

Can public opinion change the votes of Members of Parliament?

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Introduction

Can politicians learn and act on the wishes of their constituents? Under a normative ideal of democracy, (some) politicians learn the preferences of their voters and they then support policies which are consistent with those preferences (Mansbridge 2013). This is the commonly known “delegate” model of representation. There are, of course, other conceptions of how politicians should take up the act of representation, but such a delegated representation account remains one of the most important. For such an ideal to obtain, we argue that at least four conditions must be met. First, politicians must have ready access to accurate information on the preferences of their constituents. Second, they must be able to learn from this information. Third, politicians must be free to act on that information *as individual agents*. Fourth, there must be opportunities for them to act on that information. In other words, there have to be avenues for them to act as agents, whether through parliamentary speeches, public actions, or votes.

There is of course some longstanding evidence of politicians being responsive to public opinion, at both the individual (Miller and Stokes 1963) and aggregate levels (Erickson et al 2002, Soroka and Wlezien 2010). However, it is not obvious that this is because members are responsive to changes or differences in their constituents’ preferences. Of our four conditions, the fourth is regularly met. Politicians are frequently given opportunities to state their opinions on issues, whether in the media or in their parliaments. They are also regularly called upon to vote on legislation. Indeed, this is a central act which we elect them to perform. The other three conditions – *data, learning, and autonomy* – are much less easily met, especially in Westminster operating acting under strict party discipline (Bowler et al 1999).

We have two objectives in this short paper. The first is to specify the very narrow conditions under which members of parliament may be able to access, learn, and act freely on data about their constituents’ preferences. We argue that this is limited by the availability of data and by party discipline. Moreover, we argue that there is an interaction between the distribution of opinions on issues and party discipline that further constrains the ability of members to act on data. Learning, while difficult, should be less of a constraint, though not an entirely absent one. The second objective of our paper is to present results from two related experiments with Canadian members of parliament that demonstrate that very few members appear responsive to public opinion. This, we argue, is likely the result of both the distribution of opinions on the issues in question and the heavy hand of party discipline.

In what follows, we first explain our theoretical intuitions about the ability of politicians to learn and act on constituents’ opinions. We then describe our two experiments and present the results. We then consider how narrow the conditions are under which members might be able to act on public opinion data. We then very briefly discuss these results and conclude.

Theory

We argue that there are four factors which limit the ability of politicians to use data to update their information on their constituents' preferences and then act on that information.

- The availability of data
- The ability of politicians to learn
- Autonomy to act
- Opportunity to act

We expand on each in turn, but before doing so we note up front that our expectation is that the limiting factors are the first three, but especially the first and third.

Exactly what data are available to politicians, in particular on the preferences of their constituents? It is true that polling is becoming increasingly cheap as labour intensive telephone polling is replaced by large-scale online polling.¹ Nonetheless, it is still very rare for politicians to have detailed constituency-level preference data in a country like Canada. The arithmetic is clear. Suppose a well-constructed online poll surveys 1000 individuals. While this is enough to furnish useful insights at a national and perhaps regional level, it represents just three respondents per constituency across the whole country given 338 districts. Absent some aggressive form of post-stratification, what exactly could a politician learn about their voters in particular from such a poll? It is possible, of course, for Members of Parliament to poll their own constituents. However, the cost becomes prohibitively high to do so on a regular basis. Accordingly, there is little current potential or opportunity for members to receive high quality objective data. What do they rely on instead? Essentially, a schedule of motivated and biased data, whether from petition constituents, lobby groups, the media, or personal contacts.

Members also face some constraints in their ability to learn from data. While members are highly incentivized to pay attention to what their constituents think, they are also at least sometimes biased and motivated reasoners (but see Loewen et al 2016). Like normal citizens, they are likely to seek out information that accords with their priors. They are often wrong about the distribution of opinions and preferences among their constituents (Broockman and Skovron 2013). This does not mean that politicians cannot respond to a single well-designed public opinion poll, of course. They most certainly can. But it does suggest some limits on their ability to take in a large amount of disparate data and to draw from it an unbiased assessment of citizens' preferences. To be sure, this accords with the evidence on their susceptibility to other cognitive anomalies (Sheffer et al 2016).

