Introduction

Turned off? Tuned out? Dropped out?

Evidence indicates that many Canadians are not interested in politics. In the last federal election, four out of ten Canadians chose not to vote. In several of the recent provincial elections, almost half of the eligible voters stayed home. More people chose not to vote than voted for any one party.

Not only is voter turnout decreasing, but every year fewer Canadians are getting involved in other kinds of political activities, like joining or donating to political parties, signing petitions or attending protests. If nothing is done to reverse this disturbing trend, those in power will no longer hear the voices of the majority of Canadians.

This raises a straightforward, but important question: Why are people disengaging from politics? Many assume that disengaged people are simply apathetic, disinterested, or generally ignorant about politics. Thus, initiatives to improve citizen engagement often assume that the disengaged are lacking in some key attribute of citizenship and that the solution must lie in creating the ideal citizen.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, political parties and institutions rarely make efforts to speak to the disengaged, seeing these efforts as a waste of time. But this state of affairs limits our understanding of how people interact with the political system. Indeed, previous research has shown that despite low levels of political engagement, Canadians are quite supportive of democratic values and are well aware of what democracy should look and feel like. There are, in fact, many who may not be as apathetic, disinterested or uninformed as is commonly thought.

By talking to these politically disengaged people, we can gain vital insight into our political system, which can assist in reversing the trend of political disengagement in Canada.

Between August and October of 2011, Samara, a research organization that studies and encourages citizen engagement with Canada’s democracy, did just that. We spoke to Canadians across the country in a series of focus groups.
designed to elicit and examine people’s perceptions of politics and democracy—the first-ever study of its kind in Canada. Participants in seven of these groups self-identified as less interested in politics and most did not vote (the disengaged). We also spoke to an eighth group of politically engaged Canadians for comparison purposes. These different groups were chosen to provide a broad cross-section of perspectives across Canadian society (see “Background to The Real Outsiders” on page 5 for more information).

Indeed, their dislike of politics seemed closely related to their perception of a gap between what politics is and what democracy should be.

The responses of the disengaged were intriguing and remarkably consistent. The types of answers that we received transcended different social and economic backgrounds, whether we were speaking to groups of lower-income Canadians, less-educated youth, urban Aboriginal people, women, new Canadians or rural Canadians. Even more remarkable was the contrast between the experiences of the disengaged and the experiences of our comparison group of engaged suburban dwellers.

Three specific findings emerged from our research.

First, whether they were engaged or disengaged, our participants universally condemned politics. Contrary to the notion that the disengaged are apathetic, we found that those less likely to participate were neither disinterested in nor uninformed about the system. Instead we found that their disdain for politics was driven by an intuitive understanding of how the political system functions and their previous interactions with it. Indeed, their dislike of politics seemed closely related to their perception of a gap between what politics is and what democracy should be.

On the one hand, democracy is seen as a worthy ideal for society. On the other hand, for the participants, politics is a source of frustration and disappointment. These were attitudes gained through concrete experiences of interacting with political institutions—whether accessing daycare, covering tuition costs, or getting a speed bump installed on one’s street. The disappointment people feel with respect to politics may therefore be caused by a disconnect between democratic expectations and political reality.

Second, the key difference between the disengaged and the engaged is their relationship to politics. Almost without fail, the disengaged we spoke to described themselves as political outsiders. On the basis of their experiences, they described government, bureaucrats, politicians and the media as working for someone else and, therefore, irrelevant to their needs. Some went so far as to say that the political system makes them outsiders on purpose. For those who feel like outsiders, there is little reason to engage in politics when politics does not engage with them.

In contrast, those who identified themselves as politically engaged describe an insider relationship with politics, believing that the political system works for them. And even though these insiders do not always get what they want and are sometimes frustrated with the political system, they maintain a sense of hope that they can effect change. In short, it is this belief in their own efficacy that seems to keep these insiders engaged in politics.

Why do outsiders feel as they do?

The third and final finding of this report proposes that disengaged people become outsiders through their daily experience and
interactions with the political system. This finding is a far cry from conventional wisdom that holds that the disengaged simply do not care or that they lack knowledge.

Some became outsiders after seeking assistance from elected representatives and civil servants in government, but ultimately receiving little help. Others, especially younger Canadians, came to understand very early on that the political system disregards their concerns. Despite these two different pathways to outsider status, there is a common destination: the disengaged have learned from personal experience that engagement is futile.

