



# Democracy in Western Canada

An Analysis of the Looking West 2006 Survey

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## The NEXT West Project

This report is part of the Canada West Foundation's The NEXT West Project. The NEXT West Project explores three key themes: 1) economic transformations; 2) generational transformations; and 3) community transformations. Core funding for The NEXT West Project has been provided by Western Economic Diversification Canada and The Kahanoff Foundation. Additional funding has been provided by an anonymous foundation, the Canada West Foundation Founders' Endowment Fund, Petro-Canada Inc., Teck Cominco Limited, and Canadian Western Bank. The Canada West Foundation expresses its sincere thanks for this generous support. For more information on The NEXT West Project, please contact Canada West Foundation Director of Research Robert Roach (roach@cwf.ca).

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The Looking West 2006 Survey is the fourth survey in the Looking West series (previous Looking West Surveys were conducted in 2001, 2003, and 2004). The Looking West Surveys tap into the views and opinions of western Canadians on a number of key public policy topics. The purpose of the Looking West Surveys is to inform the public, community leaders, government staff, and elected officials about the views and perspectives of western Canadians. Previous Looking West Survey reports can be found at [www.cwf.ca](http://www.cwf.ca).

Additional reports based on the results of the Looking West 2006 Survey include *Consistent Priorities*, released by the Canada West Foundation in May 2006, and future reports to be released by the Canada West Foundation in summer and fall 2006.

### **Researchers: Interested in Using the Looking West 2006 Survey Data?**

As part of the Canada West Foundation's commitment to encouraging ongoing research on western Canadian public policy issues, the Looking West 2006 dataset will be made available, free of charge, for nonprofit purposes to post-secondary institutions, academics, students and nonprofit agencies. Dataset availability is anticipated in January 2007. For more information, please contact Robert Roach, Director of Research ([roach@cwf.ca](mailto:roach@cwf.ca)).

## Executive Summary

Conducted in February and March 2006, the Looking West 2006 Survey included a wide range of questions on public policy priorities, political identity, and democratic participation and attitudes. The objective of the survey is to help western Canadians and their governments better understand the opinions and attitudes of western Canadians. *Democracy in Western Canada* presents an analysis of the democratic participation and attitudes data. The public policy data can be found in *Consistent Priorities*, released by the Canada West Foundation in May 2006. The political identities data will be presented in a future Looking West 2006 Survey report.

Key democratic participation and attitudes findings of the Looking West 2006 Survey include:

### Voting

Many of society's more marginalized people—those living in lower income households, those with lower education levels, Aboriginal people, immigrants, and visible minorities—are less likely to vote. This is by no means a new or unique finding, but it is troubling for Canadian democracy.

Only 15% of respondents did not vote because they were ineligible. Most respondents mention political or personal reasons for not voting.

### Political Activities

Survey respondents were asked about their political activities (other than voting) in the 12 months prior to the survey. Two-thirds of western Canadians engaged in at least 1 of 7 political activities examined in the survey. Signing a petition is the most frequently reported activity, with nearly 4 in 10 western Canadians reporting this behaviour.

It is sometimes suggested that people who do not vote may be participating in other ways. However, the Looking West 2006 data suggest otherwise. In general, people who are more likely to report voting are also more likely to report engaging in other democratic activities.

### Media

Over 7 in 10 western Canadians report getting current events and news from television, while about 6 in 10 report getting information about current events from newspapers. Almost 3 in 10 report getting current event information from the radio, but only a quarter use the Internet to learn about current events.

### Democratic Attitudes

Many western Canadians are less than enthralled with the practice of Canadian politics. Many feel that politicians are untrustworthy, political parties are out of touch with their interests, elections fail to address their key concerns, the scope of government has grown too large, and the power of large corporations is too great. Despite these sentiments, however, western Canadians report a relatively high level of interest in politics and a sense of duty toward both voting and volunteerism.

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, many commentators have expressed concern about growing apathy in democracies around the world. Canada has not been immune to this perception, and declining levels of voter turnout in recent elections only reinforce arguments that Canadians are less interested and less engaged in democratic life. To get a sense of the extent to which western Canadians are, or are not, apathetic about politics, the Looking West 2006 Survey included a battery of questions about democratic behaviours and attitudes.

The Canada West Foundation's Looking West Surveys are designed to provide valid and reliable data on western Canadian public opinion. The Looking West 2006 Survey is the fourth in the series; previous Looking West Surveys were conducted in 2001, 2003 and 2004. Unlike many other surveys, which often lump provinces together (thus obscuring important differences between the provinces) and/or have provincial sample sizes that do not allow for meaningful analysis of opinion in a single province, the Looking West Surveys use large provincial samples to allow for statistically significant analysis of each of the four western provinces (including urban-rural analyses). Indeed, the Looking West Surveys are unique in their large sample sizes. In addition, the Looking West Surveys replicate a number of survey questions over the years, allowing for an analysis of attitudinal trends over time.

*Democracy in Western Canada* presents an analysis of the Looking West 2006 democratic attitudes and behaviours data. It should be noted that the survey also collected data on political identities and public policy. The public policy data can be found in *Consistent Priorities*, released by the Canada West Foundation in May 2006. The political identities data will be presented in a future Looking West 2006 report.

## 2. Methodology

Looking West 2006 is a random sample telephone survey of western Canadians 18 years of age or older. On behalf of the Canada West Foundation, Probe Research Inc. coordinated and administered the survey from February 23, 2006 to March 29, 2006 through its Winnipeg, Manitoba call centre DataProbe. It should be noted that this fielding window for the survey was purposely chosen in order to have at least one month separating the federal election of January 23, 2006 from the interview period.

To allow for statistically significant analyses of each province, as well as the West as a whole (BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba), a large sample was used. A total of 4,000 residents were interviewed by telephone across British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. With a sample of 4,000 across the region, one can say with 95% certainty that the results are within +/-1.55 percentage points of what they would have been if the entire adult population of the region had been interviewed. The margin of error is higher within the survey population's sub-groups. The provincial breakdowns, and the margins of error, are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:  
Sample Size and Margin of Error**

	Total N	Margin of Error +/- 95 times out of 100
BC	1,000	3.1%
Alberta	1,000	3.1%
Saskatchewan	1,000	3.1%
Manitoba	1,000	3.1%
Western Canada	4,000	1.55%

In the presentation of aggregate western Canadian regional data, a weighting adjustment factor was applied to match each province's sample weight to its portion of the regional population of those aged 18 years of age and over. Half of the respondents from each province were under 35 years of age, while the other half were 35 years of age or older. A weighting adjustment factor was applied to correct for this over-sampling of the 18-34 age group. A full analysis of the similarities and differences between the two age samples will be presented in a forthcoming Looking West 2006 Survey report on generational transformations.

