



POLLING ALONE: Canadian Values and Liberalism

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The following paper was presented to the conference on Searching for the New Liberalism, Toronto, September 27th – 29th, 2002.

In addressing the progressiveness of Canadian Liberalism with respect to the Liberal government's social policy, it is very important to consider that Liberalism itself is not static. It moves and progresses, along lines defined by changing public opinion, cultural values and need. Today's Liberalism has much in common with yesterday's Conservatism, give or take a margin-of-error of about 50 years. It evolves slowly, though in the past 10 years the velocity of movement has increased dramatically, and public attitudes toward the role of government, both socially and economically, have changed from what they were just a decade ago.

Public opinion and Liberalism evolve together in quite remarkable fashion. Liberal values mirror the values of the public. Six in ten Canadians, when forced to make a choice, identify themselves as "small-L" liberal. This is twice the number that labels themselves as "small-C" conservative, and six times as many who consider themselves socialist. This greatly facilitates the ability of Liberalism to evolve and adjust to changes in public opinion.

In most cases, Liberalism, manifested in the actions of Liberal governments, have trailed, but followed reasonably closely on the heels of public opinion. That is, in my view, the way it **should** be. Changes in public opinion need time to be realized, and adjusted to, by the public itself. Only when governments or activists forge too far ahead of public opinion do they risk losing the public's confidence. We saw this very recently, with the release of a "trial balloon" suggesting a 10% GST – thankfully killed within hours, but not without cost.

But taking strong and immediate action **ahead** of public opinion is often necessary for government to do its job responsibly. The 1995 Budget is an example; the public only became convinced of the necessity to kill the deficit mid-way through the campaign. It would have taken too long to get them on-side first.

But while one can lead public opinion on specific **policy**, there are great risks to being too far ahead of public opinion in the broader context of **Liberalism**. The former is an opinion, subject to rapid change. The latter is a value, which only changes slowly over time.

Liberalism is not a brand; it is a product category. This category consists of brands, which have been defined at various times in history by strong brand managers – ranging from CD Howe, Paul Martin, Walter Gordon, to all the Liberal Prime Ministers to varying degrees.

Pierre Trudeau provided the strongest brand identity, one whose values endure as well today, as they did during his term in office. But public expectations of government today are far different than they were in the "golden era" of political entrepreneurship.

Liberalism has been the most successful political ideology in Canada, for the single reason that it has never failed to evolve. It has rarely been left in the dust of public opinion. It is centrist, with no inhibitions about making forays into the left and the right of the political spectrum.

Indeed, political "spectrum spanning" has limited opposition opportunities for growth and maximized Liberal Party support for many years. And it is these forays, both to the left, and to the right, which have served to fine-tune Liberalism against the ever-changing map of public opinion.

This isn't easy, considering that the political center is always moving, like a pendulum, from right to left and then back again. It is further complicated by the subdivisions within this pendulum, very different public agendas with respect to social policy and economic policy. During the last decade both agendas have moved quite independently from each other, to varying degrees – socially to the left, while at the same time economically to the right. This makes it very difficult for any political party, except the Liberals to position themselves closely with the public.

In looking at the question, "Can the System be Moved?" there is certainly in Canada a willingness to embrace a revitalized and progressive social policy. As there is also a concurrent desire to enjoy a higher standard of living. These have manifested themselves in two very different government approaches: one is the innovation agenda, while the other is the social cohesion agenda. Both in concert, provide a balanced approach to spectrum positioning.



Social cohesion of course, has been in the spotlight as a result of Robert Putnam's book, "Bowling Alone", which was a best-seller in Ottawa but not widely read in Toronto. He points to the decline in organized activities, such as bowling leagues, to illustrate a fragmenting social cohesion among the public.

But Putnam's study was very much a Made-in-America product, and one that parallels but doesn't reflect completely the state of affairs in Canada. Earlier this year, POLLARA sponsored a national survey for Kroeger College of Public Affairs, exploring many of the Canadian values surrounding social cohesion, with an attempt to assess the opportunities and limitations in the agenda. These data provide many perspectives on this Canadian value-map, and on social cohesion's potential place in the broad context of Liberalism, especially with respect to the innovation agenda.

