

SAMARA DEMOCRACY REPORT #4

Who's the Boss?: Canadians' Views on Their Democracy

KEY FINDINGS

- Satisfaction with Canadian democracy is at an all-time low.
- A leading cause is Canadians' dissatisfaction with their political representation.
- Canadians feel MPs are better at representing their party than they are at representing citizens.

Despite Canada's status as one of the world's leading democracies, new research shows that only half of the population is satisfied with the way Canadian democracy works—a 20-point drop in less than 10 years. Canadians are even less satisfied with Members of Parliament, and a leading source of this dissatisfaction centres on MPs' priorities: Canadians feel MPs do a better job representing the views of the party than they do representing their constituents.

DEMOCRATIC SATISFACTION

New public opinion research commissioned by Samara reveals that only 55% of Canadians report being satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada. Notably, this view is consistent across Canada regardless of gender or province of residence. (The single exception, Francophone Quebecers, reported even greater levels of dissatisfaction.) While dissatisfaction with politics is by no means new, an identical survey question¹ asked in 2004 saw Canadians' satisfaction with democracy at a much higher rate of 75%.

Although Canadians believe their democracy is successfully enabling freedoms of expression and equality, they are disappointed with their political representation. In particular, Canadians indicated feeling that their elected representatives often are not accountable for their actions nor do they pay attention to what Canadians think.

If Canadians don't believe that those elected to represent them are listening, what do they think their representatives are doing?

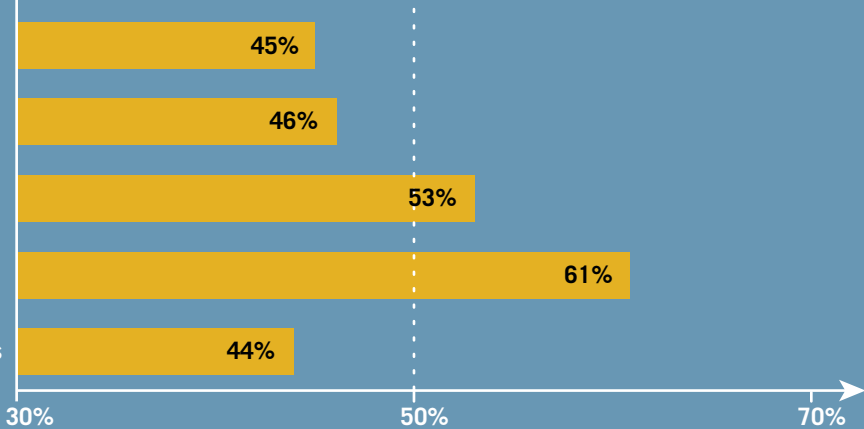
1. The 2004 Political Support in Canada study was conducted by Harold D. Clarke, Jason Feifler, Allan Kornberg and Thomas J. Scotto. Field work was carried out by Polimetrix.

CANADIANS ASSESS THEIR MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

MPS' ROLES, IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE TO CANADIANS

1. Holding the government to account
2. Representing the views of constituents
3. Debating or voting on important issues
4. Representing the views of their party
5. Managing individual constituents' concerns

PERFORMANCE SCORE (OUT OF 100)



THE ROLE OF THE MP

When asked about the performance of Members of Parliament, only 36% of Canadians were satisfied with how MPs do their jobs. Samara dug underneath this dissatisfaction by looking more closely at Canadians' views on the key roles of an MP and found a strong divergence between the roles Canadians most value and their assessment of how well MPs perform in those roles. (See above chart.)

When asked to assess MPs' performance for each role, Canadians gave most a failing grade of less than 50%.

Although this bleak report card suggests a need for all-round improvement, one result is particularly worrisome. Canadians awarded MPs the highest marks at representing the views of their party, fully 15 points higher than the mark they awarded for representing the views of the Canadians who elected them to office.

In other words, 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.

In Samara's MP Exit Interview project, in which 65 former MPs were interviewed about their life in politics, many said they went to Ottawa to represent their constituents to the country. "I've always been driven by trying to represent the people who elect me," said one.

Many cited a desire to bring constituents' views forward. "I ran on an unofficial platform but one that was very clear to me. It consisted of what I was hearing over and over again at the doorstep: 'If we

elect you, we want you to take our message to Ottawa, and not the other way around,'" said another.

But when they arrived in Ottawa, many MPs realized that their work was often circumscribed by an unexpected player: their political party.