Overall, our research shows that declining political engagement is, at least in part, due to concrete experiences with politics. Indeed, participants’ answers belie the notion that the Canadian public is not knowledgeable or sophisticated enough to understand how their political system works. Rather, the people we spoke to are keenly aware of the forces that affect politics.

Our evidence shows that the political system, including the bureaucracy that supports it, has failed many Canadians in clear and tangible ways. However, there is also a silver lining to this story: if people are disengaged from politics for specific and concrete reasons, there may also be specific and concrete ways through which to re-engage the Canadian public in politics. Participants told us that they are not asking for much. They simply need to feel that those in power will consider their voices, and that politics can become relevant to their everyday concerns. Thus, the troubling trend of declining political participation may be reversible. But only by understanding the concerns of the disengaged can we begin the process of proposing solutions.
BACKGROUND TO *THE REAL OUTSIDERS*

Samara, a research organization that studies and encourages citizen engagement with Canada’s democracy, in partnership with a team of over 20 academics, conducted eight focus groups with Canadians across the country between August and October 2011. Participants were drawn from several different demographic groups and identified themselves as less interested in politics and as non-voters. Disengaged focus groups were organized as follows:

- Lower-income Canadians
- Less-educated young people
- Francophone women in Quebec
- English-speaking women in Quebec
- Urban Aboriginal people
- New Canadians
- Rural Canadians

Samara’s researchers were less interested in the question of *who* was disengaged and more interested in the questions *why* and *how*. We wanted to ensure that we had a diverse range of focus groups in order to explore whether there were differences and/or commonalities between the various disengaged groups.

In order to compare engaged and disengaged participants, we also conducted a focus group with people who self-identified as regular voters and who lived in a suburban area. There were 56 participants in total.

In the first half of each focus group, participants were asked to describe their impressions of politics. They provided words or phrases and were then presented with a series of images and asked to select the image that most closely captured how they felt about politics. They were also asked whether they had an issue, or issues, they cared about and whether they had ever tried to do something to address it. Finally, they were asked if they felt they had a role to play in political affairs, and, if so, what that role looked like.

The second half of the discussion shifted focus from politics to democracy. As in the first exercise, participants provided their spontaneous perceptions of democracy and then selected images that best captured their feelings from the same series of images used in the previous exercise. They were asked if they felt that they had a role to play in democracy, and then to describe their ideal democracy, or what criteria should be used to evaluate Canadian democracy. The members of the disengaged groups were also asked what would make them more interested in politics.

A full description of the research methodology can be found on page 23. For a snapshot summary of each focus group discussion, please visit Samara’s website: www.samaracanada.com.
Amid the diversity of participants’ voices, a common mantra was often repeated: *Democracy’s great, it’s the politics I hate*. Far from living up to the common view of an apathetic and uninformed public, disengaged people had definite views on politics and democracy. It became clear that for many, politics leaves a lot to be desired.

**POLITICS THE BAD**

When asked to describe what politics meant to them, both disengaged and engaged participants gravitated toward negative descriptors as seen in Figure 1a. Words and phrases such as “boring,” “greedy” and “untrustworthy” were common. There were also more neutral descriptors, like “vote” and “election.” However, few participants in any of the focus groups had anything positive to say about politics.

Participants often expressed their opinions of politicians, whom they characterized using words and phrases like “corruption” and “broken promises.” For the people we spoke to, the focus on politicians was logical. As one woman from the lower-income group said, “you don’t watch TV and see a policy. You watch TV and see the politician.”

Disengaged participants also described how the issues discussed in political circles, even at election time, had little to do with what they valued. Without prompting, they spoke about their personal concerns, issues like getting a
government and politics as one and the same. In other words, they saw the representation they receive from politicians as part and parcel of the same system that delivers everyday government services.

DEMOCRACY THE GOOD

In contrast, participants had positive feelings about democracy. Many identified the various freedoms associated with a democratic system, as seen in Figure 1b. Even disengaged participants, who admitted they did not regularly exercise their rights, described democracy in terms of freedom of expression and the right to vote. Other democratic ideals like “fairness,” “equality” and “having a voice” were also frequently cited.

