



In an age without mediators, many feel left out of the political process

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What do some poor, uneducated, rural, aboriginal or immigrant Canadians have in common with members of Parliament? All are outsiders.

So concludes a new study of why Canadians don't vote. There are lessons in it for everyone who wonders how you sustain a democracy in an age of declining civic engagement.

Samara, a new organization dedicated to increasing active citizenship, conducted a series of focus groups over the summer and fall in which they asked people who considered themselves outside the political process why they felt that way. The respondents were, for the most part, less affluent, less educated, more rural or more likely to be aboriginal or immigrant, and they self-identified as non-voters. They said that whenever they tried to find a daycare space, to get into a job training program, to get a speed bump installed on a dangerously busy street – to engage, in other words, with government – they gave up in frustration.

So they washed their hands of the whole thing, including voting.

This contrasted with a control group of sorts: people who voted, who tackled bureaucracies, who set about making change, and who succeeded. These engaged citizens found the sclerosis of government no less frustrating, but they had the education, the time and the confidence to overcome obstacles.

“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,” the report concluded.

'Twas ever thus. But the authors noted with bemusement that the outsiders who had given up on the system used the same expressions and voiced the same sentiments as former members of Parliament who had been interviewed in an earlier study. MPs, too, had tried to engage the bureaucracy, to effect change, to influence the real decision-makers. More often than not, they left public life frustrated. Even the insiders feel like outsiders now.

The poor and less educated have always been on the outside looking in, but at least in the past the great majority of people, regardless of class, voted, which is the easiest and most visible way to engage with government. But now only between 50 and 60 per cent of voters bother to cast a ballot at federal or provincial elections, and the number continues to decline. What's happening?



It may be that, in the past, working and lower-middle-class voters had more social levers. They had the union, or the church, or the service club, or the PTA. Their MPP or MP saw themselves as spokesmen for their constituents within caucus.

MPs still do valuable constituency work. But they have lost much of their ability to mediate between voters and the all-powerful Centre in government. Beyond that, churches are in decline, and unions, and organizations like Rotary or Kiwanis. Without mediation, society is splintering into those who have the will and skill to engage with and influence government, and those who just carry on.

The good news is that even the most disengaged voters remain, according to Samara, enthusiastic about democracy itself. “Democracy’s great; it’s the politics I hate,” is how the authors summed it up.

Maybe we need to bend our minds to finding new mediators. Who replaces the priest? What is the next Lions Club? What can an MP be, if he can no longer be simply “a good constituency man?”

There are no easy answers to this. But if you have thoughts, please feel free to e-mail (jibbitson@globeandmail.com) or add a comment to the online version of this column. I’ll post, and comment on, the most thoughtful responses online later Monday.