

## The welfare state isn't pleasing anyone

Some of the most targeted groups for social spending – the young, natives and women – are the most disengaged from politics

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Boring. Greedy. Untrustworthy. Those are some of the first words Canadians use to describe politics. Conversely, we reserve great reverence for democracy: Freedoms, fairness, equality and responsibility top the list. This, according to a new study by the Samara Foundation, which explores why 40% of Canadians chose to sit out the last federal election – and what can be done to change that.

The study examined seven focus groups of political “outsiders,” groups that had low voter turnout, including young Canadians, urban aboriginals, Quebec women and rural Canadians. It contrasted them with one group of “insiders,” people characterized as “politically engaged.” Researchers found that while the two groups held similar views on the nature of politics and democracy, they had vastly different perceptions of what politics could do – or not do – for them.

Outsiders saw politicians as “the other,” a separate class who didn't serve their needs, and felt powerless to effect change. Conversely, insiders approached politics from an “owner- ship” perspective; in the words of one engaged woman: “I'm voting for you. You work for me.”

The study found that attitudes stem from personal experiences; negative interactions with the political system led to feelings of frustration and disconnect. Examples cited included a Quebec woman who took a government-sponsored culinary course and was upset the administrators did not credit her appropriately (she dropped out and then applied for EI instead), as well as an aboriginal woman who was upset she had to “call all these politicians” to secure a daycare spot for her grandson. With regard to young people, one woman summed it up thus: “We need more interesting issues. We are all, like, early or late teens or whatever you want to call it, none of us believe in giving a crap about anything that [politicians] are doing.”

One's initial reaction may be that politics failed these people, but their complaints raise a far more fundamental question: what is politics for? Should politicians be overseeing cooking classes or ferreting out daycare spots? Is it the job of politicians to create issues that are “interesting” to make young people “give a crap” about politics? Or is it perhaps the role of citizens — and their leaders — to engage in a little attitude adjustment about the role of the state?

Citizens of the modern welfare state have become not merely voters, but clients. They no longer expect that government will simply build roads, uphold law and order, and protect them from invaders. The state now smoothes our lives from cradle to grave, via child tax credits, school lunch programs, medicare, public universities, EI, worker retraining, business development grants and old age pensions, to name only a few of the programs dreamed up by generations of politicians and bureaucrats.

These programs are all about politics, but not about democracy. Democracy, as the study's participants confirm, is about lofty ideals, such as the protection of freedoms. In a democratic system, however, politicians must get elected; to do so, they promise to improve the lives of voters, generally using their own money, or the money of those who pay taxes. It is highly ironic that many of the Samara study's focus groups of “disengaged” citizens — aboriginals, women, youth, low income Canadians — are the most heavily targeted by state assistance programs. Yet the more that is done, the greater the demand, and the higher the level of dissatisfaction when results do not meet expectations.

Getting people to participate more in the political process is not about increasing customer satisfaction. It is about scaling back what's on offer and focusing on protecting, instead of perverting, those cherished democratic ideals. Safeguarding freedoms doesn't demand a massive bureaucracy; personal responsibility is not reinforced by ever-expanding redistribution. Perhaps it is time, to paraphrase John F. Kennedy, that voters asked not what politicians can do for them, but what they can do for themselves.