question: how are Canadians using online communication to engage in democratic citizenship? This is accomplished in two ways; first, we explore whether our respondents make use of political websites and social media offered by governments and traditional political actors. Next, we examine online political participation, that is, the extent to which our respondents participate in political activities, such as signing petitions or posting political commentary, using the Internet. In both cases, we pay special attention to the relationship between young Canadians and online political activity. The results are sobering; less than half of respondents use the Internet to engage in Canadian politics. While governments, politicians and parties have made extensive forays into cyberspace, politics is a minor online activity for Canadians.

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Canadian Online Citizenship Survey

Before looking in-depth at online political activity, the data provide a snapshot of the current state of Internet use by Canadians. Not surprisingly, we find that Internet use is ubiquitous in Canada. In the previous 12 months, 87.8 per cent of respondents used the Internet. Indeed, Internet use is part of daily life for most of our respondents. More than 75 per cent of our Internet users went online at least once a day from home, with more than two-thirds of daily online users accessing the Internet several times a day from home. Our respondents access the Internet using a variety of devices; daily use occurred on desktop computers (53.5 per cent of Internet users), laptops (51.2 per cent of Internet users), smartphones (48.3 per cent of Internet users) and tablets (32.1 per cent of Internet users). Social media is popular within our sample. We find that 56.6 per cent of all respondents and 63.4 per cent of Internet users have an account on the world's most popular social networking site, Facebook. Twitter use lags far behind Facebook. Only 18.1 per cent of all respondents and 20.4 per cent of Internet users have an account on Twitter. Hence, our data show that there are plenty of opportunities for our respondents to engage in online political activities given how regular and diverse their Internet use is. The question is – do they?

information available to citizens and businesses in an efficient and cost-effective manner that is not limited by location or time of day.[4] Today, Canadians can pay taxes and parking tickets, renew a driver licence and apply for government jobs online. In some ways, we can see that those investments are well received. More than half of our Internet users report that they visited a website of the federal or provincial government while 44 per cent had visited a municipal government website in the previous 12 months.

The websites of political parties and politicians including elected representatives do not attract the same attention as e-government. Like e-government, party and politician websites can offer citizens information (e.g. policy statements, biographies, speeches, event calendars and news releases) and mobilization opportunities (e.g. membership/donation/volunteer forms, e-newsletters, blogs and online polls).[5] However, when asked whether they had visited the website of a political party or a politician in the previous 12 months, less than 15 per cent of respondents had done so. As noted, Canadian political actors are now regularly using social media as a political communication tool. Sites such as Facebook and Twitter are great sources of instantaneous and unmediated political information for political junkies. Research shows that political parties and politicians

Table 1. Accessing Political Content

	All Respondents N=2021	Internet Users N=1800
Visited a federal government website	49.5%	56.3%
Visited a provincial government website	46.6%	53.0%
Visited a municipal government website	39.1%	44.4%
Visited a political party or politician website	13.0%	14.7%
Friended or followed a political actor on Facebook	6.3%	7.1%
Followed a political actor on Twitter	3.9%	4.5%

Accessing Politics Online

In assessing online political activity, we first explore the extent to which Canadians access different types of political content online including the Internet presences of governments and politicians (*Table 1*). Our findings show that e-government trumps e-politics. In Canada, governments at all levels have made considerable investments in e-government. E-government makes government services and

typically use social media to broadcast party-related information including news releases and stories from official websites and YouTube videos to citizens.[6] However, political parties and leaders, especially the major ones, tend to avoid the interactive aspects of social media. Two-way communication between parties/leaders and citizens on social media is limited. The inclusion of social media to the online repertoires of politicians and parties has done little to spur greater connection with citizens. We asked our respondents if

they were a Facebook friend/member or Twitter follower of the official page/account of a Canadian politician or political party at any level. As *Table 1* shows only 7.1 per cent of Internet users are Facebook friends while only 4.4 per cent are followers on Twitter. Fewer than six per cent of all respondents were both (5.9 per cent). This means that Web 1.0 (websites) is more common than Web 2.0 (social media) amongst our respondents with traditional websites being a more common way to access a political party or politician.[7] These Canadian findings are quite a bit lower than the online activity level in the United States. The Pew Research Internet Project, which has been documenting online political activity in the United States since 2002, reports that 12 per cent of American adults were a friend or follower of a political figure or candidate in 2012. This represents an increase from 2008, when the figure stood at only three per cent.[8]

