CHAPTER 2

Telling a Different Story: Canadian Citizens and Their Democracy in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The new centrality of the digital public sphere has disrupted politics and generated questions about the robustness and sustainability of liberal democracies. This chapter draws on recent public opinion research to examine trends in Canadians' attitudes toward democracy and their engagement in formal and informal politics. The data suggests that technological and political changes both in Canada and abroad have produced concern among Canadians about the health of their democracy. But longitudinal comparison reveals that, despite these disruptions and contrary to prevailing public narratives, Canadians have become more engaged and more satisfied with their democracy in recent years.

What Is the Digital Public Sphere Doing to Democracy?

Throughout the liberal democratic world, it appears as though we have entered a new era of democratic anxiety. There are several sources of this anxiety. They include a longer-term global democratic recession; resurgent and more activist anti-democratic actors in the world, specifically aiming to devalue, discredit, disrupt, and demoralize liberal democracies; increasing political polarization—or the perception thereof; and the electoral success of several

populist extremist candidates and parties (such as Donald Trump in the United States, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Narendra Modi in India, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil), who threaten democratic norms like political tolerance and respect for institutions. This confluence of forces has led thoughtful observers in some of the world's oldest democracies to ask serious questions about the sustainability of democracy as we know it (Freedom House, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018).

All of these phenomena are associated, rightly or wrongly, and to greater or lesser degrees, with the new centrality of the digital public sphere. Social media, in particular, can be regarded as a tool for autocratic monitoring and control (Diebert, 2019); a facilitator of foreign interference by malicious actors; a soapbox for radicalized citizens and extremist groups; a site which is contributing to affective polarization and the coarsening of democratic politics; and a vehicle propelling transgressive populist politicians to power. Add to this the distinct but often confluent, usually conflated concerns over the collection and use of our personal data, the practices of "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019), and the still-nascent platform governance, and we can confirm the digital public sphere as a central player in the current democratic drama. In this context of digitally driven democratic anxiety, how are Canadians actually feeling about their democracy? This was one of the questions the Samara Centre for Democracy asked in the 2019 iteration of our Citizens' Survey, which forms the basis for Democracy 360, a biennial report card on the health of Canadian democracy (Petit-Vouriot et al., 2019). The findings are at times surprising and broadly, though not universally, positive. Canadians have actually grown more satisfied with their democracy in recent years, as well as incrementally more engaged in their politics. They continue to view politicians and institutions with suspicion, but there is little evidence to suggest this suspicion has grown or deepened. All of this should be cause to revisit some of the public narrative about the state of our democracy and politics, which is casually and uncritically accepted—like the suggestion that, due to digital and economic disruption, we're cresting toward a populist revolt.[1] But while there are some positive indicators, there is also evidence that Canadians are anxious about their democratic future: a significantly greater number of Canadians perceive our democracy as becoming weaker, not stronger.

A Note on the Project and the Data

The public opinion data in this chapter come from the Samara Centre for Democracy's Citizens' Surveys. As noted above, the surveys support the production of Democracy 360, with citizens acting as the evaluators. The Samara Centre is a non-partisan charity with a mandate to work to strengthen Canada's democracy. Alongside research on institutions and political leadership, Democracy 360 is one of the centre's major ongoing research projects. It was founded on an assessment that it would be desirable to have some objective, empirical measures for examining changes in how our democracy is broadly experienced. Existing international democracy measures and ratings are useful for cross-national comparison, but not sufficiently tailored to the Canadian context to permit us to observe fine gradations of change in citizens' perceptions of democracy.

The surveys ask a series of questions about how Canadians feel about democracy generally, the myriad formal and informal ways in which they participate, and how they evaluate their political leadership. By repeating the questions and the basic survey design every two years, the hope is that survey effects can be controlled for and that change can be meaningfully observed. In addition to the core Democracy 360 questions, the 2019 survey also included some questions borrowed from the Canadian Election Study and major international surveys, enabling us to probe new areas while retaining some basis for comparing data and examining trends. The 2019 survey was conducted in English and French in January and February 2019, using an online sample of 4,054 Canadian residents over 18 years of age living in all ten provinces.

