

Improving Civic Democracy: The Poll



TORONTO
BOARD OF TRADE

VOTETORONTO2010.COM



Poll designed and analyzed by University of Toronto professor Peter Loewen;
conducted by Innovative Research Group

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BACKGROUND

In November 2009, the Toronto Board of Trade (the Board) launched its VoteToronto2010.com campaign with the release of the discussion paper *VoteToronto2010: Framework for a Better City*. The purpose of the Board's VoteToronto2010.com campaign is to frame the debate and develop solutions to the major issues in the upcoming 2010 municipal election.

The VoteToronto2010.com campaign is the latest component of the Board's focus on the global competitiveness and economic development of the entire Toronto region, building on previous work by the Board, such as *From World Class to World Leader: An Action Plan for the Toronto Region* (October 2009) and *Toronto as a Global City: Scorecard on Prosperity* (inaugural report in April 2009 and second edition in March 2010).

Four key themes were outlined in *VoteToronto2010: Framework for a Better City*:

1. Fixing the City's Finances
2. Growing the City and Regional Economy
3. Promoting Social Cohesion and Economic Inclusion
4. Improving Civic Democracy

For the fourth theme, *Improving Civic Democracy*, the Toronto Board of Trade commissioned a poll which was designed and analyzed by University of Toronto professor Peter Loewen and conducted by Innovative Research Group. The results outline the current state of participation in civic democracy in Toronto. It finds that while participation in civic elections may be lower than in either provincial or federal elections, it compares favourably with other cities. It then asks how civic democracy could be improved and how citizens could become more engaged and participatory. To do this, the findings present results from a survey of Toronto citizens — both voters and non-voters. It first gauges whether citizens feel that their vote makes a difference and whether they have confidence in City Hall. In the course of this, it outlines important differences between citizens in terms of their basic beliefs about democracy. It next asks how citizens view the economic impact of the municipal government and the operation of City Council. It then ties these factors together by showing that a focus on the economy and on improving the amount of information can increase voter participation.

In sum, this report argues that there exists the potential for a virtuous cycle in Toronto politics. If mayoral and council candidates take seriously the challenge of presenting good economic policy with clarity and conviction, then citizens will be more likely to vote. In turn, citizens will be more likely to elect candidates who focus on growing Toronto's economy.

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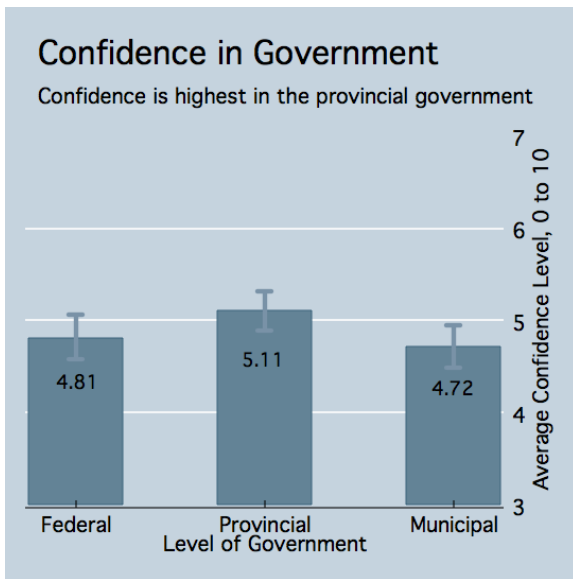
1. The State of Participation in Toronto

We begin by asking how civic participation in Toronto compares to civic participation in other comparable Canadian cities. The most central measure of this is participation in municipal elections. By this metric, Toronto fares well. Toronto registered a voter turnout of 39.3 per cent in 2006 and 38 per cent in 2003. While turnout in Vancouver reached 50 per cent in 2000, it was just 31 and 32 per cent in 2008 and 2005, respectively. Montreal similarly recorded a high voter turnout in 2001 (51 per cent), but has since declined to 39 per cent in 2009 and 35 per cent in 2005. In a comparative sense, then, citizens of Toronto are as engaged as citizens in other large Canadian cities.

This is only half the story, however. Toronto residents participate less in municipal elections than in either provincial or federal elections. Politicians and local organizations alike should aim to correct this. The City of Toronto is a government larger than that of most provinces. Its actions have a direct impact on the lives of millions of citizens. Citizens should take participation in city elections as seriously as at other levels of government. Accordingly, in this report we ask how citizens view participation in municipal elections, how they view the importance of city hall, and how they view its operation. We then tie together all of these evaluations and show how they are related to the decision to participate in Toronto civic elections. In drawing out recommendations for how participation might be increased, we believe we are also highlighting ideas that can strengthen the City of Toronto.

2. Citizens' Views on Participation

We begin by asking how much confidence citizens have in City Hall. Does their confidence outstrip that of the provincial and/or federal governments, or does it systematically lag behind? It appears that citizens have the lowest amount of confidence in the municipal government of Toronto. Although it is not significantly lower than their confidence in the federal government, it is clearly lower than their confidence in the provincial government. As we show later, citizens concede that City Hall matters; they simply lack confidence in its actions.

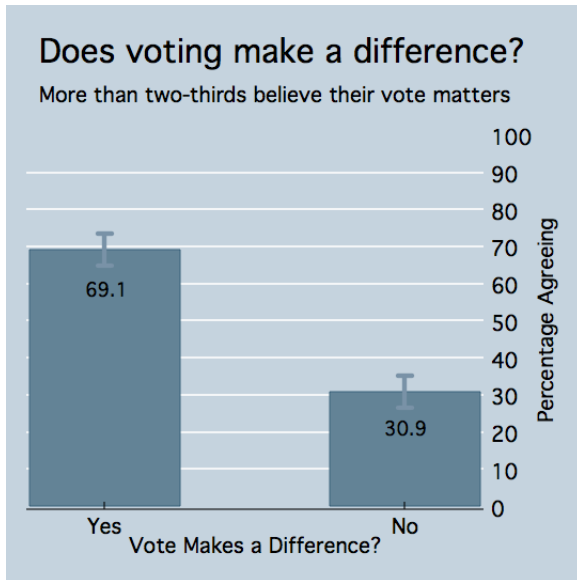
Figure 1: Confidence in Government

All citizens do not share low confidence equally. Those with the lowest confidence are those in the middle band of income, earning between \$40,000 and \$80,000 per year. Those who earn less than this amount and those who earn more display significantly higher confidence in City Hall. Likewise, differences exist according to age. Confidence in the municipal government declines with age.