As mentioned, our data allow us to pay special attention to the relationship between age and online political activity. This is particularly relevant because Canada has witnessed a decline in voter turnout, most noticeably among young voters. Turnout in the 2011 federal election was 61.1 per cent while youth voter turnout was 38.8 per cent. While both numbers are slightly higher than the previous election in 2008,

they are comparable to turnout levels seen in other elections since 2000. Younger Canadians are generally less informed about and interested in politics than older Canadians.[9] Some see the Internet and social media as ideal ways to reach young people, who are said to be increasingly apathetic about politics.[10] In a previous edition of *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, British Columbia MLA Linda Reid suggests that parliamentarians can employ digital technologies to facilitate interaction with young people by designing youth-friendly online tools.[11] Having grown up with digital technologies, young people tend to be digital innovators and spend more time using digital technologies than their older counterparts. For instance, while our data finds comparable use of the Internet by age, our 18-29 year old respondents tended to use social media more than older cohorts.[12] The Internet, in this perspective, is seen as a mobilizing force creating political opportunities for disenfranchised youth.[13]

Figure 1 reports the accessing political content metrics by age cohort for all respondents. Overall, young people (18 – 29 year olds) are not the most likely cohort to be in contact with government and politicians using the Internet. Indeed, when it comes to e-government at any level, the youngest cohort is near
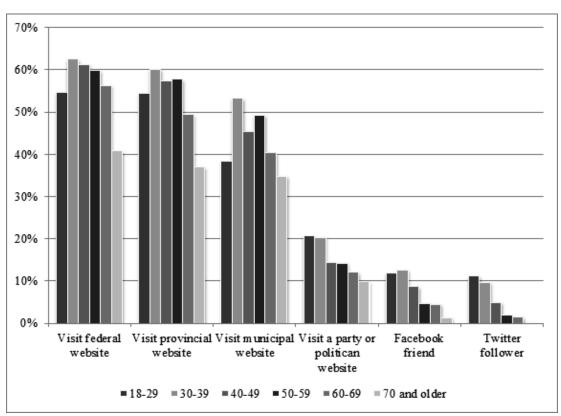
Figure 1. Accessing Political Content By Age Cohort (N=2021)

the bottom. Respondents aged 30-39 lead on four of the six metrics and are second on the other two categories. However, there is one interesting finding with regards to our younger respondents aged 18-29 from this data. This age cohort tends to access politics via social media more so than other cohorts. While we do need to be careful not to draw too many conclusions given how infrequent social media is used for accessing politics in general, 32.8 per cent of all respondents that follow a political actor on Twitter are 18-29 year-olds while 21.3 per cent of all Facebook friends are of the youngest cohort. Even with the youngest, Web 1.0 is prominent.

What might explain the moderate engagement with e-government and the very minimal engagement with party politics online? Within political communication, new technologies do not completely displace previous technologies. Rather, new technologies are used along side of older ones. The Internet and social media might be the most recent technological ways of getting in touch with governments, parties and politicians but they certainly are not the only way. Indeed, at the federal level, online service delivery is part of a multi-channel framework called Service Canada, where programs and services of the federal government are accessible from offices across the country and call centres in addition to the web.[14] We find that our respondents make use of these different channels when engaging with governments. When asked about the preferred method of contact when one had a question, problem or task requiring access with the municipal, provincial or federal government, contact by telephone was the most preferred method. Forty per cent of respondents chose telephone contact compared to 25 per cent for e-mail contact and 14 per cent who preferred using a website.

Table 2. Method Used to Contact Government or Political Actors in the Previous 12 Months (N=358)

By telephone	32.1%
In person	31.9%
By mail	18.1%
By Internet	15.7%
By e-mail	11.7%
Note: Because multiple choices were allowed, total is higher than 100%.	

We also heard from respondents that had actually been in contact with the government or elected officials in the previous 12 months (*Table 2*). About 18 per cent of respondents had contacted a government official, elected representative or political party to share an opinion about a political issue. When actually engaging in contact, our respondents were twice as likely to use telephone and in-person meetings than e-mail or the Internet. Even the post, or snail mail, was more likely to be used. Even though Canadians use the Internet regularly, traditional ways of contacting government and politicians remain popular. Online contact should be seen as merely one of many ways to access political actors and institutions in Canada.

