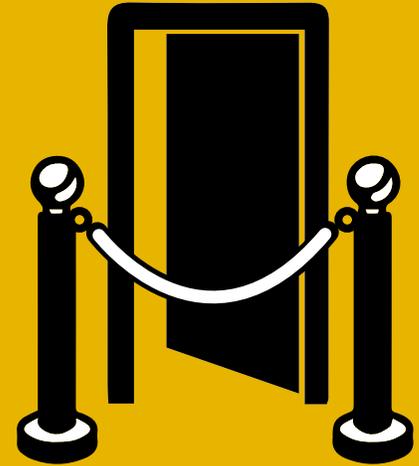


By Invitation Only: Canadians' Perceptions of Political Parties



KEY MESSAGES

Canadians express serious dissatisfaction with political parties:

- ↪ More than 50% of Canadians said parties' #1 priority should be "reaching out to Canadians," but awarded the lowest grade in that role.
- ↪ Across parties' six core areas of responsibility, Canadians award grades of D through F.
- ↪ 69% of survey respondents say parties and candidates are only interested in their votes, not their opinions.
- ↪ Those involved in political parties hold similar views about parties' priorities as other Canadians, but award slightly higher grades.

Political parties dominate Canadians' understanding of politics. Partisan debate often frames the news coverage out of Ottawa, and most of us consider party and leader preferences when casting a ballot.¹ After the election is over, parties structure how governments form and legislatures function. Even Members of Parliament acknowledge the incredible influence of their party on their daily life. One former MP said, "It was the challenge of deciding to become an MP. I've always been an independent thinker

[but] the majority of [political] life was governed by someone else and you had to adhere to the [party] policy."²

This report explores Canadians' perceptions of political parties from a new angle—what Canadians think parties *should* be doing, and how well they are performing those roles. It is intended to spark a conversation about what role these organizations—so vital to democracy—could (and should) be playing in our political landscape.

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

During elections, parties select their candidates, present policy platforms and encourage citizens to vote. Beyond elections, parties also provide an entry-point for citizens in the political process and a local presence through riding associations. As a result of their important functions, they benefit from generous public subsidies including tax credits to donors and election expense reimbursements.

From an accumulation of academic research on political parties' functions, Samara has identified six key roles in three areas:

ELECTIONS:

1. Recruiting candidates and competing in elections
2. Encouraging people to vote

ENGAGEMENT:

3. Hearing ideas from party members
4. Reaching out to Canadians so their views can be represented

POLICY:

5. Coming up with new policy ideas and solutions
6. Explaining what the party stands for

THE RESULTS

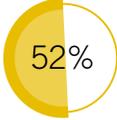
In a national survey of 1807 people, conducted by Samara in 2013, Canadians were asked to rank the importance of the six roles and then evaluate parties' performance (see chart "What do Canadians want from parties?"). Canadians awarded parties barely passing (D) or failing (F) grades on all six roles.

Roles involving elections—"recruiting candidates and competing in elections" and "encouraging people to vote"—received the best grades. These roles reflect the parties' most public functions, which are covered extensively by the media. Elections are also when parties expend the tens of millions of dollars they've accumulated from supporters and public subsidies.

Despite this, in the eyes of Canadians, "recruiting candidates and competing in elections" is viewed as the least important job for political parties, with only 4% of Canadians ranking it the number one priority. This may suggest citizens see the focus on winning elections coming at the expense of hearing their views: in the same survey, a full 69% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "Candidates and political parties are interested only in people's votes, not their opinions."

What do Canadians want from parties?

In a national survey, Samara asked Canadians how important certain roles should be to political parties, and then how well parties currently performed each role.

Ranking of parties' roles by Canadians		Average grade awarded by Canadians	Percent of Canadians who ranked the role #1
#1	 Reaching out to Canadians so their views can be represented	F	 52%
#2	 Coming up with new policy ideas and solutions	F	 14%
#3	 Encouraging people to vote	D	 13%
#4	 Explaining what the party stands for	D	 11%
#5	 Hearing ideas from party members	F	 6%
#6	 Recruiting candidates and competing in elections	D	 4%

*see Methodology and Appendix for a full breakdown of the grades awarded and how the questions were asked.

JOB NUMBER ONE

Of the six roles outlined, over half of Canadians (52%) believe parties' most important job should be one where parties engage with and listen to the public: "reaching out to Canadians so their views can be represented" (a trend shared across regions, ages, genders and party identification). This is also the role that received the lowest evaluation—a failing grade of 43%.

Earlier research from Samara showed that Canadians believe a Member of Parliament's most important job was also to "represent the views of constituents," and again, awarded MPs a failing grade for performance in this area.³

Together, these two findings send Canada's political leadership—regardless of party—a dire message: Canadians want to be heard and represented by parties, and they firmly believe this is not happening.

