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Facebook and Prorogation

Why did more than 200,000 people join the Facebook group “Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament,” and why should anybody care?

Prepared by
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January 21, 2010

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When Prime Minister Harper prorogued Parliament on December 30, 2009, few would have guessed that such an obscure political procedure would have struck a sour note with Canadians.

One of the first signs of trouble was the emergence of a group on the global social networking site Facebook, “Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament.” Facebook has millions of Canadian subscribers, and the group was initiated by a politically unaffiliated student from Alberta.

The number of members joining the group rose dramatically, in fact virally. Within days, it passed 100,000 members, and members encouraged their friends to join. Earlier this week, it topped 200,000, making it easily one of the largest groups with a Canadian political theme on the networking website. Today the group numbers 207,000 (and counting). It is estimated that more than 12 million Canadians are users of Facebook.

The emergence and rapid growth of the Facebook group has generated interest from the Canadian body politic. Some commentators have dismissed it as “the dumbest way to advocate for a political cause,” while others have urged decision makers to heed this new form of political engagement. However you look at it, the question remains, why have so many people joined this Facebook group, and what do we know about these people?

This study was designed to provide a snapshot of the Facebook group “Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament” (CAPP hereafter) using an online survey posted to the group’s page. Over 340 members elected to answer a series of eight questions to aid understanding of the group.

The survey results come with all of the caveats that accompany an open poll with a self-selecting sample, but in our view, they add value to our “national conversation” by shedding some light on who these people are and why they joined.

Here's what the responses to the survey of members of the Facebook group “Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament” tell us.

First, despite the perception that CAPP members are university and college students or recent graduates with active social lives, half of the respondents are 45 years of age or older. Thirty-four per cent of the respondents are 31-44 years of age and 16 per cent are aged 18-30. Not one person who took the survey was aged 12-17.

Second, the respondents are politically engaged people: 88 per cent described themselves as either somewhat or very engaged in federal politics. In addition to this, 96 per cent of the participants indicated that they voted in the last federal election. The CAPP group comprises a higher percentage

of people who cast ballots in elections than the general population. Only 60 per cent of Canadians voted in the last federal election.

It is no surprise that older Canadians are more politically engaged and vote more frequently than the rest of the population. So what is new here? To us, what is new is the adoption of Facebook by older politically engaged Canadians seeking to express their opinions and participate in a national conversation.

The people who joined the CAPP take this act seriously. They are not “repeat” or “serial” online political activists, as some have suggested. For over half of the participants in our survey, this is the first time they have ever joined a Facebook group with a political theme. Seventy-five per cent of the respondents think that “it will make a difference,” while another 22 per cent are unsure whether it will make a difference. Only 3% of respondents indicated that joining this group will not make a difference. Just over half of the respondents are daily users of Facebook, with the remainder using Facebook “a few times a week” or “once in a while.”

Finally, why did people choose to join “Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament” on Facebook? While Facebook makes it easy to create and join groups, these 207,000 people joined because they are interested in the prorogation of Canada’s Parliament.

Just over half (53%) indicated that it was because “proroguing Parliament is undemocratic” and another 33 per cent said it was because “Parliament needs to investigate the Afghan detainee matter.” The survey findings run counter to the slogan and logo emblazoned on the Facebook group itself, “Get Back to Work,” exhorting all MPs to return to Ottawa. Only 9 per cent of respondents said they joined the group because “Parliamentarians should be working like the rest of us,” far behind concern about Afghanistan and democracy.

One last finding bears reflection. Over 60 per cent of the respondents indicated they are from Ontario, while only 6 per cent indicated they were from Quebec. Although recent polling indicates that Quebecers think and feel the same way about prorogation as the rest of Canadians, in this instance we cannot speak of Facebook as a Canadian space for political action and conversation.

In the end, what should this mean to decision makers? We would suggest that the survey indicates that the Facebook group “Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament” matters. Its members vote, they are politically engaged, they are older rather than younger, and they are serious about this “new” way for them to participate in politics.

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Steven Staples, President of the Rideau Institute

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Findings of Survey of Facebook Group “Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament”

* Top two reasons for joining: Prorogation is undemocratic (53%) and Parliament needs to investigate the Afghan detainee matter (33%). Other choices were: need to work on the economy and jobs, the environment, and parliamentarians should be working like the rest of us.

