



Ibbitson responds: How to re-engage citizens in democracy

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Guess what? If you ask people to offer their thoughts on why citizens are increasingly disengaged from their democracy, you get hundreds of responses from readers who are deeply engaged.

Monday's column talked about a report in which the citizen-advocacy group Samara asked people who don't vote why they don't vote. The report concluded: "The political system has separated the Canadian public into insiders who have the capacity and energy to fight and remain engaged in the system, and outsiders who simply walk away out of frustration or disappointment."

I speculated that part of the problem might stem from a decline in people and institutions – the church, the union, the social club, even the member of Parliament – that once mediated between citizen and government. I also asked you to let me know what you thought. Many of you didn't hesitate.

A common response was to hold MPs accountable for not answering letters, returning phone calls, or otherwise engaging with constituents except to parrot party propaganda. Members of Parliament, people wrote, should work harder at connecting with the people who sent them to Ottawa, representing their interests fearlessly, even if that meant angering the party leadership.

"Conscientious members would make the concerns of their constituents their own," Peter Ronning contributed by email. Indeed they would.

The media came for in for its share of blame. LiberalCowboy received the highest score on the comment thread for this: "The gate keepers of democracy have fallen asleep and we are left with career journalists, flinging personalized quasi-philosophical columns out about the most trivial of events [while]all the while the barn is burning." Point taken, Mr. Cowboy.

Some blamed what they saw as the dictatorial tendencies of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, while others blamed the excessive coddling of the nanny state.

Several responses noted the Australian practice of fining people who refused to vote. "If it is the only way to ensure greater participation by the electorate, then perhaps this needs to be considered," Robin Chetwynd wrote.

Others argued for the need to entrench civics courses in the school curriculum. Yet others said moving to a form of proportional representation would do the trick

Perhaps the most interesting responses came from writers who pointed to burgeoning new forms of political mediation that seek to create a new generation of engaged citizens.



Jonathan Brun pointed to OpenNorth.ca, which seeks to encourage community participation in politics via the web. In partnership with the Plateau–Mont-Royal borough in Montreal, they created an interactive budget consultation that invites local residents to create a balanced budget using actual budget figures, which they can then submit to city councillors.

“This activity plays two roles,” Mr. Brun explained. “It educates the residents on the real costs of services, and [it]empowers citizens to change funding priorities in partnership with the local government and their neighbours.” And it’s more fun than Angry Birds.

Another compelling response came from Megan Pickersgill. At 28, she and her friends are deeply engaged in political, social and environmental issues. Not that it does them much good.

“I have tried on multiple occasions to contact my local MP voicing concern over various political issues,” she wrote. “The only response I got back was rote. The party line. It is so discouraging I feel in me the pull to give up – on politics, on democracy. If in a democratic country no one is listening, then are we truly in a democratic country?”

But rather than succumb to frustration, she and others established the Young Networking Society last year. Based in Truro, Nova Scotia, they communicate primarily through Facebook and aim “to create new social connections and increase community involvement” through shared cultural and social events.

“I’ve noticed a new forming of groups that reflect a more modern outlook and way of life,” she continued. “For example, the Fusion network in Halifax is a larger example... Researching this, I found other groups like us located all over Canada.”

Ms. Pickersgill concludes: “We’d be happy to hear from our local politicians. But we want them to listen to us as well.”

If I were a politician, I would pay very careful heed to what Jonathan Brun and Megan Pickersgill are saying. They may be helping to shape the politics of the future.