

Canadian report shows growing political alienation

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Recent election cycles in Canada have demonstrated that whole swathes of the population—indeed, often an outright majority—reject the efficacy and even the legitimacy of the Canadian political process and show it by refusing to participate in federal, provincial and municipal elections.

In recently concluded municipal contests across the province of British Columbia, just 28 percent of eligible voters, on average, bothered to turn out at the polls. Municipally, even in the larger Canadian centers, city-wide races seldom draw much more than a third of the electorate to the voting booths.

In last October's Ontario provincial election, which returned the big-business Liberal Party to power, only 49 percent bothered to cast a ballot. The 51 percent abstention rate, when applied against the 37 percent of the actual vote gleaned by the victorious Liberals, means that the "mandate" of the newly returned government is based on a mere 18 percent of the voting population. Downward spirals in electoral participation have been recorded in recent elections in Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, Saskatchewan and the North-West Territories—elections that have returned governments with similar unimpressive popular "mandates".

On the federal scene, voter participation has been steadily dropping since 1988 from an historic average of around 75 percent. In the 2008 federal election voter turnout fell to an all-time low of 58.8 percent and rose only slightly to 61 percent in the May 2011 election. In that election, Stephen Harper's Conservatives won a parliamentary majority, although less than one in four Canadians actually voted for the party.

Even these figures from Elections Canada do not reveal the entire picture. Participation figures are drawn from the pool of Canadians who are registered to vote. If we calculate turnout rates based on those Canadians eligible to vote, whether registered or not, we find that only about 53 percent of the voting age population bothered to cast a ballot in the last federal election.

The plunging voter turnout figures are particularly striking when we consider that practices previously unheard of such as assisted voting, special ballot voting, mail voting, weekend voting and ever expanding advance voting have been employed in an attempt to

reverse the downward trend in voter participation.

The ever-widening national record of low voter turnout has become the cause for serious finger-wagging in ruling class circles and in the editorial columns and opinion pages of their newspapers. Pretentious and patronizing adages such as "you get the government you deserve" or "if you don't vote, you can't complain" are trotted out in an attempt to blame the population—or at least the "apathetic", "lazy" or even "ignorant" near-majority—for any ills that may ultimately befall them. Of course, rejected outright is the very idea that there is any vestige of legitimacy to this phenomenon—that high voter abstention rates actually reflect a rudimentary recognition amongst a rapidly growing demographic that none of the existing parties represent the interests of working people.

A just released study of the phenomena of voter abstention by Samara, a Toronto-based research organization dedicated to encouraging "engagement with Canadian democracy", has forced the country's mainstream punditry to scramble for more convincing explanations to replace their previous platitudes.

Samara researchers interviewed eight focus groups between August and October of this year. Seven groups were drawn from a series of high-abstention rate populations—low income Canadians, immigrants, urban Aboriginals, lesser-educated youth, female Francophones in Quebec, female Anglophones in Quebec and rural inhabitants. The eighth focus group was drawn, in order to form a baseline, from amongst those citizens in suburban areas who regularly vote and feel actively engaged in the political process.

Contrary to the admonishments of the political and media establishments, the Samara researchers found that the respondents from all seven "non-voter" focus groups were neither ignorant nor apathetic about politics. Rather, they were alienated from a political system that they clearly viewed as serving the interests of those established within it. Even those in the eighth voting focus group had little positive to say about the political system. Although remaining hopeful that things might change through their participation in the process, they nonetheless often viewed their political representatives as "greedy", "corrupt" and "untrustworthy".

As the Samara Report, “The Real Outsiders”, explained, “On the one hand, democracy is seen as a worthy ideal for society. On the other hand, for the participants, politics is a source of frustration and disappointment. These were attitudes gained through concrete experiences of interacting with political institutions—whether accessing daycare, covering tuition costs, or getting a speed bump installed on one’s street. The disappointment people feel with respect to politics may therefore be caused by a disconnect between democratic expectations and political reality. Second, the key difference between the disengaged and the engaged is their relationship to politics. Almost without fail, the disengaged we spoke to described themselves as political outsiders. On the basis of their experiences, they described government, bureaucrats, politicians and the media as working for someone else and, therefore, irrelevant to their needs. Some went so far as to say that the political system makes them outsiders on purpose. For those who feel like outsiders, there is little reason to engage in politics when politics does not engage with them.”

The response of the media to the publication of the report is revealing. Although news outlets have covered the report, little analysis or reflection has appeared on their editorial and opinion pages. Interestingly, many of the news articles, while quoting the report’s findings, expunged the reference, in the Samara quote above, to “the media” as “working for someone else”.

Andrew Potter, managing editor of the *Ottawa Citizen*, the most important daily in the nation’s capital, anxious to quickly move on to other things, perhaps best expressed establishment dismay that certain basic truths about Canada’s political system had been revealed. “It isn’t clear that any big conclusions can or should be drawn from this,” he wrote, “apart from a variation on Bismarck’s famous line: public life is like sausage-making. It’s better not to see it in action.”

Columnist Tasha Kheiridden, writing for the neo-conservative *National Post* preferred to simply turn the report’s findings on its head, astonishingly accusing the non-voters of being largely supported by state assistance and therefore greedy and ungrateful. The real lesson from the report, she opined, is to “scale back” the social safety net! Never one to miss an opportunity to attack working people, the *Post* columnist continued, “Perhaps (it is) the role of citizens—and their leaders—to engage in a little attitude adjustment about the role of the state? Citizens of the modern welfare state have become not merely voters, but clients. They no longer expect that government will simply build roads, uphold law and order, and protect them from invaders. The state now smoothes our lives from cradle to grave, via child tax credits, school lunch programs, medicare, public universities, EI [Employment Insurance], worker retraining, business development grants and old age pensions, to name only a few of the programs dreamed up by generations of politicians and bureaucrats.”

Just as the vitriolic hostility to working people expressed by the *Post* shows the utter ruthlessness of the class forces it represents, so too is the elemental hostility to the political process expressed

by Canadians a sign of coming, bitter class battles. Like their counterparts in Greece, Europe and internationally, workers in Canada confront a savage new assault on living standards as finance capital and governments of all stripes demand working people pay for the worsening global economic crisis.

Over the past quarter-century all the parties in the country—Liberals, Conservatives, New Democrats, Parti Quebecois and Bloc Quebecois, etc—have moved sharply to the right and pursued the same pro-big business agenda. This includes slashing social spending, cutting the taxes of big business and the rich, rearming the Canadian Armed Forces and deploying it in a series of imperialist wars. In questions of war—as in the recent assault on Libya—the parties vote *en bloc*. On questions of finance, they all agree that budgets must be balanced on the backs of working people. In election campaign after election campaign, the populace has an ever more difficult time distinguishing any substantive differences between the parties. Moreover, working people have learned that whilst opposition politicians may occasionally promise to address a real grievance—say the under-funding of health care—once ensconced in power they take up the big business mantra that “the cupboard is bare” or introduce a “reform” that further reduces public services.

Certainly, inasmuch as high voter abstention reflects a rudimentary recognition that none of the existing parties represent the interests of working people, the sentiments expressed by non-voters in the Samara Report is entirely understandable. But alienation, resentment and anger by themselves are not enough. The working class must mobilize industrially and politically to defeat the big business agenda promoted by the corporate media and implemented by all the parties, including the trade union-supported New Democrats. The danger facing working people is that their contempt for the political elite has not yet been translated into the building of an international socialist political party that represents their independent interests. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party are fighting to build just such a movement.



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