Most importantly, members lack the autonomy to act. Consider the following four scenarios in Table 1, which ask when a member will change their vote *conditional upon having data on their*

¹ There is, of course, a debate about the general quality and reliability of online data (Illieva et al 2002, Yeager et al 2011). Our own sense is that there is much more opportunity and insight here than generally acknowledged by advocates of traditional phone surveys.

constituents' preferences. Members only have an incentive to act on public opinion data in one of four cases, the one in which they obtain data suggesting that their voters prefer another position than their party's and they do not face strong party discipline. How frequent is such a scenario? First, we know that party discipline is high, so we are perhaps considering 10% of cases on one dimension. How often will members who receive data find themselves on the wrong side of the issue? We contextualize this in our section after our experimental results. But to preview the answer, it is relatively high. For most issues, most constituencies are on one side of an issue, which is most often the side of the government and thus not on the side of the opposition parties. The limiting factor here, then, is party discipline.

Table 1: When will MPs respond to public opinion data?

	Strong party discipline (90% of cases)	Weak or no party discipline (10% of cases)
Constituency prefers Members' party's position	Will not change their vote.	Will not change their vote.
Constituency prefers another position	Will not change their vote.	Will change vote, conditional on the returns being greater than the costs of bucking weak party discipline.

In what follows, we present results from two experiments – one in which party discipline was partially relaxed and another in which it was not. We show that members are only likely change their vote when they receive data suggesting they are on the wrong side of an issue and they are free to vote as they wish. Following these results, we further explore the distribution of issues to contextualize how often members might have the opportunity to act on data suggesting they change their vote.

Data and experiments – The Local Parliament Project

Background

We report results from two related experiments. The experiments were run in the context of the Local Parliament Project, a large-scale research project examining the relationship between local public opinion or public preferences and the behaviour of Members of Parliament.

At the core of this project is a large-scale election study run over the course of the 2015 Canadian federal election. The study was conducted online, with an average of approximately 700 respondents per day. Sample was provided by Research Now. The sample was designed to reflect a nationally representative sample over a rolling three-day window. Generally, these data can be weighted to produce representative results using iterative-proportional fitting (or raking) weights. However, it is our experience that results generally do not change substantively when data are unweighted. The averages we present below are weighted.

Respondents to the survey spent, on average, between 15 and 20 minutes in the study. In addition to vote choice and turnout likelihood, respondents were also asked for past turnout and vote, their partisan identification, their positions on more than 30 issues, and their expectations of which party was most likely to win the most seats nationally and which party was most likely to win in their constituency.

These measures of issue positions form the core of the experiments that follow. Issue positions were solicited for 36 issues, covering economic, social, environmental, foreign affairs, and other issues. With a few exceptions, the questions were presented with agree-disagree batteries, with the intention of recovering general sentiments towards policies without asking questions aimed at recovering policy magnitude preferences.

Experiments

In the spring and fall of 2016, we conducted two related experiments. The first dealt with the seemingly controversial (but more on this later) issue of physician-assisted suicide. The second dealt with the ratification of the Paris climate change agreements.

The basic outline of each experiment is the same. We randomly selected half of 335 members² to receive an email from the Local Parliament Project with data on the distribution of opinions in their constituency on the issue in question. We also included an estimate of opinions in the nine constituencies most similar to their own.

Our data on constituency level opinion are derived from the data collected by the LPP during the 2015 election. Our very large overall N translates into a respectably large sample within each constituency. The mean is 106 with a standard deviation of 37.8, a minimum of 14, and a maximum of 253. Forty-seven percent of Members had samples of 100 or more constituents in the overall study. Eleven-percent had samples of 150 or more.

Of course, 106 constituents do not translate into highly precise and efficiently derived estimates of opinion. Accordingly, we also calculated for each member the average opinion in the 9 constituencies most similar to their own. We identify these constituencies through a block-matching technique which leverages observable data from the official Canadian census, as well as select political variables such as party vote shares and turnout. For each constituency, the 9 most similar constituencies are identified with replacement for other constituencies. According, one constituency may appear in a large number of similar-constituency estimates. The average n of such “super ridings” is 1056, sd=225, min=452, max=1650.

Members were delivered these treatments concerning their constituents’ opinions by email, sent to each of the eight official email accounts assigned to each Member. The emails came from the Local Parliament Project and were signed by the authors. Members had been

² This comprises every Member of Parliament except the three members who represent the three territories of Canada’s north.

introduced to the project in earlier emails. Members who were not in the treatment did not receive an email.