This chapter looks mostly at the aggregate picture of Canadians' democratic participation and satisfaction, along with important age effects. Obviously, these values differ from community to community in significant ways. In this respect, our measures are limited. While our tool allows for comparison across broad demographic categories like "visible minorities," those categories can often obscure more than they illuminate. It does not provide the necessary lens to examine the responses of those who may experience citizenship very differently than the majority—Indigenous Peoples, newcomers from particular communities, LGBTQ2S+, and others. Nor does it closely explore alternative democratic spaces, such as grassroots or community

organizations, Indigenous governments, workers' unions, etc. Rather, its focus is on aggregate experiences of the dominant narrative of politics in Canada.

General Attitudes Toward Democracy and Politics

Despite the pervasive narrative of global democratic decline, public opinion data collected from the last three Citizens' Surveys show that a growing majority of Canadians view our democracy favourably. In 2014, 65 percent of Canadians reported that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the way democracy worked in Canada, and by 2019, this number had increased to 75 percent (see Table 2.1). In 2019, only 6 percent were not satisfied at all—a figure which has also dropped compared to previous years. Over the same period, the same question asked in public opinion studies in the United Kingdom, the United States, France, and Australia (for example) have tended to find a precipitous decline in satisfaction with democracy—suggesting that the recent Canadian experience is different in important ways from that of other democracies that Canadians tend to watch closely.[2] Regardless of whether or not this satisfaction is warranted, and whatever its causes (and indeed, it may itself be a reaction to trends in other democracies), it suggests a relatively positive orientation in Canada toward the machinery of democracy.

Table 2.1: Satisfaction with Canadian Democracy[3]

On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Canada?

	2014	2016	2019
Very satisfied	12.3%	16.3%	20.1%
Fairly satisfied	52.7%	54.7%	55.1%
Not very satisfied	25.2%	20.1%	19.2%
Not satisfied at all	9.8%	8.9%	5.6%
n	2238.1	3722.3	3898.4

Sources: The Samara Centre for Democracy, 2019, "The 2019 Samara Citizens' Survey," https://www.samaracanada.com/research/resourcesanddata/2019-citizens-survey/, The Samara Centre for Democracy; The Samara Centre for Democracy, 2016, "The 2016 Samara Citizens' Survey," https://www.samaracanada.com/research/resourcesanddata/2016-citizens-survey, The Samara Centre for Democracy; The Samara Centre for Democracy, 2014, "The 2014 Samara Citizens' Survey," https://www.samaracanada.com/research/resourcesanddata/2014-citizens-survey, The Samara Centre for Democracy.

General interest in politics has also remained stable, if not risen slightly, since the Samara Centre began studying Canadian public opinion trends in 2014. The 2019 results indicate that two-thirds of Canadians are either very or fairly interested in local and international politics, while three quarters reported this same level of interest for provincial/regional and national politics (see Table 2.2). Previous iterations of the Citizens' Survey did not disaggregate interest by level, and so do not offer directly comparable measures, but the 2016 survey found that approximately 64 percent of Canadians were interested in politics generally. In other words, at every level of politics, Canadians are as interested or more interested in 2019 than they were in politics in the abstract three years before. Politics also is not generally seen as remote or abstract. When asked in 2019 how much of an impact politics had on their daily life, 64 percent reported it as a 6 or higher on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 representing no impact whatsoever and 10 representing extremely high impact).

Table 2.2: Interest in Politics[4]

How interested would you say you are in politics?

	2016	2019			
		Local	Provincial/ Regional	National	International
Very interested	17.8%	20.6%	28.6%	32.8%	22.8%
Fairly interested	46.0%	45.7%	48.0%	43.9%	43.6%
Not very interested	25.2%	25.5%	17.7%	17.7%	25.0%
Not at all interested	11.0%	8.2%	5.7%	5.6%	8.6%
n	3916.6	4018.7	4032.3	4017.7	3994.5

Sources: The Samara Centre for Democracy, 2019, "The 2019 Samara Citizens' Survey," https://www.samaracanada.com/research/resourcesanddata/2019-citizens-survey/, The Samara Centre for Democracy; The Samara Centre for Democracy, 2016, "The 2016 Samara Citizens' Survey," https://www.samaracanada.com/research/resourcesanddata/2016-citizens-survey, The Samara Centre for Democracy.

In short, Canadians are (relative to the recent past) interested in politics and satisfied with how their democracy works. The increased satisfaction in democracy has been observed across the partisan spectrum. To this point, Canada has avoided the fast slide

into dissatisfaction that has captured several peer democracies. But not all indications are positive. Canadians have, perhaps, also been affected by the discourse of democratic recession. When asked about the direction of Canada's democracy, 46 percent are under the impression that it is becoming weaker; a much smaller share (31 percent) perceive it getting stronger; and the smallest share (23 percent) say they don't know. However, it is perhaps notable that party affiliation has a strong effect on this perception: for example, those who identify with the Liberal Party of Canada are more likely to say that democracy is getting stronger, not weaker.

