

SAMARA'S 2017 DEMOCRACY 360: THE METHODOLOGY

What is Samara's Democracy 360?

The Democracy 360 is Samara Canada's made-in-Canada report card on the state of Canada's democracy, which focuses on the relationship between citizens and political leadership.

The Democracy 360 combines 19 indicators with 38 subindicators, focused on three areas: communication, participation and political leadership. The Democracy 360 will allow Canadians to compare and assess their democracy over time. First published in 2015, the Democracy 360 will be published every two years in order to measure improvement or decline. This is the second edition, published March 28th, 2017.

Where Did the Idea for the Democracy 360 Come From?

During Samara's exit interviews in 2009, a former MP identified a niche: Canadians need a more systematic understanding of how well our democracy is working—one that doesn't rely on anecdote. The Democracy 360's conceptual design, data collection and analysis were subsequently conducted over the next few years.

Why the Name "the Democracy 360"?

The circle echoed by the title's "360" draws on several themes: to circle back and take stock, to provide a 360-degree scan, and to draw attention to a useful metaphor that highlights the interdependence between citizens and their elected leaders—the "vicious circle" and the "virtuous circle"—when it comes to building a responsive democracy.

How Did the Research Unfold?

The design, data collection, analysis and scoring process has involved advice from academics, practitioners in the civic and political engagement space, and Samara's community. A few of the methodological components and findings have also been presented at academic conferences by Samara researchers, and many elements of the Democracy 360 were tested through the research and release of Samara's Democracy Reports from 2012 to 2014.

Though the relationship between citizens, MPs and political parties has always been at the core of the Democracy 360, *how* to organize this analysis has generated a great deal of discussion. Initially, the Canadian Democratic Audit series inspired focus on measuring democratic values like representativeness, inclusiveness and participation. Though these values underpin many of the 360 indicators, we decided to organize the Democracy 360 by three areas of activity: **communication, participation and leadership**.

What Does the Democracy 360 Measure and Not Measure?

Quality: The benefit of the Democracy 360's evaluation is in its breadth, not the depth of its indicators. For many of the indicators, for example "householders," measuring the quality presents a challenge. While this level of analysis is important, it is beyond the scope of this project. Thus, the Democracy 360 focuses on whether the activity did, or did not, happen. This measurement choice was made in order to establish a benchmark. We encourage future research to probe deeper within each measure (such as quality or frequency).

All democratic players: By focusing on elected political leadership, the Democracy 360 misses the full complexity of democracy, including the work of senators, public servants, political staff, journalists and judiciary—a trade-off made to keep the scope of the Democracy 360 project feasible. Samara also believes that the relationship between the citizen and their representative is at the heart of democracy, which is why other projects, like the Samara MP Exit Interviews have also probed the nature of this representative relationship in Canada.

Municipal and Provincial Political Leadership: The Democracy 360 does not systematically evaluate provincial and municipal political leadership in the same way that it focuses on federal leadership. However, some measures of political participation and Canadians' views on politics are not specific to the federal arena. Admittedly, this is conceptually less tidy but also reflects the realities of how citizens think about politics as observed in Samara's focus group research—politics as an activity is not neatly demarcated by three levels of governance for many Canadians.

How Were the Indicators In the Democracy 360 Selected?

With a long list of potential indicators, five criteria were used to select the indicators which measure communication, participation and leadership in Canada:

1. **Accuracy:** Is the measure precise?
2. **Reliability:** Is the measure an accurate and consistent capture of the activity?
3. **Feasibility:** With respect to finite time and resources, can the data be collected and analyzed?
4. **Replicable:** Can the measure be captured again in a similar fashion?
5. **Dynamic:** Is the indicator's change (improvement or decline) measurable?

Where Did the Democracy 360 Data Come From?

