SAMARAS'S 2017 DEMOCRACY 360
THE SECOND REPORT CARD ON HOW CANADIANS COMMUNICATE, PARTICIPATE AND LEAD IN POLITICS
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Samara Canada’s second edition of the Democracy 360 is a made-in-Canada report card on the state of Canada’s democracy. Built on the understanding that democracy is about more than just casting a ballot every four years, the report card examines the complex relationship between citizens and political leadership and how they interact, especially between elections. It measures three areas essential to a healthy democracy: communication, participation and political leadership.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Canada’s democracy earned a B-, an improvement from its C in 2015.

**Communication between Canadians and their leaders increased.**

At 68%, voter turnout was up 7 percentage points, the highest it’s been since 1993.

**Participation in formal political activities, such as donating to a campaign, was still low.**

Canadians awarded above passing grades to MPs and political parties on their core jobs.

Diversity of representation in the House of Commons continues to be a challenge.

**KEY FINDINGS**
The year 2017 is Canada’s sesquicentennial year. This is a moment that encourages reflection about Canada’s past, present and future—and what legacy from 2017 should shape the next 150 years. In 1967, as the country turned 100 years old, the federal government invested heavily in physical infrastructure—such as theatres and arenas—for the public’s benefit. Samara believes 2017 calls for a different type of investment: in our democratic infrastructure.

While the 360 doesn’t show failing grades, there are signs from abroad that democracy is fragile, with the number of “full democracies” in decline. With that in mind, Canadians should consider investing in education and an improved political culture in order to strengthen our democracy. More importantly, a country as rich in resources and people should be striving for “exceeds expectations” rather than the “meets expectations” of a B-. How might Canadian democracy receive its first A?

SAMARA’S FIVE IDEAS FOR STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC INFRASTRUCTURE:

1. **CIVIC EDUCATION, IN AND BEYOND THE CLASSROOM**

   Good civic education inspires and empowers. In schools, national, coordinated investments should be made into civics education, at every grade level, to inspire active and informed citizens. Ongoing civic education should be a priority in workplaces and community organizations.

2. **MEANINGFUL CONSULTATION OF THE PUBLIC BY MPS**

   Meaningful consultation pays dividends in connecting citizens to politics, and in solving Canada’s most complex problems. MPs need training, guidance and nonpartisan support on how to effectively and meaningfully consult their constituents.
3 INCREASED CIVILITY IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Canada's current political culture too often risks turning citizens off, rather than inspiring their involvement. Accusations, online attacks and unwillingness to compromise have become embedded in the culture. Everyone involved in politics—from citizens, to leaders, to media outlets—needs to create a more constructive and welcoming atmosphere.

4 EMPOWERED REPRESENTATIVES

Striking a healthy balance of power between parties, party leaders and MPs is at the heart of meaningful and effective Parliament. MPs require the time and autonomy to study legislation and hold government to account, and cross-partisan committees should be empowered and respected.

5 INCREASED DIVERSITY IN REPRESENTATION

Power that is diffuse, representative and diverse can lead to solutions that are innovative and well-suited to the population served. Ensuring a diverse House requires the commitment of parties and electoral district associations as well as party leaders.
“If nothing else positive comes out of 2016, let us at least find a new determination to fight for a way of life, and a system of government, that we can never take for granted.”
—Globe and Mail editorial, December 30, 2016

Two years ago, Samara Canada released its first Democracy 360, a made-in-Canada report card on democracy. Built on the understanding that democracy is about more than just casting a ballot every four years, the report examined the complex relationship between citizens and political leadership, and especially how they interact between elections. The Democracy 360 goes beyond traditional measures of voter turnout and examines measurable indicators on three areas essential to a healthy democracy: communication, participation and political leadership.

Much has changed in the two years since the inaugural report card, both in Canada, which saw an election that brought a new party to power, and internationally, where there has been unprecedented democratic upheaval in many countries.

Canada’s 150th birthday invites reflection on Canada’s past, present and future—and what legacy from 2017 should shape the future of the country. Instead of the physical infrastructure investments of 1967, Samara believes 2017 calls for another meaningful investment: in our democratic infrastructure.
WHAT IS DEMOCRATIC INFRASTRUCTURE?

Democratic infrastructure is a mix of laws and institutions, as well as the unwritten political norms and culture that allow us to work together as citizens to make decisions.

