

New Report Says Canadian Politicians' "Digital Offices" Need a Makeover

A new report by the nonprofit Samara explains how Canada's politicians are not doing well in connecting online.

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Canada has seen steep drops in political engagement over several generations, [according to Alison Loat](#), co-founder of [Samara](#), a Canadian non-profit dedicated to improving political participation. The organization is trying to evaluate whether their MPs' lackluster online presence has something to do with it; they released a report last week, [detailing their survey of websites](#) for Canada's MPs.

"We learned that most MPs fail to seize online opportunities to connect with citizens," wrote Samara's research manager Jane Hilderman in an e-mail to techPresident. "This may be a contributing factor to Canadians' overall low satisfaction – only 36% -- with the work of their MPs."

The report had volunteers use a [14-point system](#) to grade around 300 MP websites according to criteria that fell into three main categories: contact information such as office hours and links to social media; updates on an MP's work; and online participatory platforms such as petitions, volunteer opportunities and public comment boxes.

Hilderman explained that while most of their MPs have been online now for about a decade, "[W]e know very little about how MPs, on the whole, are taking advantage of a 'digital office', in addition to their physical ones." The purpose of Samara's project, she explains, was to determine "a baseline measure of how MPs in Canada use their websites to inform, engage, and reach out to citizens."

Since the release of the report last week, MPs have quickly taken note. Hilderman said survey reaction from MPs has been "fantastic," prompting Samara to create a digital badge that the top-ranked sites can sport. It has also prompted the circulation of Samara's website tip sheet among several levels of government. Only 17 MPs received top scores or ones above 11. The average score was seven out of 14 and no one scored more than 12.

"A good website is one of the tools that enables an MP to communicate with and hear from constituents," MP Alexandre Boulerice, whose website was among the top-rated, told techPresident. Boulerice's caucus colleague Linda Duncan, whose website was also amongst the top-ranked, similarly said, "A website is important as the Internet is now among the first places people seek information."

Mark Blevis, who runs [Full Duplex](#), a digital public affairs strategy company in Ottawa, told [CBC News](#) that websites are a crucial element for increasing civic engagement and that a politician's website, or "digital office" should be up to the same standard as their physical one. Blevis regularly evaluates politician's websites through a series called "[Digital Makeovers](#)," giving letter grades to their sites as well as their online political engagement.

But it seems even some of the highest-scored websites have a lot of room for improvement. Laurie Nyveen is a professor of online journalism at Montreal's Concordia University. He told techPresident he saw blank pages and repetitive content and while he "really likes" Liberal Health Critic [Hedy Fry's site](#), "Whoever is doing posting for her really doesn't know how to spell marijuana."

Nyveen also notes a political pattern: among the 17 top websites, an overwhelming majority (15) were New Democratic Party (NDP) websites (the NDP form the Official Opposition to the governing <http://techpresident.com/news/wegov/24608/new-report-says-canadian-politicians%E2%80%99-digital-offices-need-makeover>

Conservatives, with the Liberal Party in second place) Liberals and Conservatives scored one website apiece in Samara's top 17. "This just indicates to me they like the NDP template better," says Nyveen. But Samara says the top rated websites demonstrated stronger opportunities for online and offline engagement.

When asked about the prevalence of NDP websites in the top rankings, Conservative John Weston (the only top-ranked Conservative) had this to say: "All MPs are hard-working ...I congratulate all the other MPs who made it to the top of this report." Weston's site, however, has managed to go from an average 14, 500 hits per month to over 110, 000 hits per month in last 8 months.

The report implies a broader view of online engagement through social media, as websites are only a small part of social media strategy. Twitter, Facebook and other mediums are ways in which politicians can engage constituents and Samara reports 61 percent of MPs share their social media presence on their site. Some MPs are active on social media. Notably, Boulerice and Duncan who hold top-rated websites are also among those with top social media ratings, [according to Politwitter](#). However, Hilderman cautioned that "If MPs generally mirror the pattern with their websites and focus more on sending messages than receiving them, this isn't an effective use of social media – whatever the platform – and probably isn't helping constituents to engage." Part of effective social media engagement is experimenting, says Hilderman, noting MP Dany Morin as a positive example. "Pinterest was not a common platform MPs link to on their website – in fact, Dany Morin was the only one we found," she said.

As of the [last federal election](#), social media is certainly more prominent on the national political stage. And in his recent successful bid for the Liberal leadership, Justin Trudeau ([who steamrolled his competition](#)) used a snazzy online campaign some compared to the [Obama model](#). And the governing Conservatives have taken to [rolling out major announcements](#) on Twitter. Overall, Canada enjoys a positive ranking when it comes to [Twiplomacy](#) and Blevis' company recently conducted a survey of politically active Canadians and discovered that 52 percent of them reach out to their politicians through social media.

Another feature the Samara report evaluated was links to online petitions. In the Canadian Parliamentary system, MPs can submit petitions with a minimum of 25 signatures to the House of Commons. Once the petition is tabled, the government tables a response, and the petition is then sent to the Privy Council Office, which provides support and advice to the Prime Minister. Generally, petitions do not lead to legislation being passed, in the same manner, for example, as a [Private Member's Bill](#) does. Samara's survey found only 23 per cent of MP websites host petitions and invite signatures. Again, the top-rated websites seem to also demonstrate greater online political engagement. MP [Olivia Chow](#) is ranked number three by Politwitter for her use of social media and is among Samara's top-rated websites. Her website's petitions have also attracted quite the crowd. One of her petitions, to improve trucks so that they are less likely to strike cyclists, received over 2,000 signatures and another on animal rights received over 7,000 signatures and over 8,500 likes on Facebook.

Overall, Hilderman is optimistic their report will lead to improved MP online outreach. Since the survey's publication, at least one of the five MPs who lacked a website is now online. Hilderman says Samara has heard their "[Tips for Elected Officials Websites](#)" is now being circulated at other levels of government.

"If done effectively, social media is another tool a 21st-century MP can employ to make themselves and their work relevant and accessible to their constituents," Hilderman says.

Editor's Note: *This article has been revised to reflect a correction made on December 13, 2013. The original version of this article misspelled the name of Samara's research manager, Jane Hilderman, as Jane Hildeman.*

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