

A Report Card on How Canadians Communicate,
Participate and Lead in Politics

SAMARA'S

DEM  CRACY **360**

TALK.ACT.LEAD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Samara's Democracy 360, a report card on the state of Canada's democracy, focuses on the complex relationship between citizens and political leadership. With the understanding that democracy is about more than just casting a ballot every four years, any conversation about how decisions are taken on the future of our country needs to consider a more robust definition of "everyday democracy."

Samara's Democracy 360 expands the measurement of democracy and kick-starts a conversation using measurable indicators focused on three areas essential to a healthy democracy: communication, participation and political leadership. That is: talking, acting and leading.

The Democracy 360 brings together a number of data sources, such as Samara's public opinion research and website content analyses, as well as publicly available data from other sources, including the House of Commons and Elections Canada. And as such it is designed to be a thorough, yet manageable, look at the health of citizens' relationship with politics, and one that can be repeated, and will be in 2017 in time for Canada's 150th birthday.

In an effort to set a benchmark that prompts reflection and discussion, Samara has awarded an overall letter grade as well as a letter grade for each of the three areas, as outlined in this report.

The Result: What does C mean? Quite simply our democracy is not doing as well as a country as rich as Canada deserves. Canadians are not participating in politics as much as they could, they don't believe it affects them, and they don't see their leaders as influential or efficacious. To turn this situation around, Canada requires more than just higher voter turnout. Canada requires 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.

Current Grade:



WHAT'S INSIDE SAMARA'S DEMOCRACY 360?

CANADIANS DON'T TRUST MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT OR POLITICAL PARTIES AND BELIEVE THEY LARGELY FAIL TO PERFORM THEIR CORE JOBS:

- Only 40% of Canadians report that they trust MPs to do what is right and only 42% of Canadians place some trust in political parties.
- Canadians give MPs and political parties failing grades on nearly all their responsibilities, ranging from reaching out to citizens to their work in Parliament. Overall, Canadians feel MPs do a better job representing the views of the party than they do representing their constituents.

POLITICS IS SEEN AS IRRELEVANT AND, AS A RESULT, CANADIANS ARE WITHDRAWING FROM THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM:

- Only 31% of Canadians believe politics affects them every day.
- Only 37% give any time or resources to formal political activities between elections.
- A surprising number (39%) say they haven't had a single political conversation—online or offline—in a year-long period.
- With a federal voter turnout of 61%, Canada ranks in the bottom fifth among democracies, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

TO MAKE POLITICS RELEVANT, CANADIANS WILL NEED TO SEE THE VALUE IN POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY. THIS WILL REQUIRE THE FOLLOWING CHANGES:

- MPs who serve as reliable, vibrant, two-way links between citizens and government.
- Citizens who become more politically active at and beyond the ballot box.
- Political leadership that acts in ways that encourages Canadians' involvement and demonstrates how politics is a worthwhile way to invest time in order to make a difference.

DESPITE AN OVERALL UNHEALTHY PICTURE, THE DEMOCRACY 360 ALSO REVEALS SEVERAL POSITIVE SIGNS ON WHICH TO BUILD:

- MPs make considerable efforts—through social media, householder mailings and their websites—to reach out to Canadians. With small changes, they can communicate much more effectively.
- Over half of Canadians petition, donate to charity and volunteer, revealing a desire to connect to causes rooted in and affected by politics.

AN ELECTION IN 2015 PRESENTS A REAL OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD MOMENTUM TOWARDS A MORE ENGAGING POLITICAL CULTURE:

- Individual volunteers, candidates and parties, as well as community groups, can all take simple steps to change how citizens get involved and demand a more responsive democracy.
- Under #TalkActLead, anyone can contribute ideas and solutions to improve how politics works. To spur engagement, Samara Canada will be releasing tip sheets and resources as the election approaches.

INTRODUCTION

“Just because you do not take an interest in politics, doesn’t mean politics won’t take an interest in you.”

—Pericles

“Democracy is not intended to be efficient, linear, logical, cheap [...] The key to its secret is the involvement of the citizen.”

—John Ralston Saul from
Doubter’s Companion: A Dictionary of Aggressive Commonsense

Samara’s Democracy 360 is a made-in-Canada report card on the state of Canada’s democracy, which focuses on the relationship between citizens and political leadership.

