The Outsiders: Agency and the Politically Less Engaged

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Not only is voter turnout decreasing in Canada, but levels of other forms of political engagement between elections are lower as well (Gidengil et al. 2003). At the same time, the numbers of people who say they support democratic norms and values has rarely been higher (Pharr and Putnam 2000). This is a paradox. If democracy is seen as a good, what makes those disengaged be disengaged? The predominate approach to the study of political participation focuses on isolating the differences between the engaged and disengaged, assuming that lower levels of engagement are caused by the absence of what makes people engaged—with engagement being the default category, and those disengaged lacking in character. However, these studies fail to interrogate *why* those less engaged are less interested or feel less dutiful, and more importantly, how the political context may be affecting these perceptions more directly. Aimed at theory generation, this paper expands broad quantitative approaches by conducting qualitative conversations with less engaged citizens. Drawing on data gathered from 7 focus groups involving a range of less engaged Canadians and a control group of engaged Canadians, we find that the factors associated with disengagement—lower sense of duty and interest in politics—are associated with lower levels of agency. The less engaged participants were just as likely to be cynical about politics as the engaged, but unlike those that vote every time, they perceive themselves to be 'outsiders' from their own political system. Contributing to this feeling, the disengaged perceive conventional political discourse to be largely irrelevant to their egocentric concerns, and rather than simply being disinterested, they are uninterested in a conversation that does not include their concerns. Perhaps most unexpectedly, the less engaged developed these beliefs through experience. Their lack of duty, interest and participation was associated with a lack of success with previous government interactions. Overall, this paper reveals that for those we spoke with, disengagement was driven in part by lived experience and a disconnect between what people think politics 'is' and what democracy 'should be', strengthening the case for investigations into context and a shift in focus toward to role agency plays in voting motivation.

Introduction

Many Canadians are no longer engaged in politics. In the last federal election, four out of ten chose to sit it out, and in some of the recent provincial elections, more than half of the registered voters chose not to vote (Elections Canada 2011; Ontario Elections 2011). Today, the most popular option is not to vote at all.

Not only is voter turnout decreasing, but every year fewer people are getting involved in other kinds of political activities, like joining or donating to political parties (Nevitte 1996). Perhaps not surprisingly, then, political parties, and institutions rarely make efforts to speak to the disengaged, seeing these efforts as a waste of time, perpetuating a negative spiral of engagement (LeDuc and Pammett 2010). If nothing is done to reverse this trend, we could very well reach the point where democratic legitimacy itself is threatened.

This raises a straightforward, but important question: Why are people choosing not to vote? To address this question, scholars often compare non-voting Canadians to their more engaged peers, looking for between group variance. Common explanations include the idea that disengaged people are lacking in a sense of civic duty (Blais 2000) and/or are less likely to be interested or informed or knowledgeable about political affairs (Howe 2011; Milner 2010). Thus, initiatives to improve citizen engagement assume that the disengaged are lacking in some key attribute of citizenship (Ibid). The difficulty with these explanations of political engagement, however, is that they fail to address the reason why an individual may lack these attributes (Bastedo 2012). In this study we ask the question: What makes those disengaged be disengaged?

One longstanding argument forwarded in the participatory theory literature and underpinning policy attempts to get young people to vote has to do with the perceived "educative effect" of political participation. This theory maintains that participation in politics builds greater support for democratic norms, and ultimately builds better civic character (Pateman 1970; Barber 1984). Individuals who participate in politics will therefore continue to do so for the rest of their lives.

This theory however assumes that political participation has the same effect on all people, which may not to be the case. Mutz (2006), for example, argues that citizens' may have difficulty in "hearing the other side", and do not always have the capacity to stay committed to democratic outcomes when those in power hold opposing views. In turn, early research into the 'educative effect' of participation on support for civil liberties reveals that while participation seems to have a reinforcing effect on levels of support among those who actively participate and have greater levels of education, the educative effect is not found in those with lower levels of education and less experience participating in politics (Fletcher 1996). This work underlines that the rewards of participation are not necessarily uniform across society, and indeed, opens the possibility that the educative effect of participation may actually lead some people to stop participating.

Importantly, these different educative effects also demonstrate that understanding person-situation interactions is necessary before causal paths to political engagement can be

determined (Mondak et al. 2010). Both pre-dispositions, or "standing decisions" *as well as* contemporary information are involved in decision-making and political judgment (Marcus et al. 1995).