Because non-responses ("don't know/refused") are not reported in the tables or text, the data in the figures in this report do not always add up to 100%.

Urban size analyses are based on postal codes, and have the following categories: urban core (a large urban area around a Census Metropolitan Area [CMA] or Census Agglomeration [CA] with a population of at least 100,000 persons in the case of a CMA, or between 10,000 and 99,999 in the case of a CA); urban fringe (includes all small urban areas [with less than 10,000 population] within a CMA or CA that are not contiguous with the urban core of the CMA or CA); rural fringe (all territory within a CMA or CA not classified as an urban core or an urban fringe); small urban; and rural.

The following reports based on the previous Looking West Surveys are available for free at [www.cwf.ca](http://www.cwf.ca): *Looking West 2003: A Survey of Western Canadians*; *Regional Distinctions: An Analysis of the Looking West 2004 Survey*, and *Western Directions: An Analysis of the Looking West 2004 Survey*.

### **3. Democratic Participation: Voting**

Looking West 2006 Survey respondents were asked whether they voted in the most recent federal election, the most recent provincial election in their province, and the most recent municipal election in their local area. Survey respondents reported a very high level of voting: 80.0% of western Canadians report voting in the 2006 federal election, 76.5% report voting in their most recent provincial election, and 63.7% report voting in their most recent municipal election.

These reported voting rates are well above the actual turnout rates (see Figure 2 for a comparison of the self-reported federal results with the official results for the 2006 federal election, and Figure 3 for a comparison of the self-reported provincial results with the official results for the most recent provincial elections.)

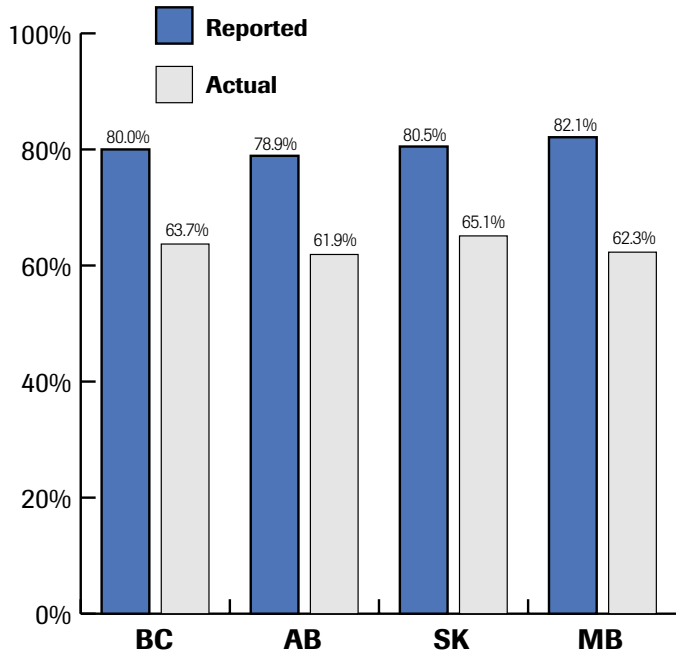
This over-reporting of voting rates is to be expected: as decades of social science researchers have found, over-reporting of voting by survey respondents is very common, and occurs internationally. The most frequent reason given for over-reporting is that survey respondents wish to provide the more "socially desirable" response. Another reason often given for over-reporting is faulty memory, especially when the most recent election was more than a few months prior to the survey.

Federal vote reporting is 15 to 20 percentage points above actual voter turnout. Given that the survey was administered between 4 and 8 weeks after the federal election, the "socially desirable response" explanation is likely more valid than the "faulty memory" explanation.

Although recent provincial election turnout rates vary dramatically, survey respondents from across the western provinces report remarkably similar levels of provincial voter turnout. The degree of provincial over-reporting does not, moreover, correspond with the length of time since the election, again implying credence to the "socially desirable response" explanation over the "faulty memory" explanation.

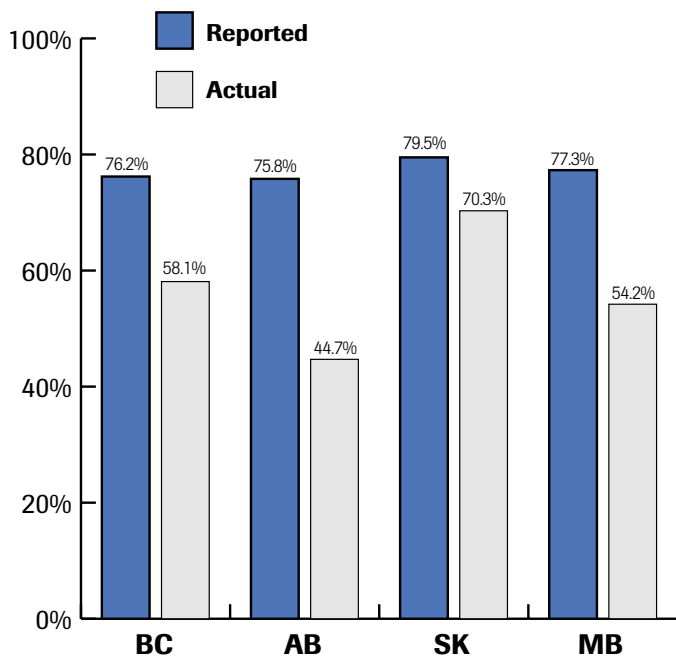
Despite the over-reporting of voting, there is value in examining who does and does not report voting; the caution, of course, is that the analysis is of self-reported voters.

**Figure 2:**  
**Self-Reported Versus Actual Federal Voting Turnout**



Survey Question: Did you vote in the recent federal election?  
Actual Results: Elections Canada

**Figure 3:**  
**Self-Reported Versus Actual Provincial Election Voting Turnout**



Survey Question: Did you vote in the most recent [province] election?  
Actual Results: Elections BC, AB, SK, and MB

Looking first at self-reported federal voting, a number of patterns are evident. As age, education, and income increase, respondents are more likely to report voting in the most recent federal election. Immigrants, visible minority respondents and Aboriginal respondents are more likely to report not voting in the most recent federal election. (Some younger respondents, immigrant respondents, and visible minority respondents who are immigrants may have reported not voting due to ineligibility.)

