

## Political riding association websites not serving grassroots, study finds

Samara, an organization devoted to improving democratic participation, analyzed MPs' websites and found very little there to encourage citizen participation in politics.

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OTTAWA—If you're looking for [grassroots democracy in Canada](#), you probably won't find it on the websites of the riding associations across the country, a new study has found.

Though the big political parties are pretty good about asking for money and showcasing leaders on the websites of their local riding associations, most are silent about local meetings, activities or recruiting candidates from the community.

The findings come from a website analysis by [Samara](#), an organization devoted to improving democratic participation in Canada. Samara set out last year to find a local, online presence for the riding associations of the five main parties — Conservatives, New Democrats, Liberals, Greens and Bloc Québécois.

The study was framed as a test of sorts for the parties' commitment to connections with the grassroots of democracy. Riding associations in Canada are where candidates must first be elected and, in between elections, are supposed to serve as the on-the-ground connection between the political parties and their communities.

“For Canadians who do not have personal connections with current party members, [volunteering with a riding association](#)

is an accessible first step into political involvement,” the study's report states. “In the age of Google, an informative website is a simple and practical way to facilitate that step.”

Only the New Democrats and the Greens could boast that they had websites for every one of their 308 riding associations across the country. The ruling Conservatives only had websites for about one-third of their riding associations, while the Liberals had 292 out of a possible 308.

The quality of the websites varies greatly, Samara found but, in general, the websites were not that useful for providing details of their meetings or even the name of the local riding-association president. Just 4 per cent of the websites contained information about past meetings, and only 48 per cent identified the local president.

Only five sites had information for people interested in becoming candidates.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the websites are a reflection of two dominant traits of political parties these days — leader-centrism and the constant search for money.

[http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/03/10/political\\_riding\\_association\\_websites\\_not\\_serving\\_grassroots\\_study\\_finds.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/03/10/political_riding_association_websites_not_serving_grassroots_study_finds.html)

A full 96 per cent of the websites contained information about how to donate and 74 per cent gave information about the party leader. Only 21 per cent had the names of past MPs and only 17 per cent gave names of the people who served on the riding association's executive.

Samara measured the websites' effectiveness against a 15-item checklist and found only four [riding associations that scored 12 points or higher](#): the Green Party riding association in Brant, and three Conservative associations in Niagara Falls, Sault Ste. Marie and the Western Arctic.

Another 28 associations scored 11 out of 15 points; most of them either Conservative or Liberal, and only one — the Thornhill Liberals — out of the entire Greater Toronto area.

Samara's study didn't examine how well the parties were doing at updating and reorganizing their local websites to take account of the [looming, big shuffle of riding boundaries](#), which will add 30 seats to the Commons and create the need for more than 100 new websites. The Samara analysis was conducted over August and September last year, so the organization warns that its findings are, in a sense, a snapshot in time.