One hundred and fifty years since Confederation, are Canadians content with how their democratic institutions and culture operate? Ensuring that the country has the “infrastructure” in place to make good decisions in the 21st century will be more fundamental to Canada’s success than any single policy question. Thus, asking Canadians about the health of their democracy has never been more important.

While Canada consistently ranks in the top 10 countries in the world on headline indices that measure freedom and democracy, these indices do not give a complete picture of Canada’s democracy. Voter turnout is affected by many things good and bad, and widespread political corruption is not an issue in Canada the way it is in many countries.

This is why the Democracy 360 report card goes deeper, measuring 19 indicators and 38 sub-indicators. Together, these indicators provide a comprehensive picture of how Canadians feel about their democracy.

To prompt reflection and discussion, Samara has awarded an overall letter grade to Canada’s democracy, as well as a letter grade for each of the three areas.

At the end of this report card, we suggest five investments that should be made in Canada’s democratic infrastructure to build a better country and to guard against decay.

SATISFIED WITH A “B-” FOR CANADIAN DEMOCRACY?

Many observers, both in Canada and internationally, believe Canada has uniquely preserved “liberal democratic” values. According to this report card, most Canadians agree, with 71% of them saying they are “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with “how democracy works in Canada.” Moreover, this is 6 percentage points higher than the first report card in 2015.

ENGAGE WITH SAMARA

It’s Canada’s sesquicentennial and we want to hear from you! How is democracy doing in your community? What letter grade would you award to Canada’s democracy? Check out Samara’s interactive online tool at samaracanada.com.

71% of Canadians say they are satisfied with how democracy works in Canada.
Our country has built a democratic infrastructure with a solid foundation of laws and rules that protect the integrity of democratic institutions and processes. For example, Elections Canada, an independent and nonpartisan federal agency, oversees federal elections, ensuring eligible Canadians have the opportunity to vote and be counted under the same rules. Additionally, independent electoral boundary commissions insulate changes to riding boundaries from partisan gerrymandering. Restrictive fundraising rules and transparency of donations reduce the influence of money in politics, federally and in many provinces. These safeguards may make it easier for Canadians to be confident in, and satisfied with, their democracy. But, as other countries’ recent experiences suggest, it is a mistake to believe Canada’s democracy is immune from challenges.

DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS AROUND THE WORLD

Based on the results of its 2016 Democracy Index, the Economist Intelligence Unit considers the world to be in the midst of a “democratic recession,” where the number of full democracies is in decline. Indeed the US was flagged as being a “flawed democracy” for the first time. While Canada is still considered a full democracy, democracy is not something to take for granted.

According to Freedom House, an independent organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world, the world is in the midst of a 10-year decline in global freedom. In its most recent report on political rights and civil liberties, Freedom House concluded, “Over the last decade, the most significant global reversals have been in freedom of expression and the rule of law.”

In 2011, the Arab Spring seemed to promise Arab countries would be the next shining lights of democracy. Today, these hopes have been extinguished as autocratic regimes curtail rights in these countries.

Countries with long traditions of liberal democracy, such as those in Europe, are also not safe from creeping authoritarianism. In the United States, the new president has demonstrated a troubling disregard for democratic norms.

GERRYMANDERING

Dividing a geographic space into ridings to give one political party an electoral majority in a large number of ridings while concentrating the voting strength of the opposition in as few ridings as possible.
Despite Canada’s relative strength as a democracy, it has not and still does not always serve its citizens equally. Canadian women were excluded from the democratic process for decades. Canadians of Japanese descent were disenfranchised. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a sobering reminder of how Canada’s democracy failed its First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. Our democracy has flaws, and it is very important to reflect on them in this sesquicentennial year.

**CANADA’S DEMOCRATIC POT HOLES**

While democracy in Canada seems to be working well for most Canadians, this does not provide grounds for complacency. While 88% of Canadians are involved in their communities, only 38% devote themselves to formal political activities, and a small subset of disengaged Canadians are “very dissatisfied” with democracy.

In addition, there are worrying trends in the Canadian political climate. Decades of centralization of power in first ministers’ offices and premiers’ offices make it more difficult for elected MPs to hold government to account. Omnibus bills and time allocation have made the scrutiny of bills and budgets more difficult. In 2008, professor Donald Savoie warned, “The relationship among Parliament, the prime minister, ministers and public servants is in need of repair.... Those with the power to introduce change for the better are reluctant to do so because they enjoy being able to wield tremendous power.”

Nine years later, little has changed.