THE PARTY WINS AGAIN

In Samara's MP exit interviews, many former MPs reported feeling that they spent too much time working in the interest of their parties. "I realized early on that ... you're there to vote the party's position more or less, or you're there to represent the party to the public," observed one.

Others felt discomfort when party discipline forced them to vote against their constituents. As one former MP summarized, "... the party isn't always right for my riding. The party, in [many] instances, was terrible for my riding."

Samara's survey research confirms that MPs are not the only ones who recognize the primacy of political parties. Canadians sense it too, and feel that their MPs' work representing constituents is falling short when compared to MPs' representation of their parties.

Certainly, part of an MP's role is to explain the positions of one's political party, but to what extent should it come at the expense of the ability to represent constituents' views to the party and Parliament? What does it suggest about Canadian political parties if both MPs and citizens see those parties as being at odds with MPs' abilities to represent their constituents?

LEADERS WE TURN TO

Despite their dissatisfaction with MPs' performance, this research suggests that Canadians understand the importance of MPs and look to them to tackle public problems. For example, when asked to whom they turn when it comes to policy issues that concern them, Canadians' number one choice was Members of Parliament, followed by elected leaders at other levels. In fact, political leaders outranked all other groups, including business, interest groups, the media, protesters, non-profit and international organizations or religious leaders.

THE PATH FORWARD

Parties play a critical role in Canadian democracy. They are responsible for engaging citizens in politics, selecting candidates for elected office, aggregating diverse policy perspectives and contesting elections. They dominate the public's understanding of politics, such that most people cast their vote for a party and rarely elect independent MPs.

Given these important responsibilities, it is unfortunate that parties are often described as being at odds with citizens, rather than a vital conduit between citizens and government.

Clearly, steps should be taken to ensure political parties—and the MPs who serve in them—better

reflect citizens and their priorities. Former MPs pointed to many examples of ways they could provide successful local representation within caucus, committees, and even at certain times on the floor of the House of Commons. However, this new research suggests that MPs' efforts are not well-recognized or that they're overshadowed by political party messaging.

With the citizen at the centre, the political system would be both more representative and accountable, something that would contribute to citizens' increased satisfaction with Canadian democracy. ^

COMING NEXT

Samara's public opinion research also indicated that two thirds of Canadians believe their interests are not being represented in Ottawa.

Are they right? Samara's next report seeks to answer this question by examining the topics MPs discuss in the House of Commons compared with what Canadians say they're concerned about. Look for the next Samara Democracy Report early in 2013.

Samara Democracy Reports

Samara's Democracy Reports are a series designed to shine a light on Canada's democratic system and increase Canadians' understanding of politics. These reports investigate commonly held assumptions, provoke questions and elevate the discussion on the health of political and democratic participation in Canada.

Previous Democracy Reports are available at www.samaracanada.com and include:

- "The Real Outsiders," which examined the attitudes of less-engaged Canadians towards politics and democracy.
- "The Neighbourhoods of #cdnpoli," which illustrated the #cdnpoli discussion on Twitter.
- "Occupiers and Legislators," which analyzed how the media covers politics.

This report is based on a small slice of Samara's public opinion research commissioned in 2012. Future reports will further explore the role of the MP, political parties and the attitudes of citizens, including young people and new Canadians, toward politics.

These reports will culminate in the Samara Index, which focuses on the relationship between citizens and the political process that governs Canadians.

ABOUT SAMARA

Samara is a charitable organization dedicated to improving political participation in Canada. Through research and educational programs, Samara is reconnecting citizens to politics.

To advance our goals, Samara initiates research, writes reports, runs seminars for journalists, conducts media interviews, speaks at conferences and produces curriculum materials for schools and universities.

The findings from our MP Exit Interview project and Democracy Reports project received extensive national and local media coverage, and are still regularly

referenced by columnists and decision makers. The findings were used to improve orientation for newly-elected MPs in 2011, are used by several academics in their own research and have been adapted into curriculum materials for use in high schools and universities across Canada.

METHODOLOGY

The Samara Citizen's Survey was designed by Samara staff with guidance from a team of academics from universities across Canada. The research was conducted in French and English by using a representative online sample of 2287 Canadian residents over 18 years of age living in the 10 provinces. Responses were weighted to ensure they reflected the actual population distribution in Canada. A sample of this size would be expected to produce results accurate to within plus or minus 3.1 percentage points 19 times out of 20.

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