“Made-in-Canada” is critical because, as Samara’s co-founders observe in *Tragedy in the Commons*, “Canada is among the world’s most successful democracies. Look at any international ranking of democracy, and we appear, almost without fail, near the top [...] Yet these rankings are increasingly difficult to square with the growing sense among Canadians that the country’s politics are not working quite as they should.” Where international rankings engender complacency, what’s really needed is a constructive dialogue on what has to change so Canada remains a great place to call home.

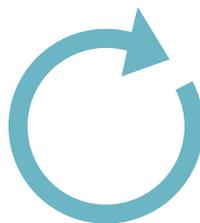
Samara’s Democracy 360 kick-starts this conversation, using measurable indicators focused on three areas that are essential to a healthy democracy: communication, participation and political leadership. That is: talking, acting and leading.

While not exhaustive, Samara’s Democracy 360 paints a rich picture of the way that Canadians engage with—and think about—politics. With the term “leadership” Samara takes a broader view than prime ministers or party leaders alone: all MPs are political leaders, as are the political parties to which most MPs belong, and which are constituted by a national network of locally led riding associations.

Samara’s Democracy 360 brings together a number of data sources, such as original public opinion research and website content analyses, as well as publicly available data from other sources, including from the House of Commons and Elections Canada. Such an approach looks beyond the oft-discussed voter turnout to better illuminate the state of Canada’s “everyday democracy”. This is not a comprehensive look at all players—for example, this report card does not directly include the work of Senators, public servants, political staff, journalists or the judiciary—and future efforts could delve more systematically into political leadership, not only at the federal level, but provincially and municipally, too. But for the inaugural edition, Samara’s Democracy 360 is designed to be a thorough, yet manageable, look at the health of citizens’ relationship with politics, and one that can be repeated and built upon in future years.

In an effort to set a benchmark that prompts reflection and discussion, Samara has awarded a letter grade for each of the three areas based on the indicators’ results.

The circle, echoed by the title’s “360,” draws on several themes: to circle back and take stock, to provide a 360-degree scan, and to draw attention to whether Canadians find themselves in a vicious or virtuous circle when it comes to the relationship between citizens and their political leadership.



Samara's Democracy 360 is presented in two parts. The Democracy 360 Report Card, shared here, interprets the results, highlights a slice of data and proposes what Canadians can do to improve our democracy. The Democracy 360 Numbers, a companion to this report, describes all 23 indicators of a healthy representative democracy, offering a rich resource of data for media and any interested citizens.

Since Canadian democracy has never been measured this robustly, this initial report card serves as the baseline, and when the Democracy 360 returns in 2017—just in time for Canada's 150th birthday—Canadians will be able to see, in a quantifiable way, if democracy has improved or declined.

WHY IS IT NEEDED?

In 2015, Canadians will elect—from among 35 million people—338 of their fellow citizens to form the Parliament that will likely lead Canada into its 150th birthday in 2017 and beyond. If Canada's 21st century takes any cues from the 20th century, domestic crises, international conflict, economic recessions and seemingly intractable problems can be expected; these are problems that Canadians will have to solve together. There will also be opportunities to adapt, evolve and change: where do we invest in innovation to drive progress? How do we build a healthier and happier country? What do we want Canada to look like at its 200th birthday?

It's through Canada's democratic system that we will grapple with these questions together. And politics, the day-to-day exercise of democracy, offers many ways to drive change, whether through leaders' framing of issues, new laws, policy designs, taxes or spending.

Yet in practice, there's a growing sense expressed not only by ordinary Canadians, but also by many former and current elected representatives, that Canada's democracy has not evolved with the changing times. The political process now repels more citizens than it attracts—particularly young Canadians. That both citizens and political leaders are concerned suggests a need to better understand what is happening to the relationship between the two. This relationship is at the heart of parliamentary democracy and is more complicated than a trip to the ballot box every four years. Under the banner of Samara's Democracy 360, Samara seeks to fill this need and begin a conversation on how to improve how our democracy functions and is experienced.

Samara Canada

Samara Canada is a charity dedicated to reconnecting Canadians to politics. Established in 2009 by Michael MacMillan and Alison Loat, Samara Canada has become Canada's most trusted, non-partisan champion of increased civic engagement and a more positive public life.