At the same time, the growing “celebritization” of political leaders in Canada and internationally reduces public scrutiny of their policies. In *Brand Command: Canadian Politics and Democracy in the Age of Message Control*, Alex Marland, a professor of political science at Memorial University, describes how citizens have become more interested in political leaders’ personal lives than their policies. “[T]he government is facing market pressures to deliver information in an entertaining manner, such as through emphasizing personalities and pop culture.”

The media plays a vital role in educating and informing the public so they can hold government to account. However the Public Policy Forum (PPF), an
independent, non-profit think tank, estimates one-third of journalism jobs have been lost in the past six years, reducing the media’s ability to produce public affairs journalism. In the 2017 report “The Shattered Mirror: News, Democracy and Trust in the Digital Age,” PPF demonstrated how a weakened media landscape leads to a weakened democracy.⁷

“Liberal democracy has overcome many crises in its relatively short history. But its capacity to do so has lulled both the rulers and the ruled in Western societies into a state of complacency,” said Canadian scholar Jennifer Welsh in her 2016 book The Return of History.⁸ David Frum, a Canadian-American political commentator, put it more bluntly: “No one should be self-congratulatory. Everyone should worry,”⁹ including Canadians.

HOW DID SAMARA BUILD THE DEMOCRACY 360?

The Democracy 360 report card brings together a number of data sources: public opinion data was drawn from the Samara Citizens’ Survey, which was conducted in English and French using an online sample of 4,003 Canadian residents over 18 years of age living in ten provinces. Data was collected between September 23 and October 6, 2016. Other data sources include Elections Canada, the House of Commons and independent social media analysis. For the complete methodology, visit samaracanada.com.

The inaugural Democracy 360 report card in 2015 captured public opinion near the end of the Conservatives’ three terms in office with an election in sight, while this second report card examines public opinion in the first year of the new federal Liberal government. It covers Canadians’ experiences and activities in a 12-month period including the 2015 federal election campaign, the election itself and the first year of the new government.
COMMUNICATION

THE ASPIRATION:
Canadians who talk about politics and policy with greater understanding and Members of Parliament who serve as reliable, vibrant, two-way links between citizens and government.

Canadians are generally more interested in talking about politics than in the previous report card, and politicians have reached out to talk to a majority of them. This outreach may not be consistent or conducted in a way that resonates with all Canadians. Yet, it provides an opportunity for Canadians to engage with politics and hear others’ political perspectives. MPs have increasingly tuned into social media.

DISCUSSION

Discussion, already a strength of Canada’s democracy in the previous report card, continued to improve. Two-thirds of Canadians (67%) reported having a discussion about politics in the previous 12-month period, up 6 percentage points from before.

Canadians’ preferred way to discuss politics remains face-to-face or on the phone (54% compared to 34% for email or text message). An increasing number of Canadians follow a politician on social media (34%), up from 23%, perhaps because of the
investment many candidates made in their digital activities during the 2015 election.

**CONTACT**

Even during an election year, when we expected to see a spike in reported contact, only 63% of Canadians reported being contacted by a party, candidate or MP, which is unchanged from the first report card. Only 32% of Canadians reported contacting an elected official themselves.

In a significant change from two years ago, MPs have fully embraced social media as a way to connect with constituents. All but one MP (99.7%) is present on Facebook, 99% of MPs are on Twitter, 88% are on YouTube, and 56% are on Instagram. A handful of MPs are even experimenting with Snapchat.

This report card saw fewer MPs sending “householders,” the paper pamphlets delivered to all households in a riding and paid for through the House of Commons. While 98% of MPs sent householders in the 2015 report card, this report card sees only 90% of MPs doing so. It is possible that MPs see social media as a better way to connect with Canadians, yet householders can be a way for MPs to reach all constituents’ homes, particularly those who are not very active online. For MPs who choose to use them to communicate about policy in a substantive way, householders can be a way to directly inform constituents about what is happening in Ottawa without the filter of the party or the media.
How much Canadians discuss politics tells us how engaged they are with issues, policies and the democratic system as a whole. Discussion is often the first step towards action.

**CANADIANS DISCUSS POLITICS**

The percentage of Canadians who reported having a discussion about politics in the last year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discuss via email or text message</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulate, repost or comment</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss face to face or over the phone</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow a politician on social media</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow a political group on social media</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** 2016 Samara Citizens’ Survey
The percentage of Canadians who reported having contacted an elected official in the last year.

\[ \text{2015: 31\%} \quad \text{2016: 32\%} \quad +1\text{pp} \]

All Canadians are served by elected representatives, and ensuring MPs understand their views requires them to ask questions or share concerns directly with their MP.