Encouragingly, we fail to find differences in confidence according to language spoken at home, which we take as a proxy of ethnicity or place of birth. Those citizens whose primary language is not English display confidence no lower or higher than those for whom English is their primary language. Finally, we fail to find any differences in confidence in City Hall according to education. Despite these positive findings, it remains that confidence in City Hall is lower than in other governments.

Most citizens feel that their vote makes a difference

In addition to asking citizens about their confidence in City Hall, we also asked them the following: “Some people say that their vote and their voice makes a difference at Toronto City Hall. Others say that it doesn't. Do you think your vote makes a difference in Toronto?” Figure 2 shows that one-in-three respondents feel that their vote does not make a difference.

Figure 2: Does voting make a difference?

While it is encouraging that two-in-three Torontonians believe that their vote does make a difference, it is important to ask whether feelings of cynicism are concentrated among certain groups of citizens. As with confidence, we examined whether these feelings varied systematically by gender, age, income, language spoken at home, and education. Perhaps surprisingly, we found no significant differences on any of these measures. In other words, the feeling that one's vote does not make a difference is shared more or less equally among a third of all Torontonians. While some may find it heartening that the share is so low, we later show that this feeling is tied tightly to the decision to participate in municipal politics. Accordingly, any effort to increase participation must acknowledge that a strong minority of citizens of all types feels as though their vote does not make a difference. One-third is one third too many. By addressing this perception, civic participation can be increased.

Even engaged citizens feel out of the loop

Even among the two-thirds of citizens who say that their vote does make a difference, an interesting pattern emerges. Nearly six-in-ten (58 per cent) indicate that "I don't know much about what goes on at City Hall", while just four-in-ten (42 per cent) indicate that "I feel like I know what is happening at City Hall." Despite these citizens feeling that their vote makes a difference, a clear majority still fails to feel informed about the operations of City Hall.

This lack of information about the functioning of City Hall is not a product of a lack of interest. Among these same citizens, more than two-thirds (70 per cent) indicate that they are interested in what is happening at City Hall. Accordingly, there exists a large reservoir of voters who feel that their vote matters and are interested in City Hall, but feel insufficiently informed or knowledgeable about the functioning of City Hall.

From the perspective of accountability and transparency, what this suggests is that any disconnect between the actions of City Hall and the knowledge of citizens is not a function of citizen apathy, but rather a function of the operation of City Hall. It is possible that a lack of citizen knowledge is due to the complexity of operations, but it is also possible that it is attributable to a council that does not take

sufficient effort to ensure transparency and comprehensibility in its decision making. Most certainly, a lack of knowledge is not attributable to a lack of interest.

3. Citizens' Views on the Impact of the Municipal Government

Toronto is the economic engine of Canada. Its GDP is approximately 11 per cent of the Canadian economy. In terms of tax revenue and debt, the City's government dwarfs most Canadian provinces. Put simply, the prosperity of Toronto is central to Canada's prosperity. But do citizens recognize the centrality of the economy when considering Toronto politics?

Citizens largely recognize the importance of the City of Toronto in their daily lives and on the economy. Citizens believe, very clearly, that the municipal government has a large impact on their lives and on the economy. A plurality of respondents (43 per cent) believes that City Hall has a bigger effect on their day-to-day life than either the federal government (25 per cent) or the provincial government (32 per cent). This view is broadly shared across different demographic groups. There are no significant differences in agreement between women and men. Likewise, those who speak English at home are equally likely to hold this view as those who speak another language. These views are also widely shared, regardless of age and education. Indeed, the only demographic variable that drives differences in this belief is income: as income increases, individuals become more likely to believe that City Hall has the largest impact on their day-to-day lives.

We also asked citizens to gauge the effect of City Hall on the economy. Using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 meant no impact at all and 10 meant the largest possible impact, we find that citizens show broad agreement that City Hall matters for the economy. Just two per cent of respondents believe that city hall has no effect at all, while 12 per cent believe it has the largest effect. On a scale from 0 to 10, the average respondent answers 7, and more than 80 per cent of respondents give an answer of 5 or higher. This belief does not vary according to language, income, and education. However, we find that it is lower among older citizens and higher among women.

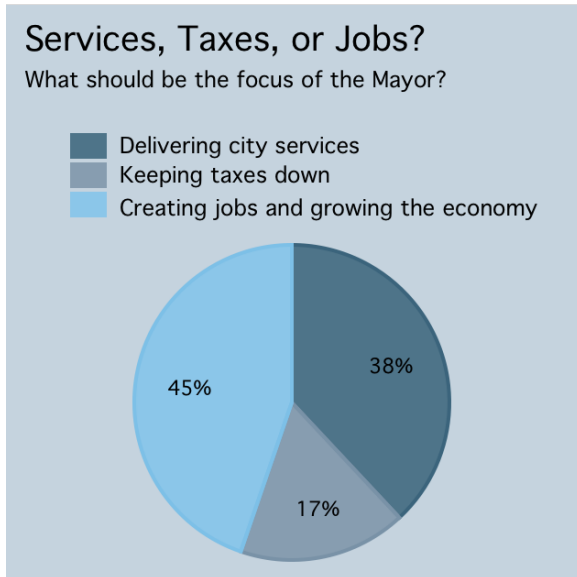
These assessments underlie how important the economy is for the coming election. First, they draw focus to the fact that most voters believe the municipal government matters for the economy. Moreover, they are related to the decision of citizens to participate in the municipal election. The belief that the municipal government exerts a large impact on the economy is positively related to the decision to vote. The larger the impact a citizen thinks the government has on the economy, the more likely they are to participate in the upcoming election.