The goal of the latter is to provide a higher standard of living to Canadians. Social cohesion's goal is to develop shared values, challenges and opportunities in Canada, based on increased hope, trust and reciprocity among Canadians. These goals are not contradictory; together they actually produce a wide straddling of the political center. But many of the government interventions by which each can be achieved, **do** conflict, not only in policy, but also in public opinion.

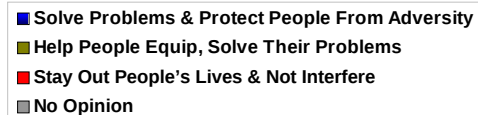
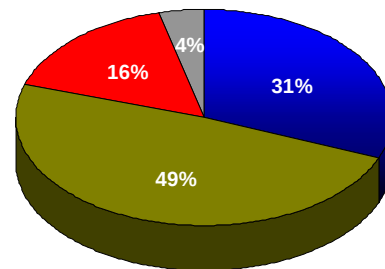
Governments around the world have embraced social cohesion agendas primarily as means to counter the increasing public disconnection and isolation from their democratic institutions. They now have to determine what roles they can play that are both appropriate and effective. And more importantly, how the social cohesion agenda can be bought-into by a public that will never endorse a solution without fully understanding the problem.

In the thirteen years POLLARA has been tracking the preferred role for government, we've seen a lot of change. Thirteen years ago, a slim majority of Canadians wanted highly active government. A government that would solve their problems and protect them cradle to grave. They were introspective, protectionist, and dependent. The boundaries of their world ended at the US-Canadian border, and since they strongly **opposed** the FTA, even the strength of this border was regarded with trepidation.

Concepts like a guaranteed annual income, which make most Canadians shudder today, were popular back then. The national deficit and debt were not even in our vocabulary, and unemployment was something to be solved with mega-projects and direct government employment. The demands on government were far greater than before this time, and had a much different orientation from what they are today.

Since that time we've seen a steady and marked shift, to the point where the largest number of Canadians now desires a government that is active in making people more independent, and more able to solve their own problems. When unemployment is high, they no longer expect government to provide direct employment like was common back in the 70s and 80s. They now look to government for training and direction, and to create the economic environment that stimulates private sector hiring.

PREFERRED ROLE OF GOVERNMENT





A majority now welcomes NAFTA, and thinks that globalization will provide benefits not only to them, but also far more to their children. They are now budget conscious and more sensitive to public spending. They were asked to tighten their belt to get the deficit under control, and they don't want to give up the gains they helped work for. They may worry about their pension, but they've increased their savings ratio and given more thought to retirement planning.

This is not to say that the demand on government is reduced. The 16% of Canadians telling us that the proper role of government is to stay out of people's lives and not interfere **has not changed significantly** in ten years. Rather, the only shift has been from "cradle to grave" orientation, to wanting government to "help us help ourselves". And this is the overlay through which they see each of the factors that make up social cohesion.

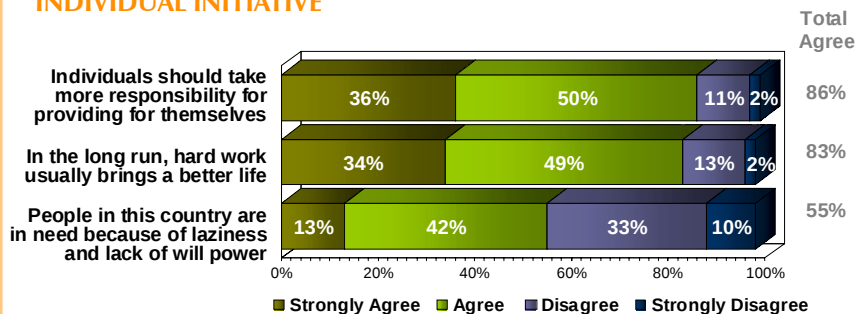
This shift toward self-reliance was not forced upon Canadians, they came to this conclusion as a result of five key factors: NAFTA, the move to fuller employment, globalization, the war on the deficit, and the Internet. These have all helped Canadians become more independent and outward looking, more entrepreneurial and dedicated to individual initiative, and in many ways more economically sophisticated.