Samara Canada's research and educational programming shine new light on Canada's democratic system and encourages greater political participation across the country, to build better politics, and a better Canada, for everyone.

LEADERSHIP LETDOWN

Despite Canada's enviable international ranking among nations, Canadians express a surprising amount of dissatisfaction with democracy—especially with their political leaders. Samara's Democracy 360 reveals several sources of this dissatisfaction, in particular Canadians' low trust in MPs and generally poor reviews of their job performance.

TRUST

Large endeavours undertaken together—like democratic governance—require trust: a belief that, despite uncertainty, leaders will follow through on their commitment. Obviously, blind trust isn't desirable, but when there's more mistrust than trust, it is hard for political leaders to lead, to tackle tough questions and commit to long-term plans. In the Democracy 360, only 40% of Canadians report that they trust their MPs to do what is right. Political parties fare no better: only 42% of Canadians report trusting them.

PERFORMANCE

Low levels of trust are compounded by the perceived performance of political leaders. When asked to rate MPs' performance across six areas of responsibility, Canadians gave MPs failing grades in all but one area: representing their parties' views (57%). This percentage is notably higher than the grades they received for representing constituents (45%) or holding government to account (42%). Though Canadians, in a way, hire an MP through elections, these elections will mean little to citizens if there is a prevailing sense that, regardless of party and regardless of sitting in government or opposition, MPs are there for their parties and not for their constituents.

Parties fare a little better in their key roles, such as policy development and engagement with Canadians. Although Canadians give parties passing grades for their roles in elections, such as recruiting candidates (50%) and encouraging people to vote (55%), they reserve their lowest marks for parties' performance in reaching out to Canadians to hear their views (42%). Perhaps, then, it's no surprise so few people are involved with parties today.

THE CITIZEN BYSTANDER

With low levels of citizens' trust and dismal job performance, political leaders may be letting Canadians down, but Canadians aren't holding up their side of the relationship either. Canadians believe in the values of democracy, but they are spectators rather than participants. Too many have tuned out altogether, whether it's at the polls, getting involved or simply talking politics.

VOTING

With federal turnout at 61% in the 2011 federal election, Canada ranks in the bottom fifth for voter participation among OECD countries. This reflects a steep decline from the 75% turnout that characterized most of Canada's post-war period until the 1980s. Particularly troublesome is that this declining turnout is driven almost entirely by young Canadians (aged 18 to 24), who vote at almost half the rate (39%) as Canadians aged 65 to 74 (75%), and who are increasingly less likely to ever start voting.

GETTING INVOLVED

Outside of an election, Canadians are less likely to participate in politics. By their own admission, a clear majority (63%) of Canadians did not put any time into any of the following six activities in the last year:

- With a political party: Joining a party, donating to a candidate or party, or volunteering for a candidate or campaign
- On politics' frontlines: Attending a political meeting or speech, planning a political event or giving a political speech in public

POLITICAL TALK

Even for a very accessible form of participation—talking about politics both online or in person—a large number of Canadians (39%) report never having had a single political conversation in a year-long period.

Without strong signals that politics matters and that political participation is something to be proud of, politics feels distant, if not irrelevant, to many people. When Samara asked Canadians “how often they are affected by decisions made by elected officials,” only 31% responded “every day.” Worse: 17% indicated they “don’t know.”

THE REPORT CARD

Canada functions well, for the most part. Daily, millions of Canadians are served by public institutions, such as public schools and universities, and publicly funded services such as medical care and law enforcement. But when problems arise—and they will—Canadians need a democratic system that works, where citizens believe politics is an effective route to make change, rather than something to be ignored or circumvented.

Canada’s democracy is now like a slow leak when it rains. It’s easy to ignore a pesky leak, but if left until the damage becomes severe or a storm rages, the problem will become more difficult and expensive to correct. So, too, is the case with democracy, which Samara’s inaugural report card echoes. The overall grade of C speaks to a turning point that Canada’s democracy faces: without some intervention, “everyday democracy” will be weakened further.

In the spirit of a constructive report card, the Democracy 360 delves deeper into each section to consider how and where to improve. Fortunately, there are many encouraging signs and examples of commitment from leaders and citizens alike. Built upon, these could yet lead to a different path, towards a politics that Canadians believe matters.

