

Does not voting make you an indifferent citizen – or an idealist?

Canadians who don't vote actually believe in democracy – they just don't believe politicians are democratic, says a study with surprising findings.

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OTTAWA—Canadians who don't vote actually believe in democracy – they just don't believe politics or politicians are very democratic, according to a new study of voter apathy in Canada.

“People's disappointment with politics is driven by their sense of what democracy should be,” says the study, by the Samara research organization, which conducted in-depth interviews with “disengaged” Canadians to see what was keeping them away from the ballot box.

What's more, many of the vote-averse Canadians have become that way through bitter experience with politics – not through lack of interest or knowledge, as is often assumed, Samara says.

“Declining political engagement is, at least in part, due to concrete experiences with politics,” says the report.

“Disengaged people felt that politics is a game that does not produce results for them . . . The overall point seems to be that there is very little reason to be engaged.”

Samara, a non-profit research organization that probes democracy and public policy in Canada, carried out the study of voter apathy through a series of eight focus groups between August and October this year. [The study](#) – an attempt to look for causes of deepening voter apathy in Canada – involved interviews with people who didn't vote as well as with people who described themselves as active participants in politics and democracy. In the last few federal elections, about four out every 10 eligible voters didn't bother to cast a ballot.

The findings blow some holes through the oft-repeated reasons for declining participation in politics – often written off as cynicism or simple lack of education or interest in democracy.

In fact, the focus groups showed a good measure of idealism about democracy and democratic principles, and often, a contempt for politics bred by familiarity with its flaws and shortfalls.

So while “insiders” in the Canadian political scene may see politics and democracy as intertwined, disengaged Canadians – “outsiders,” as Samara calls them – actually see democracy and politics as opposite concepts in current practice. And it's a bitter truth they gained from their brushes with the system.

“In the past, they believed that the political system was open to them and wanted to hear from them,” the report says. “But once they had an actual concern that needed to be resolved, they found that no one was responsive. From these experiences, the disengaged took to heart

the lesson that engaging with the political system is at best a waste of time, and at worst a discouraging and disempowering experience.”

Some of the frustration echoes the type of complaints being heard at the “Occupy” protests of recent weeks too — a sense of deafening distance between the decision makers and those affected by their decisions.

This kind of experience was at odds with that of the people who described themselves as engaged — who had enjoyed rewarding or responsive experiences with the political system or government, Samara found.

This may be a clue on how to address voter apathy, Samara’s report says — by increasing the responsiveness of politicians and government to citizens’ concerns. As things now stand, Samara says, Canada’s citizenry appears to be locked in a divide between the “insiders” who are engaged, and the increasing ranks of the “outsiders,” who believe that politics doesn’t have much to do with cherished democratic ideals.