A PATH FORWARD

Parties are often accused of being closed-door organizations, made up of unelected party insiders who make decisions about the party, Parliament and the future of our country. Even Members of Parliament interviewed for Samara's earlier research described the decisions made by parties as unclear, unaccountable and often contradictory.⁴

Canadians instinctively know there's a party going on and they're not invited, leading them to logically conclude that if parties are not interested in them, then these organizations and the people within them must be interested only in themselves. This reinforces the branding problem that too often characterizes politicians and turns Canadians away from politics.

WHAT DO PARTY MEMBERS THINK?

Those Canadians who have been members of a federal political party in the last 10 years share the same views as average Canadians when it comes to ranking the most and least important roles of political parties.

Though party members were less emphatic about parties' top job (only 39% ranked "reaching out to Canadians" number one in terms of importance, in comparison to 52% of all respondents), they still—like non-party people—give this role the lowest grade for performance. They also award parties the highest grades on elections-centered roles—just as Canadians outside of political parties do.

However, party members award slightly higher performance grades than non-party members overall, handing out mostly C minuses. So even those who know parties more intimately award quite low marks for performance.

(See the Appendix for detailed figures.)

Canadians are choosing not to vote in record numbers. They're not becoming members of parties and their reported levels of trust in political leaders continue to decline. Indeed, Samara's 2013 survey revealed that only 35% agree that "political parties offer citizens a way to get involved in politics."⁵

The survey results show that Canadians value engagement, suggesting that those parties that genuinely try to hear, involve and represent them will be rewarded in the form of votes, fundraising dollars and party members.

But to see themselves involved in a party, Canadians need an invitation that will get them past that closed door. At the moment, parties' operations and priorities are often opaque, even to those arguably inside the system, such as MPs.

This transformation will take time and will not be easy, yet there are simple first steps parties could take to open that door and let in some light. For example, they could make certain pieces of information public and easily accessible:

OPEN MEMBERSHIP: Parties could release their **membership numbers** to allow Canadians to see the quantity and diversity of party members. Seeing Canadians like themselves involved in parties could encourage Canadians to join.

OPEN SCHEDULES: Making the **dates and locations of local riding association meetings** widely available—along with explaining how Canadians can get involved and even run for office—would show Canadians that they are invited to the party.

OPEN FINANCIALS: Parties that go one layer deeper in their **financial reporting** would show how they allocate resources against their key roles. (In exchange for the public dollars they receive, parties provide an annual financial return to Elections Canada, although currently it is nearly impossible for the public to discern from public records how much parties invest in critical areas such as policy development and public engagement, particularly between elections.)

CONCLUSION

Parties are rare national organizations that have a local presence in communities across Canada, capture regular media attention, and have a mandate to talk to Canadians about the future of our country. Those that respond to Canadians' challenge to make citizens feel heard may be rewarded over the long-term with more diverse—and better—policy ideas and greater financial and electoral support.

People are the building blocks of political parties, and the sidelines are no place to wait for a perfect political party to emerge. Canadians have to step forward and reclaim a place in parties by valuing involvement rather than be suspicious or dismissive of it, and by rewarding parties that attempt to practise politics differently.

Parties are a shared political resource. If parties ail, so will our politics. We all have a stake in asking them to do more, rather than washing our hands of them. ^

¹ Anderson, Cameron D. and Laura B. Stephenson, "The Puzzle of Elections and Voting in Canada," in *Voting Behaviour in Canada*, ed. Cameron D. Anderson and Laura B. Stephenson. UBC Press, 2010.

² "It's My Party: Parliamentary Dysfunction Reconsidered," Samara MP Exit Interview Report #3. Samara, 2011.