 Constituent representation is an important aspect of any MPs’ job, and doing so effectively requires elected representatives to invite Canadians’ participation, report on their own actions, and work to understand their constituents’ concerns and ideas. It’s also important that Canadians, even if they don’t engage, are aware that efforts have been made to reach them.

Source: 2016 Samara Citizens’ Survey
MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The average percentage of MPs using four popular social media platforms.

- **Twitter**
  - 99% (99% ± 15pp)
  - 2015: 85%

- **Facebook**
  - 99% (99% ± 10pp)
  - 2015: 85%

- **YouTube**
  - 88% (88% ± 5pp)
  - 2015: 85%

- **Instagram**
  - 56%
  - (New for 2017!)

The adoption and effective use of social media suggests a willingness by MPs to engage with Canadians on interactive platforms.

*All MPs, but one, use Facebook*

With Snapchat increasing in popularity, seven MPs have started using this new platform. Thumbs up to these early adopters!

Source: Full Duplex
MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT SEND “HOUSEHOLDERS”

The percentage of MPs who reported having spent on at least one “householder” pamphlet between January and September 2016.

-8pp

90%

2015

98%

MP “householder” paper pamphlets are delivered up to four times a year to all households in a riding and are paid for by the House of Commons. MPs use them to report on their activities in Ottawa and in the local constituency.

Source: House of Commons Records
The participation score went up modestly because of high voter turnout in the 2015 general election. But that turnout number did not translate into increased engagement in other areas of political life. While Canadians give a lot to their communities, even in an election year they are still not participating much in formal political life.

**VOTER TURNOUT**

Voter turnout is often considered the most important way citizens engage with politics. For this reason, declining voter turnout over the last thirty years—largely driven by a falling youth turnout—has been a significant concern.

The 2015 federal election saw a reversal of this trend, including among youth. Voter turnout rose to 68%, 7 percentage points higher than the 2011 election, and the highest turnout since 1993. Among Canadians aged 18 to 24, voter turnout increased by an incredible 18 percentage points, with 57% of young people having their voices heard. Turnout among Canadians aged 25 to 34 also increased by 12 percentage points, reaching 57%. Encouragingly, the gap between the age cohort with the highest turnout (Canadians aged 65 to 74) and the cohort with the lowest (Canadians aged 18 to 24) lowered from 36 points to 22.

There is no doubt this rise in turnout, particularly among young Canadians, is good news. Yet, it remains to be seen whether this is the beginning of a lasting trend, or whether turnout will decline in the next election.
FORMAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Surprisingly, higher voter turnout and discussion did not translate into greater participation in other formal political activities. Few Canadians participated in a political activity, such as attending a political meeting (30%) or donating to a candidate or party (19%). Currently, only 8% of Canadians say they are a member of a party, which means it is a very select few who have a direct hand in shaping formal politics in Canada. It seems many Canadians, even those who are politically engaged, still do not see party politics as their preferred way to engage in civic life.

It is possible the low rates of formal political involvement are because of the partisan nature of formal political activities. Perhaps Canadians are unwilling to jump aboard a partisan ship, whether in an election year or not. In this, Canadians miss significant opportunities to shape democracy in Canada. Indeed, in 2017, the Conservatives, NDP and Bloc Québécois are going through a period of change: As they choose their new leaders, they will also choose the direction of their parties, which will shape Canadian politics.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVISM

If formal politics continued to turn Canadians off, that was not the case in civic engagement more broadly. Many more Canadians were engaged in community activities than were engaged in formal political activities. A robust 88% of Canadians participated in at least one civic engagement activity, a 4 percentage point increase from the previous report card; Whether donating to charity (84%), volunteering for a charitable cause (59%), or working with others to solve a community problem (46%), Canadians are deeply involved in their communities.

The number of Canadians who participated in at least one of three activism activities declined from 69% to 68%. Participation in protests declined by 1 percentage point and signing a petition declined by 5 percentage points, which may correspond with the overall uptick in Canadians’ general feelings of satisfaction with their democracy. However, Canadians boycotted more (from 37% to 40%).
VOTING RATES OVER TIME

VOTING RATES ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Source: Elections Canada
OLD AND YOUNG VOTERS’ GAP

The gap between the cohort with the highest turnout in the 2015 federal election (ages 65–74) and the lowest (18–24).

