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Elisabeth Gidengil, AndrÖ© Blais, Neil Nevitte, Richard Nadeau. *Citizens.* Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004. x + 214 pp. $25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7748-0920-7; $82.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7748-0919-1.

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Auditing Democratic Citizenship in Canada

The Canadian Democratic Audit is a major research project undertaken at the Centre for Canadian Studies at Mount Allison University. Its aim is "to consider how well Canadian democracy is performing at the outset of the twenty-first century" (p. vii). At present, in addition to this volume on *Citizens*, the Audit project has published books entitled *Elections*, *Political Parties*, *Federalism*, *Advocacy Groups*, and *Legislatures*.

The idea of a "democratic audit" originated with Trevor Smith and the Democracy Committee of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. The audit framework was initially developed for the United Kingdom and was subsequently employed in Sweden. It is now applied internationally (see, generally, `http://www.democraticaudit.com`). But does it make sense to employ accounting terms and concepts, such as audits, to understand and evaluate political questions? The authors of *Citizens* acknowledge that there may be problems with such an approach (pp. 16-17, p. 170). For this reason they attempt to avoid theoretical problems, such as the definition of democracy, by adopting benchmarks of responsiveness, inclusiveness, and participation to ask two key questions: how engaged are Canadians in the country's democratic life, and who is most (or least) engaged? (p. 3). Thus *Citizens* is predominantly concerned with, and focuses on, one aspect of citizenship: political engagement. Each chapter of the book takes up an important question regarding citizen engagement, analyzing data from various sources, including the Canadian Election Study and the World Values Surveys, to reach conclusions which are usefully summarized at the end.

Chapter 2 explores the question, "How much attention do Canadians pay to politics?", resulting in some intriguing observations. It seems that Canadians' interest in politics is middling, though by international standards Canada ranked fourth among seventeen Western democracies, behind West Germany, Belgium and tied with the United States (pp. 19-20). Older, wealthier, and better educated Canadians are more interested in politics (pp. 20-22). There is an inexplicable gender gap–women tended to be less interested in politics, a fact that is not influenced by educational or income differentials (pp. 23, 52, 174). Residents in Quebec and Saskatchewan are typically less interested in politics in general than

other Canadians (p. 24). It is not clear whether the relative lack of interest in politics by young Canadians was due to generational issues (the so called Gen X factor) or life cycle (people become more politically aware once they get a job, family, etc.). What is clear is that television is the most important source of political information (pp. 26-27).

Chapter 3 asks, "What do Canadians know about politics?" During the 2000 federal election, nine out of ten could name Jean ChrÃ©tien as leader of the Liberal Party, though fewer than three in five were able to name Alexa McDonough as leader of the NDP, and one in five could not name the premier of their province (pp. 43-45). Unsurprisingly, the single most important factor that distinguished those who had political knowledge from others was education (p. 49). Most Canadians had difficulty identifying political parties with their issue positions: close to one-third of those interviewed in the 2000 election were unable to connect a single position with the right party (p. 58). How much do people learn from election campaigns? The results indicate that election campaigns do teach people about specific campaign issues, but it is those who are already generally well-informed who take the opportunity to become even better informed–the poorly informed acquired little new information, thus challenging the notion that referenda could provide a form of civics education (pp. 63-64). It seems that Canadians generally do not understand politics in terms of "left" or "right", and are unable to locate political parties along the left-right spectrum (pp. 68-69).

"Can Canadians get by with less information?" is the theme of chapter 4. Its first part tests the efficacy of two political science theories. The "low information rationality"–or "shortcuts"–thesis proposes that we can make informed choices without necessarily having a large body of political information. For example, we rely on friends to advise us about politics. The chapter argues that shortcuts only work when one already has some contextual knowledge about politics, so that those who have tuned out cannot rely on shortcuts (pp. 73-80). The "aggregationist" thesis suggests that because people will have random opinions, upon aggregation the randomness will cause randomly decided votes to cancel each other, resulting in the prevailing of the non-random opinions of the well-informed. The authors reject this argument on the basis that there are systemic biases in the distribution of knowledge, and that some categories of citizens know more than others (p. 81). The second part of the chapter argues that Canadians are misinformed about policy-relevant facts; most Canadians incorrectly think crime is on the rise, pollution is increasing, the gap between rich and poor is diminishing and that Aboriginals are better off or the same as other Canadians (pp. 91-92).

Given the theme of the book, chapter 5–"How much do Canadians participate in politics?"–would seem to be the central chapter of the book. Who participates? Turnout in Canadian federal elections has fallen dramatically since 1988, a trend that also exists in other countries. But this does not seem to be linked with political disaffection (p. 107). Moreover, voter turnout at sub-national elections is higher than at the national elections. The single most important determinant of voting is age. Lower turnout among young people is due to life-cycle effects as well as the fact that younger, less educated Canadians are tuning out of politics (p. 111). How do people participate? Canadians top the international list on signing petitions and joining boycotts, but ranked low in illegal strikes. Interestingly, Canadians think joining an interest group is a better way of achieving change than joining a political party (p. 134).

"How civic-minded are Canadians?" is the focus of chapter 6. Compared to Western democracies, Canada has a high level of active involvement in voluntary associations, with more than three out of every four Canadians active in one or more associations over the last five years (p. 147). Community groups headed the list, followed by religious, sports, and professional associations. Younger Canadians are less active in associations. Though the number of volunteers has not changed since 1987, the number of hours has declined. Canadians are generous and, not surprisingly, those actively involved in associations were more likely to volunteer and make charitable donations.

The concluding chapter, "Engaging Canadians," completes the audit of citizenship by summarizing important themes, such as the problem of identifying democratic divides (p. 172), and enhancing democratic citizenship (p. 179). It proposes three modest yet sensible solutions for enhancing citizenship. It suggests young Canadians need to be politically re-engaged, principally through concerted get-out-the-vote efforts by political parties and reform of the permanent voters list (pp. 180-183). It argues that part of the duty of creating a more informed citizenry lies with the media, who should provide more comprehensive and even-handed political coverage (pp. 184-185). Finally, it states that democratic divides in information can be narrowed by "lifting the bottom." The most effective way of doing this is to "increase the num-

ber of Canadians who complete high school and go on to postsecondary education"(p. 190).

This general overview of *Citizens* indicates the wealth of information to be found in the book. A more detailed engagement with the core premise of the book–that "effective democracies require active and engaged citizens" (p. 18)–would have been particularly welcome. To what extent are the civic virtues expected of small republics (and therefore the notion of citizenship that it yields as an auditable benchmark) relevant or attainable in large modern democracies? Consider in this light the stark contrast between the so-called "democratic deficit" and the remarkable success of Canadian democracy–"the envy of much of the rest of the world" (p. vii). It is arguable that a democratic audit that starts from democratic deficit or democratic malaise undertakes more than an accounting of Canadian citizenship and democracy: it seeks to transform it. Putting to one side these theoretical concerns, *Citizens* ably fulfils its ambitions as a useful reference work and provocative and stimulating teaching aid for thinking about Canadian citizenship.

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