



**CANADA-EUROPE TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUE:
SEEKING TRANSNATIONAL SOLUTIONS TO 21ST CENTURY PROBLEMS**

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**Activating the Citizen:
Addressing dilemmas of participation in Europe and Canada**

Joan DeBardeleben and Jon H. Pammett, Carleton University*

A crisis of public confidence in the efficacy of political participation plagues democracies in the Western world. The ‘democratic deficit’ affects attendance at the ballot box, political party membership, and other forms of civic activism. Voter turnout has fallen consistently and significantly in national elections in many of the established democracies of Europe and North America and in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. Political parties have also suffered membership declines and a reduced capacity to recruit activists, as scepticism towards parties in general has grown in many countries and as party structures have had difficulties in adapting to new challenges.¹ While many citizens view parties as unresponsive and elections as ineffective in bringing politicians to account, these are still the most fundamental vehicles that citizens have to assert influence over their political leaders. While citizen activity is certainly not absent in other areas, it has not picked up the slack left by a withdrawal of the public from the arena of electoral and party politics.

A new book edited by the authors of this note, *Activating the Citizen: Dilemmas of Participation in Europe and Canada*,² outlines and explains these declines in political participation, but more importantly examines innovative mechanisms to address them. This book examines differences in how the participation decline plays out in particular political jurisdictions, specifically in European countries, Canada, and the European Union (EU), comparing aggregate level outcomes and seeking to explain them. Authors, where appropriate, use survey data to try to see what influences individual citizens to act or not act and to determine whether these factors are fairly universal or whether they vary by country, interacting in suggestive ways with institutional features.

*The views expressed are attributable only to the authors in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which they are associated. Joan DeBardeleben is Chancellor's Professor and Director, Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies; and Jon H. Pammett is Professor of Political Science. Both are at Carleton University. We are grateful to Palgrave Macmillan for permitting us to reprint material from the Introduction to the book *Activating the Citizen: Dilemmas of Participation in Europe and Canada* (2009) in this policy brief. For details of the book see <http://www.palgrave.com/Products/title.aspx?pid=334775>
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Why compare Canada with a range of European cases? The explanation has to do with the features that make the Canadian system similar to European ones. First, Canadian political institutions, at both the provincial and national levels, are marked by their European origins and share with most European states the parliamentary system of governance, including attendant features of the political party system. These institutional similarities are important in relation to public participation because they affect the vehicles through which citizens can hold governments and politicians accountable and affect outcomes. Second, like many European democracies, Canada has a multiparty system, and its models of party membership are close to the European pattern. Because of similarities in both of these arenas of institutional structures, innovations in Canada to attempt to address the participation and democratic deficits may be of particular applicability to Europe and vice versa. These include citizens' assemblies, national referendums, and reform to party leadership selection procedures. An additional feature of Canadian political life makes a comparison with the European context particularly fruitful; as a federal system with distinct elections, parties, parliaments, and jurisdictions at the national and provincial levels, Canada shares a multi-level character with the EU.

Multi-level systems can make voters' choices more complex, lead to a fragmentation of political party structures, and inevitably generate complex interaction effects between the different levels in the system. This can complicate the way citizens make their decisions and whether they think that elections can hold politicians accountable, in the European Parliament and in European national legislatures or in the Canadian federal system.

Much of the participation decline in Canada and Europe has occurred among the young, who often declare they will participate later in life. In fact, however, research suggests that such youthful good intentions are to some extent a delusion. The longer people live, the higher the information costs of catching up and the greater the number of competing activities that continue to defer the process of becoming informed enough to vote. The more voting opportunities missed, the easier it is to continue to abstain. As this example illustrates, examining individual motivations and behaviour patterns is crucial to understanding reasons for the participation decline. Survey data are particularly useful here; comparative survey projects—such as the International Social Survey Programme,³ carried out in 42 countries including most EU member states and Canada—offer a wealth of information that authors in this volume have used along with materials from other survey research projects.

Activating the Citizen is not only concerned with explaining why participation is declining, but also in assessing measures to address these troubling trends. These measures can be of various types, involving, for example, institutional change (e.g., changing voter registration systems or electoral systems), voter education (e.g., advertising or school courses), or increasing political mobilization. However, institutional change has its limitations in changing behaviour; either it comes with undesired side effects or it does not produce the desired outcome. It is equally difficult to change the fundamental attitudes that people have about political participation. Attitudes that inhibit participation may be rooted in past experience, either individual or collective, or may reflect habits that are deeply embedded.

Research from this volume suggests that political mobilization, group activities that organize and lead people to participate, is particularly important in motivating electoral participation, and can provide the direct contact with voters that produces behavioural outcomes.⁴ Mobilization can also take the form of public education or advertising campaigns by electoral agencies or political parties to reach out to target groups of voters.⁵ Mobilization is easier if elections and political debates address issues that engage the public and seem relevant to their everyday concerns. One problem with elections to the European Parliament is that they often don't do that, unlike many national contests. The variables that affect elections cannot easily be engineered or controlled by

electoral commissions or other organizations that may have an interest in increasing participation. However, within these constraints, ‘packaging’ participation opportunities can make a difference, and this has been a strategy consciously used in several initiatives directed particularly at youth, such as student vote programmes in the schools.

In addition, reaching out to publics through the Internet or alternate media may be a way to mobilize interest and spur less conventional forms of participation. Other possibilities, explored further in the book, have involved more dramatic changes to political institutions. For example, there is a world-wide increase in the number of contentious political questions being put to referendums,⁶ thereby by-passing the normal legislative process, or at least augmenting it. Some referendums do indeed achieve higher levels of participation when compared to elections, but it is not clear that this is consistently true, or that there is a qualitative difference between the two kinds of voting such that referendum voting is an empowering experience for the electorate. Another example involves Internet participation. The Internet has become well-known as a mobilization tool for some political candidates, but the current challenge is to sustain this involvement into other forms of political participation.

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¹ Paul Webb, David Farrell, and Ian Holliday eds., *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Also in Richard Gunther, Jose Ramon Montero, and Juan Linz eds., *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

² Jon Prammett and Joan DeBardeleben. *Activating the Citizen: Addressing Dilemmas of Participation in Canada and Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³ International Social Survey Programme. “General Information.” *International Social Survey Programme*. <http://www.issp.org/> (accessed 3 November 2009).

⁴ Donald Green and Alan Gerber. *Get Out the Vote!* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2004).

⁵ IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) *Engaging the Electorate: Initiatives to Encourage Voter Turnout from Around the World* (Stockholm: IDEA, 2006).

⁶ Lawrence LeDuc. *The Politics of Direct Democracy: Referendums in Global Perspective* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2003, 13).