Second, we asked citizens what should be the focus of the Mayor. Respondents were given three options. Delivering city services, keeping taxes down, or growing Toronto's economy and creating jobs in Toronto. Most voters (45 per cent) think that the focus of the mayor should be on growing Toronto's economy and creating jobs. Less than one-in-five (17 per cent) think the principal focus of the mayor should be keeping taxes down. Nearly 40 per cent think it should be on the delivery of city services.

This finding has important implications for the current mayoral race. While candidates may bundle together issues of economic competitiveness, growth, and taxation, what is clear from this question is

that given a choice between a simple “hold-the-line on taxes” approach, and another that emphasizes growing the economy, voters chose the second more than twice as often.

Figure 3: What should be the focus of the Mayor?



4. Citizens' Views on the Operation of Council

There is more than one way to run a city council. An examination of councils in other cities suggests other models and operational principles. For example, Toronto City Council is non-partisan in operation, while cities like Vancouver and Montreal feature municipal political parties. Toronto relies on a ward-based system, where councillors are elected from geographically defined areas; other cities allow for the election of some or all of their councillors at large. Toronto has no term limits, despite these being in effect in other cities in North America. Combined with the advantages of incumbency in a non-partisan system, this allows councillors to retain their seats often for as long as they wish. Finally, Toronto could rebalance the power between councillors and the mayor towards a ‘Strong Mayor’ framework, wherein the mayor has substantially greater powers to set the agenda of city hall and make appointments.

One of the goals of our survey was to gauge support among Torontonians for such reforms, and to grasp whether such reforms might increase civic participation. Beginning with the focus of councillors, we asked respondents if councillors should focus on issues facing the whole city (as motivated by an at large electoral system) or on issues within their own wards and neighbourhoods (as motivated by the current system). We found that respondents supported a city-wide focus by two-to-one.

We next asked respondents a question about political parties and the information environment or supply in municipal elections. We asked respondents whether they have enough information about candidates and their positions to make an informed decision, and prefaced the question by noting that there are no official parties in City Hall, and that some people feel that party labels would help voters make decisions. Voters were evenly split on whether they possessed enough information to vote for

council candidates. The introduction of party labels, then, could aid a large share of voters by giving them greater information about the positions and records of council candidates.

Following this, we queried respondents on whether Toronto needs “experienced councillors who serve for many terms” or whether Toronto needs “to elect new councillors more often.” We preceded this question by noting that Toronto has no term limits on how long a councillor can serve. The share of voters agreeing that we need new councillors more frequently outstrips those favouring experienced councillors nearly two-to-one (64 per cent to 36 per cent).

We also queried respondents on who should have the final say in “making decisions at City Hall.” If this distinction is thought to capture the key element of calls for a “strong mayor”, then it appears that this reform lacks widespread support. Sixty-four per cent of voters think that council should have the final say. Just 36 per cent think that the final say should reside with the Mayor.

5. Reforming City Hall and Increasing Participation

Thus far, we have found that many citizens do not feel that their vote makes a difference. We have also found that confidence in City Hall often lags confidence in other levels of government. Likewise, we have found that some citizens do not feel that City Hall has a large impact on the economy. Finally, we have found preferences among some citizens for municipal political parties, for term limits, for a strong mayor, and for an at-large rather than ward system. We now ask how these differences are related to the likelihood of citizens voting in the upcoming municipal election.

Among our respondents, nearly ninety per cent indicated that they were definitely, very likely or likely to vote. Such overestimations of intentions are common to nearly every survey. Despite this high number, we can still examine how difference in the expressed likelihood of voting are related to different beliefs and opinions, and use these to help us understand how reforms in isolation and in combination could increase voter turnout. To do this, we first consider the relationship between the likelihood of voting and our previous measures of citizens’ views and attitudes one-by-one. We then consider all of these factors together. This allows us to measure which reforms would exercise an effect on participation given the effect of other reforms. (This is done using a multiple regression, the logic of which is explained in the appendix).

Beginning with whether citizens feel that their vote makes a difference, we find those that believe that their vote makes a difference are more than twice as likely to vote. However, we fail to find a relationship between the confidence one has in City Hall and the probability that a citizen votes.

How are views on the economic impact of City Hall related to voting? Believing that City Hall has a greater impact on one’s life than other levels of government does not increase a citizen’s probability of voting. However, as citizens increase their sense of the economic impact of City Hall, their probability of voting increases. This suggests that citizens do not need to believe that City Hall is *the* most important level of government to be persuaded to vote. Rather, they need only acknowledge its large economic impact, regardless of the impact of other levels of government.

We next consider how citizens’ views about the operation of council are related to their likelihood of voting. First, we find no individual relationship between a citizen’s views about whether councillors should focus on local or city-wide issues and their probability of voting. Second, we do find a strong

relationship between whether citizens feel they have enough information to evaluate candidates and their likelihood of voting. In the absence of political party labels, many citizens appear to lack the information to make an informed decision for whom to vote. As a result, they disengage. Third, we find no relationship between citizens' views on the tenure of councillors and their probability of voting. Finally, we find no relationship between citizens' views on who should have the final say in council and their likelihood of voting.

Thus far, we have considered these views in isolation. What happens when we assess their impact simultaneously while also controlling for important demographic differences? We present our full multiple regression results in the appendix and summarize the results here.

When we consider all of these factors together, we find that only five factors are systematically related to whether citizens are likely to vote in the fall. First, we find that older citizens and more educated citizens are more likely to vote. This finding is very similar to most accounts of voter turnout and lends credibility to our study. We also find that women are slightly more likely to indicate an intention to vote. Second, we find that the larger the impact citizens believe the City of Toronto has on the economy the more likely they are to vote. We also find that they are more likely to vote when they have more information on candidates and their positions. Conversely, voters who feel that they are less informed — most likely because of the absence of party labels — are less likely to vote in the upcoming election.