From the perspective of the individual, recent work from Blais and Labbé St-Vincent (2001), confirms that personality characteristics do have a relationship with political engagement. Their analysis shows that personality characteristics like agency are related to voting, but are suppressed in their regression model by civic duty. Given the limitations of civic duty as an explanatory variable raised above, investigating how individuals acquire agency and how that is connected to duty and engagement is important. Indeed, Vecchione and Capara (2009) model the role of efficacious beliefs, finding that they mediate the influence of personality traits on political participation. Those who feel capable are more likely to be actively involved in politics. But the limitation of all these studies is that they lack a clear explanation of what leads some to have agency in particular circumstances while others lack it.

This theoretical gap is where context plays an important role. Franklin (2004), for example, shows that the closeness of the electoral contest and salience of any given election both have an influence on whether someone will vote. And beyond elections, which really only occupy only a small portion of individuals' everyday experience with politics, newer literature from the public policy field argues that day to day interactions with government should be investigated (Mettler and Soss 2003; Mettler and Stonecash 2008). It is entirely possible that the political context in which individuals interact has a direct influence on their levels of agency.

This study therefore examines the experiences of politically disengaged citizens with the political system in order to understand what circumstances led individuals to not participate. Employing a qualitative, theory-building approach, this study summarizes the results of a series of focus groups, held August and October of 2011, involving self-identified less-interested non-voters.

The major finding of this paper proposes that disengaged people *become* outsiders through their daily experience and interactions with the broader political system. The feeling of 'outsiderness' is in part learned. The disengaged feel that the issues that they care about are not addressed in the discourse, and when they have attempted to address problems with government, they were unsuccessful. This creates a spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1993) of sorts where politicians ignore those who don't vote, government interaction is perceived to be difficult and non-voters ignore politicians (Pammett and LeDuc 2004). Overall, the data from focus groups show that declining political engagement is, at least in part, due to negative experiences with the broader political world.

Methods

We conducted eight focus groups with Canadians across the country between August and October 2011. Participants were drawn from several different demographic groups and identified themselves as less interested in politics and as non-voters.

Disengaged focus groups were organized as follows:
- lower-income Canadians
- less-educated young people
- francophone women in Quebec
- English-speaking women in Quebec
- urban Aboriginal people
- new Canadians
- rural Canadians.

We were less interested in the question of *who* was disengaged and more interested in the questions *why* and *how*. We wanted to ensure that we had a diverse range of focus groups in order to explore whether there were differences and/or commonalities between the various disengaged groups.

In order to compare engaged and disengaged participants, we also conducted a focus group with people who self-identified as regular voters and who lived in a suburban area. There were 55 participants in total. This study is by no means representative, but designed to explore and generate theory.

In the first half of each focus group, participants were asked to describe their impressions of *politics.* They provided words or phrases and were then presented with a series of images and asked to select the image that most closely captured how they feel about politics. They were also asked whether they had an issue, or issues, they cared about and whether they had ever tried to do something to address it. Finally, they were asked if they felt they had a role to play in political affairs, and, if so, what that role looked like.

The second half of the discussion shifted focus from *politics* to *democracy*. As in the first exercise, participants provided their spontaneous perceptions of *democracy* and then selected images that best captured their feelings from the same series of images used in the previous exercise. They were asked if they felt that they had a role to play in democracy, and then to describe their ideal democracy, or what criteria should be used to evaluate Canadian democracy. The members of the disengaged groups were also asked what would make them more interested in politics.[2]

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[2] A full description of the research methodology can be found in the Appendix 1. For more in-depth summaries of each focus group discussion, please visit Samara's website: www. samaracanada.com.

Findings

Democracy's Great, It's the Politics I Hate

Amid the diversity of participants' voices, a common mantra was often repeated: *Democracy's great, it's the politics I hate*. Far from living up to the common view of an apathetic and uninformed public, disengaged people had definite views on politics and democracy. It became clear that for many, politics leaves a lot to be desired.

The Canadians with whom we spoke held an almost universally dim view of politics. When asked to describe what politics meant to them, both disengaged and engaged participants gravitated toward negative descriptors as seen in Figure 1a. Words and phrases such as "boring," "greedy" and "untrustworthy" were common. There were also more neutral descriptors, like "vote" and "election." However, few participants in any of the focus groups had anything positive to say about politics.

Figure 1a: Word cloud describing politics
(Words participants commonly used to describe politics. The relative size of words indicates how often the terms were raised across the focus groups.)

Disengaged participants also described how the issues discussed in political circles, even at election time, had little to do with what they cared about. Without prompting, they spoke about their personal concerns, issues like getting a speed bump installed on their street, getting their kids in daycare, caring for loved ones, paying their hydro bills and, for one rural Canadian, dealing with coyotes on his property. Many felt that with respect to their concerns, "[the politicians] say they're going to do a bunch of stuff and they don't do it or screw it up, yet they still have a job at the end of the day." Similarly, a francophone woman

stated, "regardless of what they say or promise; they never honour it." As one new Canadian put it, politicians are simply "concerned for their own interests."