* 88% of respondents very (36%) or somewhat (52%) engaged in federal politics. 96% of respondents voted in last federal election.

* 50% of respondents are 45 years of age or older. No one aged 12-17 participated in the survey.

* For over half of the respondents (55%), this is the first time they have joined a Facebook group with a political theme.

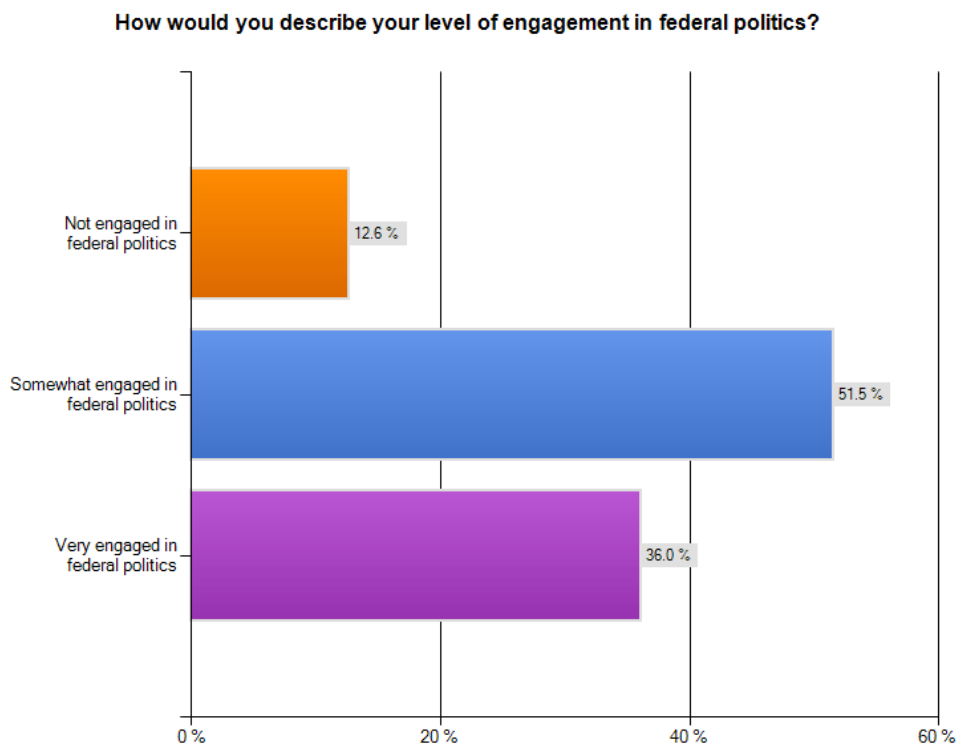
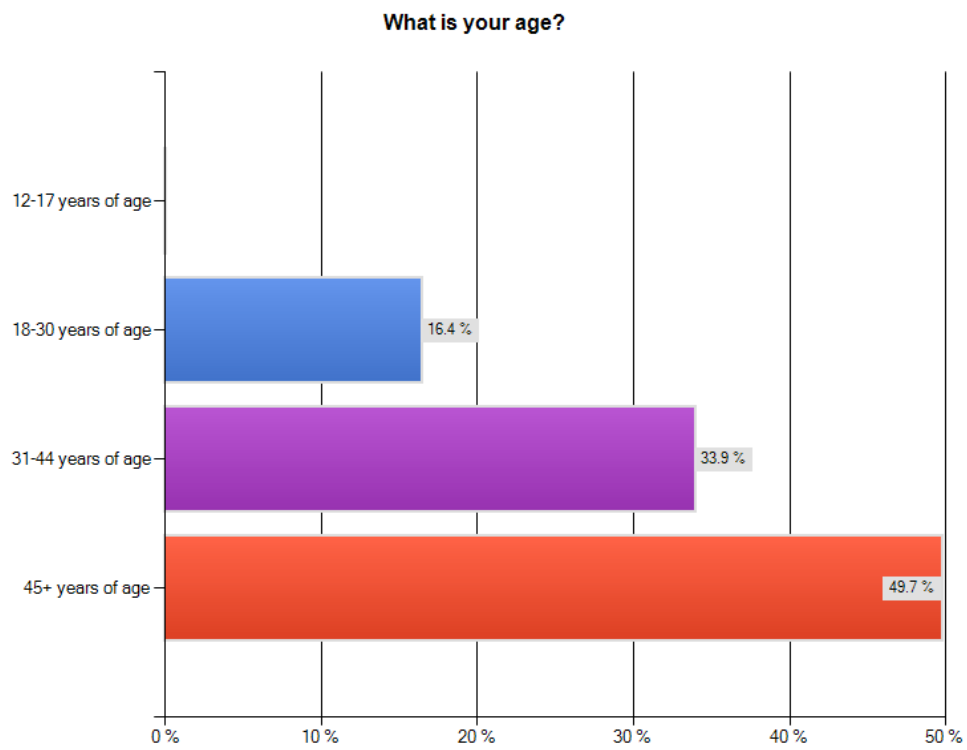
* Three-quarters of participants believe that participating in the Facebook group “Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament” will make a difference, while another 22% are unsure.