Taken together, these results generate two very clear recommendations:

1. To increase participation and civic engagement, municipal politicians should double their efforts to focus on the economy. In doing so, they should focus on clear, comprehensible plans for growing the economy. When asked about the priorities of a mayor, the majority of citizens would prefer a mayor to focus on economic issues such as keeping taxes down and growing the economy, rather than just delivering city services more effectively. Moreover, the belief that the municipal government has a large impact on the economy is one of the principal drivers in the decision to participate in the upcoming municipal election. As candidates focus on economic policy and explain it in clear terms to citizens, they can expect citizens to participate in greater numbers. Moreover, they can expect them to participate *because* of their interest in the economy. In a virtuous cycle, citizens can be convinced to participate because of the economy, and in doing so they can choose candidates who, with the most clarity and innovation, present their economic plans.
2. To increase participation and civic engagement, municipal politicians must recognize that even engaged citizens feel that they lack the information necessary to participate meaningfully in the upcoming election. While the adoption party labels and slates would quickly increase information and transparency, it would potentially invite many unintended consequences, particularly for the functioning of council. In the place of such a fundamental reform, mayoral and council candidates should make clear how they would increase transparency and accountability on council. This should begin with the budgeting process. Citizens should be presented with the budget in a comprehensible fashion, such that inputs and outputs are easily understood, and that citizens' recommendations can be incorporated. This would take the place of a budgeting process in which the estimation of revenues and expenditures are done separately, and in a manner that makes citizen participation prohibitive. When the budgeting process is transparent, citizens can potentially better evaluate the decisions of councillors. It will make it easier for voters to make their decisions, and to hold councillors to account for the

decisions that they make. This is a second virtuous cycle: by giving voters more information, they can participate with more ease. And, in doing so, they can better evaluate the candidates on offer.

We note finally that despite the fact that we do not present *direct* relationships between a strong mayor, term limits and/or a ward system and participation, this does not mean that such reforms could not increase participation *indirectly*. Any measures that increase accountability, transparency, and strengthen the link between electors and voters, especially by making electoral office harder to retain, should act as an incentive to better government. This, in turn, should increase the sense of citizens that their votes matter. Good government can increase participation, and increased civic engagement can create better government.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted by phone among 506 randomly sampled Toronto residents by Select Field Services Inc. between July 22 and July 30th. Those who were ineligible to vote were excluded. The sample is weighted according to age and gender. All analyses were conducted using STATA 10 with survey design weighted standard errors. Data in the main survey are weighted by age and gender. Unweighted, raw frequencies are presented in the appendix. The survey was written and analyzed by Peter John Loewen from the University of Toronto.

Dr. Loewen is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto. He holds a PhD from the Université de Montréal. His research focuses on public opinion and voting behaviour. He also regularly consults for a national polling firm.



MULTIPLE REGRESSION RESULTS

Table 1: Predictors of the likelihood of voting

| Variable | Coefficient | S.E. | p> z |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------|------|------|
| Support for at large elections | -0.09 | 0.20 | .66 |
| Political information | -0.30 | 0.07 | .00 |
| Support for term limits | 0.09 | 0.20 | .65 |
| Support for a strong mayor | 0.08 | 0.20 | .68 |
| Perceived importance of City Hall on economy | 0.13 | 0.05 | .00 |
| Confidence in City Hall | .05 | .04 | .22 |
| Non-English speaker | -0.22 | 0.20 | .26 |
| Income | 0.04 | 0.05 | .42 |
| Education | 0.22 | 0.06 | .00 |
| Gender | 0.49 | 0.19 | .01 |
| Age | 0.55 | 0.14 | .00 |

Results are from an ordered logit multiple regression with 498 respondents. Dependent variable is the likelihood of voting in the upcoming municipal election. Missing values were imputed using multiple imputation. The log-likelihood is -491.90. The model has a significantly better fit than an empty model (p=.00).

Multiple regression is a statistical technique which examines the relationship between a dependent variable (for example, height) and a number of independent variables (for example, parents' height, diet, exercise, and gender). Rather than comparing the relationship between height and all of its possible causes separately, multiple regression considers all these causes at the same time and determines the independent effect of each.

The estimated effect of each factor is represented by a regression coefficient. Coefficients tell us how strongly an independent variable is related to the dependent variable. Coefficients are accompanied by a p-value that tells us how sure we can be that the relationship between the two variables is not due to chance. Therefore, the larger the regression coefficient, the more important its effect. And the smaller the p-value, the surer we can be that the relationship is real and not due to chance. We say that a relationship that is not due to chance is statistically significant.

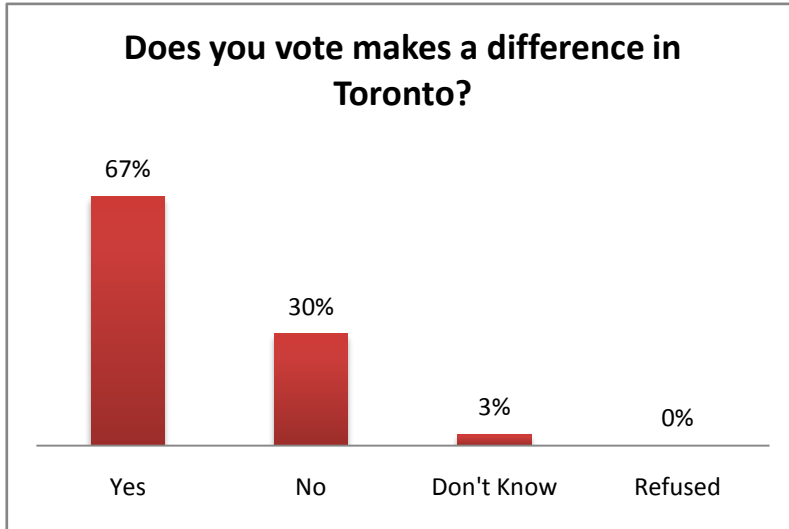
Returning to the example of the determinants of height, imagine if we found that the only two statistically significant predictors of height were parents' height and gender. This would tell us that diet and exercise do not matter after we control for parents' height and gender. And it would also tell us that parents' height and gender matter individually, such that a brother and sister could expect to have different heights (because despite sharing the same parents, they are of different gender). Likewise, two women with different parents could expect to have different heights, provided their parents were not the same height.