The Democracy 360 brings together a number of data sources, including Samara's public opinion research, as well as data external to Samara, such as from the House of Commons and Elections Canada. The data in the 2017 Democracy 360 dates from 2011 to 2016. There are four general sources of data in report card:

1. **2016 Samara Citizens' Survey:** Public opinion data in the Democracy 360 was drawn from the 2016 Samara Citizens' Survey, which was conducted in English and French using an online sample of 4003 Canadian residents over 18 years of age living in ten provinces. Responses were weighted to ensure they reflect a national representative sample of Canadians. Weighting was done with respect to gender, region, age group, whether respondents were born inside or outside of Canada, whether respondents spoke English, French, or another language at home, and self-reported voter turnout. Region was broken down by 800 respondents in Atlantic Canada, 800 in Quebec, 800 in Ontario, 800 in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and 800 in British Columbia. Data was collected between September 23 and October 6, 2016. The survey has a credibility interval of 2.7 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Samara worked with Professors Peter Loewen (University of Toronto) and Daniel Rubenson (Ryerson University) to complete the data collection, cleaning, and weighting.

The survey was conducted using Qualtrics.

Please request the Samara 360 Survey Appendix for precise data manipulation, survey question wording, and unweighted frequencies [info@samaracanada.com].

2. **House of Commons Records and Statistics Canada**

The Members' Expenditures Reports from the [third](#) and [fourth](#) quarters of 2015 to 2016 and the [first](#) and [second](#) quarters of 2016 to 2017 were used to determine the value of the Householder indicator. The reported value reflects the percentage of MPs in the 42nd Parliament that spent money on householders during the reporting periods. The Members' Expenditure Report combines funds spent in Member's Office Budget and Resources published by the House of Commons to determine the total amount spent on householders. The Government of Canada makes MPs' Expenditure data publicly available in XML (see links above). A Ruby script was used to transform the data to CSV format. The script can be found [here](#). The total number of MPs included in the analysis was 334, due to vacancies.

Parliament Diversity Data

Demographic information about MPs was compiled using information on parl.gc.ca, including [age](#), [gender](#), [place of birth](#), and [Indigenous status](#). Visible minority status is not formally reported by the House of Commons, and was determined with data independently collected by [Andrew Griffith](#). Age was also not universally available on

parl.gc.ca. In the case of missing data, Samara Canada researchers called MP offices to try to obtain MPs' ages. The data was updated in January 2017.

Using the demographic data, Samara created a Proportionality Index score for each group. This score compares how close a group's representation in the House of Commons matches their proportion in Canada's population. Canadian population figures were drawn from Statistic Canada's 2011 Census.

A score of 100 equals perfect parity between a group's presence among MPs in the House and their share of the Canadian population.

3. Publicly Accessible Data

Members of Parliament on Social Media

The data on MPs' presence on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat was collected in February 2017 by Mark Bleviss at Full Duplex. Full Duplex used political party websites, MP websites, Google search and searches of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr and LinkedIn to determine which online properties each MP has established. Not all MP online properties are in active use.

4. Elections Canada

For voter turnout by province and age, Elections Canada's ["Voter turnout by age and sex"](#) report was used. For age and province, Elections Canada uses the number of Canadian citizens over the voting age as the denominator in calculations rather than the number of registered voters, recognizing that the registry list is incomplete.

Why Create a Composite Score?

Bringing together indicators into an overall composite value, index or "score" is an inherently subjective activity—read Malcolm Gladwell on this point. Inevitably, there are a number of choices to be made; whether certain indicators should be given greater weight because they matter more, or if all indicators can all be treated the same. Seldom is there an obvious or "correct" way to combine such values that leads to complete agreement.

Despite the challenges associated with composite scores, they can still be worthwhile constructs because of the other advantages they offer, such as ease of comprehension and comparison.

Comprehension: With over twenty indicators and sub-indicators, each indicator on their own may mean little to the next, or, in other words, it is difficult to see the overall picture with several data points in play. Bringing the values together can assist with this challenge. With that said, the combination can also obscure differences among indicator values (especially large ones), which is why Samara published offers the sub-indicators online and in the appendix.

Comparison: A composite score is a powerful tool for comparison. Some indicators may improve or decline in any given year, but these changes provide little insight into the overall picture. A composite score can reveal whether, on the whole, there is improvement or decline over time. As well, when the three areas (communication, participation and political leadership) each have a composite score, it is easier to see which area is faring better than another.

How Was a Composite Score Generated?

Each of the indicators in the Democracy 360 are scored out of 100; the lower the score, the worse the result. While the scale allows for extremes—a perfect score of 100 or zero—it’s unlikely that some indicators will ever reach the upper and lower limits. Nevertheless, the use of a 100-point scale across all indicators provides consistency and reduces subjectivity, compared to creating a uniquely adjusted point-scale sensitive to the unique variation in each indicator.