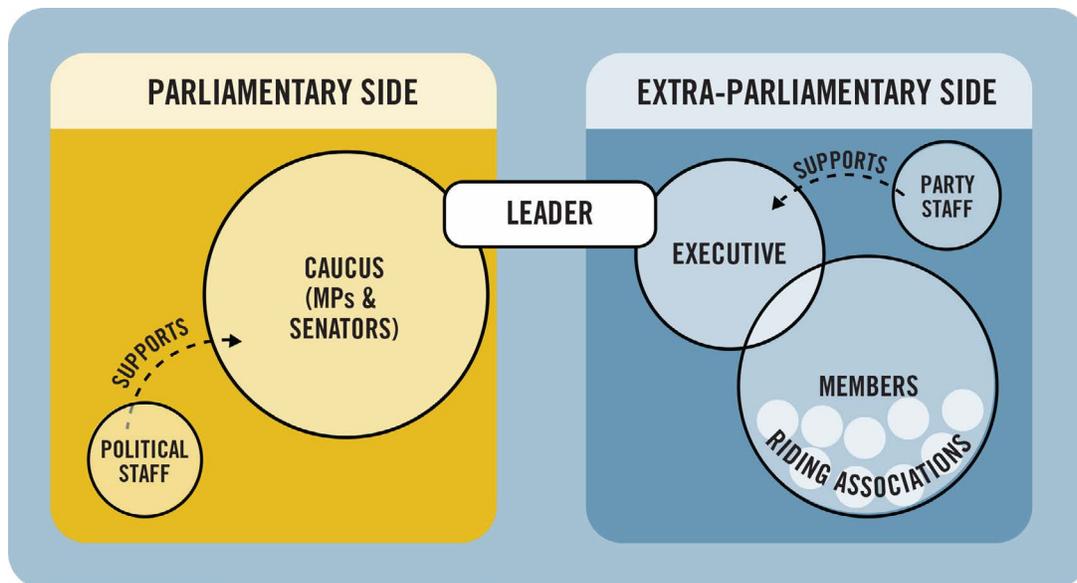
³ "Who's the Boss?: Canadians' Views on their Democracy," Samara Democracy Report #4. Samara, 2012.

⁴ "It's My Party" *ibid*.

⁵ The number 35% includes both "agree" and "strongly agree" responses. In contrast, 29% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Finally, 37% indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed. See Appendix for full details.

PARTY PEOPLE

Political parties are groups of people with shared views, who form organizations that create or influence government by competing in elections. To have candidates on a ballot in a federal election, parties must be registered with Elections Canada. Parties can organize themselves in a variety of ways. Here's an example:



The **party leader** is the head of both the parliamentary caucus and the party. He or she makes key decisions about the direction of the party and platform. Party members typically vote to select a leader.

Parliamentary caucus is made up of those Parliamentarians (MPs, and sometimes Senators) from a single party who have the leader's permission to participate. It convenes weekly behind closed doors and allows members to bring forward views privately.

Political staff are paid for by Parliament and serve the MP that hires them. They hold a variety of jobs in both the local constituency office and on Parliament Hill.

The **Executive** is made up of the party leader and other representatives selected through election or appointment to lead internal party operations.

Party staff are paid by the party to oversee its day-to-day operations, including fundraising, recruitment of party members, research and election readiness.

Party members participate in leadership review and selection, local candidate selection and policy conventions. They are people, as young as 14, who pay an annual fee to the party (permanent residents are also eligible to join).

Riding Associations (Electoral District Associations) are local party organizations that oversee the nomination of the local party candidate at election time. Between elections, they fundraise, keep local members engaged, and provide a local presence for the national party.

For a more detailed understanding of a party's structure and division of responsibilities, read documents such as the parties' constitutions and by-laws, which are available on party websites.

About Samara

Samara is a non-partisan charity that is dedicated to improving political participation in Canada.

To advance our goals, Samara performs surveys and other research, writes reports and books, conducts media interviews, speaks at conferences and produces curriculum materials for schools and universities.

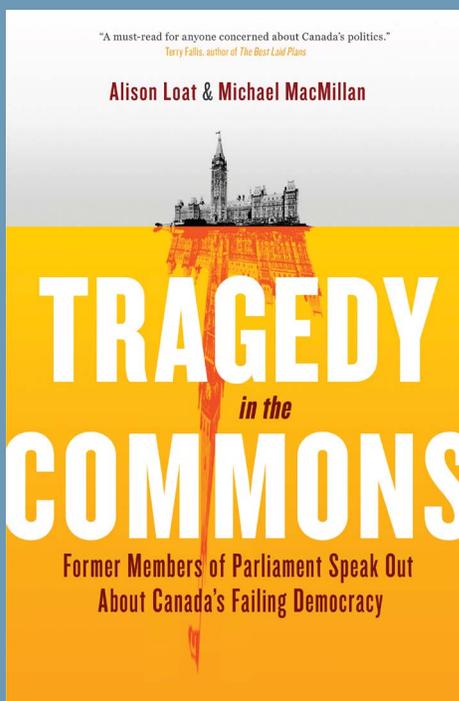
The findings from our MP Exit Interview project and Democracy Reports project received extensive national and local media coverage, and are regularly referenced by columnists and decision makers.

Samara's Democracy Reports are a series designed to shine a light on Canada's democratic system and increase Canadians' understanding of politics. These reports investigate commonly held assumptions, provoke questions and elevate the discussion on the health of political and democratic participation in Canada.

Previous Democracy Reports are available at www.samaracanada.com.