Interestingly, these views were not directed to a specific political party or leader in power. Rather, all politicians and levels of government were viewed in the same light: "There is absolutely nobody to vote for. They all have something nice to say and something to sell you on, [but] they can't back it up," one rural Canadian emphasized. Using the Rogers example one more time, just as there is public frustration with the cell phone industry as there is little choice between carriers, there is public frustration with politics as there is little choice between politicians—"...they are all the same".

In stark contrast, as quantitative data bears out, participants had relatively positive feelings about *democracy.* Many identified the various freedoms associated with a democratic system, as seen in Figure 1b. Even disengaged participants, who admitted they did not regularly exercise their rights, described democracy in terms of freedom of expression and the right to vote. Other noble ideals like *fairness*, *equality* and *having a voice* were also frequently cited.

Figure 1b: Word cloud describing democracy
(Words participants commonly used to describe democracy. The relative size of words indicates how often the terms were raised across the focus groups.)

These responses reveal both a divide and a connection between what people perceive as being political and what they perceive as being democratic. People's disappointment with politics is driven by their sense of what democracy should be. As one francophone woman put it, "there is no trust in politicians, but you do have trust in democracy." If politics better matched what people associate with democracy, politics could be more warmly perceived.

This too is not surprising. Politics is arguably the day-to-day practice of democracy.

However, looking more closely a between group divide emerges. When participants expressed negative views of democracy, these views often referred to how politics is failing to live up to the democratic ideal. One rural Canadian described democracy as a "sham," for example. Another woman in Montreal felt that "the word democracy is sort of like an illusion, a front man—publicity, advertisement, optimistic." For her, the idea of democracy is "all air … it's a dream," while politics is "a building, a person, a problem." Alongside all of the more romantic expressions of freedom and equality, poverty, greed, fighting, violence and no-real-voice were also present. In all disengaged groups there is a small but reoccurring theme echoing disappointment with how democratic ideals are executed in practice.

Overall, these perspectives set the stage for understanding how Canadians interact with their political system. What is clear from these and other comments made in the focus groups is that the participants think less often about democracy as an abstract and more often about their concrete, day-to-day experiences with politics. It is in these everyday interactions with politics, then, that we may discover why some are disengaged while others are engaged.

Outsiders

Across all the disengaged focus groups, participants described politicians and politics as *the other*—a separate class of people and processes that are beyond their influence and that do not serve them. Thus, despite a desire to be included, the disengaged could see no place for themselves within politics.

When asked directly about their role in politics, the disengaged responded with a pervasive sense of powerlessness. "I think [politicians] want to take over everybody. They don't really care what people want. They say they are going to do something, then they just never do it. It doesn't make sense, so why vote?" asked one woman in the urban Aboriginal group. An older man in the rural focus group echoed this sense of powerlessness, saying, "I look at elections and I think … the votes have been counted before the election … I don't try to do anything personally. It's not going to change."

For some, this powerlessness was felt acutely in relation to other established interests. For example, in their view, corporations held disproportionate influence within the system. Lamenting the demise of small family businesses, one rural Canadian observed that "a lot of these companies, even a company like Wal-Mart, ha[ve] got a lot of political influence higher up … they have a lot of power so that they are pulling the strings."

Others defined their powerlessness as being far removed from the established political class. In the words of one new Canadian, "they always feel so distant … they just do what they want." Some were even more explicit, viewing established interests as actively trying to mollify the public. As one young man said, "politics seems geared toward making people think they have a voice to keep them occupied … but they don't actually give you a voice." Another agreed, saying "they are trying to pull the wool over our eyes." Notably, the

disengaged never spoke of the political system as if it belonged to them. The overall point seems to be that they felt left out and, as a consequence, had very little reason to engage.

Insiders

In contrast, participants in the engaged group approached politics from the position of an *insider*. The engaged people we spoke to were almost universally able to describe a role for themselves *within* politics. They might not have been happy with some of the outcomes, nor were they all actively engaged all the time, but, they saw politics as a system that is accountable to them.

Indeed, this perceived accountability is the most notable difference between disengaged and engaged people. In the words of one engaged woman, "I'm voting for you. You work for me." This belief stands in stark contrast to the disengaged, who never spoke about the political system as something in which they had an ownership stake.

Consequently, the engaged control group had no trouble seeing ways in which they could have a role in politics, despite the negative views they expressed toward the political system. Where the disengaged spoke of their own futility, the engaged spoke about how "my responsibility is to help mobilize the people around me to work towards issues that I care about." The engaged felt that "as an individual, you have to decide that you want something changed or something done and try to go after it." Unlike the disengaged, then, the engaged felt empowered and capable of effecting change if they wanted to.

