

Why Canada's democracy rates a sad 'C' grade:

Politics repels more people than it attracts, especially among the young

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Canadians have so little trust in our elected MPs and are so turned off by politics that the legitimacy of our entire democratic system is at risk.

Indeed, politics is now so despised that it repels more people than it attracts, especially among young Canadians.

Those jarring statements aren't the rants of an out-of-touch political scientist, but the feelings of the vast majority of Canadians who took part in a massive national survey on the state of our democracy.

The survey, released Wednesday by Samara Canada, a respected non-profit think tank devoted to promoting democracy, found that most Canadians don't trust MPs, don't believe politics affects our daily lives and don't participate at all in political activities.

At the same time, it revealed that most of us think politicians don't care at all what we say or what we want, rather they're just after our votes.

The situation is so bad that Samara gave our democracy a sad "C" grade in its first-ever report, [Democracy 360](#), on the state of our democratic system.

Why is it that bad? More important, why should we care?

Citizens worried about our deteriorating democracy have raised alarms for years about how bad the fall has been and what it means for voters and our democratic institutions.

For years, though, political leaders, comfortable with the status quo, have lazily dismissed those concerns as the complaints of a small number of loud-mouthed political outsiders.

This new report, though, should act as a wake-up call for anyone — average citizen, elected politician or community volunteer — who cares deeply about the direction our democracy is headed.

"Politics is a huge lever for change, but ensuring that change is in the broader public interest requires citizens to exercise their voice, both during elections and in between," says [Alison Loat](#), executive director of Samara.

"Over time, Canadians' generally weak participation will further threaten the legitimacy of the democratic system," she warns.

<http://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2015/03/25/why-canadas-democracy-rates-a-sad-c-grade-hepburn.html>

The Samara report is based on a national online survey of 2,406 Canadians conducted during a two-week period in December. Samara experts also looked at data from Elections Canada and the House of Commons in preparing its report card.

In particular, Samara focused not just on voter turnout and poll results, but also on what it says are areas essential to a healthy democracy, including communications, participation and political leadership.

Among the key findings were that only 40 per cent of us trust our MPs to do what is right, and 62 per cent believe politicians only want our vote. In addition, just 31 per cent say we have contacted an elected official in the last year and 39 per cent say we haven't had a single political conversation in a year.

To reverse these results will take more than just an increase in the number of people voting. It will require "a culture shift towards 'everyday democracy,' in which citizens feel politics is a way to make change in the country and their voices are heard," the report said.

Loat says the finding that most surprised her was that 31 per cent of those surveyed don't believe politics affects us daily. "I think this gets to the heart of the issue: Canadians don't see politics as relevant to them," she says.

With a federal election scheduled for Oct. 19, the Samara report is a great resource for Canadians interested in talking about how our democracy could improve.

Loat says the report represents "a challenge here for all candidates, campaign volunteers and political parties to put the health of democracy at the top of the agenda in a meaningful way." One way of doing that is for candidates to pledge to increase voter turnout in their riding and take concrete steps to make that happen.

Also, Loat suggests citizens who are already active in politics or who vote regularly bring a friend or neighbour to a political event or to the polls. "If each of us did that, it would make a huge difference," she says.

"Find a campaign and become a volunteer. It's a great way to meet new people and learn about your community and country."

As the election approaches, citizens should also demand that candidates commit to ensuring political parties act transparently, create opportunities for people to get involved and improve how Parliament works.

The first step, though, is to admit there's a problem. After reading this report, no one can doubt that.