* 62% of respondents are from Ontario; only 6% of respondents are from Quebec.

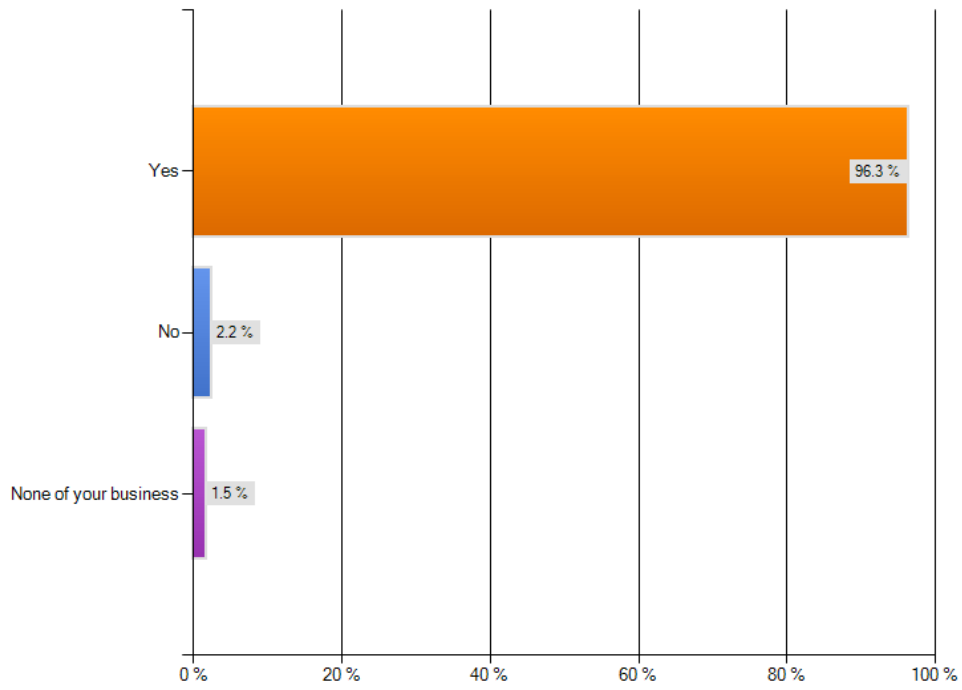
Survey Methodology

This survey was conducted on-line from January 13 to January 16, 2010. Three hundred and forty-one people (341) responded to the survey. An invitation to participate in the survey was posted on the “wall” and the discussion board of Facebook’s Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament group. The survey was open to all participants. Only one response per computer was permitted.