Canadians believe in individual initiative and hard work. They also believe that competition is not a bad thing in itself and that people **can** accumulate wealth without hurting others. These serve as rigid confines on the level of economic intervention and approach that government could make with respect to promoting social cohesion. The OECD concept of social cohesion tends to recognize this. The Council of Europe approach is less applicable to Canadian attitudes and values.

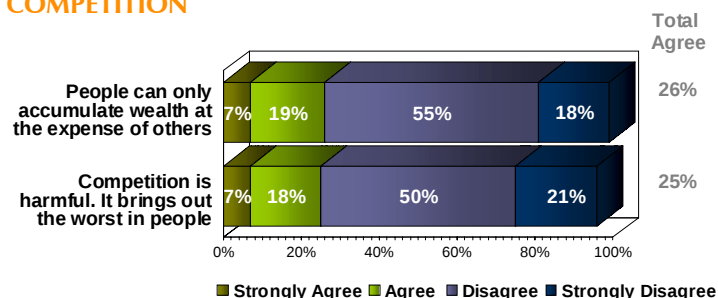
At the same time, there is a belief and a desire across Canada for social justice. There is some recognition and concern that Canada, especially with the growth of globalization and technology, may now be approaching a trend of **two-tier** economic development.

New technologies, many people feel, may widen income and opportunity disparities instead of closing them.

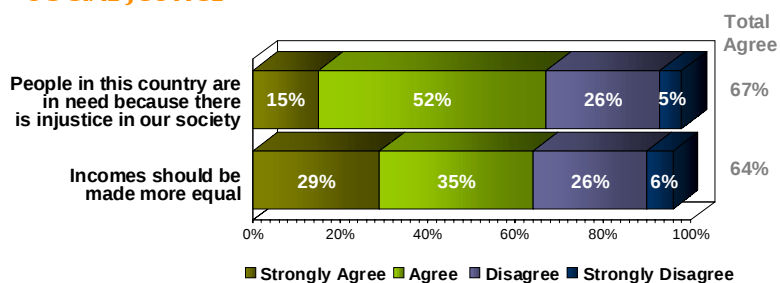
INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE



COMPETITION



SOCIAL JUSTICE





The federal government's broadband strategy, albeit under-funded due to lack of resources, is clearly a key component of both the innovation and social cohesion agendas. That program was not designed to equalize incomes, only to provide more equalization for opportunity and access for a high standard of living. Despite a desire for more equal distribution of wealth across Canada, straight and simple income redistribution is **not** a desired course of action on the part of most Canadians.

Cross-analyzing the results of those proposing more equal incomes, reveals that these same people also believe strongly in competition, hard work, and individual initiative and responsibility. Most of them consider themselves to be Liberals. To them, lack of opportunity is a social injustice and its resolution would be beneficial both individually and collectively.

Further evidence of the confines of the government's abilities to promote social cohesion is provided by the lack of Canadians willing to make the trade-off between increased spending on social services and higher taxes. Despite their concern over social injustices, there is not the public will, and this will impact on the political will, for more money to be thrown at the problem. Politically, the status quo is the government's easiest position.

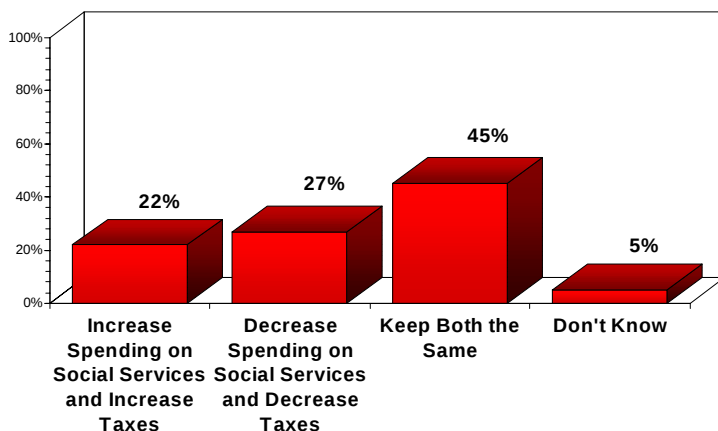
Political positioning however is often based on simple majorities of public opinion. It often overlooks the significant minorities, in this case one-in-five Canadians, who would be prepared to pay higher taxes for more social spending. This is why segmenting and analyzing these population clusters will be very important to the understanding of this issue, and to make the case against the tyranny of the majority.