These responses reveal both a divide and a connection between what people perceive as being political and what they perceive as being democratic. People’s disappointment
sort of like an illusion, a front man—publicity, advertisement, optimistic.” For her, the idea of democracy is “all air ... it’s a dream,” while politics is “a building, a person, a problem.”

Overall, these perspectives set the stage for understanding how Canadians interact with their political system. What is clear from these and other comments made in the focus groups is that the participants think less often about democracy and more often about their concrete, day-to-day experiences with politics. It is in these everyday interactions with politics, then, that we may discover why some are disengaged while others are engaged.

with politics is driven by their sense of what democracy should be. As one francophone woman put it, “there is no trust in politicians, but you do have trust in democracy.” If politics better matched what people associate with democracy, politics could be more warmly perceived.

This is not surprising. Politics is arguably the day-to-day practice of democracy. And when participants expressed negative views of democracy, these views often referred to how politics is failing to live up to the democratic ideal. One rural Canadian described democracy as a “sham,” for example. Another woman in Montreal felt that “the word democracy is...
There is a great deal of similarity between how the disengaged and the engaged view politics and democracy. Yet these outlooks do not explain why only some engage in political life. To better understand the differences between the disengaged and the engaged, we asked participants to discuss their initial thoughts about politics. We found clear differences between how the disengaged viewed their relationship with the political system and how the engaged did, and these differences may explain why some participate and others do not.

**DISENGAGED: THE REAL OUTSIDERS**

In Samara’s 2011 report, *The Outsiders’ Manifesto*, parliamentarians with over a decade of experience described themselves as being outside the system, powerless to make a difference. If parliamentarians, who have participated in the very heart of federal politics in Canada, can feel this way, then it comes as no surprise that this perception also emerged among participants in our focus groups.

But while parliamentarians described their outsider status as a badge of independence, the disengaged described a deep sense of alienation from the political system. Across all the disengaged focus groups, participants described politicians and politics as the other—a separate class of people and processes that are beyond their influence and that do not serve them. Thus, despite a desire to be included, the disengaged
could see no place for themselves within politics. When asked directly about their role in politics, the disengaged responded with a pervasive sense of powerlessness. “I think [politicians] want to take over everybody. They don’t really care what people want. They say they are going to do something, then they just never do it. It doesn’t make sense, so why vote?” asked one woman in the urban Aboriginal peoples group. An older man in the rural focus group echoed this sense of powerlessness, saying, “I look at elections and I think ... the votes have been counted before the election ... I don’t try to do anything personally. It’s not going to change.”

The disengaged never spoke of the political system as if it belonged to them.

For some, this powerlessness was felt acutely in relation to other established interests. For example, in their view, corporations held disproportionate influence within the system. Lamenting the demise of small family businesses, one rural Canadian observed that “a lot of these companies, even a company like Wal-Mart, ha[ve] got a lot of political influence higher up ... they have a lot of power so that they are pulling the strings.”

Others defined their powerlessness as being far removed from the established political class. In the words of one new Canadian, “they always feel so distant ... they just do what they want.” Some were even more explicit, viewing established interests as actively trying to mollify the public. As one young man said, “politics seems geared toward making people think they have a voice to keep them occupied ... but they don’t actually give you a voice.” Another agreed, saying “they are trying to pull the wool over our eyes.”

Notably, the disengaged never spoke of the political system as if it belonged to them. They never felt that they had any power to influence or control what happens inside the political system. Instead, they viewed themselves as passive observers of politics—not by choice, but simply by virtue of their place as outsiders.

Consequently, these outsiders did not make
ENGAGED: THE INSIDERS

In contrast, participants in the engaged group approached politics from the position of an insider. The engaged people we spoke to were almost universally able to describe a role for themselves within politics. They might not have been happy with some of the outcomes, nor were they all actively engaged all the time, but, by and large, they saw politics as a system that is accountable to them.

Indeed, this perceived accountability is the most notable difference between disengaged and engaged people. In the words of one engaged woman, “I'm voting for you. You work for me.” This belief stands in stark contrast to the disengaged, who never spoke about the political system as something in which they had an ownership stake.