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

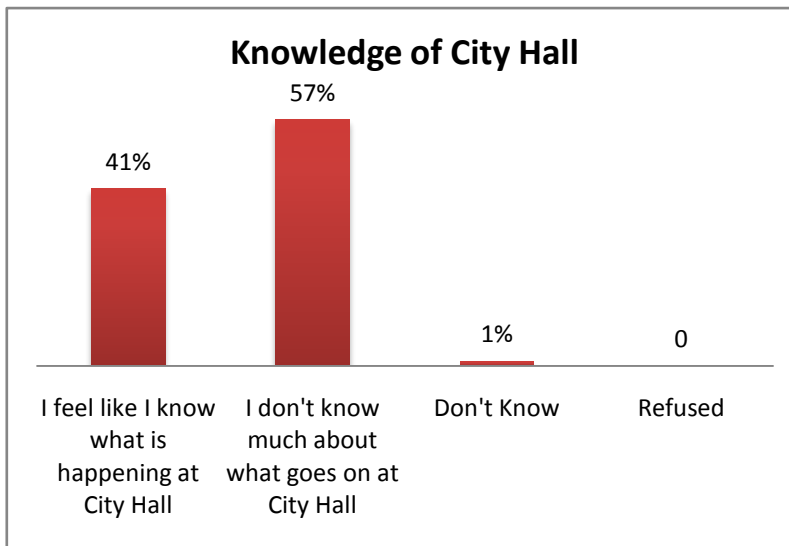
(Unweighted frequencies are reported)

A. Feelings of Engagement

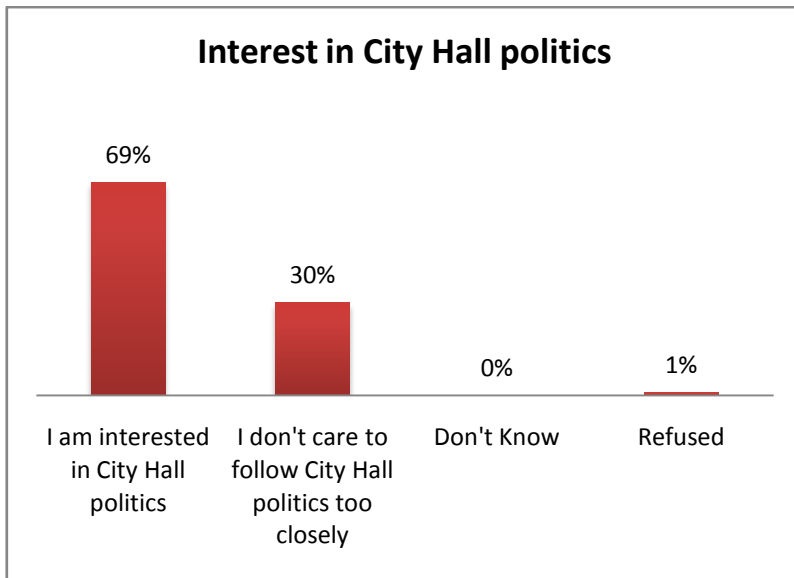
(A1) Some people say that their vote and their voice make a difference at Toronto City Hall. Others say that it doesn't. Do you think your vote makes a difference in Toronto?



(A2) Which statement better describes your situation:



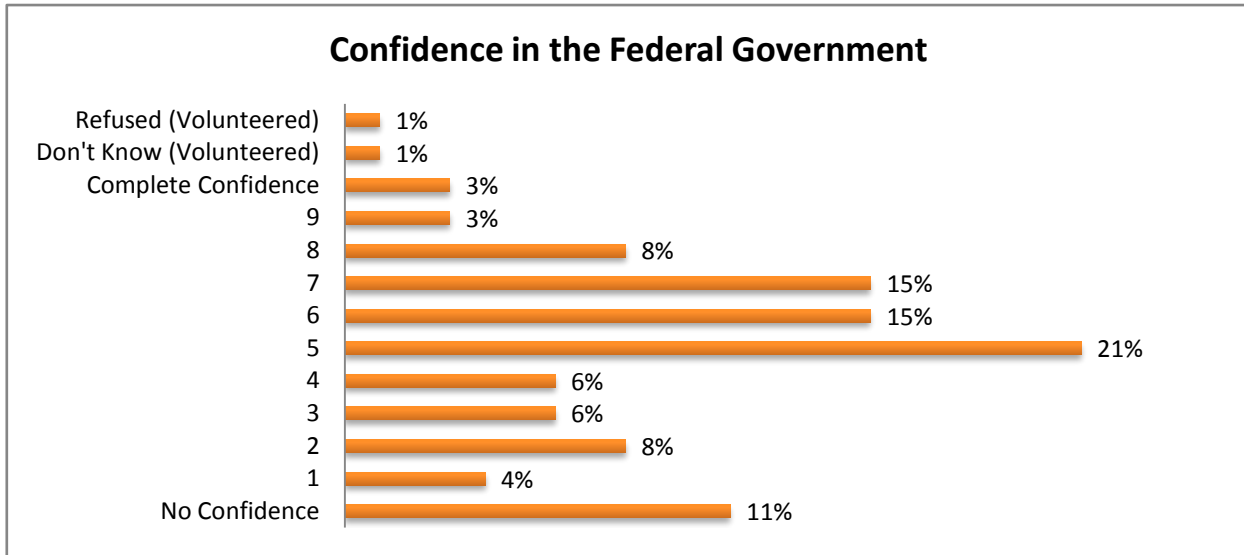
(A3) And which of these statements better describes your situation:



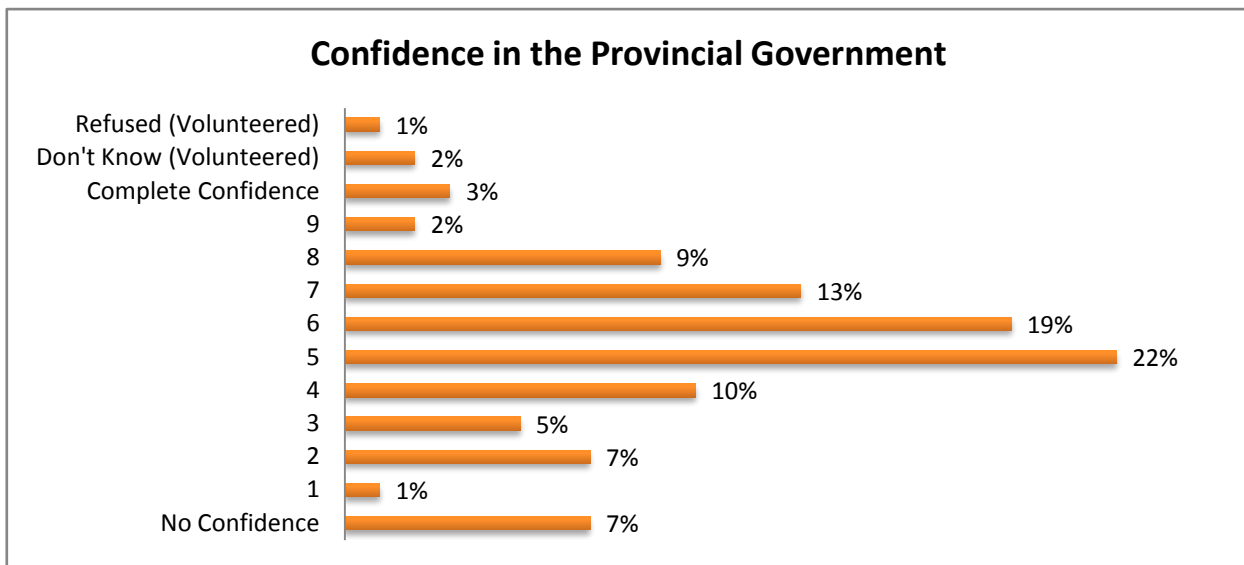
B. Assessments of City Hall

On a scale from 0 to 10, where **0** is **No Confidence** and **10** is **Complete Confidence**, how much confidence do you have in the

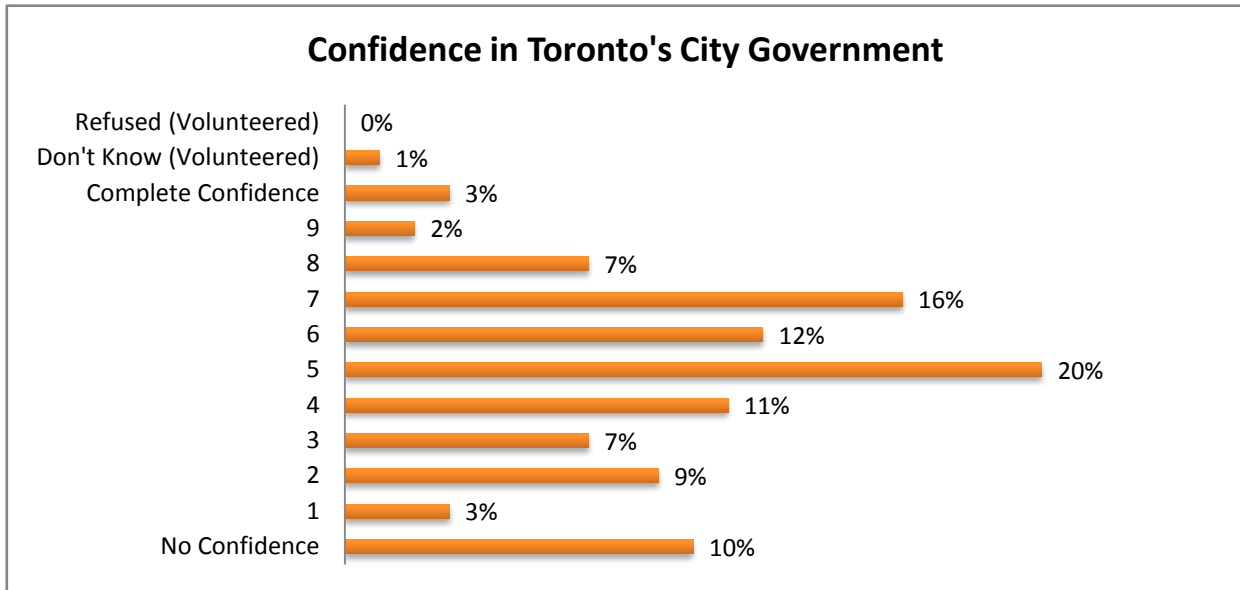
(B4) Federal Government?



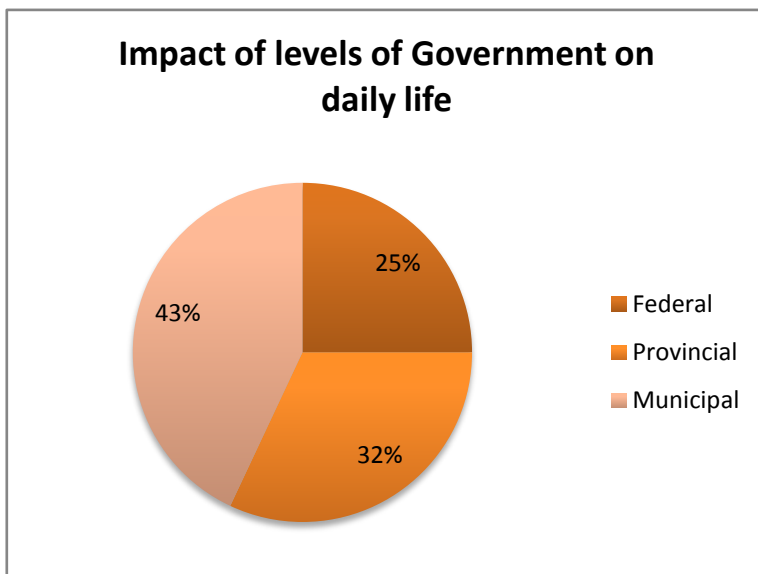
(B5) Provincial Government?