Online Political Participation

We now turn our attention to online political participation. While the Internet allows for greater connection with government and elected officials, it may also allow citizens to participate in political activities. According to Verba et al., political participation is an "activity that is intended to or has the consequence of affecting, either directly or indirectly, government action."[15] Arguably, the Internet could enhance participation. As with the discussion of e-government, the Internet can lower barriers to participation. Website and social media can make participating easier and more efficient with minimal cost.[16] As noted above, the Internet may increase levels of participation by opening up politics to the politically disenfranchised and marginalized. *Table 3* reports our findings on online participation.

The most common online political activity among respondents was signing an online petition or e-petitions. Petitions have long been used by citizens to make appeals to public authorities. As a democratic practice, petitioning is important because it is often a bottom up or grassroots initiative. E-petitions can reach large number of citizens regardless of location and can 'go viral' by being shared on social media and e-mail. There are numerous online petition sites that Canadians can make use of including *petitiononlinecanada.com* and *change.org*. A recent example includes a *change.org* petition, calling for a public inquiry into missing and murdered Aboriginal women, which obtained more than 300,000 signatures in four months.[17] One in five Internet users signed an e-petition in the last year. That is two percentage points higher than respondents who reported they had signed an offline petition in the same time frame. Indeed, this was the only case in our survey where an activity was more common online than offline. While donating money to a political organization or political party was relatively rare in our sample, traditional means of contributing such as mail or telephone are

Table 3. Online Participation

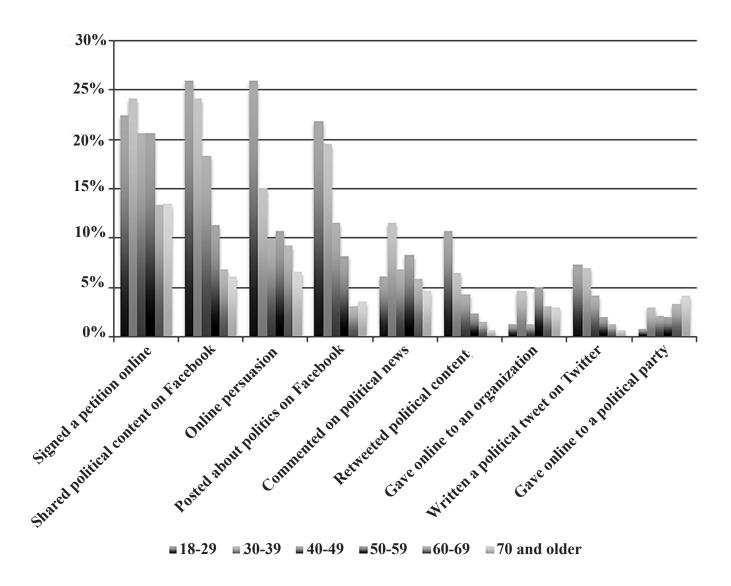|	All Respondents (N=2021)	Internet Users (N=1800)
Signed a petition online	18.2%	20.5%
Shared political content on Facebook	13.5%	15.2%
Online persuasion	11.7%	13.1%
Posted about politics on Facebook	9.6%	10.8%
Commented on political news	7.0%	7.9%
Retweeted political content	3.6%	4.1%
Gave online to an organization	3.1%	3.4%
Written a political tweet on Twitter	3.1%	3.5%
Gave online to a political party	2.5%	2.8%

more commonly used than using the Internet. We find that 8.5 per cent of our respondents made a donation to a political party in the previous year. Of those 70 per cent donated offline compared to 30 per cent online; that amounts to 2.5 per cent of all survey respondents using the Internet to contribute. Similarly, almost six per cent of respondents contributed financially to a political organization such as Greenpeace or the Canadian Taxpayers Federation; 67 per cent did so offline compared to 33 per cent using the Internet (3.1 per cent of all survey respondents).

We saw above that friending or following political actors on social media were infrequent amongst our respondents; however, we should not take this as an indication that social media is not a venue for citizen participation. Indeed, many respondents shared political content and expressed political views on Facebook, though Twitter appears to have less resonance among respondents for online political activity. As *Table 3* shows, sharing political content on Facebook is the second most common online political activity. We find that 15.2 per cent of Internet users shared political news and stories for their friends while one in 10 Internet users posted a comment about politics on Facebook for others to read. There has been considerable talk about the role of Twitter in politics. For instance, the 2011 federal election was dubbed the 'Twitter election' by the news media as was the 2012 Québec election.[18] However, our data suggests this is more hype than fact. Not only did our respondents rarely follow political actors on Twitter, political engagement activities were also limited. Fewer than five percent of respondents engaged in Twitter politics: 3.6 per cent of all respondents and 4.1

per cent of Internet users retweeted or shared political content such as news or the tweets of others on their own feeds while only 3.1 per cent of all respondents and 3.5 per cent of Internet users had written a political tweet on the social media. So, despite its 140 character limit, which lowers users' requirement of time and thought investment for content generation, very few respondents opted to share an opinion here.