Experiment 1 – Assisted Suicide

Experiment 1 concerned physician assisted suicide. In 2015, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that legal bans on physician assisted suicide in cases where an illness was irreversible and inevitably fatal, and associated with physical or mental anguish, were unconstitutional. It gave the Parliament a year to change legislation. In April 2016 a bill – C-14 – was tabled. We randomly selected and emailed half of MPs on May 19, in the week before the third reading (i.e. final vote) on the Bill. Treatment is unrelated to observables. The Bill passed soon after, was sent to the Senate, was amended, and then received final ascent by the House on June 18.

Our treatment involved mailing MPs the data from their constituency and the nine most similar constituencies on the following question:

- Individuals who are terminally ill should be allowed to end their lives with the assistance of a doctor.

Respondents could answer with Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Neither Agree nor Disagree; Agree; or Strongly Agree.

We assigned the responses categories a score of -2, -1, 0, 1, and 2 respectively. We report to the MP the share of each response category and the average score. We also communicate where that score falls on the agree-disagree scale. Finally, we tell them how many respondents were sampled to generate that score. The same information is also presented for the 9 constituencies most similar to their own.

The average score was 0.97, $sd=0.21$. This is closest to the response category of “agree”. The lowest observed score was 0.06, and the highest was 1.39. Accordingly, *in every constituency the average opinion was on the side of agreement with the government legislation.*

Our outcome of interest is the third reading vote which occurred in the third week of May. We code all votes for the Bill as 1 and all votes against the Bill and abstentions as 0.

Experiment 2 – Climate Change

Experiment 2 concerned the Paris climate change accords. The Government of Canada signed on to the accord in late 2015. In October 2016 it held a vote in Parliament to ratify Canada’s participation in the accord.

On October 3, in the week before ratification, we again randomly selected 50% of 335 MPs – independently of the first draw – to receive data on three different question. As before, treatment is unrelated to underlying observables. Each item had the same agree-disagree

answer structure. As in Experiment 1, each included the distribution of responses, the average score, its placement on the agree-disagree scale, and the number of respondents. We also provided all of these data for the 9 most similar constituencies. The questions were:

- To help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the federal government should institute a carbon tax.
- Environmental regulation should be stricter, even if it leads to consumers having to pay higher prices.
- When there is a conflict between protecting the environment and creating jobs, jobs should come first.

Agreement on the first two items obviously correlates with support for greater action on the environment, while the third item is reversed. Empirically, the average constituency score for each are all related to a single factor (eigenvalue=1.6) with the third item loading negatively. The same results obtain if we look at the super-riding results (eigenvalue=1.7).

If we sum the scores of each question together, reversing the direction for the third item, the average score is 0.09, $sd=0.16$, $min=-0.27$, $max=0.55$. In contrast to opinion on assisted suicide, average opinion falls closest to the middle position of neither agree nor disagree. Moreover, there is a substantial number of constituencies on either side of that mid point (33% on the disagree side and 66% on the agree side).

Our outcome of interest is how members voted on the ratification motion. We collapse together abstention with voting against the motion.

Differences between the two issues

We note two important differences between the issues, which matter for our theoretical expectations as well as our analysis. First, average constituency-level opinion on assisted suicide was uniformly positive. In every constituency, the average opinion was in broad favour of the government's position. On environmental matters, ambivalence rules. Second, votes on the environmental issue were whipped. All members were expected to vote their party's position, which was against the accord in the case of Conservatives, and for the accord in the case of the Liberals and the NDP. Nonetheless, members could abstain, which we register as voting against the Accord. In the case of assisted dying, the vote was whipped for the NDP but was a free vote for the Liberals and Conservatives.

Implications for the analysis

These differences matter for our expectations and for our analysis. For assisted suicide, those who received data could only learn that their constituents were in favour of the legislation. This would do nothing to change the considerations of Liberals who were already prepared to take their party's cue, as their party was on that side of the issue. For New Democrats, the vote was whipped so changing opinions in the direction of the legislation might confer some electoral

reward, but it would come with the cost of party discipline. Accordingly, we might not expect any effect among these members. For Conservatives, it is a different story. Tory members who received data would learn that even their constituents were in broad favour of the government’s legislation. They could vote for this legislation without fear of party reprisal (as it was a free vote) and with some potential of electoral returns from their constituents. Accordingly, we should only expect a treatment effect among Conservative members. It should occur as a result of treatment itself and not as a result of variation in the score communicated in the treatment, as opinion was uniformly positive.