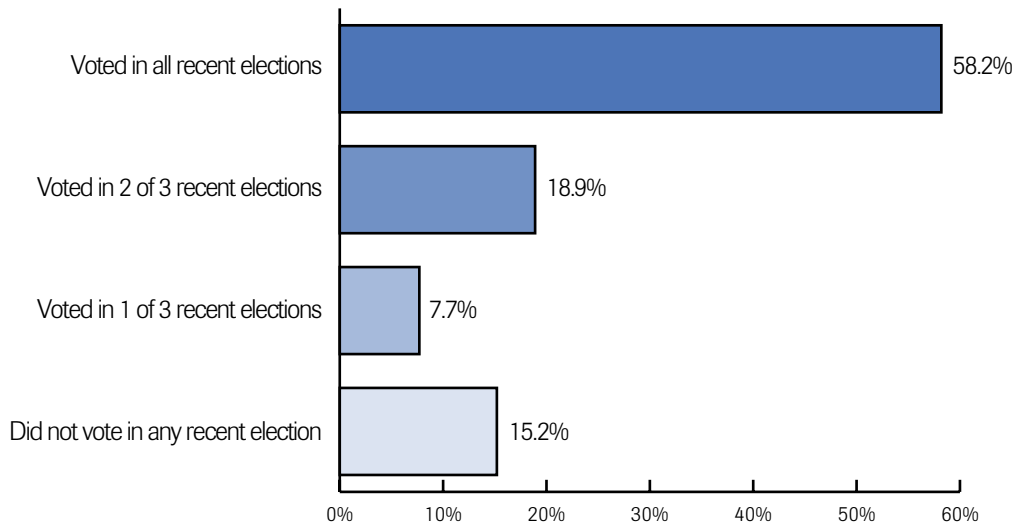
Similar patterns are seen with self-reported provincial voting: in general, as age, education, and income increase, respondents are more likely to report voting while immigrants, visible minority respondents and Aboriginal respondents are more likely to report not voting. (Again, some younger respondents, immigrant respondents, and visible minority respondents who are immigrants may have reported not voting due to ineligibility.) This pattern is repeated for municipal elections.

Almost 6 in 10 western Canadians report voting in all recent federal, provincial, and municipal elections. Manitoba respondents are most likely to report voting in all recent elections, while British Columbia respondents are least likely to report doing so. As age increases, respondents are more likely to report voting in all recent elections, ranging from a low of 1 in 4 for the 18-24 year olds (some of whom may have been too young to vote in at least one of their most recent elections) to a high of almost 3 in 4 for respondents aged 65 and over.

As education levels and, in general, income increase, respondents are more likely to report voting in all recent elections (see Figure 4). In the lowest income category (under \$20,000 annual household income), over a quarter of respondents report not voting in any recent election. Immigrants, visible minority respondents, and Aboriginal respondents are less likely to report voting in all recent elections. (Some immigrant respondents and some visible minority respondents who are immigrants may not have been eligible to vote.)

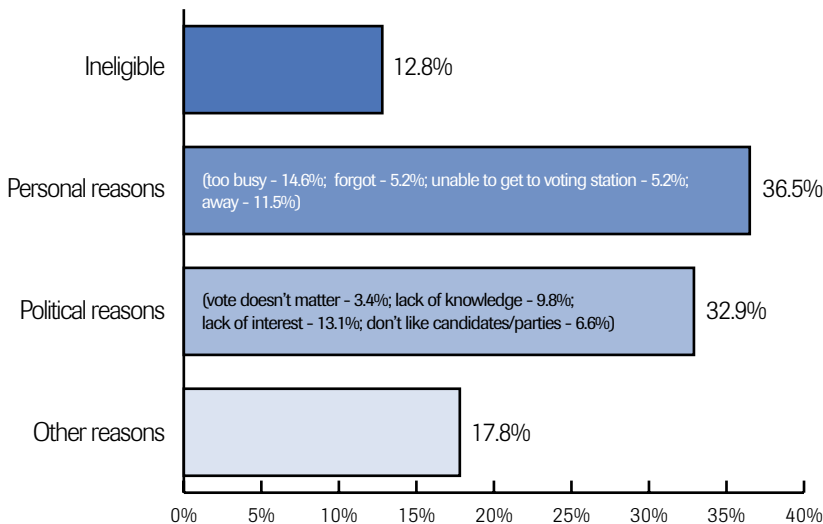
A full 15% of westerners report not voting in any recent election.

**Figure 4:  
Frequency of Self-Reported Voting (Western Canada)**



Survey Questions: Did you vote in the recent federal election? Did you vote in the most recent [province] election? Did you vote in your most recent municipal election?

**Figure 5:  
Reason for Not Voting (Western Canada)**



Responses shown are the first reason given for not voting. "Other" includes reasons related to: not knowing where or when to vote; health; relocation; childcare; religion; acclamation; enumeration; "enough of politics"; "have never voted"; weather; working; and other reasons. None of these reasons exceeded 3% of the responses, while many represented less than 1% of responses. Survey Question: You indicated that there have been recent elections in which you did not vote. Why didn't you vote?

**Demographic variations:**

BC and Alberta respondents, respondents aged 18-24, immigrants, and visible minority respondents are more likely to cite ineligibility as their reason for not voting. Manitoba respondents, respondents living in rural fringe areas, respondents with an annual household income of \$150,000 or over, and Aboriginal respondents are more likely to cite personal reasons for not voting. Respondents living in urban fringe areas, respondents with either a high school diploma or less, or with a bachelor degree, respondents with an annual household income of \$80,000-99,999, Aboriginal respondents, and visible minority respondents are more likely to cite political reasons for not voting. Saskatchewan respondents, respondents living in rural fringe areas, respondents with less than a grade 12 education or with a college/trade diploma or certificate, and respondents with an annual household income of \$60,000-79,999 are more likely to cite other reasons for not voting. As age increases, respondents are more likely to provide other reasons for not voting.



The self-reported voting behaviour data suggest that many of society's more marginalized people—those living in lower income households, those with lower educational levels, Aboriginal people, immigrants, and visible minorities—are less likely to vote. This is by no means a new or unique finding, but it is troubling for Canadian democracy.

Why are these people not voting? Respondents who reported that they did not vote in any or all of the recent elections were asked: "You indicated that there have been recent elections in which you did not vote. Why didn't you vote?" This was an open-ended question, with respondents invited to voluntarily supply their own reason(s) for not voting.

As Figure 5 demonstrates, there is no single common reason why people do not vote. Only 13% of respondents who report not voting attribute their failure to do so to being ineligible with most respondents citing personal or political reasons.

