

Dreschel: Are Canadians political lightweights?

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Talk of citizen engagement may be all the rage in Hamilton, but a new survey suggests most Canadians couldn't care less.

Only 40 per cent of Canadians discussed a political or social issue in person or by phone in the past year, according to a nation-wide poll conducted by Samara, a charitable think-tank dedicated to improving political participation.

"I was most discouraged by the low level of discussion," said Alison Loat, Samara's executive director.

In addition, only 17 per cent of those surveyed say they shared political information using social media, such as Facebook and Twitter.

While 30 per cent report using email or instant messaging to discuss social and political issues, Samara suggests the findings show politics have not moved online in a big way.

Loat says lack of political engagement among youth is particularly troubling.

"It's a bit of a canary in the coal mine for where politics might be going."

The poll found Canadians aged 18 to 34 are taking part in a variety of social and community activities at the same or higher levels than older respondents, except when it comes to formally participating in politics or interacting with politicians.

Youth rates were 11 to 34 per cent lower, depending on the pursuit.

Samara released the findings Monday in a research paper titled "Lightweights? Political Participation Beyond the Ballot Box."

The online poll asked 2,287 Canadians how much they engage in 20 activities which Samara and academic researchers identified as vital in measuring political engagement between elections.

The activities included activism, community revival, on-and-offline discussions, and formal political participation.

The Samara poll doesn't have a margin of error because of guidelines from the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association, the survey industry's professional body, about online polls and random sampling. Samara oversampled young Canadians.

There were some encouraging signs — 55 per cent of Canadians report volunteering in the last year and 51 per cent signed a petition.

But Loat believes that the overall snapshot of political engagement is pretty grim, particularly when viewed in tandem with declining voter turnout over the last 50 years.

Given the enormous amounts of public money involved in political and policy decisions at the federal, provincial and municipal levels, Loat argues there may be serious long-term consequences if citizens don't realize they have a duty to engage and vote.

"If you see Canadians increasingly checking out on their ability and responsibility to participate in these things, I think we'll start to see not only a decline in the legitimacy of the political system, but, I would argue, poorer quality decisions will be made over time."

She notes that research shows people are concerned about health, education and community issues, yet many don't connect those dots to politics.

"That's the worry and that's the challenge for our elected leaders: How do they work to make it clear in the minds of Canadians that decisions that are made in legislatures and city councils across the country actually do affect the topics that people care about?"

Loat attributes the indifference to a number of factors, including cynicism and institutional failure to promote political participation.

She hopes the survey sends a strong message to political parties and elected officials that they have to think hard about how to make citizens more aware and engagement more accessible.

The wake-up call is certainly timely for Hamilton, what with the city's rebooted citizen engagement project aimed at learning what residents think about city services and a similar grassroots exercise launched by the Hamilton Civic League and the tech company Democravise.