



Alienated from what? By whom?

Are voters disengaged from politics? It depends what you mean by disengaged, and by politics, writes Andrew Potter

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But even if these disparate outsiders are sincere, it isn't clear that politics is the true source of their discontent. The Samara report looks at the "pathways to powerlessness" articulated by the members of the focus groups, most of which involve someone trying to work with the system and getting shut out, leading to disengagement. One woman tells of trying to get a cooking school credential recognized by Employment Quebec, another story is about a parent trying to get a bus route extended to her house, while someone else wanted a speed bump installed on their street.

These sorts of things are important, but they are "political" only in the most expansive definition of the term. Almost without exception, the anecdotes that led to disengagement are fables of bureaucratic obstruction and institutional sclerosis, not political greed and perfidy. As the Samara reports points out, this is because most people don't distinguish much between local and national issues, or between bureaucrats and politicians, or between opposition parties and the government. In the mind of the disengaged public, it seems that these are mere facets of one big system that is as cold, hard, and impenetrable as a diamond.

All of this is good news for politicians themselves, because it means that for all the incessant fussing about bad behavior in Parliament, no one apart from newspaper columnists much cares. What people want out of their politicians are everyday things like day care spots and speed bumps. If anything, Samara's report suggests that greater investment in staffing for frontline services at the local level could be a relatively easy route to greater democratic satisfaction and increased voter turnout at all levels of government.

As for the more philosophical point about how Canadians value democracy but politics turns them off it, you could say exactly the same things about justice and lawyers. Everyone loves justice, but everyone hates lawyers.

Or how about lamb chops verses abattoirs? Politics is the process of democracy, law is the process of justice, and the abattoir is the process of getting to lamp chops. It isn't clear that any big conclusions can or should be drawn from this, apart from a variation on Bismarck's famous line: public life is like sausage-making. It's better not to see it in action.