



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

International Day of
Democracy 2016

Think Piece

International Day of Democracy 2016

The Future of Democracy: Reimagining how we evaluate democracy and political participation

By Laura Anthony and Jane Hilderman

This year, citizens around the world have grappled with the consequences of democratic decisions. With Brexit and the rise of populism in the United States, some have questioned whether democracy has lost its momentum.

Despite these doubts, healthy democracy offers the only way forward to the year 2030. It is how we can overcome global and local challenges together. But for democracy to remain healthy, it requires constant care. It is a powerful but imperfect system that must be honed and fine-tuned.

Last year, Samara Canada released *Democracy 360*, the first-ever report card on the state of Canada's democracy. The report focused on the relationship between citizens and political leadership. What it shows us is not only important for evaluating the state of our democracy now, but also for determining how we should shape democracy in the future.

Democracy 360 indicated Canadian democracy is not doing as well as it could be. Believing that politics does not affect them, Canadians are not participating in politics as much as they could, and they do not see their leaders as influential or efficient. It will take more than higher voter turnout to fix these problems. It will require a culture shift towards "everyday democracy," in which citizens feel politics is a way to make change in the country and their voices heard.

While democracy must be free and fair, this is not a high enough standard. Whether we are new or established democracies, we must overcome the issues we face – issues of corruption, representation or apathy – to make our democracies stronger.

How should democracy change in the next 14 years? First, democracies should be more reflective and sophisticated in tracking their own performance. Second, democracy should be more expansive, looking beyond voter turnout as a blunt measure of participation, and carving out roles for civil society organizations.

Reflective

Right now, each Parliament's performance is reviewed at elections, when the electorate votes to stay with the current government or change course. Voter turnout is used as a proxy for the health of a democracy. But we can do better.

In the future, democracies must adopt more reflective and sophisticated ways to track and evaluate their performance. In countries with more established democracies, the system is not perfect; citizens' trust and satisfaction in democracy have dropped alongside voter turnout. To improve how citizens are heard and how decisions are made, each country should evaluate its own performance nationally.

As part of our *Democracy 360* report, Samara measured indicators focusing on three areas essential to a healthy democracy: communication, participation and leadership. In its evaluation of Canada's democracy, Samara builds on the work of the OECD's Better Life Index, which measures quality of life, and Freedom House's freedom score, which assesses political rights and civil liberties.

While the OECD and Freedom House compare democracies to one another, *Democracy 360* deepens our understanding of Canada's democracy. It tracks Canadian democracy across a wide range of areas. Those include diversity in the House of Commons, the many ways Canadians can participate in politics and how Members of Parliament and parties function. While not exhaustive, the indicators taken together paint a rich picture of the way that Canadians talk, act and lead in politics, adding multiple dimensions to voter turnout.

With this more complete understanding of Canadian democracy, Parliament and political institutions can become more adept at intentionally improving our democracy. Such robust evaluation would similarly allow other countries to see how citizens connect with politics. It would thus determine what is needed to reduce the distance between citizens, and political institutions and actors.

That can lead to concrete actions to modernize and improve democracy between now and 2030. For example, if many citizens sign petitions online, a democracy might adopt e-petitions as one part of modernizing Parliament, as was recently done in Canada. In this way, governments can become more responsive to citizen needs, strengthening democracy.

Democracy 360 will be a continual, reliable measurement that will accrue value over time. Over the next 14 years, we will be able to assess if Canadian democracy has improved, remained static, or declined since 2015. This will help parliamentarians and policymakers target areas of weakness, and celebrate markers of success.

Today's young people will have had *Democracy 360* for their whole lives. They will consider it commonplace to measure democracy beyond voter turnout, and will have a tangible resource to examine how their democracy has evolved throughout their lives. But the benefits are not only for young citizens. By illuminating tensions and patterns, *Democracy 360* will allow all citizens to more easily evaluate their democracy. Each democracy and its citizens can benefit from having similar domestic performance evaluations.

Expansive

Currently, voter turnout is widely viewed as a measure of political participation. This is a blunt measure, inadequate for capturing the complexity and range of political participation at the ballot box and beyond. In the future, we must expand our definition of political participation to go beyond voting once every four years as the cornerstone of democratic participation. Measures of political participation should include reaching out to elected representatives, signing petitions, discussing politics with friends and family, and other activities that encompass the many ways in which citizens demonstrate civic engagement.

The ushering in of a new political generation requires us to change our definition of political participation. Research suggests that while youth are engaged in their communities, discuss politics, and contribute to political activism, they are removed from electoral politics. Young Canadians are unlikely to vote, join a political party, or contact an elected official. Expanding our definition will validate the ways they do choose to participate. Over time, this will encourage young Canadians to see the political system as worthwhile, in turn making them more likely to engage with that system.

Democracy also needs to be more expansive by valuing the role played by civil society actors. The constant evaluation required by a mature democracy is best carried out by civil society actors outside the formal political system. That is the case with the Hansard Society in the United Kingdom, and Sunshine Foundation and Pew Research Center in the United States.

Those democratically minded civil groups provide an important bridge between citizens and the work that elected legislatures carry out for them. As citizens turn away from the political system, this bridge building is more important now than ever before. Samara's *Democracy 360* found only 40 per cent of Canadians trust Members of Parliament to do what is right, while only 31 per cent of Canadians think they are affected by political decisions every day.

Citizens in Canada and other democracies have more trust in civil society groups than politicians. By 2030, democracies must understand and entrench the role that outside voices play in calling attention to things that more traditional actors might not otherwise see. For the health of democracy, governments must view civil society organizations as complementary, rather than combative.

There is no question: our democracies face many challenges. More reflective, sophisticated and expansive ways of evaluating the health of our democracies will help them better face these challenges. We can set the stage for new generations to be welcomed into a healthier, more vibrant political system through reliable measurement, strong civil society actors, and valuing all the ways that citizens participate politically.

Laura Anthony (@laumicant)

Laura Anthony is the Research Manager of Samara Canada, the non-partisan charity dedicated to improving political participation and strengthening Canada's democracy. Laura oversees all of Samara's innovative research; from the first conceptualization of an idea to crafting the final report. She regularly discusses Samara's research with interested citizens, academics, media, and policy-makers across Canada.

Laura holds a Master of Arts in Political Science from the University of Western Ontario and a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Political Science from the University of Toronto.

She frequently takes the opportunity to explore democratic institutions around the world and has admired parliaments and legislatures in India, Hungary, Australia, Chile, Argentina, Italy, and Greece.

Jane Hilderman (@jhilderman)

Jane Hilderman is the Executive Director of [Samara Canada](#), the non-partisan charity dedicated to improving political participation and strengthening Canada's democracy.

Jane works to bring Samara's mission--to reconnect citizens to politics--to life. She frequently discusses Samara's work in the media and with Canadians across the country.

*Her previous role at Samara includes Research Director, where she oversaw groundbreaking research that explores Canadians' participation in democracy. In 2015, Jane co-wrote Samara's *Democracy 360*—a report card on how Canadians communicate, participate and lead in politics. [The Democracy 360](#) will be updated just in time for Canada's 150th birthday in 2017.*

She holds degrees from the School of Public Policy & Governance at the University of Toronto (MPP) and Queen's University (BAH). Jane is also a fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, which seeks "to make Canada better known to Canadians and the world."