

Politicians to blame for voter apathy: study

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The politically disengaged are not as apathetic or ignorant of politics as previously thought — they opt out because they feel the political system has failed them, says a survey of Canadians across the country, including a focus group from Mississauga.

The report, titled *The Real Outsiders: Politically Disengaged Views on Politics and Democracy*, was released today by Samara, a non-profit, non-partisan research organization.

The survey, the first-ever study of its kind in Canada, was prompted by dismal voter turnout in elections this year. For example, in the last federal election, four out of 10 Canadians chose not to vote. In Mississauga's 2010 municipal election, only 34 per cent bothered to make the trek to the polls.

Samara made three observations:

- less engaged Canadians overwhelmingly describe themselves as outsiders. They do not feel they have a voice or any ownership stake in the political system
- Canadians' dislike for politics seems closely related to a perceived gap between the ideals of democracy and the reality of how they are represented politically
- Disengagement is, in fact, a response to people's personal interaction with politics and government

"A common theme across the focus groups was that the political system has failed many Canadians in clear and tangible ways," said Alison Loat, Samara's co-founder and executive director.

"Consequently, political disengagement is a learned response — this is a far cry from the conventional wisdom that assumes the disengaged simply do not care."

Kendall Anderson, Samara's communications and project manager, says the research shows most disengaged non-voters start off wanting to be part of the system, but a series of unpleasant experiences ultimately turns them into non-voters.

"So it's not the individual's deficiency — as is often thought — but more of a systemic breakdown. This report suggests that perhaps we should stop focusing on election time and worry more about the

everyday interactions between citizen and government between elections — which will, in turn, raise voter turnout and citizen participation,” she said.

There’s a silver lining to the research: Heather Bastedo, Samara’s research and project director, notes disengagement is reversible given the right conditions.

“Canadians told us they are not asking for much. They simply want to feel heard, they want their problems to matter and they want promises kept — they want to feel represented,” she said. Samara conducted eight focus groups for the study. By chance, the control group hailed from Mississauga. The seven members ranged from a 20-year-old unemployed man to a 60-year-old self-employed woman.

“We did the Mississauga group with people who did vote and who described themselves as very interested in politics — that group was our point of comparison,” Anderson told The News.