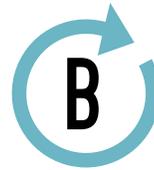
A note on the letter grades

As this is the first time Canadian democracy has been measured in this way, bringing together data on citizens' perceptions as well as objectively measurable data, there are no historical or cross-country comparisons that can be accurately made. In order to establish a scale that underpins the grades given, researchers at Samara with input from individuals active in the area of democratic engagement, considered the question "*What would a 'great' democracy look like in ten years time?*" Based on this input, we compared these definitions of "great" with where Canada is now, and determined the grades below. More details are available in the full [methodology](#).

COMMUNICATION

The Aspiration: Canadians need Members of Parliament who serve as reliable, vibrant, two-way links between citizens and government, and citizens themselves need to begin to engage by talking about politics.

Current Grade:



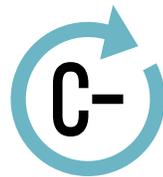
MPs do reach out to Canadians through the channels available to them. Most MPs are on social media, and the vast majority of them maintain websites that share their offices' contact information. Only a few fail to send printed householders to all the homes in their ridings. In short, MPs have the tools to speak to Canadians and they use them, but whether they do so successfully is more difficult to ascertain; Canadians' low trust levels suggest there is room for improvement. For example, when social media is used more often to broadcast a message, rather than gather input or exchange views, it misses a chance to engage.

Over half of Canadians report having some form of contact with an MP, political party or candidate in the last year. This is more evidence that outreach is happening, though perhaps it is not consistent or executed in a way that resonates with everyone. But with many Canadians receiving a phone call, email, mailing or a door knock, there are ample opportunities for Canadians to spend a few more minutes considering politics or, better still, engaging with others in a political conversation.

PARTICIPATION

The Aspiration: Citizens need to be more politically active—at the ballot box and beyond. They should feel invited and compelled to put some of their time and energy into politics to effect change.

Current Grade:



Over half of Canadians say they petition, donate to charities and volunteer annually. This is proof that many citizens do care about their communities and country, and are willing to give their time or resources accordingly.

But this activity is often at a distance from politics. For example, only a third of Canadians report that they've reached out to an elected official in the last year, whether to share a message, an idea or concern. What would it take for citizens to value the political arena as a domain for change, as they do with their charitable donations and volunteer hours?

One way to make this happen is to better connect community work to being political—and to reclaim a term that is often seen as pejorative rather than complimentary. This means that Canadians who embody the belief that politics matters to communities should be better recognized and celebrated for their contributions, in the same way volunteers or entrepreneurs are celebrated. Samara has launched an annual “[Everyday Political Citizen Project](#)” which asks Canadians to nominate ordinary people engaging in big and small ways that enhance the country’s political culture. These energies with the help of many—schools, community groups, foundations and political leaders—can lead a cultural shift that reclaims being political.

LEADERSHIP

The Aspiration: Members of Parliament and political parties should act in ways that encourage Canadians involvement and build a culture in which politics is seen as worthwhile and efficacious.

Current Grade:



A slight majority of Canadians (54%) believe that MPs *can* shape the direction of the country—a hopeful sign. From the 80 exit interviews that Samara conducted with former MPs, most of the people who become MPs describe entering politics to make a difference in their communities and country. However, MPs also report being stymied by their own parties, which prevents them from doing the job they initially sought.

This too is reflected in Canadians' views of political parties; a majority (62%) feel candidates and parties only want their vote, not their involvement. Yet parties remain essential to the functioning of Canada's parliamentary system. It's clear that in order to restore the trust of those who elect them, party leaders and MPs should work towards more balanced relationships—relationships that enable MPs to better fulfill their jobs as representatives.

Another aspect of leadership is the degree to which it reflects the people from which it's chosen. Though diversity in Parliament has improved significantly over time, the speed of change hasn't matched the country's demographic changes. Women, visible minorities, Indigenous peoples, immigrants and young people are all underrepresented in Parliament. While perfect demographic representation is unlikely, a better match would send a powerful message to citizens that they are reflected in the political process and that Parliament is equipped to understand the specific needs and concerns of Canada's diverse population. To remedy this, political parties, as the entities that recruit and select candidates, have a major role to play.