Finally we find evidence of discursive participation in our sample. Discursive participation concerns discourse about politics with others including talking, debating and deliberation.[19] Discursive participation can take place offline (face-to-face exchanges or by telephone) or online (Internet forums, e-mail or social media). We saw above that some respondents engaged in discursive participation on Facebook by posting comments about political topics for their friends. We also find that just under eight per cent of our sample of Internet users engaged in discursive participation by commenting on a political story on a news organization's website (*Table 3*). While there is certainly evidence of online discursive participation in our sample, this also is an area where offline political activity is more common. We asked our respondents, if they tried to persuade other to adhere to their political views. Almost half of the sample did so (47.8 per cent). When asked whether these discussions took place offline, using the Internet or both, we found that the vast majority (73.4 per cent) discussed politics with others offline, 1.1 per cent did so only online and the final quarter of respondents did both. Again, the Internet is merely one way to engage in politics and still far from being the dominant one.

Figure 2. Online Political Participation by Age Cohort (N=2021)

■ 18-29 ■ 30-39 ■ 40-49 ■ 50-59 ■ 60-69 ■ 70 and older

Earlier we explored the issue of age. As noted, there is much speculation about whether young people who are technology-savvy will engage in Internet politics. We saw above that younger Canadians did not access e-government services as much as older cohorts. However, there is a much more positive story when looking at online political participation. *Figure 2* shows each of our metrics by age cohort. While our younger respondents age 18-29 are less likely to make an online donation to a political party or a political organization, they seem quite apt to do many other online activities and again, we see a connection between young people and social media politics. For instance, our youngest respondents are more likely to use Facebook for politics by writing a political post and

sharing political content. Twitter politics also appear to be more appealing to young people than other age groups. To be sure, Twitter is used minimally within our sample, but we do see that young respondents are more likely to tweet and retweet political content. This finding coincides with American data. The Pew Center Internet Project found political engagement on social media sites was especially common among the youngest Americans (18-24 year olds).[20] Young people are also more apt to engage in online persuasion than older respondents. There may be some merit on the part of governments, parties and politicians, in providing specialized content for young people on social media, as Linda Reid suggested.

Conclusions

Our results paint a sober picture of the extent to which Canadians make use of digital technologies to access, discuss and engage in politics. It is worth noting that surveys such as this tend to over-represent the politically engaged and interested. So, if anything, these are optimistic projections of the extent of online access and participation, which makes the results even more sobering. Despite all of the opportunities made available through Internet politics including extensive political information, connection with governments and politicians, the ability to share and discuss politics with others, or mobilization opportunities, we find there is little evidence that our respondents took advantages of them in large numbers. The average number of all respondents that accessed political contents including e-government and party/politician websites was just slightly over 25 per cent (26.4 per cent) while less than 10 per cent of them engaged in online political participation activity (7.8 per cent). It appears that the Internet is just one of many venues by which Canadians participate in politics. Indeed, older, traditional ways to doing politics (face-to-face or telephone) remain important in the Internet age. Overall, politics is a minor online activity. On a positive note, however, we see some evidence that young Canadians, who have grown up in the digital age, are more engaged in online political activity than other Canadians.

What are the implications of the findings of the *2014 Canadian Online Citizenship Survey* for political practitioners? They provide a reminder that new communication technology supplements rather than replaces older ones. The data shows that face-to-face, telephone and snail mail are still important in the digital age. Different communication technologies will resonate with different audiences. For instance, "householders," the printed materials sent by MPs to inform their constituents about parliamentary activities, remain a useful way to communicate. This is because they are delivered to mailboxes, and the information gathering effort on the part of constituents is minimal. The same can be said for op-ed pieces written in local newspapers. At the same time, the Internet and social media are important for other citizens, especially the politically engaged who participate in politics in as many mediums as possible. What this does mean, however, is that political communication in the digital age is multifaceted. Political practitioners need to be aware of what different types of communication can and cannot accomplish and they must select their tools accordingly.