This is not to say that our engaged focus group participants thought that the system worked well. Like the disengaged, they used words such as "untrustworthy," "corruption," and "mismanagement" to characterize the political system. But the engaged group seemed to remain hopeful that things could be better. As one man pointed out, "we are hoping for someone you can trust, not the guys we've got now." Another woman concurred, reflecting that despite reading the news and getting depressed, "I always see that things can change and try to do my part." These sentiments did not emerge in other groups.

Despite the negative views toward politics shared by both disengaged and engaged groups, their vantage points were very different. Politically disengaged people saw politics from the outside: impenetrable, immovable and, therefore, unimportant. Politically engaged participants saw politics from the inside: imperfect and flawed, but ultimately accessible. They had a much stronger belief in their own efficacy, which was bolstered by the conviction that the effort is worth it. It is quite possible, then, that these two different outlooks on politics are closely related to people's level of engagement in the political system. But if this is the case, an important question remains unanswered: How do people become outsiders or insiders?

Lessons in Powerlessness

As we learned from the focus groups, politics is experienced at a personal level. Citizens make few distinctions between the abstract concepts of *politics*, *government* and the *political system.* As one rural participant said, "I am more concerned about what goes on in my little sphere of influence as opposed to the country as a whole." This is understandable. People are most aware of their personal environment and experience. Their perspective on how politics functions generally cannot be separated from how they experience politics personally.

However, even though both the disengaged and engaged spoke of personal experiences that shaped their lasting impressions of politics, we discovered that for the disengaged, their horizons were quite local and attempts to interact with politics taught them that participating even to achieve the most simple result, was futile. They had *learned* to accept powerlessness—a lesson that became engrained over time. Conversely, the engaged told stories of interacting with the political system and experiencing relatively positive outcomes. They did not always get what they wanted, but their interactions with politics reinforced their sense of agency and the idea that engagement is a useful pursuit.

In general, disengaging from politics was the result of one of two broad experiences.

First, many disengaged people in the focus groups described having tried to effect change, but failing in their efforts. Disengaged participants had not always felt powerless. In the past, they believed that the political system was open to them and wanted to hear from them. But once they had an actual concern that needed to be resolved, they found that no one was responsive. From these experiences, the disengaged took to heart the lesson that engaging with the political system is at best a waste of time, and at worst a discouraging and disempowering experience.

A woman in the francophone focus group provided an illustration of this process. Wanting to become a cook, she applied for and was accepted into a nine-month culinary education program sponsored by Employment Quebec. She spent several months learning the culinary trade, but at the seventh month the program administration moved her from working in the kitchen to serving customers in the cafeteria. In response, she asked the program to recognize her seven months of culinary education on her certificate in order to demonstrate that she could both cook and serve customers. The administration, however, would only recognize her customer service training. This response frustrated her since she had aspired to cook as well. She felt that "they complicated the entire situation to see if I would drop out, and I did … I was very discouraged and disappointed." She sought help from her sponsor, Employment Quebec, but the man she explained her situation to was about to leave on vacation. He told her to come back when he returned, but this discouraged her even further. As a result, she applied for employment insurance instead.

A similar story of frustration was told by an Aboriginal woman who described her efforts to gain access to daycare services for her grandson:

I had to call all these politicians, I had to call all, and believe me, I do it. When I go there, I go there. I wrote the letters, I called. I did everything I could because we were now without a daycare. Nobody did anything … it took me four or five months before we got him into another daycare, and we had to put him in the Catholic daycare and we're not Catholic. What I got back from these politicians were these form letters, but nobody really did anything except for me having to push and push to find a daycare.

These and other stories consistently emerged demonstrating the barriers that many participants faced when they tried to engage. Whether a parent was trying to get a school bus route extended to reach her house, a new Canadian was trying to get his credentials recognized so he could work, or residents attempted to get a speed bump installed to slow down speeding cars on the street, these experiences taught many participants that the system was not set up to serve them. As one said, "why should I care for the system if the system doesn't care for me?" In the end, many expressed feelings of fatigue. They were tired of having to "fight all the time to be heard." Engaging in the political system was not something they would consider doing again.

The second pathway to disengagement is equally troubling: some people, especially less-educated youth, were taught the futility of engagement before they even had a chance to engage. They too felt largely left out.

These Canadians felt a sense of powerlessness and irrelevancy which was reinforced by the political messages they hear—or in their case, the absence of messages. The young people we spoke to felt that politicians view their voices as inconsequential and unimportant. As one young person explains; "[politicians] have their plans—they don't care about us." Another young participant articulated, "more kids our age would care if politics cared about us." As a result, these young people never felt that they should engage in the first place.