Populism and Attitudes Toward Political Elites

Populism is central to much of the public narrative about democracy, in Canada and elsewhere. It is perceived as a driving force behind some of the major political outcomes of recent years, including the election of Donald Trump in the United States (November 2016), and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (June 2016). It is sometimes thought that the digital public sphere is causally important in the rise of populism—for example, by giving populist politicians opportunities to transmit a norms-transgressive message to the public without relying on traditional intermediaries, or by creating avenues for new kinds of organizing and coalition building, from which populists can benefit (Krämer, 2017; Schaub & Morisi, 2019).

A long line of Canadian commentators have asserted that populism is also present here, that Canada is a "tinderbox for populism" (Graves & Valpy, 2018), that populism is redrawing the basic political cleavages of the country (Harper, 2018), or creating opportunities for the ascendancy of previously marginal political traditions (Broadbent, 2019). Is this the case?

The Citizens' Survey provides Canadians opportunities to evaluate their political leadership. The 2019 iteration also included some additional questions meant to measure aspects of populist thought, and for which there was some basis for longitudinal comparison.[5] The study adopts a definition of populism that is conventional in the scholarship but sometimes confused in the popular discourse: it treats populism as the belief that society is divided into two camps, elites and the real people, and that legitimate governance must reflect the uninhibited will of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013).[6]

The overall finding is strong: there is scant evidence of a movement toward populism in Canadian public opinion (Morden & Anderson, 2019). Instead, Canadians have grown modestly more trusting of and satisfied with their political leadership. Attitudes toward MPs are markedly improved in the 5 years leading to 2019; for example—51 percent of Canadians trust MPs to do what is right, up from 40 percent in 2014, and 53 percent of Canadians are satisfied with MPs, compared with 46 percent in 2014. Attitudes toward political parties have held steady or softened slightly; for example, the share of Canadians who trust political parties has increased to 45 percent, from 42 percent in 2014. The Citizens' Survey also replicates questions asked in past Canadian Election Studies (CES). The results are not directly comparable for several reasons, including likely polling effects due to inconsistency in how the questions were asked over time. They are nevertheless strongly suggestive of a general decline in anti-establishment feeling since the 1990s. For example, in 2019, 60 percent of Canadians agreed that the government does not care what people like them think, compared with 75 percent of Canadians asked in the 1993 CES. Similarly, in 2019, 63 percent of Canadians agreed that those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people, down from the 85 percent who thought that in 1993.

These measures admittedly exclude some aspects of populist thought, or populism-adjacent tendencies. For example, they do not probe Canadians' inclination toward authoritarian leadership in the interest of the people. Nevertheless, what is manifestly absent here is any hint that Canadians are turning away from elites in some dramatic fashion. They show high levels of dissatisfaction and cynicism relative to appropriate aspirations for our democracy—but this is enduring dissatisfaction, rather than sea change. And indeed, consistent with the rise in democratic satisfaction and interest in politics, they suggest that change that has occurred has been in a mostly positive direction.

Reported Participation in Politics and Community

The consistency and even modest improvement in attitudes toward democratic politics are reflected, in some ways, in reported participation. The rise in voter turnout in the 2015 federal election, especially pronounced in several groups that are typically among the least

engaged in politics (youth and Indigenous Peoples), offered some hope that Canadians are not turned off formal politics altogether. In fact, 2015 saw voter turnout rise for the second election in a row—the first time that has happened since 1972. Turnout fell slightly in 2019, but early indications are that some of the important 2015 turnout gains were sustained. In a major Statistics Canada survey, self-reported turnout among young Canadians in 2019 was at roughly the same level as in 2015 (Statistics Canada, 2020).

But as noted above, the Citizens' Survey seeks to capture the full spectrum of forms of political engagement beyond voting, the proxy that is often relied upon. The CES is the most comparable alternative data source—though the fact that CES has (previous to this point) only collected in election years makes comparison with recent data impossible. Nevertheless, it is notable that, compared to the CES, the Citizens' Survey has returned slightly higher rates of reported participation in some activities. It is therefore difficult to reach firm conclusions about whether the Citizens' Survey over-reports participation more than is typical of other instruments. New research does suggest that simply presenting our survey to prospective respondents during the recruitment phase as being "democracy focused" could yield a disproportionately engaged respondent pool (McGregor et al., 2020). It is because of these uncertainties that we regard the change over time within the (roughly) same survey administered the same way as most analytically useful.