If voter turnout varies significantly by age, politicians are less likely to fully represent the population and its diverse needs.

Source: Elections Canada
RATES OF FORMAL ENGAGEMENT

The percentage of Canadians who participated in at least one formal political activity in the last year.

- **Member of a party**: 8% (8% in 2015, -1pp)
- **Attended a political meeting or speech**: 30% (+1pp)
- **Donated money to a candidate or party**: 19% (0pp)
- **Volunteered for a candidate or campaign**: 15% (-2pp)
- **Gave a political speech in public**: 9% (0pp)

Formal political activities get citizens closer to political decision makers and decision-making.

Source: 2016 Samara Citizens’ Survey
RATES OF ACTIVISM

The percentage of Canadians who participated in at least one form of activism in the last year.

Signed a petition: 59% (-5pp)
Boycotted or bought products for ethical, environmental or political reasons: 40% (+3pp)
Protested or demonstrated: 21% (-1pp)

Source: 2016 Samara Citizens’ Survey

These activities are a way for citizens to immediately express their political support or opposition in between elections, without direct contact with their Member of Parliament.
RATES OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The percentage of Canadians who participated in at least one civic engagement activity in the last year.

Democratic life and community vitality are closely linked. Tracking civic engagement reveals ways that Canadians contribute to their communities beyond formal politics.

Many more Canadians were engaged in community activities than were engaged in formal political activities.

Source: 2016 Samara Citizens’ Survey
LEADERSHIP

THE ASPIRATION:
Political leadership that operates in ways that are more responsive, transparent and inclusive, with Members of Parliament and political parties that are less focused on winning and more collaborative in their decision-making.

Canadians’ satisfaction with the performance of elected leaders and parties went up. There are still opportunities for diversifying representation of Canadians in the House of Commons.

PERFORMANCE

Canadians are generally more pleased with the leadership of their MPs and political parties than in the inaugural report card, though the grades awarded are still very low. Canadians believed MPs did a better job in all their core roles, including representing their constituents (53%) and the views of their party (63%), holding the government to account (50%), and debating and voting on issues in the House of Commons (56%). Notably, the highest scores still go to MPs’ representation of their parties, rather than their important legislative work. Why is the work around Parliament given such poor marks? Can this work be made more approachable, understandable and constructive so that Canadians award higher marks here.

Even more extraordinary than the uptick seen by MPs was the 9 percentage point rise in approval ratings for political parties, from 48% to 57%. Parties performed better on a wide range of functions, from hearing ideas from party members (55%), to reaching out to Canadians so their views could be represented (53%), to coming up with new policy ideas (53%). Canadians, during an election period, gave political parties a 57% grade on recruiting candidates and competing in elections—a 7 percentage point increase from the 2015 Democracy 360. Canadians were also happier with efforts to encourage people to vote, giving parties a 66% on this indicator.
TRUST

Trust—the “glue” of politics—has largely been in decline over the past 30 years across the world. Some of this shift is attributable to the erosion of blind trust in officials, which is actually positive as such trust is subject to abuse. Yet, political leaders still need some public trust for democracy to succeed.

In this report card, 47% of Canadians trust both MPs and political parties “to do what’s right,” a 7 percentage point increase for MPs and a 5 percentage point increase for parties. While this is positive, as it demonstrates trust need not track downwards forever, more than half of Canadians do not trust political actors, which is an important place for improvement.

There may be reason for skepticism as to how sustainable this increased level of trust will be. Often, with new governments there’s a “honeymoon” period where trust is high, but as a government’s tenure wears on, trust generally declines. Trust that is built on a firm foundation of openness and transparency, by many parties and successive governments, might avoid these peaks and valleys.

DIVERSITY

Having political leaders look like their constituents is important for allowing constituents to see themselves in politics and imagine a time when they might put themselves forward for office. As well, diverse viewpoints in the House can lead to innovative thinking.

