



Canadians quickly losing faith in their democracy, survey suggests

KIM MACKRAEL, THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Canadians' satisfaction with democracy has dipped to a new low, research suggests, with many people pegging the problem on weak performance by their federal MPs.

About 55 per cent of Canadians say they are satisfied with democracy in the country, according to a new research paper by Samara, a not-for-profit organization aimed at improving political participation. That's down 20

points from 2004, when similar research suggested about 75 per cent of Canadians were satisfied with their democracy.

"We've known for a long time that there is declining trust and satisfaction with democracy," said Alison Loat, Samara's executive director. "But to see such a large decline in a short period of time was a surprise to us."

Samara published the findings in a paper called "Who's the Boss?" which it released Monday morning. It's part of a series of reports the organization is writing to analyze the results of a wide-ranging democratic engagement survey it conducted earlier this year.

Monday's report suggests that only 36 per cent of Canadians are satisfied with the way elected officials do their jobs. Asked to assess Parliamentarians' performance in several categories, respondents said MPs do a relatively good job of representing the views of their political parties, giving them a score of 61 per cent. But Canadians panned MPs' performances when it came to holding the government to account and representing the views of their constituents, with scores of 45 per cent and 46 per cent respectively. They also gave MPs a score of 44 per cent in managing individual constituents' concerns.

"I think there's a bit of a sense, at least among the public, that perhaps MPs are representing their political party at the expense of their ability to represent constituents," Ms. Loat said.

Ms. Loat said her organization conducted a series of "exit interviews" with former MPs of all political orientations and found that many of them felt their party was a constraint to their ability to represent their constituents.

NDP MP Craig Scott, who gained his seat earlier this year in Toronto-Danforth's by-election, said he believes most people enter politics "for a good and noble reasons." But he suggested that some Conservative MPs have become "cogs" in their party's machine, diminishing the level of debate in the House of Commons by evading opposition questions in favour of the party's talking points.



But Conservative MP Tim Uppal, minister of state for democratic reform, said his party and his constituents often share the same interests – and he doesn't see an inherent conflict between the two. "It's incumbent upon politicians to make the case to their constituents that the work that they're doing is important," he said. "I feel, in my riding, I can at the same time represent the views of my constituents and the views of my party."

The Samara report points out that political parties play an important role in Canadians' understanding of politics. Former Liberal leader Stéphane Dion, who is now his party's critic for democratic reform, said that's a good thing because it helps voters get a sense of a candidate's political orientation before they cast their ballot.

But framing the debate in terms of how well an MP represents either his party or his constituents misses the mark, he said. "I know why people are voting for me. It's because they expect me to work hard for Canada," Mr. Dion said. "Yes, they want me to take care of their interests ... they [also] expect me to help them be proud of their country."

The online survey of 2287 adults, conducted for Samara in the spring of 2012, is expected to accurately reflect the views of Canadian residents within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.