Notes

1   See Jeffrey Roy. *E-Government in Canada: Transformation for the Digital Age*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2006; Sanford Borins, Kenneth Kernaghan, David Brown, Nick Bontis, Perri 6, and Fred Thompson. *Digital State at the Leading Edge*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007; Tamara A. Small. "The Not-So Social Network: The Use of Twitter by Canada's Party Leaders" in Alex Marland, Thierry Giasson and Tamara A. Small (eds.), *Political Communication in Canada: Meet the Press and Tweet the Rest*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014.

2   Two notable exceptions would be the *enpolitique.com* project, which explored how Quebecers engaged with digital technologies during the 2012 provincial election, and the *Canadian Internet Project*. Also see: Quinn Albaugh and Christopher Waddell. "Social media and political inequality," in Elisabeth Gidengil and Heather Bastedo (eds.), *Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perceptions and Performance*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014.

3   *Online Citizenship/Citoyenneté en ligne* is a SSHRC funded project exploring online political activity and democratic citizenship in Canada. For more information about the project, visit: http://www.oc-cel.ca.

4   Roy, 2006.

5   Darin Barney. "The Internet and political communications in Canadian party politics: The view from 2004" in Alain-G. Gagnon and A. Brian Tanguay (eds.) *Canadian parties in transition*, Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2007, pp. 371–382.

6   Small, 2014.

7   As the name implies, Web 2.0 is an advancement on the early Web or Web 1.0. In Web 1.0, users are passive recipients of content -- they are audiences in the same way as they are with television or radio. In Web 2.0, users are active; they do not simply read or listen to online content, they actively contribute to it.

8   Aaron Smith. *Civic Engagement in the Digital Age*. Pew Research Center, 2013. URL: http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/04/25/civic-engagement-in-the-digital-age/ (Retrieved: September 24, 2014).

9   Elisabeth Gidengil, André Blais, Neil Nevitte, and Richard Nadeau. *Citizens*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014.

10 See B. D. Loader. *Young Citizens in the Digital Age*. London: Routledge, 2007.

11 Linda Reid. "Engaging Youth Through Social Media." *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 35:4, 2012. URL: http://www.revparl.ca/english/issue.asp?param=213&art=1500 (Retrieved: September 24, 2014).

12 While 18-29 years do use social media more than older respondents, it should be pointed out that there is little difference in general Internet use in terms of age cohort in the survey.

13 This perspective is known in the literature as the 'mobilization hypothesis.' The hypothesis holds that by providing both the resources and the access to the political system to those who would otherwise not participate, the Internet can significantly change the political environment. This perspective not only applies to young people but other political disenfranchised and marginalized groups based on things like income or ethnicity (e.g. African Americans in the United States).

14 Patrice Dutil, Cosmo Howard, John Langford, and Jeffrey Roy. Rethinking Government-Public Relationships in a Digital World: Customers, Clients or Citizens? *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* 4:1, 2007 pp. 77-90.

15 Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.

16 Kay Lehman Scholzman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady. "Weapon of the Strong? Participatory Inequality and the Internet." *Perspectives on Politics* 8:2, 2010, pp. 487-509.

17 Petitioning Hon. Kellie Leitch, Minister for the Status of Women: Call a public inquiry into hundreds of missing and murdered Aboriginal women like my cousin Loretta Saunders. URL: http://www.change.org/p/hon-kellie-leitch-minister-for-the-status-of-women-call-a-public-inquiry-into-hundreds-of-missing-and-murdered-aboriginal-women-like-my-cousin-loretta-saunders (Retrieved: September 24, 2014).

18 See Laura Payton. "The House: The Twitter election: Why what happens on Twitter matters to everyone." CBC News, 2011. URL: http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/the-house-the-twitter-election-1.1044391 (Retrieved: September 24, 2014.); Thierry Giasson, et al. "#Qc2012: l'utilisation de Twitter par les partis" in *Les Québécois aux urnes: les partis, les médias et les citoyens en campagne*, in Frédérick Bastien, Éric Bélanger and François Gélineau (eds.), 135-148. Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2013, pp. 135-148.

19 Michael X. Delli Carpini, Fay Lomax Cook, and Lawrence R. Jacobs. "Public Deliberation, Discursive Participation, and Citizen Engagement: A Review of the Empirical Literature." *Annual Review of Political Science* 7:1, 2014, pp. 315-344.

20 Pew Research Center. *Youngest Americans Are the Most Politically Active on Social Networking Sites.* 2013. URL: http://www.pewresearch.org/daily-number/youngest-americans-are-the-most-politically-active-on-social-networking-sites/ (Retrieved: September 24, 2014.)