

## OPINION

# This election, vote for a Parliament that will defend, reinvigorate democracy

By KENDALL ANDERSON (/AUTHOR/KENDALL-ANDERSON) OCT. 17, 2019

Our political system is set up for short-term gain not long-term planning—politicians know they're always on trial for their jobs.



Representative democracy, starting on Oct. 22nd, needs to be rethought, reinvigorated, and reimagined. *Photograph courtesy of the House of Commons' Twitter*

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When Oct. 22nd dawns, no matter which party wins, somewhere between 60 and 65 per cent of Canadians who voted will feel like they lost.

And with voter turnout at an average of 63 per cent for the last five elections, likely another third of Canadians will not even have played the game.

Newly elected politicians need to ask themselves: What are the long-term effects of having little more than one-fifth of Canadians on the “winning” side?

When the Samara Centre for Democracy surveyed Canadians about democracy, 46 per cent said they thought it was weakening and another 23 per cent said they didn’t know. Across the world, people are questioning if representative democracy is up to the task of tackling today’s big public issues. Can democracy solve climate change while also creating better economic conditions for all? *Does democracy make my life better?*

Around the world, signs of this weakened state include increased polarization, and low participation in the public realm by citizens—not just a long-term decline in voting, but also declining involvement in community groups and political parties. We also see it when governments cede their responsibilities for delivering the public good to private actors, like charities and corporations.

In this clicktivist moment, people often feel they must go around democracy—or at least around political structures—to solve their problems. Unfortunately, that efficiency comes at the expense of universality, equity, and accountability. This creates a patchwork of solutions that are not equally available to all Canadians, and which are not subject to public expectations of accountability and transparency.

Over the past decade, the Samara Centre for Democracy has conducted almost 300 hours of exit interviews with former Members of Parliament. These conversations have shown us that our political system is set up for short-term gain, not long-term planning—politicians know they’re always on trial for their jobs.

Representative democracy is meant to be a midway point between an elite-led, autocratic decision-making, and direct democracy. It should offer a balance between efficiency and indecision, between centralized leadership with clear lines of accountability, and consensus-based leadership with shared accountability.

But representative democracy, starting on Oct. 22nd, needs to be rethought, reinvigorated, and reimagined.

While reforming our electoral system has often been put forward as one way to reimagine parliamentary democracy—and worldwide, studies have shown that more proportional systems tend to see greater satisfaction in democracy—there are also practical solutions to increase satisfaction with democracy, starting with those in power listening to the 80 per cent of people who did not vote for them.

This election, Samara recommends nine such ideas (<https://www.samaracanada.com/samara-in-the-classroom/stronger-democracy-platform>). These ideas are based on research, they're cross-partisan and not very expensive to implement.

To develop independent and thoughtful representatives, this next Parliament should lessen the chokehold on MPs by ending the whips' lists of approved speakers and creating a parallel parliamentary chamber, where complex and long-term issues can be discussed civilly between MPs. Committees should be empowered and cross-partisan—no longer should committee reports sit on a dusty shelf. Omnibus bills should be eliminated or restricted to one area of influence, and MPs—and media, too—should be allowed better opportunities to scrutinize the budget and the estimates.

To ensure that parties are engines of political engagement, parties need to regain Canadians' trust by bringing themselves under meaningful privacy legislation and making their nomination races more transparent and predictable. And let's insist that all parties take the Reform Act votes (which are required by law, but which several parties failed to hold in 2015), and adopt the provisions that would empower the caucus over the leader.

Finally, we need to find new and robust ways to engage Canadians—so they have a chance to set the agenda between elections. Currently many Canadians will not have voted for the governing party—so how else can they feel heard? We should require parliamentary debates on petitions that gather enough support (with a mechanism to exclude the old Boaty McBoatface argument). We need to empower MPs and government to become better listeners and communicators, so that

Canadians in every riding can be brought into the process, and no longer sit on the sidelines, shaking their heads. Most important of all we need to invest in lifelong civic learning beyond school.

In this last week of the election, the question should not be which party will “win,” but how Parliament, under the leadership of the governing party, should work to defend and reinvigorate democracy.

The Samara Centre for Democracy calls on this next Parliament—however it’s made up—to take the threats to democracy seriously and act now.

*Kendall Anderson is the new executive director at the Samara Centre for Democracy.*

*The Hill Times*

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