This view is, perhaps, predictable given that the issues receiving most attention in the political arena are traditionally less relevant for youth. This is the underpinning of life cycle theory, which maintains that politics is less likely to engage young people as the issues are just not as critical when you are not paying taxes, sending your kids to school, or needing healthcare for example (Archer 2006).

But the disengaged youth we spoke to went a little bit further, underlining that the political system made little effort to reach out to them. They asked why politicians do not speak to youth in terms that they can relate to, or why they do not try to make issues more appealing. One young woman reflected that "we need more interesting issues. We are all like early or late teens or whatever you want to call it, none of us believe in giving a crap about anything that they are doing."

However, one young woman's observation suggests that this indifference is deliberate. As she argued, "I think politicians want it that way [irrelevance to young people], they want to

show us everything has to be controlled, everything in our mindset so we can think what they want us to, but when you think outside the box, that's when you feel defeated."

Regardless of which pathway one takes toward disengagement, for many, disengagement is the result of explicit, personal experience. Few people in the focus groups associated their disengagement with apathy. On the contrary, those who indicated that the political system is too difficult and complicated to navigate placed the blame squarely on the system for being *intentionally* convoluted, designed to keep them out. Whatever their specific experience, however, our disengaged participants were unanimous in their feeling that the political system gives them no reason to engage.

Engaged citizens, however, painted a far different picture. While they, like the disengaged, spoke of the challenges of being heard, unlike the disengaged, they did not feel that their efforts were futile. They persisted with their efforts, and experienced some success. These successes gave the members of the engaged focus group hope that change could be achieved, encouraging them to continue engaging.

One particular account from the engaged group illustrates this point. A woman in the group told about her attempts to get medical care for her mother:

> I had frustrations along the way most certainly, but what I found is that the squeaky wheel gets the oil because I didn't know where to go. I did not know where to get services. Somebody—an acquaintance of mine—said you know try [Community Care Access Centre], so I tried them and through persistence and being extremely nice and polite on the phone—you cannot be harsh. You cannot show your frustration or they will knock you down. Now I managed to get a caseworker who was actually interested, who got me somebody to come to the house to do an assessment, who said yes she does need this, this and this. And I actually got help, but only because I was at it relentlessly every day.

Others who self-identified as engaged echoed this story of fighting and ultimately achieving success. One man noted that he frequently signs petitions on the internet and that "about fifty percent of the time, I get an email back a couple of weeks later saying our petition won … so that kind of gives me hope." Others spoke about the necessity of sending letters to their Members of Parliament and making phone calls to share their opinions with program administrators. Taking action was important for this group.

These stories reveal a sense of empowerment that the disengaged groups did not exhibit. Engaged participants were confident in their ability to effect change, driven by a belief that "in a nutshell [the political system] is working for me." This is not to say that they always expected to win, or that they could effect change on their own. Engaged participants were cognizant of the need to work collectively to solve problems, arguing that "you can only effect change if you get enough people engaged to work together to a common goal." But unlike the disengaged, these people saw a place for themselves in the political system and avenues that they could pursue to resolve their concerns. It is these perceptions that presumably keep them engaged in politics.

Political Lessons

Personal, everyday experiences seem to have a deep impact on political engagement and feelings of efficacy. For the disengaged, the outcomes of political engagement and the content of political discourse taught them that they had little impact on the political process. When a problem arose that required government assistance—be it finding a job, securing a daycare spot, or addressing overcrowded schools—they expected less of their politicians and less of their government.

Importantly, when disengaged participants experienced difficulty with the system, there was little conceptual separation between the role of civil servants and the role of politicians. For most of the people we spoke to, government was synonymous with politics. Thus, both a negative experience in accessing government services and receiving poor service from the office of a Member of Parliament were equally likely to shape an individual's negative perception of the political system. That there was no *welcome mat*— no indication that government cares about their voice to begin with—led to a sense of powerlessness that ultimately keeps them out of the political process.

In contrast, while members of the engaged group also reported some degree of frustration from time to time, they reacted differently. Such frustration fed a resiliency to keep picking up the phone, to keep knocking on doors, and to keep sending emails until they saw results. Perhaps driven by a sense of ownership of the political system, many continued to push until they received some satisfaction. These successes, no matter how small, reinforced the behaviour of the engaged.

How the Context May Affect Agency

In recent years, governments, political parties, civil society organizations and academics have all tried to answer the same simple question: Why aren't people participating in politics?

While the question may seem simple, there are many possible answers. This research shows that the conventional wisdom that the disengaged are disinterested, apathetic and uninformed may be accurate, but it misses something important. By speaking at length with less engaged citizens, we have discovered that they are often keenly aware of how politics work but do not participate in politics because of the failure of the political system to serve them in specific and personal ways, causing them to question their ability to affect change and the belief in their own agency. They expect little from politics and politicians.