A similar quarter of all Canadians, most of them the same people endorsing high taxes and social spending, also oppose the move to privatization of government commercial operations.

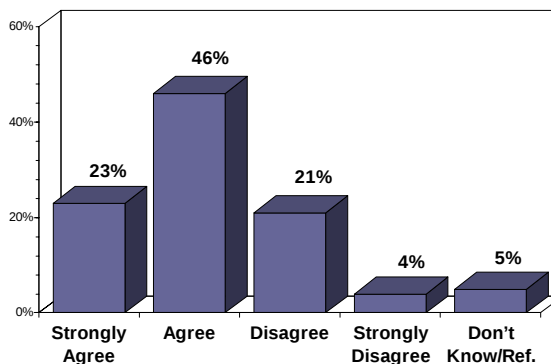
Having polled on the CN, PetroCan and Air Canada privatizations, as well as those of many provincial utilities, we can state that this number doesn't change significantly across sectors. It is a hard-core collectivist group of well-educated New Democrat and left-leaning Liberal supporters who oppose any move toward private ownership. Similarly, supporters of privatization are to be found in the Alliance, PC and centrist-Liberal support groups.

And it is this latter group that has the most impact on political decisions involving all issues related to both innovation and social cohesion. No political party wishes to isolate its own supporters, and Liberal voters are firmly in the center. But where this sometimes limits the efficacy of government in promoting some aspects of social cohesion, it also encourages the social cohesion agenda in many other ways.

CANADIANS' ATTITUDES ON TAXATION AND GOVERNMENT SPENDING



GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS SHOULD BE DECREASED





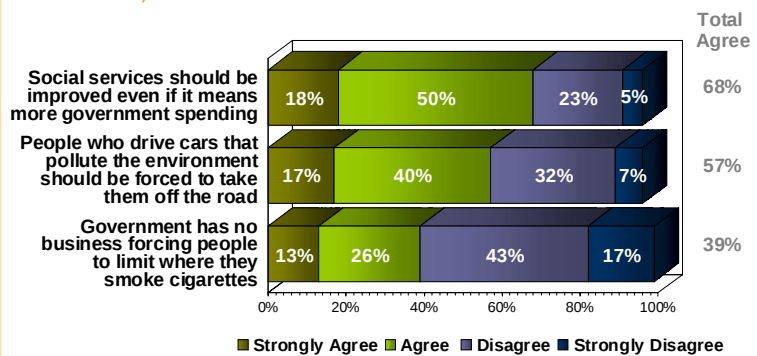
Politically, the social cohesion agenda complements the innovation agenda. Government, especially this government that is very widely straddling the political center, cannot afford to stake out an unbalanced position on the right or the left. It must stay anchored in the center, and while some aspects of social cohesion tend to run counter to individualistic views (which are more aligned with the innovation agenda), it also enhances the appeal of the whole package to both collectivists and individualists.

It is a political risk for government to promote either the innovation agenda, or the social cohesion agenda, alone. But as a package of the two, it minimizes this risk while promoting the maximum good.

This is not to say that those who support parts of a social cohesion agenda are smaller or less significant than would support parts of an innovation agenda.

Indeed, despite their lack of willingness to pay higher taxes, there is majority support in Canada for improved social services even if it meant more government spending. The state is also seen to have the right to intervene in many social issues, notably here environmental and health-related.

SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL SERVICES, HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT



Canadians very much take a menu approach to all the individual facets of collectivism and individualism. What they tend to choose could be termed contradictory, but we tend to view it as more balanced.

We may want less government intervention generally, and that mainly confined to giving us the tools to doing the job ourselves, but there is recognition that many aspects of our life should not be run by private enterprise, and that there are areas in which the government must intervene.

Again, this is a balanced approach that is politically encouraging for both agendas, giving government more efficacy, while removing unwanted obligations from the private sector.

While it is important that the encouragement of social cohesion by government be along lines currently acceptable to Canadians, it should be remembered that this level of acceptability will move back and forth like a pendulum. Politically, opinion polls have been tracking the movement of the political center from right to left and back again, in durations lasting about 5 years, for at least as long as polls have been taken.

