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Who stands for Canada? Not many of us, it seems

By: [Melissa Ridgen](#)



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Newsflash No.1: Canadians want more say in political decision-making.

Newsflash No. 2: We won't get off our fannies to get involved in the process.

A poll released yesterday by SES Research, Crossing Boundaries National Council and the Public Policy Forum shows 61 per cent of Canadians want a more direct say in influencing public policy and shaping government decisions.

But all those As in Canada must stand for apathetic because the same poll shows most Canadians sit idle rather than get active politically when given the chance.

Just 21 per cent are members of a political party. Only 22 per cent have taken part in a demonstration. Thirty-two per cent have written a letter to an elected official. Thirty-eight per cent have attended a town hall meeting and 57 per cent have signed a petition.

There's little doubt that petition-signing drew the most participation of the five traditional forms of activism because petitions are easy. They show up at your door, complete with something to write on and write with. Petitions are the fast food of involvement — political activism for the lazy. You barely have to leave your comfy chair and favourite crime drama to scrawl your name on the dotted line and voila — you're "involved" in an issue.

It's so much easier than writing a letter, much less time consuming than those long, drawn-out town hall meetings and there's no need to worry about inclement weather, which can make those outdoor demonstrations, marches and rallies quite tedious.

One quarter of Canadians, the poll shows, have never engaged in any form of political activism. We're a bunch of armchair politicians, it seems — yappy poodles who complain about what's being done while doing nothing to change the status quo. Just like the official Opposition, we boisterously oppose everything the ruling party does or doesn't do but when given the chance, we too do squat.

SES Research pollster Nik Nanos found the disinterest in political activism "startling."

"The fact that one out of four Canadians is fully disengaged from traditional forms of participation means that there is definitely room for new innovative ideas," Nanos said.

He might be on to something. Maybe more people don't flock to town hall meetings, start letter writing campaigns and arm themselves with signs at demonstrations and rallies because they see these traditional political activities as ineffective. Maybe Canadians aren't apathetic or lazy but simply don't want to waste their time on efforts they feel won't bear fruit. Another possibility is that people fear that taking part in a

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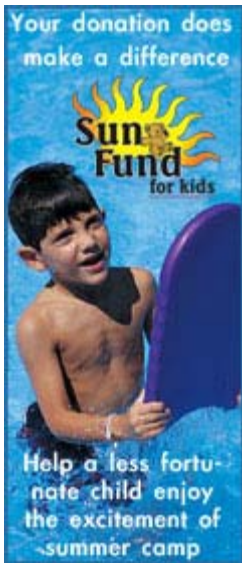
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public display would put their job, business or status in the community in jeopardy.

"Democratic renewal could be a huge political opportunity for our leaders and parties," Nanos said.

But do politicians want to think up new ways to get us involved in the process? If we become a stronger force in decision-making, doesn't it make them redundant to a large extent? If we're doing more, they'd be doing less. Is it even possible for our elected officials to do less? Would they still be worthy of their bulky salaries?

It will be interesting to see what politicians do with these poll results. Will they rise to the challenge put forward by Nanos to find innovative ways to get the electorate more involved in the democratic process, or do they want us to continue to be disconnected and idle?

Gee, I wonder.

Melissa Ridgen is the city editor of the Brandon Sun. Her column appears on Wednesdays. You can reach her at mridden@brandonsun.com