Consequently, the engaged Canadians we spoke to had no trouble seeing ways in which they could have a role in politics, despite the negative views they expressed toward the political system. Where the disengaged spoke of their own futility, the engaged spoke about how “my responsibility is to help mobilize the people around me to work towards issues that I care about.” And where politics a priority in their lives. This was often expressed as a lack of time or energy to engage in politics as compared to more pressing concerns. As one new Canadian asserted, “We are too busy with our own lives. We are more interested in a cup of coffee than to think a little bigger. That is why we have politicians.” This view was echoed by a participant in the lower-income group who said, “nine times out of ten I just have so much other crap on my plate. You know what guys? Have fun. Fight your fight but I cannot take it on right now.” Or as one university student succinctly put it, “I have a job. I got school. I have friends. I don’t have time.”

Politics, therefore, was by and large irrelevant to the disengaged people we spoke to. But this was not because they were complacent or uncaring. Rather, disengaged people felt that politics is a game that does not produce results for them, as much as “everybody would still like to believe there is something happening.” It is not surprising that many disengaged respondents said that “I don’t feel I have a role in politics” and that “the best way for me [to cope] is just not to care about them.” The overall point seems to be that there is very little reason to be engaged.

“I think the government knows what they want to tell us, they know what they want us to think ... they may show a little percentage of our voice, but I really don’t think it matters.”

—Young woman
the disengaged felt they did not have enough time to participate, the engaged felt that “as an individual, you have to decide that you want something changed or something done and try to go after it.” Unlike the disengaged, then, the engaged felt empowered and capable of effecting change if they wanted to.

This is not to say that our engaged focus group participants thought that the system worked well. Like the disengaged, they used words such as “untrustworthy,” “corruption,” and “mismanagement” to characterize the political system. But the engaged group seemed to remain hopeful that things could be better. As one man pointed out, “we are hoping for someone you can trust, not the guys we’ve got now.” Another woman concurred, reflecting that despite reading the news and getting depressed, “I always see that things can change and try to do my part.”

**DIFFERENT VANTAGE POINTS**

Despite the negative views toward politics shared by both disengaged and engaged groups, their vantage points were very different. Politically disengaged people saw politics from the outside: impenetrable, immovable and, therefore, irrelevant. Politically engaged participants saw politics from the inside: imperfect and flawed, but ultimately repairable. They had a much stronger belief in their own efficacy, which was bolstered by the conviction that the effort is worth it. It is quite possible, then, that these two different outlooks on politics are closely related to people’s level of engagement in the political system. But if this is the case, an important question remains unanswered: How do people become outsiders or insiders?
As we learned from the focus groups, politics is experienced at a personal level. Citizens make few distinctions between the abstract concepts of politics, government and the political system. As one rural participant said, “I am more concerned about what goes on in my little sphere of influence as opposed to the country as a whole.” This is understandable. People are most aware of their personal environment and experience. Their perspective on how politics functions generally cannot be separated from how they experience politics personally.

However, even though both the disengaged and engaged spoke of personal experiences that shaped their lasting impressions of politics, we discovered that for the disengaged, their attempts to interact with politics taught them that participating is futile. They had learned to accept powerlessness—a lesson that became deeply ingrained. Conversely, the engaged told stories of interacting with the political system and experiencing relatively positive outcomes. They did not always get what they wanted, but their interactions with politics reinforced the idea that engagement is a useful pursuit.

TWO PATHWAYS TO POWERLESSNESS
In general, disengaging from politics was the result of one of two broad experiences. First, many disengaged people in the focus groups described having tried to effect change, but failing in their efforts. Many disengaged
participants had not always felt powerless. In the past, they believed that the political system was open to them and wanted to hear from them. But once they had an actual concern that needed to be resolved, they found that no one was responsive. From these experiences, the disengaged took to heart the lesson that engaging with the political system is at best a waste of time, and at worst a discouraging and disempowering experience.

A woman in the francophone focus group provided an illustration of this process. Wanting to become a cook, she applied for and was accepted into a nine-month culinary education program sponsored by Employment Quebec. She spent several months learning the culinary trade, but at the seventh month the program administration moved her from working in the kitchen to serving customers in the cafeteria. In response, she asked the program to recognize her seven months of culinary education on her certificate in order to demonstrate that she could both cook and serve customers. The administration, however, would only recognize her customer service training. This response frustrated her since she had aspired to cook as well. She felt that “they complicated the entire situation to see if I would drop out, and I did ... I was very discouraged and disappointed.” She sought help from her sponsor, Employment Quebec, but the man she explained her situation to was about to leave on vacation. He told her to come back when he returned, but this discouraged her even further. As a result, she applied for employment insurance instead.