Currently, the economic political center is to the right, though socially it is still marginally on the center-left. Both will eventually return or move further to the left, and it is likely that government and institutions will increase in importance, trust will increase and community spirit will be enhanced.



We have seen some of this post-September 11th, but whether this is a brief check in public attitude or a more lasting effect it is too early to tell. We are much looking forward to tracking some of these questions later this year.

Social participation may have been declining these past few decades, but Canadians are not writing off its importance.

Indeed, if we look at whether the glass is half-full or half-empty, the situation may not have been what it was, but it is far from despairing. The importance of social interaction and involvement are at least recognized as being important by Canadians. In this we compare very favourably with American attitudes.

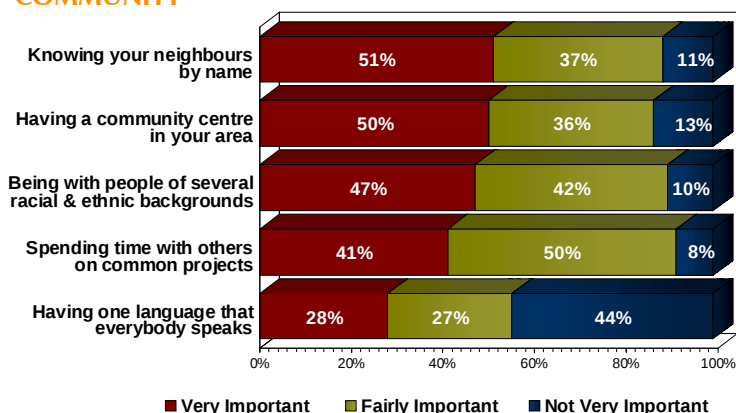
Again, these levels of importance will be fascinating to track next year, after Canadian memories of September 11th move further into the past.

Former US Speaker Tip O'Neil once said that "all politics is local", and it is predictable that Canadians feel closer to their towns and neighbourhoods than they feel toward their country. But the **intensity** of closeness is greatest with respect to Canada, and this surprised me, as I've seen a lot of data suggesting that we are actually closer to our provinces than our country. This is the first time we've actually asked the question directly however.

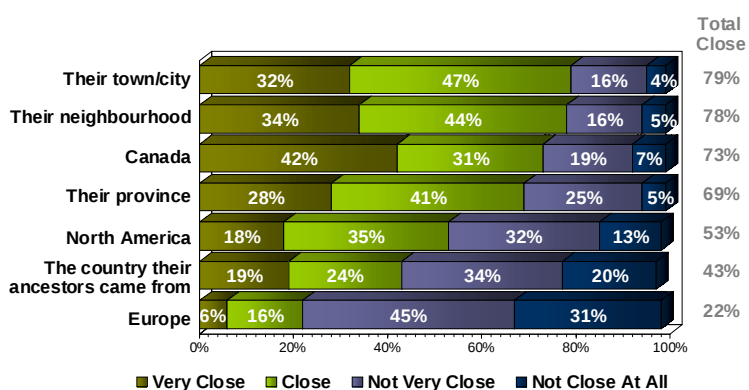
But while these may appear to be encouraging, it is again the minority opinion that must be taken into account. A fifth of Canadians seem to have little connection to their town or neighbourhood even though they've lived there for an average 14 years, and even worse, more than a quarter have no connection to Canada itself.

This is a very high number and far greater than the percentage of separatists in the country. However, this is a problem that **can** be directly approached by government, through communications messaging and the fostering of a stronger and more unique brand identity sensitive to our values and culture.

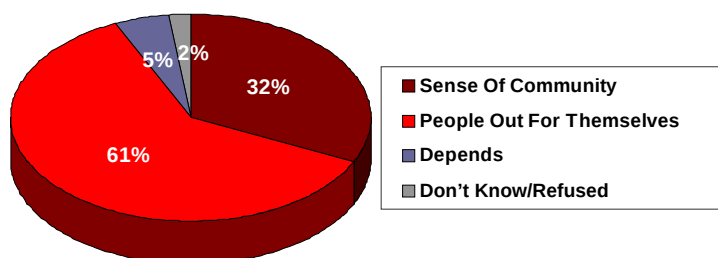
IMPORTANCE OF VARIOUS FACTORS IN CREATING COMMUNITY



DEGREE OF CLOSENESS TO VARIOUS GEOGRAPHIC AREAS



CANADIANS' ATTITUDES ON COMMUNITY SPIRIT IN CANADA





Levels of community spirit are even more alarming and problematic in Canada. Only one-third of the population really believe that people in general feel a sense of community with others – most believe they are only out for themselves.

