

EMBARGOED until 12:01am, September 22, 2020

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With MPs deeply divided on how to convene pandemic Parliament, new report charts a way forward

Survey finds MPs from all parties agree the House of Commons should meet regularly and all Members should vote on important legislation

Toronto, September 22, 2020—With a Throne Speech and new session of Parliament just days away, MPs have struggled to find basic agreement on how the House of Commons should resume its operations. A new study finds that MPs are most divided on the question of whether to implement some form of virtual Parliament, but they agree that the Commons must meet regularly to scrutinize the Government, and that all MPs should be able to vote on key legislative decisions.

In late spring, the Samara Centre for Democracy surveyed MPs about how the pandemic has affected their jobs, what they thought of the Commons' emergency sittings and the Special Committee on COVID-19, and which working arrangements they would support for the Commons to sit more regularly. The results of the survey are captured in **Representation in Isolation: The Samara Centre's 2020 Member of Parliament Survey**, and represent the opinions of 123 MPs, or 36% of the Commons.

Key findings include:

1. MPs' roles drastically changed during the first months of the pandemic, as Parliament adjourned and constituency work skyrocketed. MPs and their staff took up many responsibilities that usually fall to the public service, and became broadcasters of real-time information for their communities.
2. MPs have rapidly adopted new digital technologies to stay in touch with their constituents, stakeholders, and colleagues.
3. More than **80%** of MPs agreed that the House of Commons must find a way to meet regularly, but most also recognized that business as usual isn't possible.
4. **Two-thirds** of MPs agreed that major legislative decisions should be voted on by all Members, rather than the small subset of MPs who participated in Commons votes in the spring.
5. Nevertheless, there is a deep partisan divide over the question of implementing some form of virtual Parliament, with **96%** of Conservative MPs opposed to moving most of Parliament's important business online, and the other parties largely in favour.

"Given how hard it's been for MPs to reach an agreement on how the pandemic Parliament should work, it's heartening to see that they're aligned on core values," notes Adelina Petit-Vouriot, Research Associate at the Samara Centre and lead author of the study. "But just how much of the House of Commons should go virtual remains a major sticking point."

Based on MPs' experiences during the first months of the pandemic, their assessment of Parliament, and their own suggestions for how the House of Commons can resume sitting, the Samara Centre offers three urgent recommendations:

1. The House of Commons or Library of Parliament should be resourced to provide more digital tools and training for MPs and their staff, so they can better engage with constituents during physical distancing and beyond.
2. The government should make sure MPs are equipped with up-to-date information about its new programs and public health measures, given MPs' role in keeping constituents informed and supported.
3. Political parties must finally land a workable compromise for the Commons to meet regularly, and for all MPs to vote on important legislation. A hybrid virtual Parliament, with a significant contingent of MPs based in Ottawa and others participating through roll-call remote voting, offers the best prospect for getting the work of the Commons back on track quickly.

"The pandemic response needs daily oversight, but so does the rest of the Government's activities," adds Dr. Michael Morden, Interim Executive Director at the Samara Centre. "Parliament needs to scale up rapidly. Our best bet is to design a hybrid virtual Parliament, but one that takes its critics seriously, and reflects the symbolic importance of the physical House of Commons."

Please contact José Ramón Martí if you would like to receive an advance copy of **Representation in Isolation** or request an interview with a Samara Centre spokesperson.

**The report will be available at 12:01 a.m. on September 22, 2020, at:
samaracanada.com/representation-in-isolation**

About the Methodology

The survey was conducted online from May 11 to June 26. It was available in English and French, and answers were submitted anonymously. Of the 130 MPs who started the survey, 123 completed it. Responses from the 123 completed surveys were used for the analysis in this report. This was the Samara Centre's fifth survey of current MPs.

About the Samara Centre for Democracy

The Samara Centre for Democracy is a non-partisan charity dedicated to strengthening Canada's democracy, making it more accessible, responsive, and inclusive. The Samara Centre produces action-based research—as well as tools and resources for active citizens and public leaders—designed to engage Canadians in their democracy. To learn more about how our research and educational programming is building better politics and a better Canada, visit samaracanada.com.