For the second experiment, we note that votes were whipped for every party. Moreover, opinions were largely ambivalent on average. Indeed, in literally every constituency the average opinion fell between disagree and agree. Accordingly, there is little for members to work from to determine how they should vote on the legislation. We should expect no relationship between treatment and vote on the Accord.

Results

Given the randomized nature of our treatment, we present very simple analyses. We begin with Experiment 1 (assisted suicide), in Table 2. Our quantity of interest here is the share of members voting in favour of the legislation in each party, according to treatment condition. As articulated above, our intuition is that the treatment should matter only for Conservative members. This is largely what we observe. For Liberals, receiving the treatment reduces the likelihood of voting for the legislation by ~3.7 pp. The difference is not significant ($p=.18$, two-sided). For New Democrats, there is no effect at all. No member voted for the bill in either condition. But for Conservatives, there is a substantively impressive effect. Those who received treatment were 13.4 pp more like to vote for the bill ($p=.06$, two-sided), an increase of 2.5 times.

Table 2 – vote for assisted suicide, by treatment and party

	Liberals	Conservatives	New Democrats	Total
Untreated	96.4%	8.6%	0.0%	51.2%
Treated	92.7%	22.0%	0.0%	58.4%
<i>p</i> , chi2 test	.18	.06	---	.18

N=334. Cells display share of members by party and treatment condition voting in favour of the legislation versus abstaining or voting against.

It is important to recall the context here. Conservative members were not whipped on this vote. Those is treatment could see they were way off the majority opinion. Given they would pay little cost for moving, they moved.

Table 3 – vote for ratification of the Paris Climate Change Accord, by treatment and party

	Liberals	Conservatives	New Democrats	Total
Untreated	87.9%	0%	77.8%	63.1%
Treated	86.5%	0%	94.1%	57.1%
<i>p</i> , chi2 test	.78	---	.15	.27

N=334. Cells display share of members by party and treatment condition voting in favour of the legislation versus abstaining or voting against.

Table 3 presents results for the Paris Accord votes. There is essentially no movement on the part of the governing party and none on the part of the Conservatives. New Democrats do appear more likely to move upon receiving treatment, but there is substantial uncertainty associated with this. To be sure, the difference between conditions is attributable not to fewer individuals voting against the bill (none do), but to fewer abstaining (22% in control, 6% in treatment). The end result is that, as expected, there is little evidence that our treatment had any effect, in particular in the face of substantial party discipline.

Contextualizing results

Thus far, we have argued that there is little scope for Members of Parliament to respond to public opinion. This is because they rarely receive high-quality data and, when they do, they are constrained by party discipline. We show that there is some evidence of this. But we wish to further contextualize these results. Two factors matter here. First, we note that on most nearly every issue there is substantial party discipline when it comes to final votes (Kam 2009). But perhaps as importantly, it is not clear that there is always a clear advantage to members voting along with their constituents, especially in the case of opposition members.

Suppose two different scenarios. In scenario A, suppose that most citizens support the action of the government. Suppose further that in the vast majority of constituencies, the average position is one of agreement. In other words, there is little variance within and between constituencies. Suppose finally, following Dewan and Spirling (2011), that most opposition parties must oppose the government most of the time. How would receiving public opinion data change the vote of a member in this instance, assuming the data told them there was support for the government's position. For government members, the data affirms their current position. For opposition members, acting on the data would require bucking their party's position. Such actions are not tenable in the long run. However, this is the case in which we might most expect a member to move absent sanction.

In scenario B, suppose that most citizens are ambivalent on an issue on average. In most constituencies, the average position falls somewhere near the midpoint of agree-disagree. Suppose the government is on the agree side. For government members, there is little incentive to change their opinion away from the government's position. For such members the future opportunity costs of defying the whip are particularly high. For opposition members, there is perhaps more potential returns, in the absence of party discipline, to following their

constituents' preferences. So, we might expect individual level effects in the absence of party discipline. However, this will only apply to some members, as perhaps half by definition will find constituency level support for a position in opposition to the government. In aggregate we should not expect much.