It will take further analysis and correlating with the other questions on the survey to fully explore the reasons behind this. It could be a mixture of crime, the growth of individuality and competition, and a growing lack of public trust for individuals and institutions.

We know from our regular quarterly tracking report, Perspectives Canada, that confidence and trust in all individuals and institutions has been falling throughout the last eight years - both in the private sector and the public sector.

A couple of waves of our yearly “Public Trust Index” can be found on the www.Pollara.ca web-site, ranking trust in about 50 institutions and occupations. This year however, post-September 11th, we’ve seen a small recovery in trust and confidence, for every type of institution.

Public utilities, banks, insurance companies, oil and gas, and telecom companies, have joined governments at all levels in moving ahead in both impression and trustworthiness.

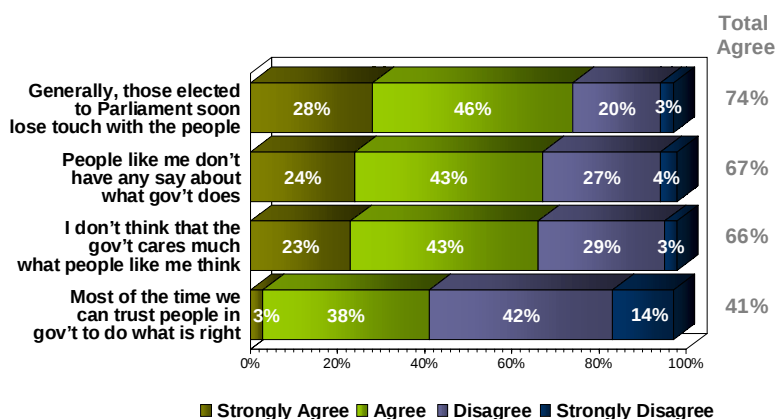
Whether this is short-term or will have a more lasting impact we can’t at this time determine, but we will track this, and hope for at least a significant residue of improvement. Currently, the most socially cohesive attitude we’ve measured is that everybody seems to hate Air Canada.

But when it comes to Canadians’ trust in their government, this is the area in which the most improvement is needed, and indeed which may be driving many other unproductive attitudes.

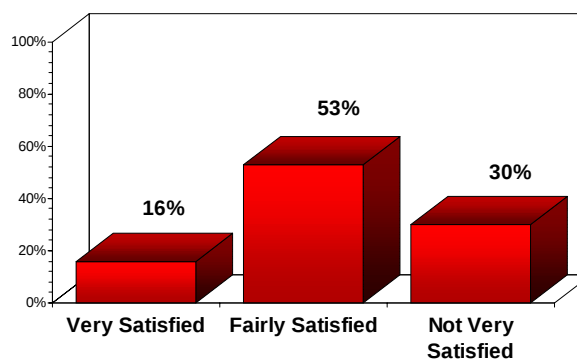
Canadians have always been cynical to government, and this should always be expected to some degree. However, the sense of disconnection that we currently have with our governments is quite significant and rather ugly. It paints a picture of a people who have been isolated by governments that are perceived as out of touch, not caring what the public thinks, inaccessible, and not always out for the public’s best interests.

This is not a recent occurrence. Indeed the results were actually worse more than a decade ago, during the Mulroney administration, when on a scale of one to ten, where one is not at all impressed and ten is very impressed, each of the federal government, the civil service and the Party in office all rated lower than a “3” average. All are now over “5”, but still have far to go.

CANADIANS’ ATTITUDES ABOUT DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS



SATISFACTION WITH LEVEL OF DEMOCRACY IN CANADA





If they are not overly happy with the institutions, and disconnected from government, the public is equally subdued when it comes to their satisfaction with our level of democracy. Again, the emphasis must be on the 3 in 10 Canadians who are not very satisfied, and further exploration of the issue with these people is needed.