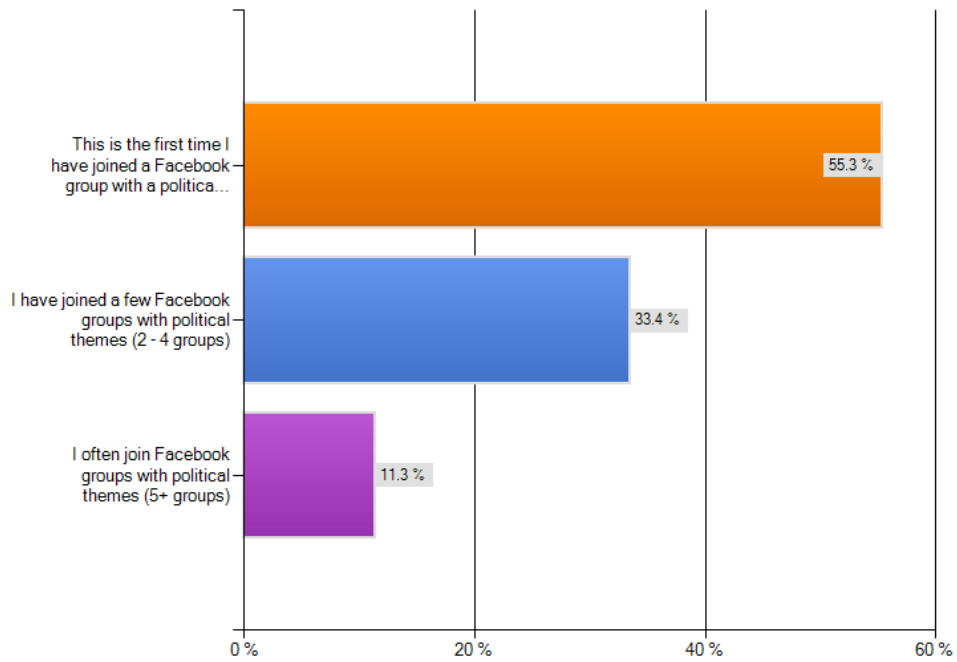
Survey Tables



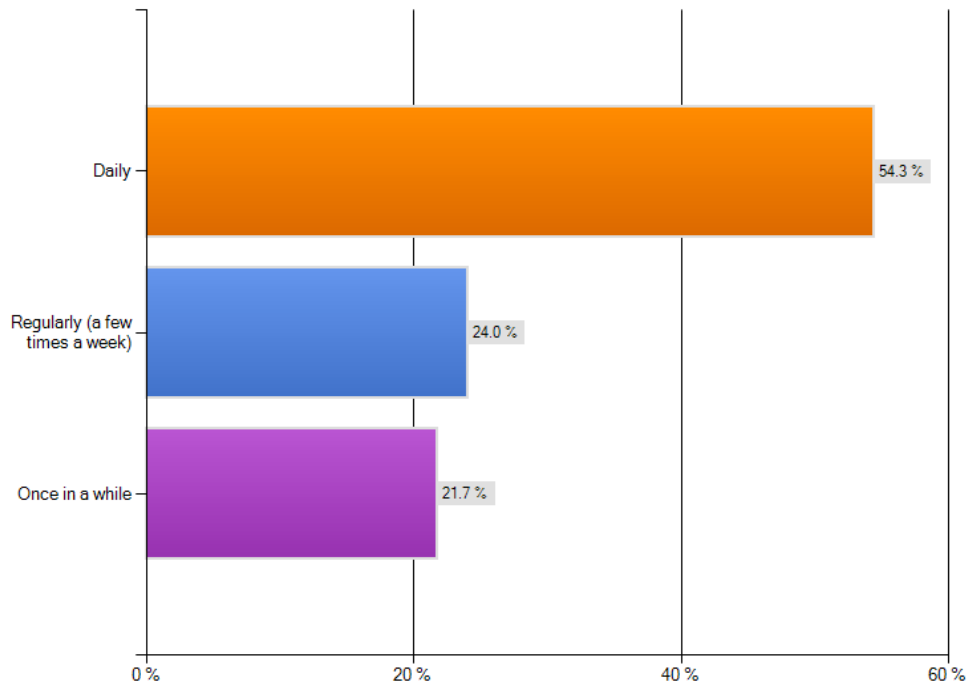
Did you vote in the last federal election?



