

Canadian democracy rates a mediocre 'C' in new report ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The health of Canadian democracy is in peril as many voters tune out from politics and lack trust in the MPs they send to Parliament Hill, a new study has found.

The consequences of the trend are disturbing: low voter turnout in elections; low participation by Canadians in political activities; a lack of diversity in the House of Commons; and ultimately, a clear public sentiment that politicians don't really care to hear from voters.

The report by Samara, a public interest group, gives Canada's democracy a "C" grade, and its authors warn that the political process now repels more citizens than it attracts - particularly young Canadians.

"Overall, I think the main message is there is plenty of room for improvement," Samara executive director Alison Loat said in an interview.

"I don't think we should be very happy with it. Canada has one of the lowest voter turnouts of any comparative western democracy. Which is a sign of peoples' declining interest."

Loat said the report indicates there is an urgent need for Canadians and their politicians to address the issue, particularly as they gear up for a federal election this year. "I think democracy is one of those subjects that is a little bit like your health. If you're not vigilant over the long term, the results can be quite negative."

Samara is a non-partisan advocacy group that promotes increased "citizen engagement" and a closer connection by Canadians to their political system.

Samara's latest report, released Wednesday, is based on a national public opinion survey conducted for it in December, as well as information gleaned from Elections Canada and the House of Commons.

The online survey of 2,406 Canadians was conducted by Qualtrics from Dec. 12 to 31, with the assistance of Prof. Peter Loewen of the University of Toronto and Prof. Daniel Rubenson of Ryerson University.

Among the report's highlights:

Faith and trust in politics

Only 40 per cent of Canadians trust their MPs to do "what's right." Furthermore, 62 per cent believe that candidates and parties "only want their vote."

Samara says this suggests Canadians think politicians aren't interested in "real engagement in dialogue."

"If public levels of trust in MPs and their organizing bodies - parties - remains low, the legitimacy of government is undermined," says the report. "And decisions taken by government will be difficult to implement and possibly even ignored."

The report also found that only 31 per cent of Canadians believe decisions made by elected officials affect them "every day."

This low number suggests that Canadians "aren't connecting public services to political decisions," says the report.

Samara also found that only 54 per cent of Canadians believe that the work and decisions of MPs "influence the direction of the country."

Loat said that this perception likely comes in part from how political leaders and their parties exercise so much control over MPs.

"When you have MPs who are content just to repeat talking points and not speak directly from the heart, then I think that does propagate the view they are really just there to be puppets for the party."

Diversity in the House of Commons

The face of Canada is not reflected in Parliament. Some examples: Visible minorities constitute 19 per cent of the Canadian population but only nine per cent of MPs; women constitute 51 per cent of the population, but only 25 per cent of the Commons.

Voter turnout

For about 40 years after the Second World War, voter turnout in elections hovered at about 75 per cent. But it began to decline in 1988. In the 2011 federal election, voter turnout was 61 per cent.

"If you believe that a citizen's voice is at the very heart of democracy, it's highly concerning when you don't see that being exercised," said Loat. "We're not quite there, but you can look to a lot of countries where peoples' voices aren't incorporated into policymaking decisions and you see things like an increased rates of violence, and a lot of other signs of disaffection and disconnection with society. And I would hate for us to get there."

Samara notes that voting turnout varies dramatically by age category. In 2011, only 38.8 per cent of voters aged 18 to 24 cast a ballot, compared to 71.5 per cent of those aged 55 to 64. Loat said that young people traditionally were less likely to vote. But now, young people are remaining detached and are not voting even as they grow older.

"What that means is we are socializing people to just tune out completely from politics and from their democracy."

Related link: Samara Democracy 360 ^[3]

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