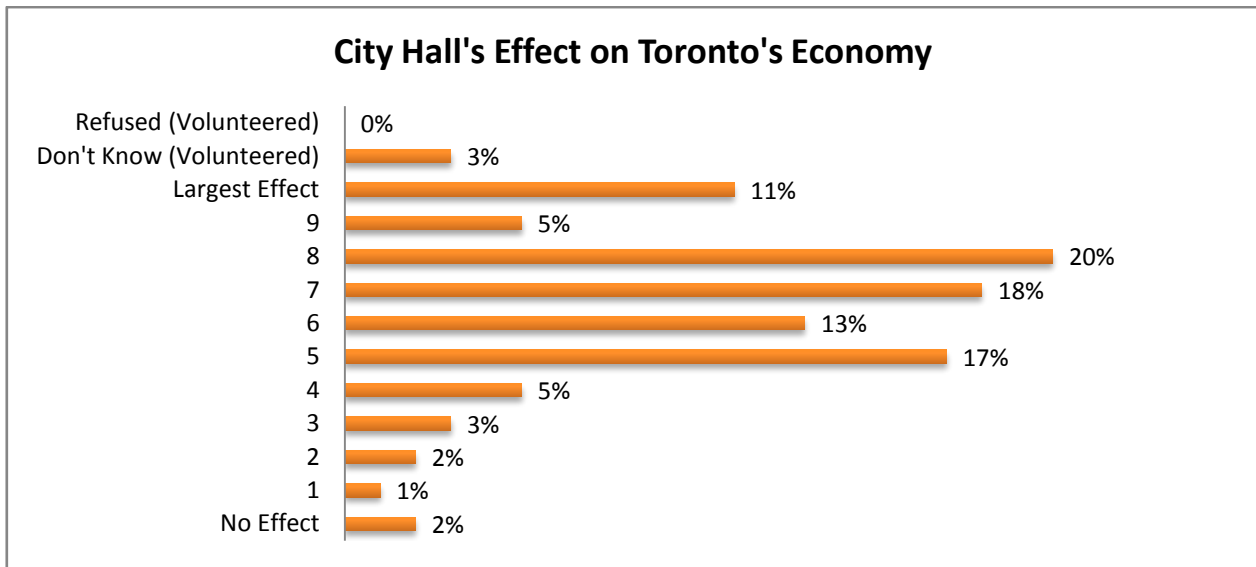
(B6) Toronto's City Government?



(B7) Which level of government do you think makes the greatest difference in your day-to-day life, whether positive or negative?

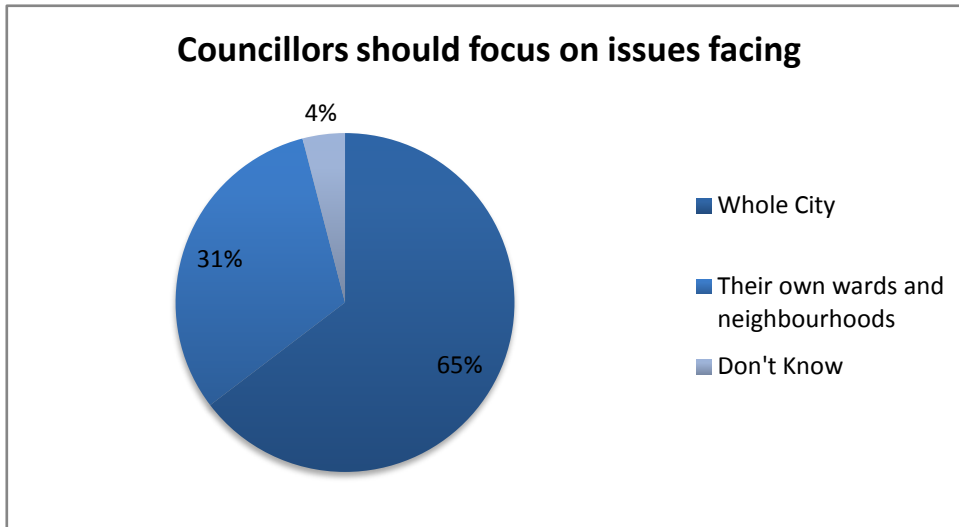


(B8) On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means No Effect and 10 means the Largest Effect, how much do you think the decisions of City Hall effect Toronto's economy?



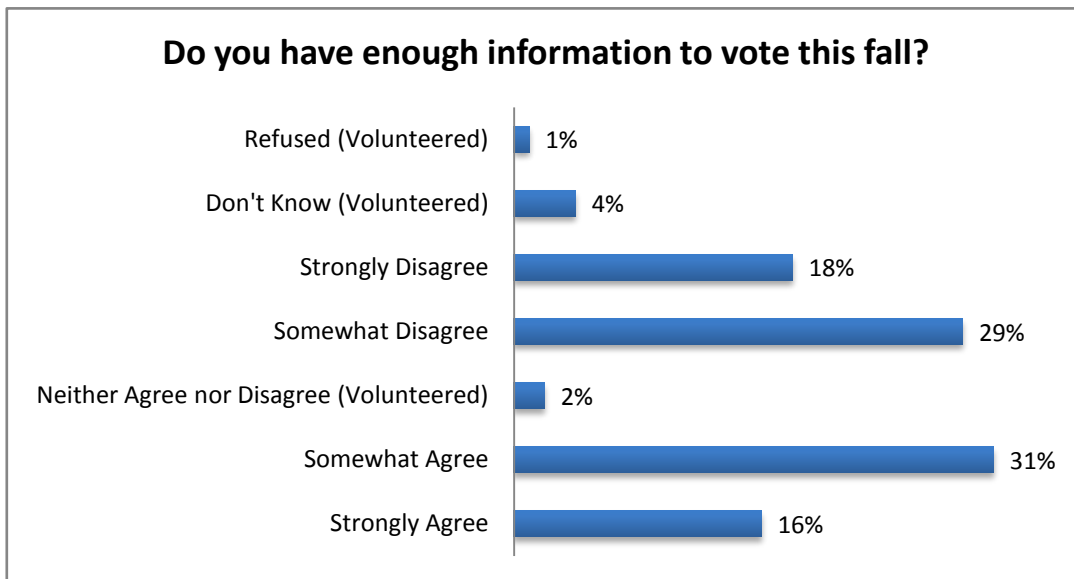
C. Operation of City Hall

(C9) Thinking about the City of Toronto, would you say that councillors should focus on issues facing:



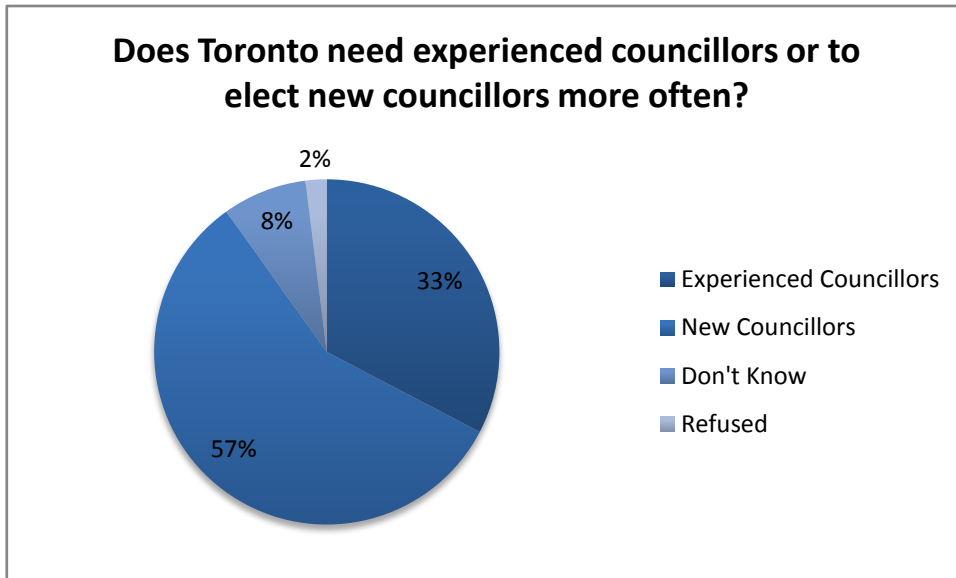
(C10) Currently, we have no official political parties at City Hall. Some people feel that party labels would help voters make decisions about which councillors to vote for.

Do you agree or disagree that you have enough information about council candidates and their positions to make an informed decision in the City of Toronto election this fall.

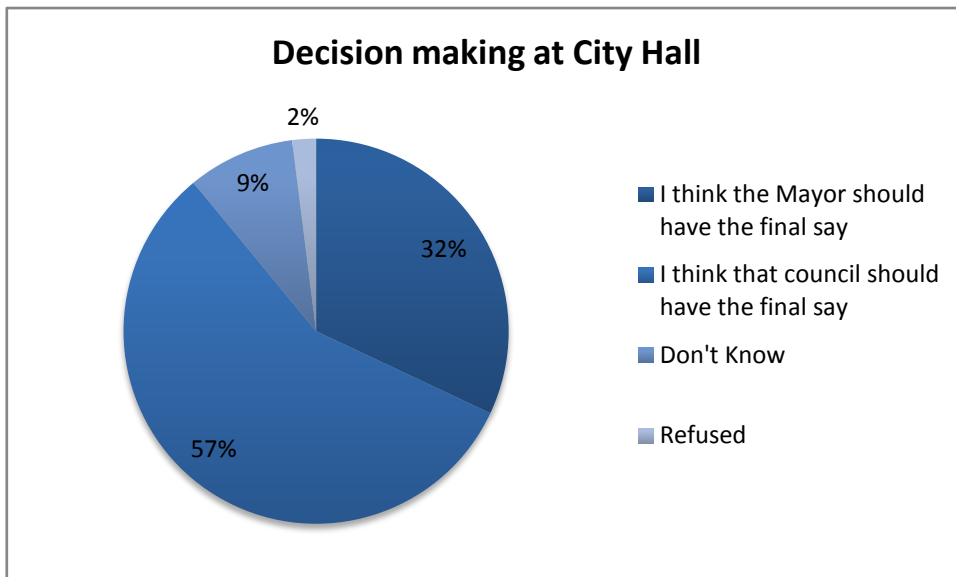


(C11) Currently, we have no term limits on how long a councillor can serve. Or, that the City of Toronto needs to elect new councillors more often.

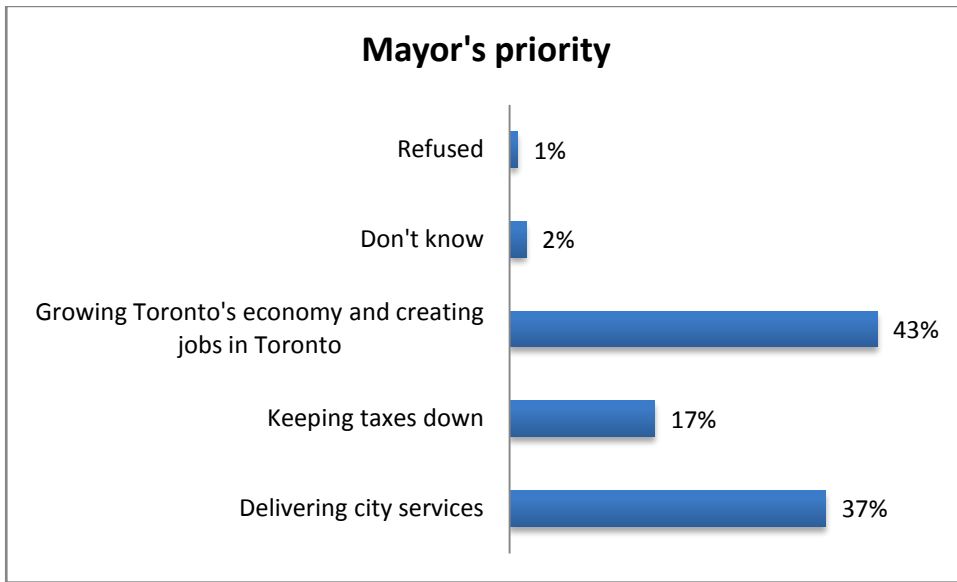
(Randomize Order)



(C12) Which statement is closer to your view? When it comes to making decisions at City Hall



(C13) What do you think a mayor's priority should be? (Randomize order)



D. Vote

(D14) How likely are you to vote in the municipal election this fall?

