

# Survey shows crisis of faith in democracy

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Fed up with the state of Canadian politics? You're not alone.

According to new research released yesterday, Canadian satisfaction with democracy is at an all-time low.

The online survey, conducted by charitable organization Samara, found that out of the 2,287 Canadians of voting age contacted, just 55 per cent reported they were satisfied with the way Canadian democracy works—a 20-point drop from 2004, when 75 per cent reported satisfaction.

“We knew that Canadians’ views towards politics and democracy had been declining, but we were a little surprised by the degree to which Canadians were reporting their levels of dissatisfaction,” Jane Hilderman, one of the study’s co-authors, said.

Only 36 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the way members of parliament were doing their jobs. According to the report, this may have to do with the priorities of MPs. Canadians said their MPs did the best job at representing the views of their party, with 61 per cent approval—but respondents ranked that priority fourth out of five in order of importance. Ranked first was holding the government to account, receiving a mere 45 per cent approval rate.

“In other words,” the report read, “Canadians feel MPs are doing the best job at the very thing Canadians see as a low priority: representing the views of their political parties.”

According to Samara, this dissatisfied response was consistent across the country, regardless of gender, province or residence—Francophone Quebecers were the only exception, displaying even higher levels of dissatisfaction.

Hilderman noted there was a slight difference in opinion, however, depending on the political affiliation of respondents.

“We did ask the respondents who they would vote for if there was an election called, and it made a small difference in some questions in terms of your satisfaction,” she said. “If you identified as a Conservative voter, you weren’t as dissatisfied as someone who identified as an NDP, Green or Bloc Quebecois supporter. But, still, the general trend for all those different people was towards dissatisfaction.”

Though Hilderman noted a correlation between the drop in satisfaction since 2004 and the Conservatives’ ascension to power in 2006, she hesitated to identify that as a causal link.

“Importantly, we know, too, that voter turnout has been declining even longer, and that is sort of one symptom of dissatisfaction with the system. So it may have accelerated in recent years, but chances are we would see these roots lying even before the Conservatives came to power,” she said.

Hilderman said Samara had identified two main areas in need of improvement—increasing citizen engagement with political parties as membership levels among citizens have fallen, and improving communication between MPs and their constituents.

“There’s sort of a need of renewal in order to become more accountable, more representative and more relevant to Canadians again. We think if parties could do a better job of engaging Canadians, that would probably help the problem.”