Of course there are always exceptions: there are some who would decline to participate in politics regardless of how well the system performs, just as there are those who would be highly engaged no matter what the outcome. No study, no matter how nuanced or far reaching, can fully explain all the complex factors that determine how we relate to our political system.

But this study reveals a troubling situation: the political system is sending an exclusionary message to a wide variety of people, thereby separating the Canadian public into insiders who have a sense of agency and belief in their own ability to be heard and remain engaged in the system, and outsiders who feel left out of discourse, and no longer have a sense of efficacy.

While it is beyond the scope of this study to decide who to blame or what specifically we must do to fix the political system, we have identified three aspects of what could be contributing to this outsider problem. First, is the sense that the system is uninterested and unresponsive, and this is attached or even leads to the feeling that politicians cannot be held to account. The second quality that emerges is the idea of inclusiveness, or lack thereof. And third, is success in participation.

The responsiveness of politicians and government is of course key. In the first section of this paper, we documented the divide between what people thought democracy should be and what politics really is. In all the focus groups, both disengaged and engaged, we heard participants say that issues discussed in the political arena do not address what they actually care about, and it is difficult to hold politicians to account.

Our focus groups also said that the lack of observable accountability in the political system was a problem. We heard a lot about untrustworthy politicians, who say one thing, and do another. And respondents were very unhappy with the lack of consequence demonstrated daily in political affairs, as evidenced in the following statements;

> I would care more if they said, 'Well, I can do a bunch of different things,' and they were accountable for it. If it didn't happen they would be punished in some way—not physically. Pay cheque–wise, instead of staying at a five-star hotel they have to stay at a small hotel, you know, whatever—something like that.

> I think their intent is good, they just don't follow through. But I think it's the lack of accountability. It starts from the top and filters down. If the top is not accountable, then everyone is doing their own thing.

Notably, the people we spoke to did not think this requirement of accountability was unreasonable or unachievable. They wanted to know more—in simple terms—about why things were the way they were in order to better understand political outcomes. But on this basic requirement of democracy, our participants thought politics fell short.

The inclusiveness of the political system is the second aspect of democracy that emerged as problematic. An inclusive political system allows different voices to be heard and encourages the Canadian public to express their views. But as we reported many disengaged people struggle to be heard. The disengaged feel, by and large, like outsiders in their own democracy. They feel that the interests expressed in the political arena are not their own. Their everyday personal experience with politics tells them that they will not be included, even though all they want is "to know someone is going to listen."

In contrast, the engaged feel like insiders. They believe that politics works for them. They expect to have access to government and their representatives and to have success with their efforts. They see a reason to fight. Thus, despite also perceiving negative aspects of politics, they continue to work toward change.

Participation is the third aspect of concern. No matter how responsive or inclusive a government is, citizen participation is required to make it a democracy. We described how many people become disengaged through the lessons they absorbed from earlier attempts to participate. Many had negative experiences engaging, and withdrew over time.

We heard from our focus groups that participation in the political system should be made easier. Civil servants, as well as politicians, must be conscious of the significant role they play in shaping citizens' perceptions of their own agency. Citizens who feel powerless will not be inclined to participate again. Similarly, those who feel that the system has never made an attempt to engage with them are unlikely to participate at all. They need to feel a part of things, and to know that their involvement can make a difference. In a sense the three qualities buttress or undermine a sense agency which is necessary for continued interest, commitment and engagement.

Conclusion: The Underpinning of Agency in Politics

Listening to those less engaged provides fresh insight into why the less engaged appreciate democracy, yet chose to stay at home on election-day. And this investigation in turn provides further support for a pre-established connection between agency and the declining sense of duty to politics (Blais and Labbé 2011). However, as this work is by no means representative, we must be careful with the conclusions we draw. Nevertheless testing which involves a larger more representative sample size to further probe the role or relationship between negative interactions with government and perceived sense agency and responsibility could prove very beneficial—particularly if the study includes measures of perceived government responsiveness, inclusiveness, and satisfaction with participation, as they seem to be what decreases agency, and duty alike.

The Agency/Duty Model for Less Engaged

The agency/duty model of is quite simple. We expect that those who experience negative interactions with government will have a decreased sense of agency, which lead to lower levels of duty and engagement. Notably, this relationship can easily be turned around,

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through positive interactions with government, leading to greater sense of agency, and increased levels of duty and engagement.