While our current Cabinet was selected to be more reflective of the Canadian population, Parliament generally, with 74% men, still has a long way to go. Women represent half of Canada’s population, but they are only 26% of its MPs. Visible minorities are better represented—they make up 14% of MPs and 19% of the population. Indigenous MPs make up 3% of the House and 4% of the population. In terms of representation of the youngest cohort of voters Canadians, representation has lost ground since 2015. Only 4% of MPs in the 41st Parliament are aged 18 to 30, a cohort that comprises 17% of the Canadian population.
While Canada has fewer financial and institutional barriers to running for office than many other countries, and Parliament is certainly doing better than in 1867 when it was made up exclusively of white men, more improvement is needed to ensure Canada’s seats of power reflect the diversity of its people.
DIVERSITY IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

A score out of 100 that reflects the average of how well five different Canadian demographic groups are reflected in the makeup of the House of Commons.

For Canadians to believe politics matters, they need to see themselves represented in the makeup of the House of Commons. A parliament made up of MPs of diverse backgrounds will be better suited to understanding the specific needs and concerns of Canada’s diverse population. Perhaps if Canadians see themselves in the system, they might be more likely to participate.

* In the original publication of this report, the parity score for visible minorities was reported as 89% and included Indigenous MPs. To remain consistent with the 2015 report, the parity score (75%) has been adjusted to include only MPs who are visible minorities. See the parity score for Indigenous MPs below.
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<th>2017</th>
<th>2015</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26% of the House</td>
<td>51% of the Country</td>
<td>0% of the Way to Parity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Youth</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>4% of the House</td>
<td>17% of the Country</td>
<td>0% of the Way to Parity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Foreign-Born Canadians</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13% of the House</td>
<td>20% of the Country</td>
<td>62% of the Way to Parity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2015</td>
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TRUST IN AND SATISFACTION WITH POLITICAL LEADERS

TRUST

The percentage of Canadians who trust MPs and parties “a great deal” or “a fair amount” to do what’s right.

Members of Parliament

- 2015: 40%
- 2015: 47%

Political Parties

- 2015: 42%
- 2015: 47%

Satisfaction

The percentage of Canadians who are “very” or “fairly” satisfied with how MPs and parties are doing their jobs.

Members of Parliament

- 2015: 46%
- 2015: 53%

Political Parties

- 2015: 42%
- 2015: 50%
MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT ARE INFLUENTIAL

The percentage of Canadians who “agree” or “strongly agree” that the work and decisions of MPs can influence the direction of the country.

Source: 2016 Samara Citizens’ Survey

PARTIES ONLY WANT VOTES

The percentage of Canadians who “agree” or “strongly agree” that candidates and parties only want their vote.

Source: 2016 Samara Citizens’ Survey
MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT’S JOB PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

The average percentage grade Canadians gave MPs on six core jobs that focus on representation, accountability and legislation.

Through elections Canadians hire and fire MPs as their representatives in Ottawa. This indicator gives Canadians a chance to weigh in on MPs’ job performance between the elections by awarding them grades on each of their jobs.

Source: 2016 Samara Citizens’ Survey
POLITICAL PARTIES’ JOB PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

The average percentage grade Canadians gave political parties on six core jobs that focus on elections, engagement and policy development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>+9pp</th>
<th>2015</th>
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<tr>
<td>Recruiting candidates and competing in elections</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td></td>
<td>+7pp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging people to vote</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td></td>
<td>+11pp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing ideas from party members</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>+8pp</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaching out to Canadians so their views can be heard</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>+11pp</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Coming up with new policy ideas and solutions</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>+9pp</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explaining what the party stands for</td>
<td>57%</td>
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Source: 2016 Samara Citizens’ Survey

Political parties dominate Canadians’ understanding of politics. Partisan debate often frames the news coverage out of Ottawa, and most Canadians consider party and leader preferences when casting a ballot. After the election is over, parties affect and direct how governments form and legislatures function.
BUILDING CANADA’S DEMOCRATIC INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE NEXT 150+ YEARS

For Canada’s 100th birthday, the federal government invested heavily in physical infrastructure across the country—many arenas are adorned with Canada’s Centennial logo to this day. These physical spaces were a legacy that encouraged Canadians to come together and build community.

Fifty years later, in 2017, this sesquicentennial year calls for a renewed investment in our democratic infrastructure. This may be less tangible than the physical kind, but it remains just as vital to the success of Canada.

While the 360 doesn’t show failing grades, there are signs from abroad and within Canada that democracy is fragile and requires everyday attention.

More importantly, a country as rich in resources and people as Canada should strive for “exceeds expectations” rather than “meets expectations,” in report card parlance. How might Canadians go from Cs and Bs to As?