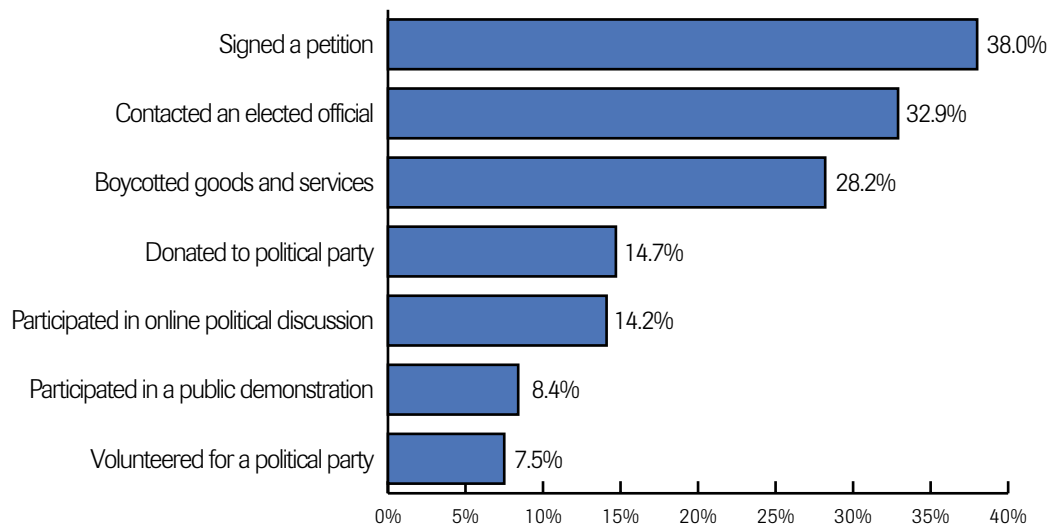
#### ***4. Democratic Participation: Political Activities***

Democratic participation is not limited to voting; there are many other ways in which citizens can and do get involved in the political process. Looking West 2006 Survey respondents were asked to report if they engaged in any of the following ways in the previous 12 months:

1. did volunteer activities for a political party;
2. contacted an elected official by letter, email, phone or in person;
3. signed a petition;
4. participated in a public protest or demonstration;
5. made a donation to a political party;
6. participated in an online discussion about political issues; or
7. boycotted goods and services from a particular company for ethical reasons.

- Signing a petition is the most frequently reported political activity outside of voting, with nearly 4 in 10 western Canadians reporting this behaviour in the previous 12 months.
- About 3 in 10 western Canadians report contacting an elected official by letter, email, phone or in person in previous 12 months.
- Almost 3 in 10 respondents report boycotting goods and services from a particular company for ethical reasons in the previous 12 months.
- Almost 15% of western Canadians report making a donation to a political party in the 12 months prior to the survey.
- Less than 15% of western Canadians report participating in an online discussion about political issues.
- Only 8% of western Canadians report participating in a public protest or demonstration in the 12 months prior to the survey.
- Volunteering for a political party is the least common political behaviour, with less than 8% of respondents reporting doing so.

**Figure 6:  
Political Activities in Last 12 Months (Western Canada)**



Survey Question: Please let me know if you have engaged in any of the following activities in the past 12 months...

#### **Demographic variations:**

**Signed a petition** – BC respondents are more likely than prairie respondents to report signing a petition. In general, as education increases, respondents are more likely to report signing a petition. Also, as age increases up to age 55 and over, respondents are more likely to report signing a petition, and in general, as annual household income increases up to \$150,000 and over, respondents are more likely to report signing a petition. Women, respondents living in urban fringe or smaller urban areas, and Aboriginal respondents are more likely to report this behaviour, while immigrants and visible minority respondents are less likely to do so.

**Contacted an elected official** – There are no significant provincial differences on this behaviour. Men, respondents living in smaller urban areas, Aboriginal respondents and visible minority respondents are more likely to report contacting an elected official. As education and income increase, respondents are more likely to report contacting an elected official. As age increases up to age 65 and over, respondents are more likely to report this behaviour.

**Boycotted goods and services** – British Columbia respondents are more likely to report this behaviour, and Manitoba and Saskatchewan respondents are less likely to report this behaviour. Respondents living in urban fringe and rural fringe communities are more likely to report boycotting goods and services for ethical reasons, as are respondents aged 35-54. Respondents with annual household incomes below \$40,000, visible minority respondents, immigrants, and respondents aged 65 and over are less likely to report this behaviour. In general, as education increases, respondents are more likely to report engaging in an ethical boycott.

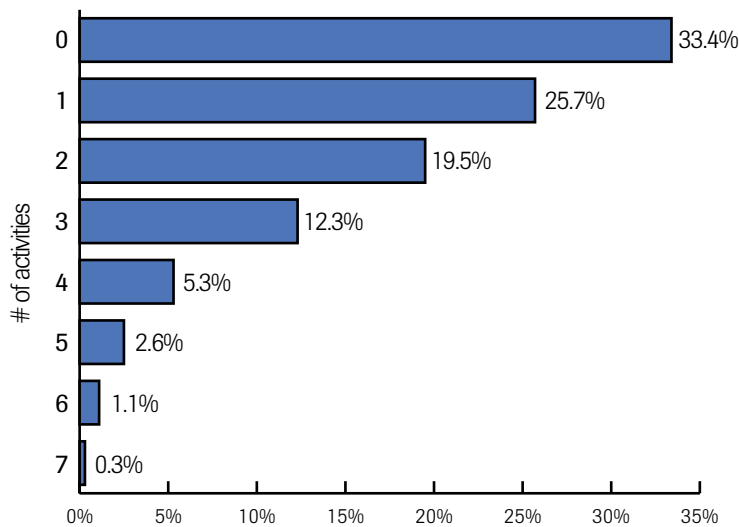
**Donated to a political party** – There are no significant provincial differences on this behaviour. Men, immigrants, and respondents living in urban fringe and rural fringe areas are more likely to report making a donation to a political party, while Aboriginal respondents and visible minority respondents are less likely to do so. As education increases, respondents are more likely to report making a donation, and in general as income and age increase, respondents are more likely to report making a donation.

**Participated in online political discussion** – There are no significant provincial variations on this behaviour. Men, Aboriginal respondents, respondents age 18-24 and 35-44, respondents with a bachelor's or graduate/professional degree, and respondents with an annual household income above \$150,000 are more likely to report engaging in an online political discussion. Respondents living in rural fringe areas are less likely to report doing so.

**Participated in a public demonstration** – BC respondents are much more likely than prairie respondents to report this behaviour. In general, as education increases, respondents are more likely to report participating in a protest or demonstration. Respondents living in urban core or rural fringe areas, respondents aged 18-24 and 35-44, Aboriginal respondents, and respondents with annual household incomes of \$40,000-59,999 and \$100,000-149,999 are more likely to report protest behaviour, while respondents aged 65 and over and those with annual household incomes above \$150,000 are less likely to report doing so.