A similar story of frustration was told by an Aboriginal woman who described her efforts to gain access to daycare services for her grandson:

“I had to call all these politicians, I had to call all, and believe me, I do it. When I go there, I go there. I wrote the letters, I called. I did everything I could because we were now without a daycare. Nobody did anything ... it took me four or five months before we got him into another daycare, and we had to put him in the Catholic daycare and we’re not Catholic. What I got back from these politicians were these form letters, but nobody really did anything except for me having to push and push to find a daycare.”

“Why did they go and put up all that security? Because some foreign leaders were there.”

“They’re lining their pockets now.”

“When I see this kind of stuff, I can’t believe it’s happening here ... violence throws us for a loop.”

—Discussion in the lower-income focus group

Photo Credit: Pete Morawski (petemora.com)
These and other stories demonstrate the barriers that many participants faced when they tried to engage. Whether a parent was trying to get a school bus route extended to reach her house, a new Canadian was trying to get his credentials recognized so he could work, or residents attempted to get a speed bump installed to slow down speeding cars on the street, these experiences taught many participants that the system was not set up to serve them. As one said, “why should I care for the system if the system doesn’t care for me?” In the end, many expressed feelings of fatigue. They were tired of having to “fight all the time to be heard.” Engaging in the political system was not something they would consider doing again.

The second pathway to disengagement is equally troubling: some people, especially less-educated youth, were taught the futility of engagement before they even had a chance to engage.

These Canadians felt a sense of powerlessness and irrelevancy which was reinforced by the absence of political messages directed at them. The young people we spoke to felt that politicians view their input as inconsequential and unimportant. One young person went so far as to say that “[politicians] have their plans—they don’t care about us.” As a result, these young people never felt that they should engage in the first place. As another young participant articulated, “more kids our age would care if politics cared about us.”

This view is, perhaps, unsurprising given that the issues receiving the most attention in the political arena lack relevance for youth. The disengaged youth we spoke to felt that the political system made little effort to reach out to them. They asked why politicians do not speak to youth in terms that they can relate to, or why they do not try to make issues more appealing. One young woman reflected that “we need more interesting issues. We are all, like, early or late teens or whatever you want to call it, none of us believe in giving a crap about anything that they are doing.”

In response to “What should democracy be?”:

“More equal ... because if we don’t have some of that we’re going to have some hell on the streets, hell on the way we do our daily living and everything else.”

—English-speaking woman in Quebec

Photo Credit: 24hrt / Flickr via Creative Commons
However, one young woman’s observation suggests that this indifference covers a deeper emotion: defeat. As she argued, “I think politicians want it that way [irrelevance to young people], they want to show us everything has to be controlled, everything in our mindset so we can think what they want us to, but when you think outside the box, that’s when you feel defeated.”

Regardless of which pathway one takes toward disengagement, for many, disengagement is the result of explicit, personal experience. Few people in the focus groups associated their disengagement with apathy or a lack of general political knowledge. On the contrary, those who indicated that the political system is too difficult and complicated to navigate placed the blame squarely on the system for being intentionally convoluted, designed to keep them out. Whatever their specific experience, however, our disengaged participants were unanimous in their feeling that the political system gives them no reason to engage.

**RESILIENT AND ENGAGED**

Engaged citizens, however, painted a far different picture. While they, like the disengaged, spoke of the challenges of being heard, unlike the disengaged, they did not feel that their efforts were futile. They persisted with their efforts, and in some cases experienced some success. These successes gave the members of the engaged focus group hope that change could be achieved, encouraging them to continue engaging.

One particular account from the engaged group illustrates this point. A woman in the group told about her attempts to get medical care for her mother:

I had frustrations along the way most certainly, but what I found is that the squeaky wheel gets the oil, because I didn’t know where to go. I did not know where to get services. Somebody—an acquaintance of mine—said, you know, try [Community Care Access Centre], so I tried them and through persistence and being extremely nice and polite on the phone—you cannot be harsh. You cannot show your frustration or they will knock you down. Now I managed to get a caseworker who was actually interested, who got me somebody to come to the house to do an assessment, who said yes she does need this, this and this. And I actually got help, but only because I was at it relentlessly every day.