The 2019 results find that rates of formal political participation have remained relatively stable during the last five years, with a small rise in participation most evident when using a composite index of several indicators (see Table 2.3). Although the number of people who report that they are a member of a federal political party has dipped slightly, more Canadians have recently donated or volunteered for a political party or candidate than in previous years.

On the other hand, rates of activism have fluctuated from year to year. Significantly fewer respondents reported that they had signed a petition or taken part in a protest in 2019 compared to 2014, while those choosing to boycott/"buycott" increased. There is some suggestion in this that activism may be more context- and event-driven than conventional political engagement.

Table 2.3: Formal Political Participation

In the past 12 months, have you participated in the following activities? (affirmative responses only)

	2014	2016	2019
Been a member of federal political party	8.8%	8.2%	7.7%
Attended political meeting/speech	28.5%	30.1%	31.5%
Donated money to candidate/party	18.8%	18.6%	21.0%
Volunteered for candidate/party	16.7%	15.3%	18.8%
Composite index (those who participated in at least one of the above activities)	35.5	37.1	41.4
n (of composite index)	2330.0	3864.0	3925.0

Sources: The Samara Centre for Democracy, 2019, "The 2019 Samara Citizens' Survey," https://www.samaracanada.com/research/resourcesanddata/2019-citizens-survey/, The Samara Centre for Democracy; The Samara Centre for Democracy, 2016, "The 2016 Samara Citizens' Survey," https://www.samaracanada.com/research/resourcesanddata/2016-citizens-survey, The Samara Centre for Democracy; The Samara Centre for Democracy, 2014, "The 2014 Samara Citizens' Survey," https://www.samaracanada.com/research/resourcesanddata/2014-citizens-survey, The Samara Centre for Democracy.

Table 2.4: Activism

In the past 12 months, have you participated in the following activities? (affirmative responses only)

	2014	2016	2019
Signed petition in person or online	64.3%	58.8%	56.5%
Boycotted or bought products for political reasons	37.0%	39.8%	47.5%
Protested or demonstrated	21.6%	21.2%	16.5%
Composite index (those who participated in at least one of the above activities)	69.4%	67.6%	67.6%
n (of composite index)	2321.0	3812.0	3938.0

Sources: The Samara Centre for Democracy, 2019, "The 2019 Samara Citizens' Survey," https://www.samaracanada.com/research/resourcesanddata/2019-citizens-survey/, The Samara Centre for Democracy; The Samara Centre for Democracy, 2016, "The 2016 Samara Citizens' Survey," https://www.samaracanada.com/research/resourcesanddata/2016-citizens-survey, The Samara Centre for Democracy; The Samara Centre for Democracy, 2014, "The 2014 Samara Citizens' Survey," https://www.samaracanada.com/research/resourcesanddata/2014-citizens-survey, The Samara Centre for Democracy.

A Snapshot of Youth

Younger people may or may not be more affected by the emerging centrality of the digital sphere, but they inarguably are most likely to occupy it. It is therefore particularly interesting, in a digital context, to observe the ways in which young people differ in how they regard or engage in democratic politics. Looking at 18- to 29-year-olds in comparison with older demographics, the Citizens' Survey finds some consistencies and interesting differences.

A common public narrative is that young people lack trust in our institutions and elites, or that they only see politics as remote from themselves, but this is often disputed in public-opinion research (O'Neill, 2007; Norris, 2002). The Citizens' Survey is no exception. It finds that young people, for example, are equally or slightly more satisfied than older demographics with how democracy works. They are also equally likely to believe that politics has an influence on their everyday lives.

Young people tend to evaluate our political leadership more positively, too. More young people are satisfied with MPs (60 percent of ages 18–29 versus 50 percent of ages 56+), trusting of MPs (57 percent of 18–29 versus 50 percent of 56+), satisfied with political parties (56 percent of 18–29 versus 44 percent of 56+), and trusting of parties (53 percent of 18–29 versus 42 percent of 56+). And while young people are less likely to belong to a political party, they are considerably more likely to consider joining one in the future. It is difficult to conclude that youth lack trust, at least in the abstract. Moreover, more young people hold an optimistic outlook for our democracy. It is true that just as in the aggregate, more youth perceive our democracy as getting weaker than stronger. But the gap between those groups is relatively small (5 percentage points for ages 18–29, compared with a 16-percentage-point gap among ages 30–55, and a 22-percentage-point gap among those 56+). We cannot reach causal conclusions, but it is nonetheless notable that so-called digital natives appear least affected by the democratic anxiety of the moment.