A lot has been made within the social cohesion issue of the problem of declining voter turnout. While its not to be denied that participation levels in society are not where we would like them to be. We strongly believe that too much has been made of this issue where it applies to voting. In 1988, there was a very high turnout as a result of a divisive issue, Free Trade, which many Canadians felt would threaten their livelihood. In 1993, there was a lower turnout, though closer to the historical average, as the issue was jobs, there were many people out of work, and the incumbent government was highly unpopular.

Since then there have been two more federal elections, each one progressively more boring, progressively less threatening to anybody's way of life, and resulting in progressively lower turnouts.

But in 1995, during the Quebec Referendum, in the **ultimate** of threatening situations, more than 90% of eligible voters cast their ballots.

In every election, and at every level of government, the turnout has always been proportional to the threat posed by the issues being debated. When the issue is important, Canadians **can** be counted on to vote.

Many in the Liberal Party could easily design a party election platform so radical that 90% of the public would be motivated to vote, but of course they'd be voting against us.

There is no evidence of the need for mandatory voting, or for moving to a system based on proportional representation – both of which have been suggested by academics and the media.

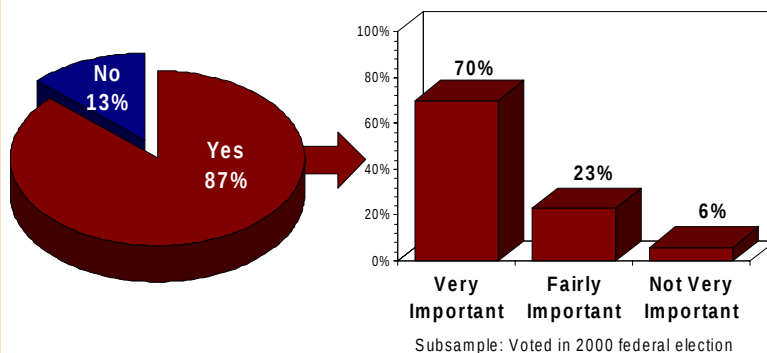
But though voter participation has clearly declined through the last three elections, in a way that appears little to do with social cohesion, Canadians do see the importance of voting and the importance of civic duty.

Witness that some 26% of the public would lie to the pollsters on a survey such as this, saying they had voted when the actual turnout was 61%. They at least recognize a social stigma resulting from not bothering to vote.

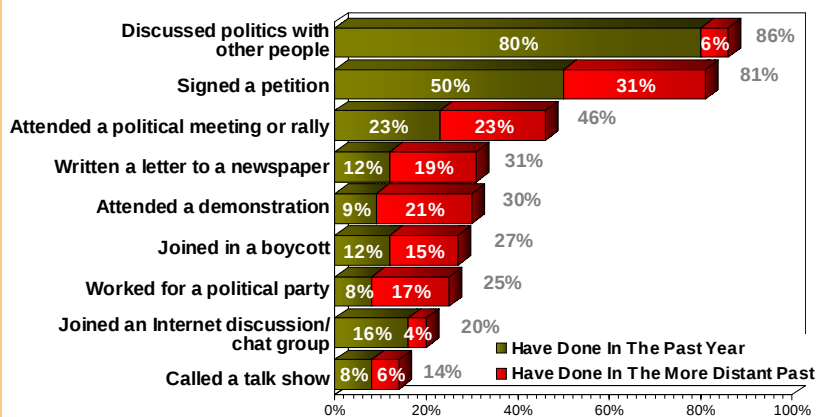
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Voted in 2000 Federal Election

Importance of Civic Duty in Decision to Cast Vote



INVOLVEMENT IN OTHER POLITICAL ACTION IN PAST YEAR





While Canadians political involvement compares favourably with that of Americans, there is no dispute that it **could** be higher and that this would be beneficial all the way down the line.

Over the past decade there have been some small victories for the public, which have given them a feeling of greater empowerment. The negative-option cable television issue, when the industry caved into public pressure. The reversal of the NHL taxpayer bailout, when the people spoke and the government listened, and Air Canada's decision to back off their Aeroplan point reduction changes, though few such victories in the past year.

But this hasn't been enough, and there are still a majority of Canadians who don't actively participate in public affairs. This is not surprising, considering the majority who feel that they can't have any effect, and that the government doesn't care what people like them think.