If we suppose that the government-opposition split of the legislature is 55-45 (essentially the current split), this means that just 45% of members are in a position to act on their constituents' views, given data, and absent party discipline. The potential for such effects are thus rather limited. But when we consider the universe of issues and apportion them between scenario A (where there is a lot of consensus and thus greater incentive to move) and scenario B (where disagreement allows for effects but there is less incentive), we see some potential for movement. What then is the ratio of scenario A to B?

Figure 1 shows the distribution of average position by constituency for 36 issues in the Local Parliament. For one-fifth of issues (21%), the average position is on the same side of agree or disagree *in every constituency* in the country. For 46% of issues, 90% of constituencies are on one side of the issue. And for 69% of issues, 80% of constituencies are on one side of the issue. In short, scenario A is much more common than scenario B. Absent severe party discipline, then, perhaps there is substantial potential for public opinion to change members' votes. The limiting factor, then, is the party whip.

Conclusion

In this short paper, we present some intuitions about when public opinion will change the votes of individual Members of Parliament. Our core argument is that Members will change their votes when they are presented with reliable data which suggests that they are on the wrong side of an issue and when they will not face electoral sanction for doing so. Such conditions are relatively rare, though this is due mostly to the prevalence of party discipline, and less so due to the distribution of issues.

We tested our intuitions according to a relatively rare experiment (but see Butler and Nickerson 2011), in which Members were presented with constituency-level data about the constituents' preferences. We did see some movement where we might expect it, namely among members who found themselves on the wrong side of an issue and were not constrained by party discipline. This suggests some capacity for public opinion to change members' votes. However, we expect that the central organizing principle of Westminster democracy – the government-opposition dynamic with enforced party discipline – is likely to limit this potential.

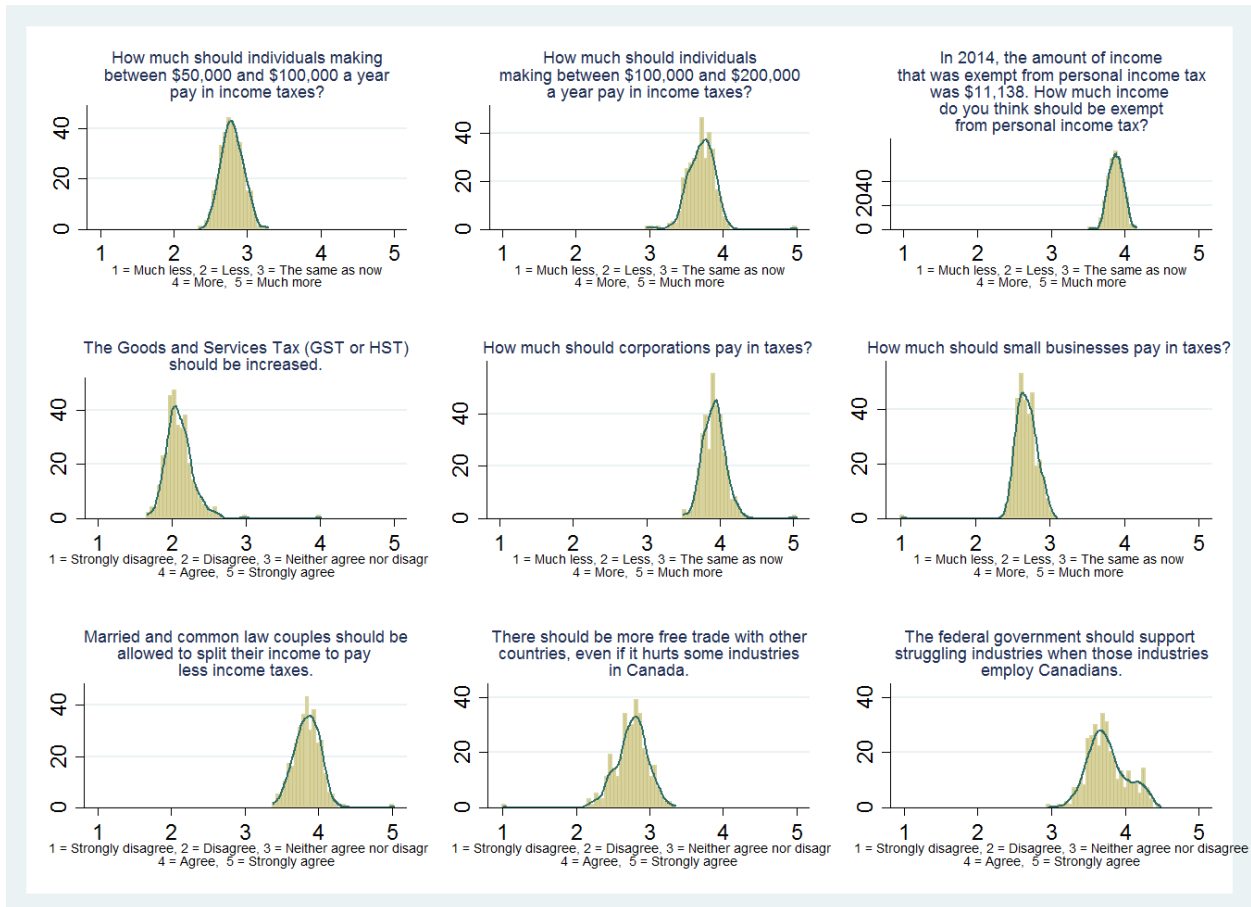
There are four future steps for our larger research project. First, we intend to run 10-15 more such vote experiments in the Canadian parliament, leveraging variation on issue types, opinion distributions, and party discipline. The work here is in the development of theory which will guide expectations (which can ideally be preregistered) about which types of issues and support distributions will interact with party discipline to produce more or less congruence between citizens and their representatives. Second, we are running experiments considering other