Here are five suggested answers:

1. **CIVIC EDUCATION, BOTH IN AND BEYOND THE CLASSROOM**

Politics functions like the systems that exist under a city: the location of water pipes and power cables is known only to a few. When approaching politics, Canadians need a map of the underground before they start digging. In other words, Canada needs to create a system where everyone gets a thorough civics education.

On top of increased civic education, Canada needs to address the very real barrier of low motivation. Before anyone considers investing time and energy
into a cause, they must be motivated to do so. As Samara has shown in previous research, engaging unsuccessfully with an opaque bureaucracy can be off-putting for many.

In schools, national, coordinated investments should be made in civics education, at every grade level, to inspire active and informed citizens.

But this education around how politics works cannot end with high school graduation. Decisions made by politicians and government affect Canadians every day, and when they don’t understand how decisions are made and how to make the political process work for them, their lives are made poorer. But how can people outside of schools be reached? It’s much harder.

Workplaces could provide in-work training and support around civic education and our rights and responsibilities as citizens. Some of this work has been done by labour unions in the past, but with unionization rates falling steadily, new efforts are needed.

The media plays an important role in informing Canadians about government, so that citizens can hold government to account. Yet, some argue that the decline of media outlets and the scarcity of journalists may make it more difficult to provide substantive coverage of policy issues, even as increased access to entertainment media makes it harder than ever to capture Canadians’ attention.

It is equally critical that political leaders themselves consider how they can contribute to Canadians’ civic knowledge or detract from it. Politicians need to begin to explain policy simply and without toxic partisanship. Political parties can educate and include Canadians in policy development at the grassroots level.

Additionally, community-based organizations, including associations, clubs and even the local YMCA, can reinforce learning by bringing political leaders to speak, educating first-time and reluctant voters, and bringing groups together to advocate for causes of concern to their community. For newcomers, community organizations and settlement agencies can take an active role in explaining how they can contribute to Canada’s political culture by knowing who their representatives are, by joining a political party or even running for office themselves.
MEANINGFUL CONSULTATION OF THE PUBLIC BY MPS

As representatives, MPs have a unique ability to bring constituents’ attention to important public issues and to solicit their input. MPs can host information sessions, consultations for citizen input, or issue campaigns. Too often, efforts like town halls feel underwhelming at best, or dominated by “usual suspects” at worse.

Robust consultation by MPs is still in its infancy. MPs do not enter Parliament as experts at consultation and, indeed, they don’t always have the authority to enact what they hear. They need training, guidance and nonpartisan support on how to effectively and meaningfully consult their constituents. Consultations are not easy to do: they raise expectations and they don’t typically result in consensus. But doing them right is an investment in our democratic infrastructure that could pay dividends in connecting citizens to politics, and in solving Canada’s most complex problems—something that cannot be done by government alone.

CIVILITY IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Canada’s current political culture too often risks turning citizens off, rather than inspiring their involvement. Accusations, online attacks and unwillingness to compromise have become embedded in the culture, such that only those with the skin of a rhino are willing to put themselves forward for public office.

While everyone has a role in encouraging civil political discourse—journalists can cover politics as though it’s a realm for change; citizens can discourage bad behaviour in MPs and each other—MPs and parties can take the lead by modelling the communication that is acceptable in the public sphere. Personal attacks and aggressive antagonism between political leaders sends a message that throwing mud is what politics is all about.

MPs can hold themselves to a higher standard during House of Commons debates, scrums, media interviews and social media engagement. Samara’s research showed that 69% of MPs believe heckling is a problem in the House of Commons. Parties can opt into a standard of “truth in advertising” such that they don’t denigrate the entire political class. And last but not least, when
something goes wrong, even if they aren’t personally responsible, political leaders can engage in that most Canadian of activities and just say “sorry.”

### EMPOWERED REPRESENTATIVES

While Canada’s democracy means each Canadian has a representative in the House, the reality is that power has become more centralized within the offices of the party leaders, and especially the prime minister. Only a small majority (54%) of Canadians agree the work and decisions of MPs influence the direction of the country.

There are real risks when decision-making power ends up concentrated in the hands of a few. Politics becomes less transparent, less open to ideas, and ultimately less responsive to Canadians’ needs, even if it may be more efficient in the short term. Striking a healthy balance of power between parties, party leaders and MPs is at the heart of meaningful and effective Parliament.

What would empowered representatives look like? MPs would have the time and autonomy to study legislation and hold government to account. (In this report, MPs’ performance on “holding government to account and watching how they spend money” received the lowest marks.) It would also mean that the work of cross-partisan committees are empowered and respected. There would be fewer whipped votes and more chances for MPs to vote against their party, when they choose.