**Volunteered for a political party** – There are no significant provincial variations on this behaviour. Men, respondents living in urban core areas, respondents aged 45 and over, respondents with bachelor's or graduate/professional degrees, and those with annual household incomes of \$40,000-59,999 and \$100,000 and over are more likely to report volunteering for a political party.

**Figure 7:  
Number of Political Activities in Last 12 Months (Western Canada)**



**Demographic variations:**

BC respondents, men, respondents aged 35-54, respondents with annual household incomes of \$40,000-59,999, and respondents living in urban core and urban fringe areas are more likely to report engaging in 5 or more political activities. Respondents from Manitoba and Saskatchewan, women, respondents aged 18-34 and 65 and over, immigrants and visible minority respondents are more likely to report engaging in no political activities. As education increases, respondents are less likely to report engaging in no political activities. A similar pattern is seen with income, although there is a small increase in respondents reporting no political activities in the highest income category (\$150,000 and over).

Survey Question: Please let me know if you have engaged in any of the following activities in the past 12 months...

Two-thirds of western Canadians engaged in at least 1 of the 7 political activities examined in the survey. While it is rare that individuals will engage in a wide diversity of activities—less than 1 in 10 report engaging in 4 or more, and less than 0.5% report engaging in all 7—the high proportion of western Canadians who report some form of political activity outside of voting suggests a relatively high level of interest in politics.

It must be noted that the survey only asked respondents to report on whether or not they participated in an activity, and did not probe how frequently they participated. In other words, it is possible that a respondent only participated in one activity (for example, signing petitions) but did the activity numerous times (signed many petitions). Thus, Figure 7 provides an indication of the breadth of self-reported political actions, but does not imply information about the frequency or depth of action.

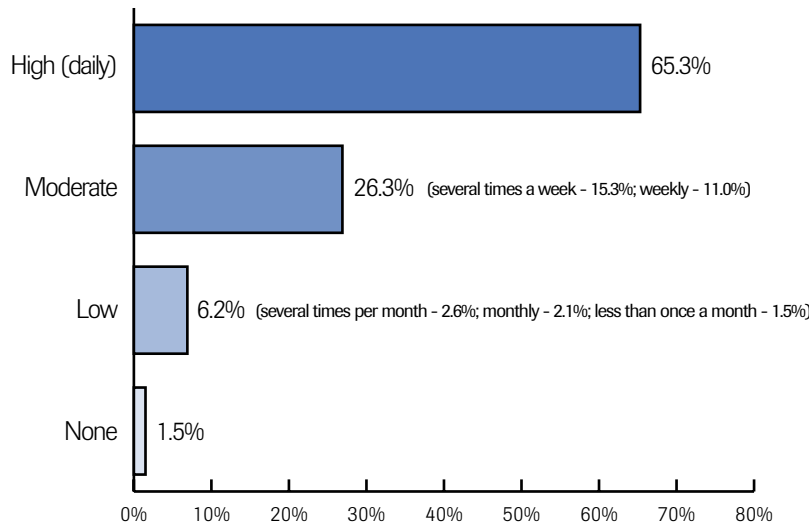
It is sometimes suggested that people who do not vote may be participating politically in other ways. However, the Looking West 2006 Survey data suggest otherwise. Almost 3 in 5 of the respondents who reported not voting in any recent election also reported not engaging in any of the 7 political activities. Conversely, respondents are more likely to report engaging in a higher number of political activities if they voted in a recent election.

## 5. Current Events and News Media

To what extent are western Canadians informed about current events, and where do they get their information? Looking West 2006 Survey respondents were asked: “How frequently do you follow current events in the news?” Two-thirds of western Canadians report following current events daily, while another 3 in 10 report following current events at least once a week.

Respondents were also asked “When you do follow current events, where do you usually get your information?” Over 7 in 10 western Canadians report getting current events and news from television, while 6 in 10 report getting information from newspapers. Almost as many western Canadians report getting information from the radio as from the Internet, although these

**Figure 8:  
Frequency of Following Current Events (Western Canada)**

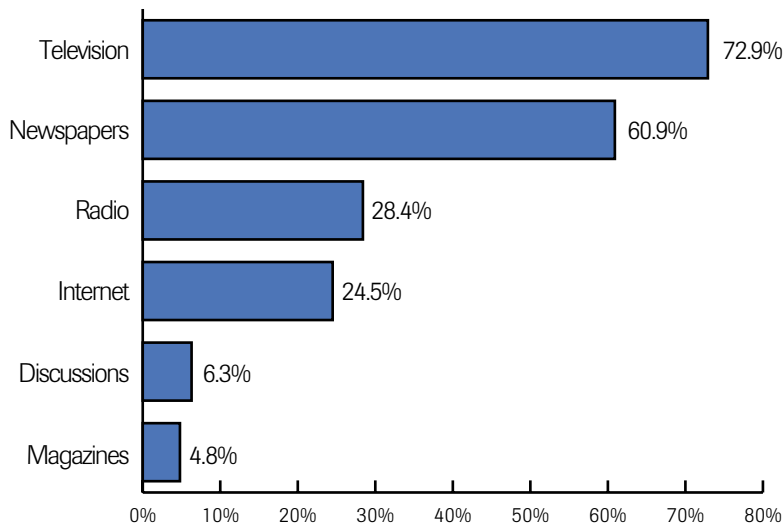


Survey Question: How frequently do you follow current events in the news?

**Demographic variations:**

There are no significant provincial variations on this question. Men, immigrants, and respondents with a bachelor's degree or graduate/professional degree are more likely to report following current events daily. As age increases, respondents are more likely to report following current events daily, with 18-24 year olds much less likely than older age cohorts to report daily following of current events. In general, as income increases, respondents are more likely to report following current events daily. Finally, respondents with a high school diploma, Aboriginal respondents, visible minority respondents, and respondents living in urban fringe areas are less likely to report following current events daily.

**Figure 9:  
Source of Current Event Information (Western Canada)**



Survey Question: When you do follow current events, where do you usually get your information?