outcomes, such as parliamentary speeches, attendance at informational events, and requests for more data. Third, we plan to test how responses to public opinion by members shapes the preferences of voters, both in controlled surveys and in the next election. Fourth, we plan to examine how making public the match (or mismatch) between the votes of members and the preferences of their electors can change the behaviour of Members of Parliament.

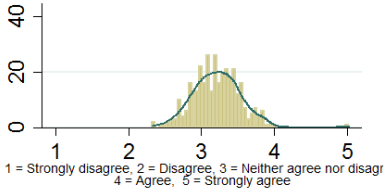
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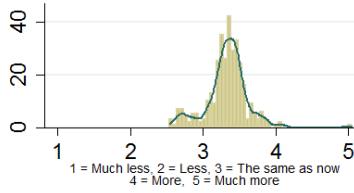
Figure 1 – Distribution of opinions by issue



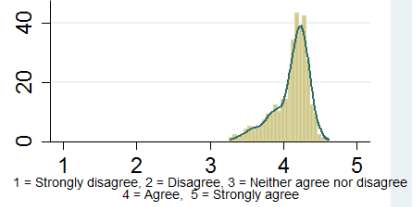
When economic development projects cross on Aboriginal land, Aboriginals should have the final say.



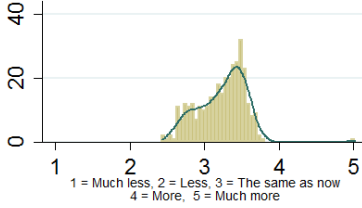
How much money should the federal government send from richer provinces to poorer provinces?



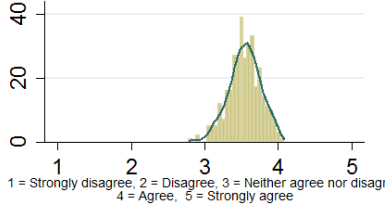
Quebec should be treated the same as every other province.



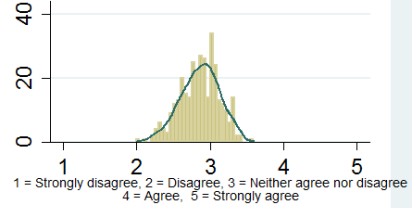
How much should the federal government spend on the Canadian military?



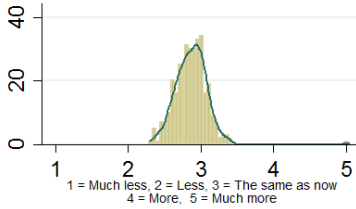
Canada should continue its military mission against ISIS.



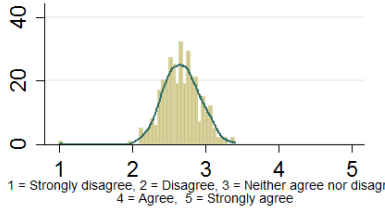
The biggest threat Canada faces is from terrorism.



How much should Canada spend on aid to poorer countries?



Canada should increase the number of immigrants it admits each year.



Canada should increase the number of refugees it admits each year.