Others who self-identified as engaged echoed this story of fighting and ultimately achieving success. One man noted that he frequently signs petitions on the internet and that “about fifty percent of the time, I get an email back a couple of weeks later saying our petition won … so that kind of gives me hope.” Others spoke about the necessity of sending letters to their Members of Parliament and making phone calls to share their opinions with program administrators.

These stories reveal a sense of empowerment that the disengaged groups did not exhibit. Engaged participants were confident in their ability to effect change, driven by a belief that “in a nutshell [the political system] is working for me.” This is not to say that they always expected to win, or that they could effect change on their own. Engaged participants were cognizant of the need to work collectively to solve problems, arguing that “you can only effect change if you get enough people engaged to work together to a
common goal.” But unlike the disengaged, these people saw a place for themselves in the political system and avenues that they could pursue to resolve their concerns. It is these perceptions that presumably keep them engaged in politics.

**POLITICAL LESSONS**

Personal, everyday experiences seem to have a deep impact on political engagement. For the disengaged, the outcomes of political engagement and the content of political messages taught them that they had little impact on the political process. When a problem arose that required government assistance—be it finding a job, securing a daycare spot, or addressing overcrowded schools—they expected little of their politicians and little of their government.

Importantly, when disengaged participants experienced difficulty with the system, there was little conceptual separation between the role of civil servants and the role of politicians. For most of the people we spoke to, government was synonymous with politics. Thus a negative experience in accessing government services or receiving poor service from the office of a Member of Parliament were equally likely to shape an individual’s negative perception of the political system. That the government and bureaucracy did not lay out a welcome mat—to indicate an interest in that individual—led to a sense of powerlessness that ultimately keeps them out of the political process.

In contrast, while members of the engaged group also reported some degree of frustration from time to time, they reacted differently. They kept picking up the phone, knocking on doors, and sending emails until they saw results. Perhaps driven by a sense of ownership of the political system, many continued to push until they received some satisfaction. These successes, no matter how small, reinforced the behaviour of the engaged.
In recent years, governments, political parties, civil society organizations and academics have all tried to answer the same simple question: Why aren’t Canadians participating in politics?

While the question may seem simple, there are many possible answers. Our research shows that the conventional wisdom, that the disengaged are disinterested, apathetic and uninformed, is inaccurate. In fact, by speaking at length with disengaged citizens, we have discovered that they are often keenly aware of how politics works but do not participate in politics because the political system has failed to serve them in specific and personal ways.

Of course there are always exceptions: there are some who would decline to participate in politics regardless of how well the system performs, just as there are those who would be highly engaged no matter what the outcome. No study, no matter how nuanced or far reaching, can fully explain all the complex factors that determine how we relate to our political system.

But our study reveals a troubling situation: the political system has separated the Canadian public into insiders who have the capacity and energy to fight and remain engaged in the system, and outsiders who simply walk away out of frustration or disappointment.

Blame for this outcome can be placed on a variety of factors. Fixes to the system can be found in many different places as well. And while it is beyond the scope of this study to decide who to
blame or what specifically we must do to fix the political system, we have learned about three aspects of our system that should be monitored more regularly and examined more systematically to ensure the lasting health of democracy in Canada.

MEASURING WHAT REALLY MATTERS

The responsiveness of democracy is the first indicator of democratic health. In the first chapter of this report, we documented the divide between what people thought democracy should be and what politics really is. In all the focus groups, both disengaged and engaged, we heard participants say that issues discussed in the political arena do not address what they actually care about.

Our focus groups also said that the lack of observable accountability in the political system was a problem. In a healthy democracy, the political system will respond to the issues the public cares about, in part because the public has the ability to hold politicians to account for their actions. Instead, we heard about untrustworthy politicians and an unresponsive bureaucracy. Notably, the people we spoke to did not think this requirement of accountability was unreasonable or unachievable (see inset). They simply wanted more transparency in order to better understand political outcomes. But on this basic requirement of democracy, our participants thought politics fell short.

The inclusiveness of the political system is the second aspect of democracy that should be monitored. An inclusive political system allows different voices to be heard and encourages the Canadian public to express their views. But as we reported in chapter 2, many disengaged people struggle to be heard. The disengaged feel, by and large, like outsiders in their own democracy. They feel that the interests expressed in the political arena are not their own. Their everyday personal experience with politics tells them that they will not be included, even though all they want is “to know someone is going to listen.”