Though POLLARA did not ask specifically about bowling leagues or choral singing, as Putnam did in his study, we do find that group participation in Canada is limited to a minority of people, which tend to be the same core people involved in multiple organizations.

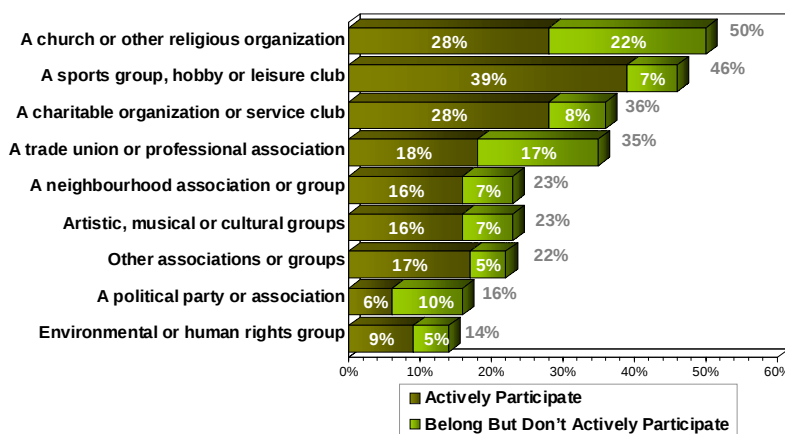
There is much that governments can do to stimulate the development of a community of shared values and inclusiveness. However, most of the standard methods result in only short-term improvements. Longer-term improvements need to be based on a greater spirit of trust and goodwill with respect to these institutions, and these levels are low to begin with.

There are more questions than answers to be found in the issue of social cohesion. The one that many people spend the most time thinking about is "What level of social cohesion is desirable?" Having too much would likely be as damaging as having too little. The perfect example of extreme social cohesion is the Hells Angels biker gang.

However, we have a long way to go before we worry about this question. Currently only significant minorities of the public are participating and getting involved in public issues. The rest are isolated and disconnected and this affects both their outlook and their usefulness to society.

Only in the area of voluntary work do we find anything approaching a majority level of participation, and then we still have that significant minority that is not participating.

PARTICIPATION IN GROUPS OR ASSOCIATIONS



VOLUNTARY WORK

Do You Do Voluntary Work?





CONCLUSION

For government, it is easy to approach some of the components of social cohesion. Securing the means to achieve equal opportunity is an **industry** within the government. Government has always strived in this direction and will likely always do so. The broadband strategy is just one in a long line of these initiatives, but one that deals with the threat of two-tier economic development.

Participation and sense of community can be artificially, though only partially stimulated, through the encouragement and founding of organizations such as Katimavik, CUSO and similar programs of national youth service, both for the domestic market and for export.

Branding the Canadian identity as unique and valuable could stimulate patriotism and connection, as could positioning Canadian history as more relevant to our heritage.

Communications can play a key role in fostering participation, identity and connection. However, in the current economic climate, the government has neither the funds nor the political will for such communication.

The public themselves, has always viewed it as being self-serving and wasteful, especially in the past six months. Perhaps we need to look at all government communications within the frame-work of promoting social cohesion, and give it enhanced priority under this new agenda.

To do this would also mean putting the issue of social cohesion on the table for public discussion and input. The public won't endorse a solution until they understand the problem, and I doubt that one person in twenty has ever even heard of the term social cohesion, much less what it means.

Advertising is not the only confinement that government must face in dealing with social cohesion. The Canadian public holds both individualistic and collective values, and there is much to the agenda that they would embrace and refuse, sometimes at the same time. Income redistribution, changes to tax structure, government ownership of commercial operations, or any regulatory change that impacts too bluntly on Canadian's strong feelings of individual initiative, are too **risky** to approach today. This could change with time.

But the major political asset to the agenda, that will ensure its place at the table, is that social cohesion is political insurance when proceeding with the innovation agenda. Its inclusion puts the government, and indeed Liberalism, in **balance**, with **anchors** on both the political right and left, and enhances the appeal of both as a package.

Such a package minimizes the political risk to the government, while at the same time promoting the maximum good.