

The democracy gap – how did not voting become the preferred option?

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A new study released today has a new take on the ebbing interest in politics that the authors hope offers clues about how to turn the tide. The report by Samara, an Ottawa-based institute that looks at citizen engagement and democracy, found that it's not a lack of interest, but a sense of futility that goes beyond what happens in the voting booth. They say that some don't vote because they have been turned off by previous experience, either with the government or politicians. They believe the system doesn't work for them.

In many Canadian elections, the number of people who don't vote exceeds the number who back the winning candidate.

In the recent municipal elections, the average turnout was just under 30 per cent - seven in 10 eligible voters in B.C. didn't bother to mark a ballot.

In the last provincial election, a record low of 55 per cent of registered voters turned out. Federally, the percentage has been hanging around 60 per cent, with a slight increase in the May election in which Prime Minister Stephen Harper finally got his majority.

A survey following that campaign found that about 28 per cent of those who didn't vote said they weren't interested. That response included people who felt their vote would not have made a difference in the outcome.

The next biggest category, about 23 per cent, said they were just too busy. Other reasons included illness or disability, not liking any of the candidates, couldn't get to the polls and just plain forgot.

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The Samara report suggests there is more going on. They set up eight small focus groups, seven with people who didn't vote and an eighth with people who did as a control. The seven groups who didn't vote were organized around groups that traditionally have had a low turnout: lower-income Canadians, less-educated young people, women in Quebec, urban aboriginals, recent immigrants and rural Canadians.

What they found was that people who were engaged felt they were part of the democratic process and people who didn't saw themselves as outsiders, often because at some point they had an experience in which their expectations weren't met.

They may have sought assistance from elected politicians or civil servants and received little help. Or, especially with younger Canadians, they just assumed the political system didn't represent their concerns.

Although the groups were small and did not represent the overall population, in a somewhat parallel finding, outgoing members of Parliament interviewed by Samara co-founders Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan following the 2009 federal election often reported that they also felt like outsiders at times, despite their success in the system.

They said that prime ministers, whatever the party, acted more like dictators than democratic leaders.

One way to look at these findings is to say that all parts of the system, from political parties to politicians to governments, need to become more service-oriented. No doubt that would help. We need to feel as if the public service works for us, that our MPs and MLAs are representing our views, not just answering to their party leaders.

But I wonder whether this isn't also a question of unreasonable expectations.

Successful democracy can't be defined as a system that allows everyone to achieve exactly what they want. That is too high a bar.

What we can strive for is a system that gives anyone who wants to participate a chance to feel as if their voices matter even if their views don't prevail.

I'm not sure what that would look like. But when even MPs feel they don't have a voice in the way Canada is governed, it's still a long way off.

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