In contrast, the engaged feel like insiders. They believe that politics works for them and that their voices will be included in the debate. They expect to have access to government and their representatives and to have success with their efforts. They see a reason to fight. Thus, despite also perceiving negative aspects of politics, they continue to work toward change.

Participation is the third aspect of concern. No matter how responsive or inclusive a government is, citizen participation is required to make it a democracy. In chapter 3, we described...
how many people become disengaged through the lessons they absorbed from earlier attempts to participate. Many were initially interested in participating, but withdrew over time.

We heard from our focus groups that participation in the political system should be made easier. Civil servants, as well as politicians, must be conscious of the significant role they play in shaping citizens’ perceptions of their own efficacy. Citizens who feel powerless will not be inclined to participate again. Similarly, those who feel that the system has never made an attempt to engage with them are unlikely to participate at all.

NEXT STEPS
Can hope be found in a scenario where a growing number of Canadians see themselves on the outside of their political system? There were undoubtedly many participants whose exasperation and frustration with politics resulted in resigned fatigue. But while there may be a point of no return to engagement for some, there are also some threads of hope. Focus group participants

**Figure 4a: Describing what matters to democracy**
Words participants commonly used to evaluate the health of democracy. The relative size of words indicates how often the terms were raised across the focus groups.

**WHAT PEOPLE WANT**
We asked people what they wanted out of their political system. Here is a selection of what they said:

**Less-educated young woman on communications:** “(Government/politicians should) talk in a language that we could actually understand ... if you need to explain it to me more than two or three times, don’t bother.”

**Engaged suburban man on modernizing communications:** “Make engagement sexy. Right now, it’s about bureaucracy—being on the phone all day. There’s an impression that it is a losing battle ... We need to be informed and encourage others.”

**English-speaking woman in Quebec on accessing government:** “Seeing a real person. Not [on] the phone system. They have no emotion. I want to see someone who cares about me, and the neighbour and the English person and the Italian person and the Portuguese person, [etc.]”

**Engaged suburban women on political parties:** “Somehow, political parties of whatever stripe must find a way to appeal to everybody—to equally include everybody.”
were quick to share what they valued most about democracy and also identified what they wanted to see improved (See Figure 4a).

They also wanted to believe that the system can change. As one woman in the rural Canadian focus group recognized, “helplessness is not good ... there is no point not believing in [change], and I think when we believe in something, it will come true if we can create it.” Moreover, the people we spoke to were adamant that they are not asking for much. “It’s not like you’re asking or making requests [of politicians] that are all that difficult. It’s not like you’re asking them to walk on their hands,” summed up one francophone woman.

There are many possible ways to fix the problems that have been raised in this report. Some solutions may be more successful than others. And as Samara observed in the 2011 report The Outsiders’ Manifesto, the solution will not likely come in the form of a “silver bullet.” Citizens, the media, Parliament and political parties all have a role to play in reinvigorating our political system. But given the insights provided by the people we spoke to across the country, the goal for any solution should be to address the three aspects of democracy we highlight above.

With this goal in view, Samara, in partnership with a team of academics from across the country, will be developing an annual, comprehensive index to measure the health of our democracy based on what we have learned from the focus groups. Scheduled to be released in 2013, this annual index is based on the belief that the health of democracy should be evaluated on more than just electoral turnout every four years. Indeed, it is the responsiveness, inclusiveness and participatory nature of our democracy between elections that will help us understand the extent to which our democratic system leaves people feeling like outsiders.

It is our hope that this information will lead to solutions that will strengthen Canada’s democracy so that all members of the Canadian public are actually insiders.
Acknowledgements

*The Real Outsiders* report is part of a broader, large-scale project to better understand and analyze citizens’ political engagement. This report reflects only the most visible part of a technically complicated project. As such, there are many people we would like to acknowledge.

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Thank you to everyone for your support of this project.
This report incorporates data from eight focus groups (N=56 participants) ranging in size from five to nine participants. The groups were conducted in Toronto, Hamilton, Mississauga, Vancouver, Montreal and Ottawa between August and October 2011. In total, 38 women and 18 men participated. The unequal gender distribution reflects the two focus groups that were deliberately made up entirely of women.

While these focus groups are not representative of the population overall, they provide insight into the thoughts of the population we are most concerned about: politically disengaged Canadians (see below for definition). Thus, observations of the focus groups cannot and should not be used as a general observation about the Canadian population as a whole.

