

Is politics broken? Let's vote on it – or not

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The debate we had gathered to witness, and to vote upon, revolved around a simple resolution, according to moderator Steve Patterson: “Is politics broken?”

“So broken,” muttered the young man sitting in front of me. “So, so broken.” His arms were crossed. We might have been sitting in Tripoli or Donetsk, and not in the soaring atrium of the publicly funded Canadian broadcaster. Not a very well-funded public broadcaster, and one that’s shrinking every day, which may have explained the cash bar. (Popcorn and acrimony were free.)

Outside the CBC’s headquarters on a cold March night there were no barricades, no armed insurrections, no cops with truncheons, just people going home or to see the sharks at the aquarium. A few blocks away is Toronto’s City Hall, which recently resembled a careening, driverless chuckwagon but is now on a more sedate path. Up the street is Queen’s Park, my former workplace, where the woman in charge is the first openly gay premier in Canada.

Can politics really be considered broken, given such a backdrop? Hell yes, was the mood at the CBC as Mr. Patterson asked the audience to punch our responses into the electronic keypads attached to our seats. The official motion read, “The political process is no longer the most effective way to enact real change.” Fingers jabbed – unlined fingers, for the most part, unmarked by liver spots – and 69 per cent of the audience said yes. That might have been more voting than some of them had done in their lives.

If things have gone to hell in a handcart, then at least a lot of people are watching the descent. For a while, #IsPoliticsBroken was trending, ahead of the news of the latest One Direction defection.

The CBC had a stellar group of debaters on hand. “If you leave out voting and elections and Parliament, politics works pretty well in this country,” said National Post columnist Andrew Coyne, arguing for yes. He outlined the fractures: powerless MPs, neutered committees, curtailed debates, laughable scrutiny of legislation, power concentrated in an untouchable few. How could you blame anyone for wondering if the glass is “1 per cent full, or 99 per cent empty”?

The voters who are the most turned off are the ones who don’t vote at all. “Politics now repels more people than it attracts, especially young people,” said Samara’s Alison Loat. (The young people in my aisle nodded at that, arms still firmly crossed.) Samara, a charity that agitates for civic engagement, has just released a democracy report card for Canada, based on participation, communication and leadership, and the country (its politicians and citizens) got a woeful C.

Only 39 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds voted in the last election, although, as Samara points out, that is just one measure of disengagement: The same number of Canadians hadn’t had a single political discussion, either online or in real life, in the preceding year.

For an allegedly apathetic bunch, the crowd was feisty and fed up. They asked questions about why so many people feel unwelcome in the political process. They cheered when Dave Meslin, who is crowdsourcing 100 ways to fix the political system, suggested that high-school students need more civics classes. (I cannot imagine similar approval in my day.) They gasped when he told a story about Calgary's City Hall School, which invites students to spend a week learning about politics in the place where it happens (or at least where bylaws get made). One kid hadn't even known what City Hall was: "I just thought it was a building with a clock on it," he told Mr. Meslin. "I didn't know people were doing stuff in there."

I'm afraid Team No didn't stand a chance, perhaps because they represented The Man (former Conservative MP Monte Solberg), the past (former deputy prime minister Sheila Copps) and those weirdos south of the border whose system is even more dysfunctional than our own (political strategist Aisha Moodie-Mills). It didn't help that their single argument boiled down to a plaintive, "but politics is all we have. What's the alternative?"

The alternative, as those madly jabbing fingers suggested when they voted again on the proposition at the end of the debate, was not a different system but an improved one. A system that's more inclusive, more representative, more flexible, more accountable. By the end of the evening, the number of people who thought that politics is broken had climbed to 76 per cent.