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# FAST FACTS



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## Low Voter Participation Means Low Levels of Equality

As has been widely reported, voter turnout in the recent provincial election in Manitoba was historically low. It fell 14 percentage points from 68 percent in 1999 to 54 percent in 2003. This is substantially lower even than the voter turnout rate in the 2000 federal election, in which only 61 percent of eligible voters cast ballots – and that was the lowest voter turnout rate in a national election in Canadian history.

Voting is the least participatory form of political activity, and yet only a very slim majority regularly musters up the initiative to cast ballots. This issue raises familiar questions of efficacy, cynicism and ambivalence toward party politics in general. But civic literacy is also an important concern. Civic literacy is the knowledge and capacity an individual must possess in order to make sense of the political world. The evidence shows that low levels of political knowledge and political interest are two of the most significant determinants of voter apathy.

The relationship between voter apathy and political knowledge is of academic interest but the effects are

of practical concern. Low levels of political knowledge have been shown to affect policy outcomes. In his book *Civic Literacy: How informed citizens make democracy work*, Henry Milner conducts a comparison of advanced industrial nations and finds low levels of civic literacy and

high levels of socio-economic inequality are directly correlated. Milner measures factual knowledge as knowledge of the United Nations. The literacy component of his scale includes scores on standardized tests in reading, writing, mathematics and science. These components are used because they are relatively easy to measure and compare across nations.

### A Virtuous Circle – Or a Vicious One

Sweden, Finland, Norway and the other Nordic states are characterized by high levels of civic literacy, social spending and socio-economic equality. The United States is at the very bottom of the scale. Canada scores only slightly higher than the United States in terms of both civic literacy and socio-economic equality. The correlation is as close to perfect as can be expected in the social sciences.

**Low levels of political knowledge have been shown to affect policy outcomes**



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It is a near one-to-one ratio. Few advanced industrial states deviate from the pattern. Depending on where you live, it is a virtuous cycle—or a vicious one.

## Income Equality and Civic Literacy

Countries with high levels of income equality have high levels of civic literacy partly because income is a good determinant of political knowledge and activity. As Milner points out, on the other side of the cycle, an “informed population chooses institutions and policies that reinforce egalitarian [sustainable welfare state] outputs and outcomes...” Those who possess a sufficiently high level of civic literacy are better able to determine which parties or policies best reflect their political preferences. Policies that combine deficit reduction, a flattening of the progressive income tax system and sustained cuts to social spending, increase inequality. A certain level of civic literacy is needed to understand the possible implications of these policies.

In addition, political parties pay attention to those who are most likely to vote. Regular voters are interested in politics and they possess relatively high levels of civic literacy. If a significant percentage of the population is politically active and informed, governments will be more likely to advance egalitarian policies that aim to benefit the majority. Canada’s political landscape might look quite different if we had higher levels civic literacy.

In his article “Information Effects in Collective Preferences,” Scott L. Althaus uses statistical methods to compare the actual opinions of American citizens to the opinions of a hypothetical but fully informed American population. He considers a variety of fiscal, operative, social and foreign policy issues. Would the United States be more egalitarian if the population were better informed about politics? In this study the fully informed aggregate opinion is less inclined to favour tax cuts and more inclined to favour spending on social services. 70% of respondents indicated that they would prefer to keep taxes at the current level. But the figure falls to 52.9% for a fully informed hypothetical population. To be sure, there are complications that must be considered and the fully informed opinion in the analysis does not uniformly favour more egalitarian policies. Also, Althaus insists his “findings only suggest what collective opinion might look like in a hypothetical world of politically attentive citizens.” Nonethe-

less, on an issue as significant as spending versus tax cuts, public opinion in the United States might be substantially more egalitarian if the population was fully informed about politics. This is entirely consistent with Milner’s study.

The results of Althaus’s analysis cannot be directly transplanted to the Canadian context. The relationship between civic literacy and political activity needs to be studied more extensively. There are no Canadian studies that measure information effects on collective policy preferences. But all available information suggests Canadians score only marginally higher than Americans on political knowledge tests. Certainly Canada is only marginally more egalitarian. This is not unimportant. In Manitoba a 54% voter turnout rate was enough to elect an NDP government but it is a government that is often difficult to distinguish from the federal Liberals. Today’s NDP is as neo-liberal as it is social democratic. Positioning oneself just right of centre is a good way to get elected in Manitoba. It is the only way to get elected in Canada. Would this be the case if we were more politically active and had higher levels of civic literacy? It might not be.

—Michael MacKenzie

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