The structure of the Democracy 360 is nested and hierarchical. The three areas (communication, participation and leadership), as well as the indicators within each area, were weighted equally. The weight applied to each indicator is dependent on the number of indicators within each area. As for the indicators with sub-indicators, the indicator reflects the average of all the sub-indicators.

The Democracy 360’s weighting scheme is based in conceptual rather than statistical theory—or, in other words, it focuses on the three key areas of democracy that Samara has identified. However, researchers at Samara did conduct a factor analysis of the indicators that rely on survey data alone, since this process required the omission of the three other data sources, the results were revealing rather than directive.

Given the Democracy 360’s conceptual focus, Samara determined that each category would be treated as equally important. This meant the composite score applies an equal weighting scheme to each of the three areas and an equal weighting scheme within each area to each of its indicators.

Scores for each of the three areas (communication, participation and political leadership) are calculated by averaging the scores of the area’s indicators. The three areas (each weighted equally) were added to create a total score out of 100.

$$\textit{Communication} + \textit{Participation} + \textit{Leadership} = \textit{Samara 360}$$

$$\textit{Score out of 33} + \textit{Score out of 33} + \textit{Score out of 33} = \textit{Samara 360 (out of 100)}$$

Category	Number of Indicators	Sub-Indicators	Percentage
Communication	5	9	59%
Participation	5	13	51%
Leadership	9	17	48%
<i>Total</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>53%</i>

Why Give a Letter Grade In the Democracy 360?

Advice from communications experts suggested a report card component would be a valuable tool to help Canadians understand the data. This reflects a trade-off between adding another layer of subjectivity to the data, but also ensuring the research is made accessible and useful to Canadians.

How Was a Letter Grade Assigned?

Deciding on a letter grade scale was more complicated than simply applying the grading system familiar to most school settings (e.g. A above 80%, F below 50%). Communications advice suggested that an overly negative report card (with several Fs), year over year, would be discouraging and risk greater alienation from the political arena and political participation if Canadians do not see hope for improvement. The advice also suggested the report card would be less effective as a communications tool if the grades were unlikely to change year over year.

This meant Samara needed a letter grade scale where (1) the value of an F grade would need to be lower than the commonly used 50% threshold and (2) each letter grade should cover a fairly narrow numerical range so that there would be greater sensitivity to changes in the letter grades assigned.

To design this grade system, Samara's researchers first sought some outside input from a small group of experts, practitioners and engaged citizens in the democratic space to help determine where the Democracy 360 scores are now, in relation to where they could be if Canada's democracy was stronger in 10 years time. Specifically, they each provided their opinion of what a "great" score for each indicator in roughly 10 years would look like. The group did not have access to the current Democracy 360 values though they were provided some historical and comparative data as reference points.

What Is a “Good” Grade?

Indicator values provided by the outside consultants were combined using the same weighing scheme for the composite scores. Overall, their input suggested a goalpost for the Democracy 360 of 60%, which is 12 percentage points higher than the 2014 score of 48%.

The goalposts for the three areas (communication, participation and leadership) helped to establish the upper limit for the letter grade scale. For example, the 70% goalpost for communication would correspond with the highest grade on this scale (A+).

Inherently, determining the rest of the scale values was arbitrary—but was driven by a desire to have each letter value be cover about the same numerical range (that is to say two to three points).

Grading Scale

Letter grade	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
Scale	65 or higher	64-63	62-60	59-58	57-55	54-53	52-50	49-48	47-45	44-43	42-40	39-38	37 or lower

An alternative grading system which used a unique grading scale for each category also held merit. This approach would have allowed each category to be graded on the basis of a different “great.” In practice, this would mean that an A+ in leadership would equal 47% whereas an A+ in communication would equal 70%. However, as the primary aim of the report card is a communications tool, the desire to keep the design simpler resulted in the choice to develop one letter grade system for the three areas and overall score. This means that a “great” report card does not necessarily include all A+s. But perhaps that is realistic—perfection need not be the enemy of improvement.

In the end, we hope the Democracy 360 report card serves as a useful tool for all Canadians to better understand how our democracy is working. If you have any additional questions about the methodology, please contact info@samaraCanada.com.