In other respects, young people present some familiar paradoxes. They are much less likely to regard living in a democracy as very important (55.9 percent versus 75.8 percent for those 56+)—a relationship that is enduring and consistent across most established democracies (Foa & Mounk, 2017). They report being less interested in

politics across all levels of government and politics; the interest gap between younger and older voters is greatest for local politics (53 percent of 18–29 versus 77 percent of 56+), and smallest for international politics (62 percent of 18–29 versus 72 percent of 56+). But across the vast majority of forms of participation—other than voting—youth are most likely to participate. It is likely no surprise that young people are more likely to engage in activism, for example, but striking that they are also more likely to discuss politics—in any venue, online or offline—than are those from older cohorts.

Conclusion: Holding Steady, but Worried

While the Citizens' Survey does not allow us to directly measure the effects of the expanding digital sphere on Canadian politics, it does permit a snapshot of ordinary Canadians as democratic actors in this historical moment. The picture it reveals is complex, but there is much in here to challenge some familiar narratives about change in our democracy. A significant segment of Canadians are dissatisfied with democracy in general, and most are dissatisfied with the state of our politics. Participation is uneven, and far too many Canadians remain on the sidelines of our civic and political life. These are hugely consequential problems, and they demand solutions. But they should be understood as long-term, structural problems rather than some new crisis that has suddenly descended upon us.

There are important suggestions in the data that the democratic experience in Canada of recent years is meaningfully different than that of several of the democracies closest to our own. And while we should guard against complacency and self-satisfaction, we should also avoid uncritically copying and pasting foreign narratives onto our own democracy.

The long-term structural problems facing our democracy are well known, and include the weakness of Parliament and the legislature, and a concentration of power within political parties. This study is a reminder to address these to make our democratic institutions more responsive, accessible, and representative, rather than defending a status quo which is not good enough, against threats that have not yet completely materialized.

These findings are not predictive. It may be that our slide into dissatisfaction is coming, and that our populist moment will follow. There are at least some indicators that there is a qualitatively

and quantitatively different polarization underway here (see, for example, Cochrane 2015; Kevins & Soroka, 2019), which could facilitate some of those forces. It may be that the new digital public sphere will meaningfully change how we perceive and engage our democracy, and in negative ways. Indeed, Canadians perceive a risk here; in a recent 54-country study, Canadians were found to be most likely to regard social media as a threat to their democracy (Dalia Research & Rasmussen Global, 2019). But in the meantime, scholars and students of Canadian politics should remain critical consumers of public narratives, and should work to expand the existing evidence basis to empirically probe the democratic implications of our connected age.

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Notes

1. For example the argument has been made by Frank Graves and Michael Valpy (2019) in *The Toronto Star*, Ed Broadbent (2019) in *The Globe and Mail*, and Jeff Rubin (2019) in *The New York Times*.
2. For example, the percentage of Australians satisfied with their democracy went from 72 percent in 2013 to 41 percent in 2018. Similarly, satisfaction rates among the French was 64 percent in 2012, then declined to 34 percent in 2017, and the United States saw a drop in satisfaction from 80 percent to 46 percent during that same time period. For more comparative data, see Pew Research Center (Wike et al. 2017), modules 1 to 4 in The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (2015a, 2015b, 2015c, and 2015d), and the Museum of Australian Democracy and the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis at the University of Canberra (2018).
3. All figures cited in this chapter have been weighted against census values for age, gender, language, region, and immigration status. In Table 2.2: Interest in Politics, chi-square test = 121.1778; P-value = <0.00001.

4. Data from 2014 is not available.
5. For example, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: "I don't think the government cares much what people like me think," "Those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people," "Ordinary people would do a better job of solving the country's problems than elected officials," and "The will of the majority should always prevail, even over the rights of minorities." See Michael Morden and Kendall Anderson (2019) for an analysis of these populist themes.
6. Adopting such a definition of populism made it possible to measure the prevalence of populist views over time in the Canadian adult population, something which would not lend itself well to an analysis based on a rhetorical or political-strategy lens. For an overview of different approaches to studying populism and their methodological implications, see Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski (2013).

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