**Demographic variations:**

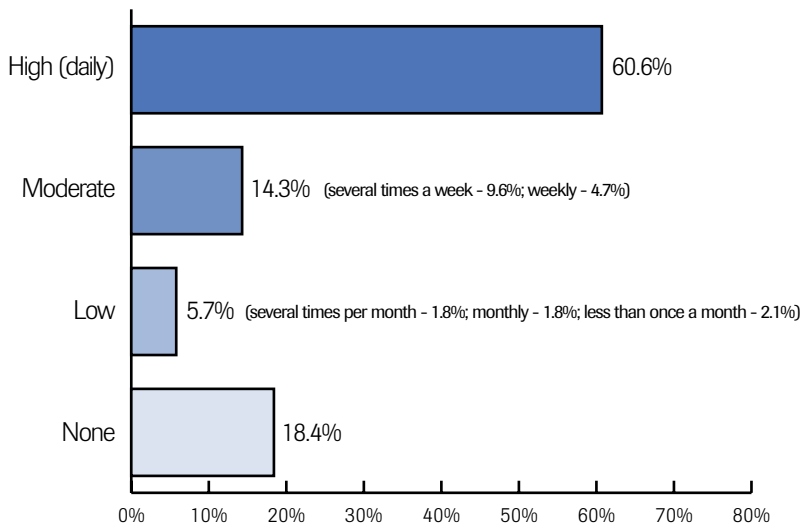
**Television** – Saskatchewan respondents, women, and respondents living in urban fringe areas are more likely to report getting information from the television. In general, as education increases respondents are less likely to report getting information from television, and as age increases respondents are more likely to report getting information from television.

**Newspapers** – Manitoba and BC respondents are more likely to report getting information from newspapers, as are respondents living in urban core or urban fringe areas. Aboriginal respondents are less likely to report getting information from newspapers. In general, as education, age and income increase, respondents are more likely to report getting information from newspapers.

**Radio** – Saskatchewan respondents, respondents living in urban fringe and rural communities, and respondents with either a college or trade diploma, a bachelor's degree or a graduate/professional degree are more likely to report getting information from the radio. In general, as income and age increase respondents are more likely to report getting information from the radio. Immigrants, Aboriginal respondents and visible minority respondents are less likely to report getting information from the radio.

**Internet** – BC respondents, men, immigrants, and respondents living in urban core or small urban centres are more likely to report getting information from the Internet. As education increases, respondents are more likely to report getting information from the Internet. A similar pattern is seen with income, although there is a drop in the highest income category. As age increases, respondents are less likely to report getting information from the Internet

**Figure 10:  
Frequency of Internet Use (Western Canada)**



Survey Question: How often do you use the Internet, including email?

**Demographic variations:**

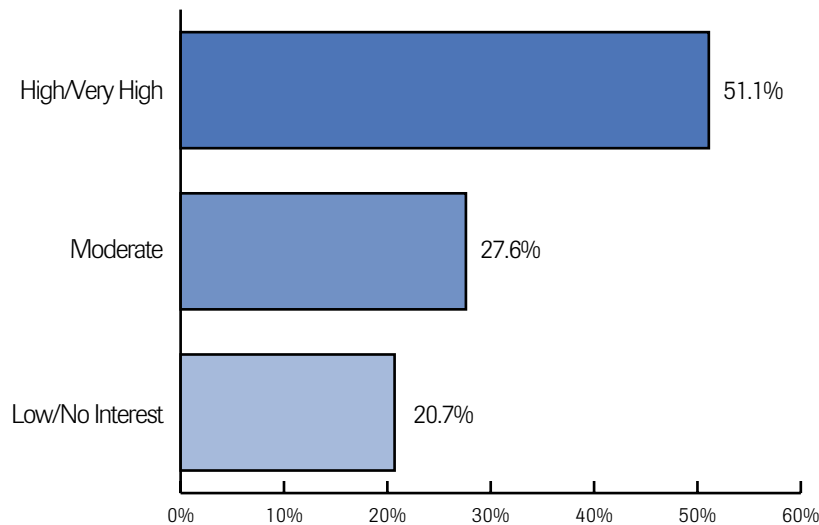
In general, as education and income increase, respondents are more likely to report daily Internet use, while as age increases respondents are less likely to report daily Internet use. Women, immigrants, Aboriginal respondents, visible minority respondents, and respondents living in rural fringe and rural areas are less likely to report daily use.

Saskatchewan and Manitoba have a higher number of non-users than Alberta and BC. Aboriginal respondents, visible minority respondents, and respondents living in rural areas are more likely to be non-users. As age increases, respondents are more likely to report never using the Internet, with less than 5% of 18-24 year olds and over 1 in 2 respondents aged 65 and over reporting never using the Internet. A similar pattern is seen with education: while less than 5% of respondents with a graduate/professional degree do not use the Internet, 1 in 4 respondents with a high school diploma and 1 in 2 respondents with less than a high school diploma never use the Internet. And, in general, as income increases respondents are less likely to report being non-users of the Internet.

numbers are rather low at less than 3 in 10 western Canadians. Only 6% of western Canadians get their information from discussions with other people, and even fewer get their information from magazines (4.8%).

It is interesting to note that only a quarter of respondents get their current event information from the Internet given that respondents report a high use of the Internet in general: over 6 in 10 western Canadians report using the Internet (including email) daily. Given the pervasiveness of the Internet in modern life, the non-user rate is still relatively high at almost 1 in 5 western Canadians (18.4%).

**Figure 11:  
Interest in Canadian Political Issues (Western Canada)**



**Demographic variations:**

There were no significant provincial differences on this question: from BC to Manitoba, westerners report a similar pattern in terms of their interest in politics. Men are more likely than women to rate their interest level as very high, and in general, as age increases respondents are more likely to rate their interest as very high. In addition, respondents with a bachelor's or graduate/professional degree and respondents with an annual household income of \$150,000 and over are more likely to rate their interest as very high, while Aboriginal respondents, and respondents living in urban fringe and small urban centres are less likely to select this rating.

Survey Question: How would you rate your personal interest in Canadian political issues on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being no interest at all and 5 being a very high level of interest?

## 6. Attitudes Toward Democracy

Western Canadians' interest in Canadian politics is quite strong (see Figure 11). Respondents were asked "How would you rate your personal interest in Canadian political issues on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being no interest at all and 5 being a very high level of interest?" Half (51.1%) of western Canadians rate their interest as a 4 or a 5, reflecting a high or very high level of interest in Canadian politics. Indeed, 2 in 10 western Canadians rate their interest as very high. At the other end of the spectrum, less than 1 in 10 western Canadians rated their level of interest as no interest at all.