The Agency/Duty Model for Engaged

Positive Interaction with Government	→	Increased Agency	→	Increased Duty/ Engagement

Through discussions with politically less-interested non-voters, we have observed that their political behavior has been shaped by a very different "educative effect" compared to the positive, reinforcing experience envisioned by Pateman (1970) and Barber (1984). The disengaged focus groups in our study reported that their personal experiences with political participation had been found frustrating and futile. As a result many had *learned* that participation is not worth their time and energy. The legacy of these personal experiences was also expressed in language that reflected a perceived outsider-insider division. Overtime, negative experiences of engagement diminished both a sense of agency and belonging within politics. This stood in contrast to a group of engaged individuals that asserted both belonging and ownership within politics.

Through such research, a much more nuanced understanding of political behavior and political participation is emerging, but there is reason to be cautious. The self-report nature of focus groups can lead to rationalization that is inaccurate. Even though participants could articulate past experiences that 'turned them off', psychologists will remind us that individuals are rarely equipped to account for the reasons for simple, never mind complex, behaviours. And much careful heavy lifting is to be done before conclusions can be made.

Nevertheless, our study's findings raise the importance of past experience as a key factor within the broader context that influences individuals' perceptions of agency, and in turn, their attitudes towards political participation. This observation could also prove important for those concerned about democratic malaise.

Appendix 1: Research Methodology

This report incorporates data from eight focus groups (N=55 participants) ranging in size from five to nine participants. The groups were conducted in Toronto, Hamilton, Mississauga, Vancouver, Montreal and Ottawa between August and October 2011. In total, 37 women and 18 men participated. The unequal gender distribution reflects the two focus groups that were deliberately made up entirely of women.

While these focus groups are *not* representative of the population overall, they provide insight into the thoughts of the population we are most concerned about: politically disengaged Canadians (see below for definition). Thus, observations of the focus groups cannot and should not be used as a general observation about the Canadian population as a whole.

All focus group participants provided written informed consent, which ensures that their identities remain confidential. Participants received pecuniary compensation upon completion of the focus group; focus group meetings were a maximum of two hours in length.

Samara retained the services of a private, independent marketing research firm with experience recruiting focus groups. This screener used random digit dialing to collect a randomized pool of potential participants. Participants' eligibility was further refined based on their responses to a short screening interview. This screening survey gauged their engagement with, and interest in, politics, and collected demographic information.

During initial screening, potential focus group participants were asked about their level of interest in their communities, the frequency with which they accessed news media (reading newspapers, watching TV news), the degree of their interest in politics, their attitude toward voting and whether they voted in the last federal and provincial elections. We sought participants who were less interested in political affairs and more disengaged, but who were aware of current issues. Thus, the majority of participants selected reported reading or watching the news either daily or two to three times a week—a proxy for awareness of current issues. However, most reported that they no longer vote at all.

The **less-educated youth group** had a median age of 20.5 years and was recruited from Hamilton, Ontario. We selected young people with lower levels of education since studies of youth engagement almost always focus on those with university education. In this group, most participants had completed only high school, with the exception of one participant who did not complete high school and one who had obtained some university education.

Participants in the **lower-income group**, also recruited from Hamilton, were selected based on their socio-economic status. The average household income of the participants was between $35,000 and $40,000 a year and none had an income of more than $50,000 a year. They came to the focus group with a wide variety of educational and occupational backgrounds. One participant was unemployed, for example, while another worked in the trades.

There were two groups in Montreal: one made up of English-speaking women with low levels of interest in politics, and one made up of French-speaking women who were also less interested in politics and political affairs.

The **francophone group** (24 to 54 years of age) was made up of women living in various Montreal neighbourhoods. They were also a diverse group in terms of their education, which varied from some high school to completed college studies. Three participants were born outside Canada.

Participants in the **English-speaking women's group** (31 to 63 years of age) were recruited from Montreal. They offered a specific opportunity to determine whether their status as minority language speakers affected their views of politics and democracy when compared with the francophone women's group.

Participants in the **urban Aboriginal group** (23 to 62 years of age) were located in Toronto. They had varied educational and occupational backgrounds. A few participants had some high school education, while a few had college or university education.

In Vancouver, we held a focus group with **new Canadians** (19 to 51 years of age). Most participants had been living in Canada for five to seven years and had emigrated from East Asian or Southeast Asian countries; there were also two people of European birth. The longest period of Canadian citizenship was 4.5 years while three participants anticipated receiving their citizenship in the next twelve months. As such, five participants noted during the focus group selection that they were ineligible to vote in the last federal and provincial elections. Most had some university education or were university graduates.

Rural Canadians (21 to 57 years of age) were drawn from smaller communities surrounding Ottawa, Ontario such as Barrhaven, Metcalfe, Carleton Place and Alymer in the Gatineau, Quebec region: populations ranged from around 1,700 to around 50,000. Due to the urban location of commercial, purpose-built focus group facilities, we were limited to rural locations with convenient proximity to a major urban centre. As a result, these areas and their inhabitants were more likely to be influenced by their metropolitan neighbours, since many of the respondents in this group commuted to work in Ottawa.

