

Why Canadians have no time for politics

Inequality and the distrust it yields are at the root of our growing political apathy.

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Samara recently published yet another study showing that Canadians, especially young Canadians, are profoundly disengaged from formal politics. Not only are citizens voting less and participating less in political parties, they are not writing, reading or even talking with friends about party politics. While many are still donating money and time to causes, they don't have much use for politics.

Of course this is not the first such study. With every passing year, we get more evidence that trust in politicians, government and our democratic institutions is in sharp decline. Every election seems to bring a new low in voter turnout and, inevitably, a flurry of opinion on what needs to be done – elevate politics, renew democratic institutions, strengthen accountability and transparency, motivate disengaged citizens. And yes, these are all worthy objectives but despite the studies, despite all the talk, nothing much changes, things just seem to get worse. Maybe we're missing something.

Social trust

A growing body of international research, most notably by Sweden's Bo Rothstein and, in the US, Jong-Sung You, points us to what may be the underlying factor we'll need to address if we are to turn things around: the decline of social trust.

By "social trust" is meant something more than whether we trust our neighbour or others in our community or in similar circumstance. It is rather the generalized belief that most people in a society can be trusted, including those quite different from ourselves.

Social trust is not the same as political trust, but where it is high people are readier to trust their democracy, more willing to give the benefit of the doubt to government when something goes wrong, and less likely to see the latest scandal as indicative of the entire class of politicians. Even when governments perform so badly as to make political trust impossible, where social trust is high, citizens still participate, still try to make things better. Because they trust the future and their ability to influence it, they are still capable of outrage rather than the indifference or fatalism of the jaded.

High social trust implies solidarity, the sense that the members of a society share a common fate and mutual responsibility and this is reflected in greater commitment to helping others. Individuals take responsibility not only for themselves and those in their social milieu, but also for the stranger, and for the direction of their society.

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Contrary to the Margaret Thatcher view of the world, we are or at least can be more than isolated, atomized individuals fiercely pursuing our self-interest. We live in relationships with others, we live in society, and the strength of those relationships and our fellow feeling matters profoundly. High trust societies work; they have less crime and corruption, more effective governments, and stronger economies.

Trust and Inequality

According to the research, the most important factor in determining the degree of social trust in a society seems to be its level of equality, both economic equality and equality of opportunity. In highly unequal societies rich and poor live such fundamentally different lives that it's impossible to develop the mutual empathy essential to building trust and a sense of shared fate. When this is coupled with lack of opportunity for economic progress we get conflict, politics as a zero-sum game and a downward spiral of distrust. Highly unequal societies are also characterized by widespread corruption, which undermines all manner of trust.

Equality, it seems, not civic participation, not the efficiency of government, not diversity, is the key determinant of social trust. Your work shows that where equality is high solidarity more easily coexists with cultural and ethnic differences, debunking the notion that equality is only possible in homogeneous societies.

Public policy matters

The research also shows that how governments design and deliver social and labour programs is key to achieving both greater trust and greater equality. In this age of austerity and tax cuts, many governments are doing exactly the wrong things, exacerbating inequality by undermining wages and weakening the programs that reduce inequality and alleviate its consequences, moving from universal to narrowly targeted approaches or starving the programs that the research shows make the biggest difference. What Rothstein's work demonstrates is that universal programs – universal healthcare, childcare, education, income security, and access to justice, are the most effective by far in promoting equality and social trust. They are inclusive and not subject to arbitrary income cut offs and often degrading means-testing in which officials decide who's in and who's out. They bring people together across income and cultural differences. Because they belong to everyone, everyone has a stake in their quality.

I can hear the howls of protest. Unaffordable. Unsustainable. Impossible. Many of these programs, while demonstrably efficient and effective, do require significant public funds and that means higher and more progressive taxes, obviously an increasingly hard sell. Not surprisingly the countries with the highest social trust are also those with the highest taxes – for example, the Scandinavian

countries. They also have strong economies and impressive productivity, a reminder that we do indeed have choices even in the hyper-competitive global economy.

Social Traps

Which brings us to the final conclusion one can draw from the research. In countries where social trust is low and inequality high, it is awfully hard to reverse direction. Even when people know what's needed, there's not enough trust to get it done. This is the classic social trap. Absent trust, people are not willing to pay the necessary taxes; each worries that they're being ripped off by the other, those at the top effectively secede from society and those at the bottom withdraw believing that the game is rigged. It is almost impossible in those cases to imagine big new social programs or even strengthening existing ones. And so inequality and distrust grow; solutions seem increasingly out of reach.

Where's Canada?

Over much of the post-war period, with some exceptions, most notably our shameful treatment of Aboriginal people, Canada did pretty well in both social trust and equality, tucked in just behind the Scandinavian countries and Netherlands. The last couple of decades, however, have seen a sharp decline in social trust and an accelerating increase in income inequality, and while mobility is still pretty high it won't stay that way if income inequality continues to grow. We are in better shape than many but are moving in the wrong direction.

Canadians are rightly proud of our universal medicare but we are allowing it to erode. Public funding for education is in decline so more of the burden and related debt fall to students and their families. Wages are under assault – witness the attacks on collective bargaining and the abuse of the foreign workers program. Fewer than forty per cent of unemployed Canadians have access to employment insurance. Our income support system is fragmented and inadequate – and too often demeaning. Huge gaps – childcare, civil legal aid, pharma- and home-care – exacerbate inequality. Old fault lines are deepening and new ones are emerging, particularly with respect to constrained opportunities for young Canadians. We are squandering the Canadian advantage.

The problem of disengagement, then, is not simply one of governance or style, however important these are, it is in the substance of our public policies, in the fallacy that we can focus on the economy as if it were disembodied from human relations and nature. Nothing will work to engage the disengaged, no reforms however worthy will make the difference, unless and until we reverse growing inequality and the loss of trust this yields. Only by bringing humanity back into public policy will we bring people back into politics.



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