

Canadians increasingly cynical about state of democracy: Hepburn

Voters are losing trust in the way Canada's democracy works.

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Votes are souring on Canada's democracy.

Tim Brinton / Newsart

EDMONTON—In findings that should disturb every politician across the country, a series of new national surveys suggest record numbers of Canadians are fed up with the state of our democracy.

Worse for elected leaders, more and more Canadians believe that

politicians, regardless of their party affiliation, don't listen to them, don't care about the issues that really concern them and aren't willing to act to preserve and improve our democratic institutions and traditions.

Indeed, the surveys indicate Canadians are more cynical now than at any time in recent history about politicians and how our democracy is working.

"There is an eroding confidence in government, in our political institutions," pollster Keith Neuman of the Environics Institute said at a conference in Edmonton last week sponsored by the Montreal-based Trudeau Foundation.

The conference — entitled "The Common Good: Who Decides?" — attracted 350 participants, including politicians, government bureaucrats, academics and public policy experts.

Neuman told the delegates that growing numbers of Canadians are disillusioned with elected officials and have now turned to supporting grassroots citizen actions, such as the last fall's Occupy Movement, the B.C. referendum on the HST and this summer's Quebec student protests, as a way to make their voices heard.

On the eve of the conference, the Trudeau Foundation released a survey by the Environics Institute that indicated Canadians are placing less confidence in the ability of politicians to solve the country's problems and balance competing interests when there are big differences on key issues.

Importantly, almost as many people (39 per cent) said they place greater faith in citizens taking grassroots actions through protests and other means as the best way to get action as

those who said they still have confidence in politicians (45 per cent) to settle issues with competing interests.

Another survey released two weeks earlier by the Environics Institute found “clear evidence” of a decline in approval of political institutions since a similar poll in 2006.

The AmericasBarometer, which examined public opinion relating to democracy in Canada and 25 other countries in North and South America, indicated trust in Parliament and our politicians is at abysmally low levels.

Only 17 per cent of Canadians trust Parliament and only 10 per cent trust political parties. A third poll, which is to be released on Dec. 3 by Samara, a non-profit group devoted to promoting citizen engagement, is expected to reinforce the view that the level of Canadians’ satisfaction with our democracy and in particular with our elected politicians is in free fall.

Critics will likely dismiss these polls as meaningless because confidence in politicians has been dropping for years. But such criticism overlooks the fact that the decline appears to be picking up speed.

The overall result is that many Canadians are politically apathetic and disengaged. Indeed, the AmericasBarometer poll indicated most Canadians don’t follow or understand the most important issues facing the country.

Obviously, disillusionment with the state of our democracy started under Liberal governments long before Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper took power, but it has accelerated under Harper’s watch.

Since becoming prime minister, Harper has systematically assaulted democracy, overlooking — and at times condoning — clear cases where our democratic institutions and traditions were undermined.

In the past year, though, Canadians have started to fight back, launching letter-writing campaigns, tweeting politicians, signing petitions and joining grassroots local organizations promoting citizen engagement.

The big question for politicians is how to reverse this downward spiral in confidence.

Speaking at the Edmonton conference, former Reform party leader Preston Manning suggested a good first step would be to rebuild civility in politics, which he says is in appalling shape.

Former Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff said politicians must stop treating MPs in other parties as “enemies” and work together in a bipartisan manner to reach compromises that recognize the concerns of all Canadians.

Manning and Ignatieff are right to criticize our elected politicians.

For too long, politicians at all levels of government — national, provincial and local — have taken the public for granted, ignoring their pleas for civility and respect for our democratic values and institutions.

It’s time they stopped, because a tipping point may be fast approaching.