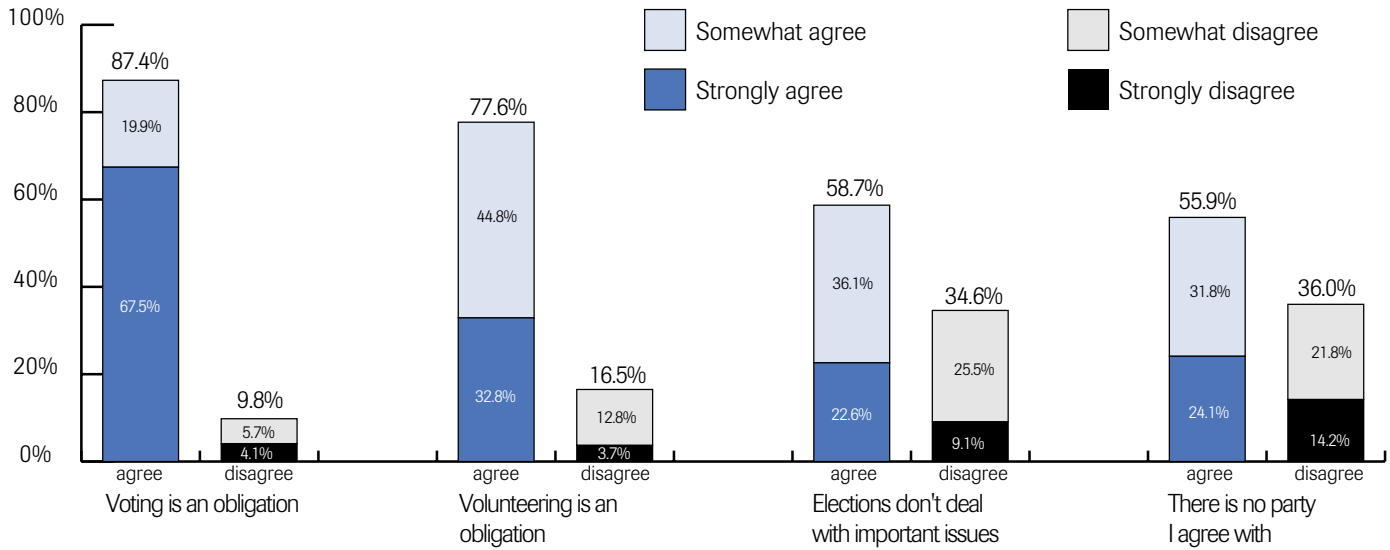
In addition to a relatively high level of interest in politics, western Canadians have a number of strong opinions and beliefs about democracy in Canada (see Figure 12). The Looking West 2006 Survey asked respondents to agree or disagree with a number of political statements, some of which were positive and some of which were negative. The attitudes expressed suggest that many western Canadians are somewhat disillusioned with politics in Canada.

Many respondents feel a sense of duty or obligation to participate in Canadian democratic life. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement "All Canadians who are eligible voters have an obligation to vote," almost 9 in 10 western Canadians agree, with almost 7 in 10 strongly agreeing.

Respondents aged 18-24 are much less likely to strongly agree that all Canadians who are eligible voters have an obligation to vote. In general terms, as age increases, respondents are more likely to strongly agree. In addition, immigrants and respondents with an annual household income of \$150,000 or over are more likely to strongly agree.

The idea of obligation appears to go beyond voting as many western Canadians also see volunteer community activities as an obligation. Looking West 2006 Survey respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement "Citizens have an obligation to volunteer in their community."

**Figure 12:  
Attitudes Toward Canadian Democracy (Western Canada)**



Survey Question: For the following statements, please indicate if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree.

**Demographic variations:**

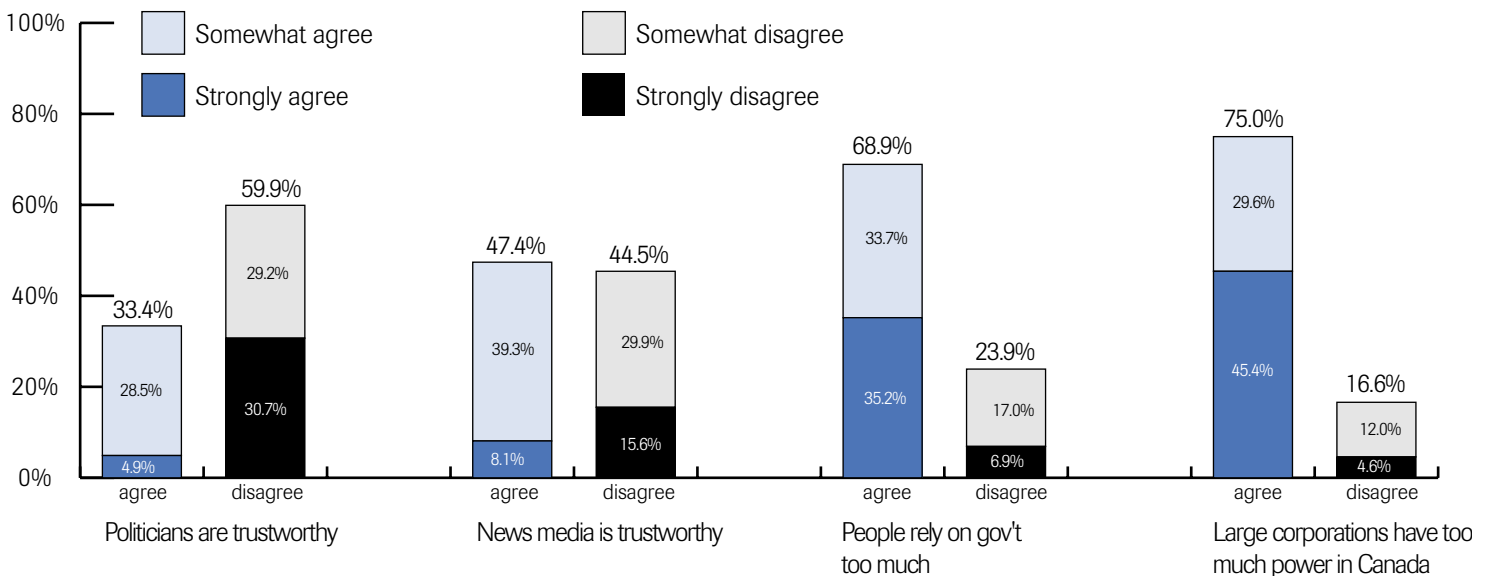
*Voting is an obligation* – There are no significant provincial differences on this question. There is an age variation of note, as respondents aged 18-24 are much less likely to strongly agree with the statement. In general terms, as age increases, respondents are more likely to strongly agree. In addition, immigrants, respondents living in urban fringe areas and respondents with an annual household income of \$150,000 or over are more likely to strongly agree, while respondents with a high school diploma are less likely to strongly agree.

*Volunteering is an obligation* – Saskatchewan respondents stand out on this question, with 4 in 10 strongly agreeing that volunteering is an obligation. In addition, women, respondents with less than a high school education, Aboriginal respondents, visible minority respondents, and respondents living in small urban and rural areas are more likely to strongly agree. As age increases, respondents are more likely to strongly agree. There is a correlation between the two obligation variables: respondents who feel it is an obligation to vote are more likely to feel it is an obligation to volunteer.