The Largest Provincial Differences

Canadians experience most of their political life in the same way across all provinces, and hold similar views when it comes to how politics works. However, there are a few survey questions where interesting differences can be seen.

- When it comes to the number of Canadians who report having been contacted by email, phone, mail or in person by political leaders, there's a 22 percentage point difference: Residents of Newfoundland report the lowest levels (50%) and residents of Manitoba report the highest (72%)
- On social media, Canadians from PEI are the most likely to follow a politician (45%) while those from Saskatchewan are the least likely (15%).
- Ontario and Alberta have the highest number who are “very satisfied” with the way democracy is working (16% and 15% respectively) and Quebec has the highest number “not satisfied at all” (15%).
- Canadians in Ontario are the most satisfied with the way Members of Parliament are doing their jobs (53%), while those in Quebec are the least satisfied (37%).

For a full list of statistically relevant differences among the provinces, see the data [here](#).

CONCLUSION

With an overall score of C, Samara's Democracy 360 reveals a rather lacklustre state of Canada's politics. Samara's aim in creating this resource is not to signal that perfection is attainable in democracy, but that improvement is required. This presents an important challenge to Canadians: Moving away from a vicious circle that increasingly separates political leadership from citizens' ideas and talents, and corrodes citizens' trust in, and valuation of, political leadership. However, a federal election in 2015 presents a critical opportunity not just to cast a ballot, but also to provoke citizens, candidates, parties and civil society groups to play a role.

If history is a guide, we can expect in the coming federal election the usual mix of horserace-driven media coverage, focused primarily on party leaders, push-polls and negative advertising. But there will also be numerous occasions to get involved on campaigns, to ask candidates tough questions and, above all, to make a stronger democracy a powerful theme in the election campaign. Every small effort—by citizens and leaders—towards a positive, engaged democratic Canada can spark another effort, and bring Canada to a virtuous circle and a stronger democracy.

Samara hopes that when the Democracy 360 returns in two years, in time for Canada's 150th birthday, Canadians will be communicating, participating and leading the way to a Canada that is more representative, dynamic and responsive—in short, a more democratic country.



In the meantime, 2015 remains an important year to work together. The findings of the Democracy 360 offer a focal point for citizens, community groups and candidates to elevate communication, participation and leadership—to #TalkActLead. Samara will be releasing a number of resources throughout 2015 to help make #TalkActLead straightforward and something everyone can do, and Samara will be listening for great ideas under the #TalkActLead banner.

BRIEF METHODOLOGY

In the intervening years between conception and publication of Samara’s Democracy 360, Samara Canada test-drove a number of the analyses in the Samara Democracy Report series, which also have provoked questions about the health of political and democratic life in Canada. Previous Democracy Reports are available to read at www.samaracanada.com.

Samara Canada was also happy to share the data with a team of academics. The subsequent academic book published by UBC Press in 2014, [*Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perceptions and Performance*](#), provides an in-depth exploration of Canada’s democracy—focusing on citizens, political leadership and the media.

A full methodology that includes greater detail about the process used to create the Democracy 360 is available [here](#). Included below are brief descriptions of the data sources used in Samara’s Democracy 360.

2014 SAMARA CITIZENS’ SURVEY

The Samara Citizens’ Survey was conducted in English and French using an online sample of 2406 Canadian residents over 18 years of age living in ten provinces. Data was collected between December 12 and December 31, 2014. The survey has a credibility interval of 1.99 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Responses were weighted to ensure they reflect a nationally representative sample of Canadians. Questions that asked about Canadians’ activities were limited to the last 12 months.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The [2013 to 2014 Members' Expenditures Reports](#) were used to determine the percentage of MPs that spent money on householders, and therefore likely sent a householder, during the reporting period. Demographic information about MPs was compiled using information available on www.parl.gc.ca.

PUBLICALLY ACCESSIBLE DATA

Samara collected data on MPs' websites (collection from May to July 2014) and Electoral District Association websites (collection from August to September 2013). The MP social media data is drawn from the 2013 annual report "[Peace, Order and Googleable Government](#)" produced by Full Duplex.

ELECTIONS CANADA

Rates of 2011 voter turnout are sourced from [Elections Canada's reports](#).

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