- [Member of Parliament Website Analysis](#) gauges how well Members of Parliament engage with the public on their websites.
- [“Lightweights?”](#) examines how Canadians participate politically beyond voting.
- [“Who’s the Boss?”](#) offers a performance review for Members of Parliament.
- [“Lost in Translation or Just Lost?”](#) compares Canadians priorities to what was discussed in the House of Commons.
- [“The Real Outsiders”](#) examines the attitudes of less-engaged Canadians towards politics and democracy.

These reports will culminate in the Samara Index, which focuses on the relationship between citizens and the political process that governs Canadians.



Watch for

TRAGEDY IN THE COMMONS

a ground-breaking book on political leadership from Samara co-founders Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan, coming April 15th, 2014, from Random House Canada.

**A must-read for anyone
concerned about
Canada's politics.**

Terry Fallis
Author of *The Best Laid Plans*

Methodology

The 2013 Samara Citizens' Survey builds on a similar survey fielded in 2012, which was designed with guidance from a team of academics from universities across Canada. The survey research was conducted in English and French using an online sample of 1807 Canadian residents over 18 years of age living in ten provinces. The survey was fielded between August 22 and 29, 2013. Samara oversampled young Canadians aged 18 to 30.

Responses were weighted to ensure they reflect a national representative sample of Canadians, in consideration of gender, region, age, as well as whether respondents were born inside or outside of Canada, whether respondents spoke English, French or another language at home, and self-reported voter turnout. This weighting was informed by the 2011 Canadian census and verified voter turnout figures from Elections Canada.

Samara worked with Professors Peter Loewen (University of Toronto) and Daniel Rubenson (Ryerson University) to complete the data collection, cleaning and weighting. Values reported were rounded to the nearest whole number. "Don't know" responses were coded as missing. Performance scores were converted from a score out of 10 to a score out of 100. Please see the appendix for precise survey question wording and weighted frequencies.

In constructing the party report card, Samara translated the percentage based scores (collected via the Samara Citizens' Survey) for the party roles into traditional letter grades using the following scale: A+ (90%–100%), A (85%–90%), A– (80%–84%), B+ (75%–79%), B (70%–74%), B– (65%–69%), C (60%–64%), C– (55%–59%), D (50%–54%), F (0%–49%). Grade F is the sole failing mark.

Please contact Samara for further details about the survey, methodology or analysis.

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Appendix

Precise survey question wording provided. Results reflect the weighted frequencies from the 2013 Samara Citizens' Survey and are rounded to the nearest whole number. N denotes the number of survey responses involved in each calculation. Not all differences among groups can be said to be representative of the Canadian population. Please contact Samara for significance analysis.

	All Canadians		Non-Party Members		Party Members	
How important do you think each activity should be to Canadian political parties? Please rank from 1 (most important) to 6 (least important)	% Ranking Most Important	<i>N</i>	% Ranking Most Important	<i>N</i>	% Ranking Most Important	<i>N</i>
Reaching out to Canadians so their views can be represented	52%	1801	54%	1575	39%	185
Coming up with new policy ideas and solutions	14%	1801	14%	1575	17%	185
Encouraging people to vote	13%	1801	13%	1575	16%	185
Explaining what the party stands for	11%	1801	11%	1575	10%	185
Hearing ideas from party members	6%	1801	5%	1575	13%	185
Recruiting candidates and competing in elections	4%	1801	3%	1575	5%	185
Now please rate the performance of Canadian political parties on each of the following. Please rank from 0 (extremely low) to 10 (extremely high)	Grade Awarded	<i>N</i>	Grade Awarded	<i>N</i>	Grade Awarded	<i>N</i>
Reaching out to Canadians so their views can be represented	43%	1783	42%	1558	49%	185
Coming up with new policy ideas and solutions	46%	1790	45%	1564	52%	185
Encouraging people to vote	54%	1775	54%	1552	59%	183
Explaining what the party stands for	50%	1778	49%	1554	57%	183
Hearing ideas from party members	49%	1784	48%	1559	55%	185
Recruiting candidates and competing in elections	53%	1786	52%	1561	61%	185
Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:						
Candidates and political parties are interested only in people's votes, not their opinions.						
Strongly agree	32%		33%		34%	
Agree	37%		37%		27%	
Neither agree nor disagree	20%		20%		21%	
Disagree	7%		7%		12%	
Strongly disagree	3%		3%		6%	
<i>N</i>	1730		1514		183	
Political parties offer citizens a way to get involved with politics						
Strongly agree	6%		5%		15%	
Agree	29%		28%		41%	
Neither agree nor disagree	36%		36%		25%	
Disagree	20%		21%		11%	
Strongly disagree	9%		9%		9%	
<i>N</i>	1696		1482		180	
Have you been a member of a federal political party in the last 10 years?						
Yes	11%		Referred to as "Party Members" in this report			
No	89%		Referred to as "Non-Party Members"			
<i>N</i>	1760					