*Elections don't deal with important issues* – There are no significant provincial variations on this question. Men, Aboriginal respondents, visible minority respondents, and respondents with annual household incomes of less than \$20,000 are more likely to strongly agree, while respondents living in rural fringe areas are less likely to strongly agree.

*There is no party I agree with* – BC respondents are slightly more likely than prairie respondents to strongly agree with this statement. Respondents with annual household incomes of less than \$20,000, respondents living in urban fringe areas, Aboriginal respondents, visible minority respondents, and respondents with an incomplete university education or a completed college/technical school education are more likely to strongly agree. Respondents age 55 and over and immigrants are less likely to strongly agree.

**Figure 12 Continued:  
Attitudes Toward Canadian Democracy (Western Canada)**



Survey Question: For the following statements, please indicate if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree.

**Demographic variations:**

*Politicians are trustworthy* – There are no significant provincial variations on this question. Respondents age 35-44 and respondents living in urban fringe areas are more likely to strongly disagree that politicians are trustworthy, while immigrants are less likely to strongly disagree. Visible minority respondents are more likely to both strongly agree and strongly disagree.

*News media is trustworthy* – In general terms, as education and income increase, respondents are less likely to strongly agree that the media are trustworthy. Respondents living in urban core areas and immigrants are more likely to strongly or somewhat agree that the media are trustworthy, and respondents aged 35-64 are more likely to strongly disagree. Aboriginal respondents and visible minority respondents are more likely to both strongly agree and strongly disagree.

*People rely on government too much* – There are no significant provincial variations on this question. Men, respondents with annual household incomes of \$60,000-99,999 and \$150,000 and over, visible minority respondents, and respondents living in urban fringe and rural fringe areas are more likely to strongly agree. In general, as age increases, respondents are more likely to strongly agree; the exception here is the age 65 and over category, at which point the level of strong agreement drops. Respondents with a bachelor's or graduate/professional degree are less likely to strongly agree that people rely on governments too much.

*Large corporations have too much power in Canada* – BC and Alberta respondents are more likely than Saskatchewan and Manitoba respondents to strongly agree with this statement. As age increases, respondents are more likely to strongly agree that large corporations have too much power. In general, as income and education increase, respondents are less likely to strongly agree. Rural respondents, visible minority respondents, and Aboriginal respondents are more likely to strongly agree, while respondents living in urban fringe areas are less likely to strongly agree.



Although the level of agreement was 10 percentage points lower than for voting, it is striking to see that almost 8 in 10 Canadians agree that volunteering is an obligation. It should be noted that agreement with this statement is somewhat weaker than the agreement with the voting is an obligation statement: only 32.8% strongly agree that volunteering is an obligation compared to 67.5% for voting. The comparison of responses to these two statements reinforces the strong sense of obligation western Canadians feel toward voting.

Feeling an obligation to vote does not mean that people are necessarily engaged with the issues being debated during elections. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement “Elections rarely deal with the issues that I feel are important,” the majority of western Canadians (58.7%) agreed, and 2 in 10 strongly agreed.

Many western Canadians also do not feel highly connected to political parties. Over half of westerners (55.9%) agree with the statement “There is no political party that I really agree with,” and 24.1% strongly agree with the statement. BC respondents are slightly more likely than prairie respondents to strongly agree with this statement. In general, though, the level of disaffection is consistent across the West—even in Alberta, which is a Conservative Party stronghold at both the federal and provincial levels.

A number of western Canadians also displayed cynicism or unease about politicians. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement “In general, politicians are trustworthy,” almost 6 in 10 western Canadians disagreed.

While western Canadians are clearly distrustful of politicians, they are more ambivalent about the media. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement “In general, the news media are trustworthy.” The responses show a near-even split. It is interesting to note, however, that roughly twice as many western Canadians strongly disagree than strongly agree that the media are trustworthy. BC respondents are the most cynical about the media. BC is the only province in which the percentage of respondents disagreeing is greater than the percentage agreeing.

A correlation exists between the two trust variables: respondents who feel the news media are trustworthy are more likely to feel that politicians are trustworthy, and those who distrust the media also distrust politicians.

Do western Canadians feel the scope of government has grown too large? It appears so. When presented with the statement “People rely on governments too much,” almost 7 in 10 western Canadians agree, with 35.2% strongly agreeing.


Some respondents registered concern about power outside of government. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement “Large corporations have too much power in Canada.” Fully 3 in 4 western Canadians agree with this statement, with the plurality (45.4%) strongly agreeing.

Taken together, these democratic attitudes suggest that many western Canadians are less than enthralled with the practice of Canadian politics. Many feel that politicians are untrustworthy, political parties are out of touch with their interests, elections fail to address their key concerns, the scope of government has grown too large, and the power of large corporations is too great. Despite these sentiments, however, western Canadians report a relatively high level of interest in politics and a sense of duty toward both voting and volunteerism.

## 7. Conclusion

Are western Canadians apathetic? From their attitudes and reported behaviour, it would appear that they are not: many western Canadians report voting and engaging in other political activities, many report a moderate-to-high level of interest in politics, many report a sense of obligation toward voting and volunteering in their community, and many report following current events in the news.

Rather than seeming apathetic, western Canadians appear somewhat frustrated and alienated from political parties and the political process. Their level of trust in politicians is low. This is not surprising given that the survey data were collected shortly after an election in which concerns about government accountability and corruption played a significant role. Western Canadians do not feel that political parties or elections speak directly to the issues important to them, and it may be this disconnect that leads many to act in ways that appear apathetic.

The good news is that western Canadians do seem to care about Canadian democracy. The challenge, however, is for political parties, candidates and elected officials to find ways in which to more fully engage the average citizen. 

## About the Canada West Foundation

### **Our Vision**

A dynamic and prosperous West in a strong Canada.

### **Our Mission**

A leading source of strategic insight, conducting and communicating non-partisan economic and public policy research of importance to the four western provinces, the territories, and all Canadians.

Canada West Foundation is a registered Canadian charitable organization incorporated under federal charter (#11882 8698 RR 0001).

In 1970, the One Prairie Province Conference was held in Lethbridge, Alberta. Sponsored by the University of Lethbridge and the Lethbridge Herald, the conference received considerable attention from concerned citizens and community leaders. The consensus at the time was that research on the West (including BC and the Canadian North) should be expanded by a new organization. To fill this need, the Canada West Foundation was created under letters patent on December 31, 1970. Since that time, the Canada West Foundation has established itself as one of Canada's premier research institutes. Non-partisan, accessible research and active citizen engagement are hallmarks of the Foundation's past, present and future endeavours. These efforts are rooted in the belief that a strong West makes for a strong Canada.

More information can be found at [www.cwf.ca](http://www.cwf.ca).



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