Opportunities for systematic review and renewal of Parliament’s rules and structures that shape the ability of MPs to exercise influence and accountability don’t arise all that frequently. The most recent, comprehensive efforts to study and recommend changes occurred last in 2003 and, before that, in 1985. The Liberal Government in March 2017 has asked an existing committee of MPs to consider a broad suite of procedural reforms. This review is well worth undertaking, particularly if the committee studying it can maintain a spirit of multi-partisan independence that prioritizes what is best for Parliament, and not what’s best for the Government or the Opposition. An even bolder study in 2017 would consider examining the role of political parties, that enjoy limited oversight despite their central role in Canada’s democracy and the public subsidies they receive.

### LEADERSHIP

Political leadership that operates in ways that are more responsive, transparent and inclusive, with Members of Parliament and political parties that are less focused on winning and more collaborative in their decision-making.
INCREASED DIVERSITY IN REPRESENTATION

Power that is diffuse and diverse can lead to solutions that are innovative and well-suited to the population served. That diversity begins with who is in the House. Canada’s first House of Commons was made up of 180 white men. Over the last 150 years, it has evolved to include women, visible minorities, MPs as young as 19 and Indigenous peoples. However, the data shows that there is still a long way to go.

Ensuring a diverse House requires the commitment of parties and electoral district associations as well as party leaders. These groups have an opportunity and a responsibility to ensure that 2019 features candidates who look like Canada. Improved civility in the House and some power sharing will also go a long way towards making Parliament a place where more people feel comfortable and want to work.

CONCLUSION

As Jennifer Welsh asserted in the 2016 CBC Massey Lecture, “... [we should] remember that our own liberal democratic society was not inevitable—that it required sacrifice, compromise, and leadership—and that we must all, as individuals, take more active role in its preservation and growth.”

Can Canada build a better democracy? One that is representative, transparent and consultative? Yes! However, unlike physical infrastructure, there is no chief planner to take charge. Renewing our democratic infrastructure will be a messy, collaborative process involving both citizens and political leaders. It will take citizens to demand change and responsive leaders to make it happen. Our democracy can only be improved when Canadians are engaged to build a better political system—and a better Canada—for everyone.
METHODOLOGY

WHAT IS SAMARA’S DEMOCRACY 360?

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

The Democracy 360 combines quantifiable indicators, focused on three areas: communication, participation and political leadership. The Democracy 360 will allow Canadians to compare and assess their democracy over time. First published in 2015, the Democracy 360 will be published every two years in order to measure improvement or decline. This is the second edition, published March 28th, 2017.

HOW WERE THE INDICATORS IN THE DEMOCRACY 360 SELECTED?

With a long list of potential indicators, five criteria were used to select the indicators which measure communication, participation and leadership in Canada:

1. Accuracy: Is the measure precise?
2. Reliability: Is the measure an accurate and consistent capture of the activity?
3. Feasibility: With respect to finite time and resources, can the data be collected and analyzed?
4. Replicable: Can the measure be captured again in a similar fashion?
5. Dynamic: Is the indicator’s change (improvement or decline) measurable?

WHERE DID THE DEMOCRACY 360 DATA COME FROM?

The four main sources of data in the report card: Public opinion survey data collected between September 23 and October 6, 2016, using an online sample of 4,003 Canadian residents over 18 years of age living in ten provinces, House of Commons records, Statistics Canada, Elections Canada turnout records, and independent analysis performed by Full Duplex (for social media accounts).

The full methodology and an appendix containing regional data can be found at samaracanada.com/democracy-360.

If you have any additional questions about the methodology, or if you’d like to request the Samara 360 Citizens’ Survey for precise data manipulation, survey question wording, and unweighted frequencies, contact info[@]samaracanada.com.
THANK YOU

Samara would like to thank all of our individual donors as well as Bennett Jones LLP and Your Canada Your Constitution for their continued support of this project.

As a charity, Samara relies on the generous support of donors and is proud to have a broad base of support. We are so grateful to all the individuals and groups who have contributed to Samara’s research and education efforts and made our success possible. If you’re interested in supporting Samara’s work, please visit samaracanada.com or contact us at 416-960-7926.

ENDNOTES


2 “Declining trust in government is denting democracy.” Economist Intelligence Unit. 25 Jan 2017.


4 Ibid.