All focus group participants provided written informed consent, which ensures that their identities remain confidential. Participants received pecuniary compensation upon completion of the focus group; focus group meetings were a maximum of two hours in length.

Samara retained the services of a private, independent market research firm with experience recruiting focus groups. This screener used random digit dialing to collect a predefined pool of potential participants. Participants’ eligibility was further refined based on their responses to a short screening interview. This screening survey gauged their engagement with, and interest in, politics, and collected demographic information.

During initial screening, potential focus group participants were asked about their level of interest in their communities, the frequency with which they accessed news media (reading
newspapers, watching TV news), the degree of their interest in politics, their attitude toward voting and whether they voted in the last federal and provincial elections. We sought participants who were less interested in political affairs and more disengaged, but who were aware of current issues. Thus, the majority of participants selected reported reading or watching the news either daily or two to three times a week—a proxy for awareness of current issues. However, most reported that they no longer vote at all.

The less-educated youth group had a median age of 20.5 years and was recruited from Hamilton, Ontario. We selected young people with lower levels of education since studies of youth engagement almost always focus on those with university education. In this group, most participants had completed only high school, with the exception of one participant who did not complete high school and one who had obtained some university education.

Participants in the lower-income group, also recruited from Hamilton, were selected based on their socio-economic status. The average household income of the participants was between $35,000 and $40,000 a year and none had an income of more than $50,000 a year. They came to the focus group with a wide variety of educational and occupational backgrounds. One participant was unemployed, for example, while another worked in the trades.

There were two groups in Montreal: one made up of English-speaking women with low levels of interest in politics, and one made up of French-speaking women who were also less interested in politics and political affairs.

The francophone group (24 to 54 years of age) was made up of women living in various Montreal neighbourhoods. They were also a diverse group in terms of their education, which varied from some high school to completed college studies. Three participants were born outside Canada.

Participants in the English-speaking women’s group (31 to 63 years of age) were recruited from Montreal. They offered a specific opportunity to determine whether their status as minority language speakers affected their views of politics and democracy when compared with the francophone women’s group.

Participants in the urban Aboriginal peoples group (23 to 62 years of age) were located in Toronto. They had varied educational and occupational backgrounds. A few participants had some high school education, while a few had college or university education.

In Vancouver, we held a focus group with new Canadians (19 to 51 years of age). Most participants had been living in Canada for five to seven years and had emigrated from East Asian or Southeast Asian countries; there were also two people of European birth. The longest period of Canadian citizenship was 4.5 years while three participants anticipated receiving their citizenship in the next twelve months. As such, five participants noted during the focus group selection that they were ineligible to vote in the last federal and provincial elections. Most had some university education or were university graduates.

Rural Canadians (21 to 57 years of age) were drawn from smaller communities surrounding Ottawa, Ontario, such as Barrhaven, Metcalfe, Carleton Place and Alymer in the Gatineau, Quebec, region. Populations of these towns ranged from around 1,700 to around 50,000. Due to the urban location of commercial, purpose-built focus group facilities, we were limited to rural locations with convenient proximity to a major urban centre. As a result, these areas and
their inhabitants were more likely to be influenced by their metropolitan neighbours, since many of the respondents in this group commuted to work in Ottawa.

In order to provide a point of comparison with the focus groups composed of disengaged participants, we organized a single focus group drawn from the suburban community of Mississauga, Ontario, composed of seven typically engaged individuals. They were recruited on the basis of regularly voting and having significant interest in political affairs. The engaged suburban group responded to a similar set of questions as the disengaged participants. They were between 20 and 60 years old.

A semi-structured interview format was used to gain insight into respondents’ knowledge of and attitudes and opinions about issues related to politics and democracy, both in Canada and more broadly. André Turcotte, an experienced focus group facilitator and member of Samara’s research team, facilitated all the focus groups.

Respondents were first asked to describe “which words and phrases come to mind” when thinking of the words “politics” and “democracy.” Respondents were asked to describe how they view their own “role” in relation to each of these concepts.

Respondents were also presented with a set of images and asked to select which images they would associate with “politics” and “democracy.”

A final exercise examined the state of “democratic health” by asking respondents to select key attributes of Parliament, the media and public engagement according to their overall importance to Canadian democracy.