In order to provide a point of comparison with the focus groups composed of disengaged participants, we organized a single focus group drawn from the suburban community of Mississauga, Ontario, composed of seven "typically engaged" individuals. They were recruited on the basis of regularly voting and having significant interest in political affairs. The **engaged suburban group** responded to a similar set of questions as the disengaged participants. They were between 20 and 60 years old.

A semi-structured interview format was used to gain insight into respondents' knowledge of and attitudes and opinions about issues related to politics and democracy, both in Canada and more broadly. André Turcotte facilitated all the focus groups.

Respondents were first asked to describe "which words and phrases come to mind" when thinking of the words "politics" and "democracy." Respondents were asked to describe how they view their own "role" in relation to each of these concepts.

Respondents were also presented with a set of images and asked to select which images they would associate with "politics" and "democracy."

A final exercise examined the state of "democratic health" by asking respondents to select key attributes of Parliament, the media and public engagement according to their overall importance to Canadian democracy.

Discussion Guide

Section 1 - Introduction

Review of the process:

The role of the researcher: ask questions, probe and encourage/ensure participation from all

The role of the participants: being forthcoming, no need for consensus, allow everyone to participate

Reassurance of Confidentiality

First Roundtable:

First name and background

When you think of Canada, and what you care about in Canada – what comes to mind?

Simialrly, when you think about your community, what you care about in your community and your role in your community – what comes to mind?

When you think of the word "politics" – what comes to mind?

Section 2 - Politics

A. Explore the list of words and expressions generated through the first roundtable.

Probe:

Reasons behind negative impressions

Reasons behind positive impressions

Which words/expressions (if any) would not have been on that list about 10-15 years ago?

Which words/expressions (if any) would have been on a list developed 10-15 years ago?

Reasons for change

B. When you think of the word "politics" – which "Images" come to mind

Probe

Any images missing?

C. Is politics limited/restricted to things related to government?

If not? What else/who else?

D. Do you have what you might call 'political' conversations?

What are they about?

Who are they with?

Has there been a political issue that was important to you and you were dissatisfied with? Can you tell us about it?

Did you discuss this issue with anyone?

Did you contact an official – if so what happened?

E. Can you recall a situation when you had to contact public officials/get involved in order to settle an issue or a problem?

(If necessary: if could be as anything from an issue in your neighborhood, a problem that mattered to you, etc)

Describe the first steps you took? What did you do, who did you call? Why?

Guide participants through the steps they took and probe reasons for choice (especially if steps did not involve elected representatives?

Overall evaluation of experience

If not – why not?

F. Now, when it comes to getting information about politics or a poltical issue – how do you feel?

Where would you turn to look for information?

What do yo like about the political information available? What might you like to see, but can't find?

Probe, positive and negative.

G. Overall Satisfaction

On the whole are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very, or not at all satisfied with the array of choice in political parties? Is there a party for you?

Section 3 - Democracy

A. Second Roundtable:

When you think of the word "democracy" – what comes to mind?

Explore the list of words and expressions generated through the roundtable.

Probe:

Reasons behind negative impressions

Reasons behind positive impressions

Which words/expressions (if any) would not have been on that list about 10-15 years ago?

Which words/expressions (if any) would have been on a list developed 10-15 years ago?

Reasons for change

Thinking 10-15 years from now – which words/expressions will still be on the list – which ones may disappear?

Reasons for change

B. When you think of the word "democracy" – which "Images" come to mind

Probe - Any images missing?

C. What do you feel is your role in democracy?

How well or poorly do you feel you are fulfilling your role in democracy? Reasons for evaluation (Written exercise followed by discussion)

Probe:

Reasons for evaluations

Isolate Motivations/Skills for Good Evaluation

Isolate Obstacles Responsive for Poor Evaluation

Do you care?

D. Evaluation

On the whole are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very, or not at all satisfied with democracy in Canada?

Reasons

Do you think democracy is healthy in Canada? Why or why not?

Section 4 – Index

We are trying to develop a way to measure qualities of democratic health. And are going to read you a list of attributes; could you please let me know which ones you would rank close to the top of your list and why?

Transparency
Accountability
Representativeness
Responsiveness
Fairness
Accessibility
Efficiency
Competence
Comprehensibility
Distribution of power
Political knowledge
Equality
Engagement/Participation
Inclusiveness/Diversity

Also, could you tell me what is missing from the list?

Section 5 – Conclusion
Among all the things discussed today, what is the one thing you feel was most important? Explain your choice (Written exercise followed by discussion time permitting)

The first phase of focus groups could then be conducted in June and July 2011. To do so, the following timeline is suggested:

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