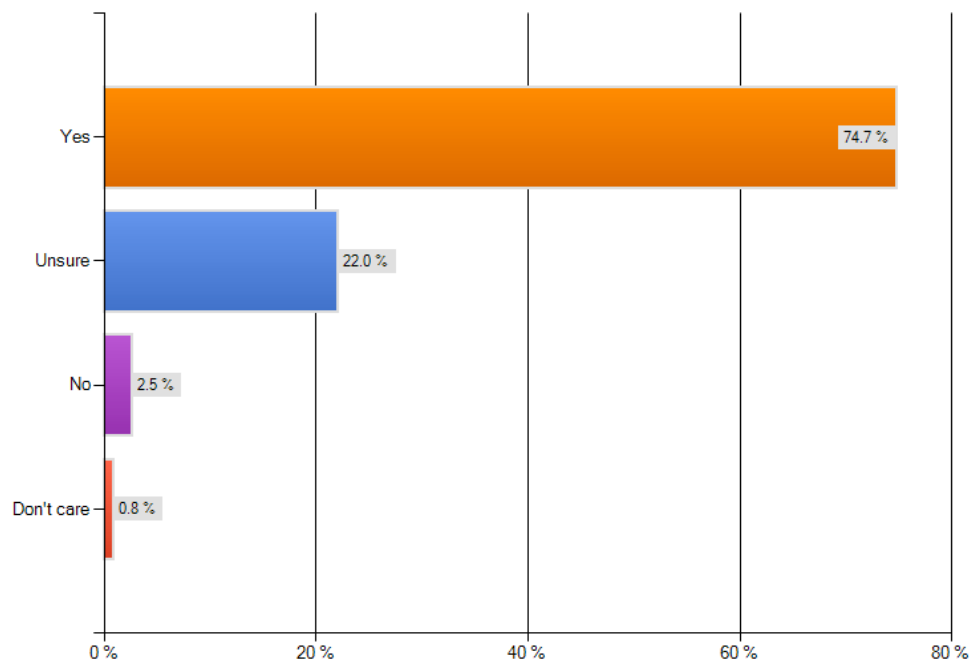
How would you describe your level of participation in Facebook groups with political themes?



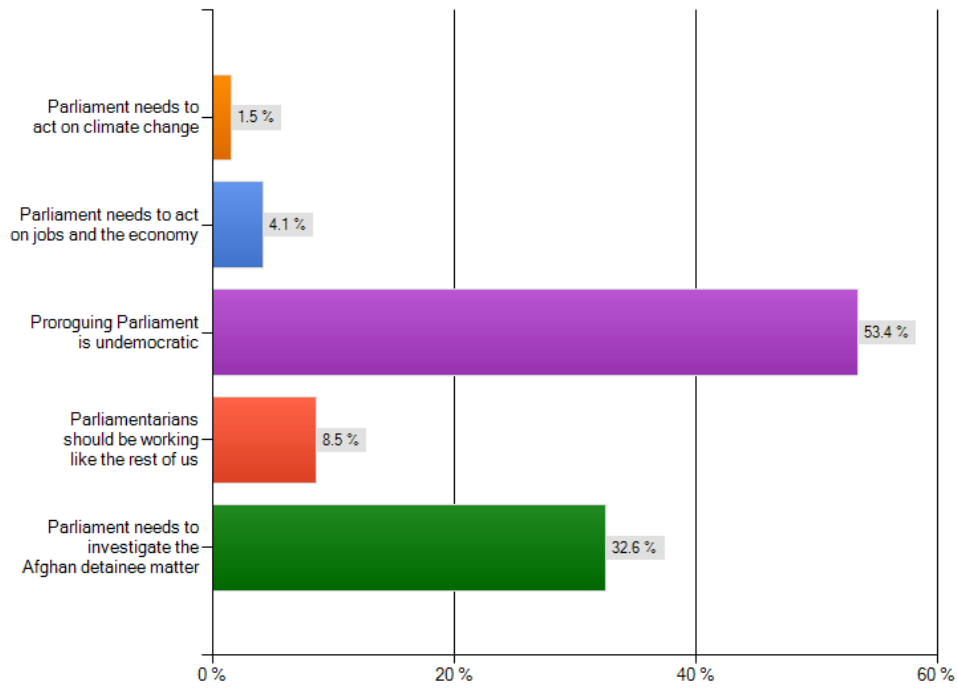
How often do you use Facebook?



Do you think that your joining "Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament" will make a difference?



Why did you join "Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament"?



What part of Canada do you live in?

