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## LET'S GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

Alison Loat

### INTRODUCING DEMOCRACY TALKS

THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS SITTING AROUND THE TABLE AT THE CITIZENS' Academy in Ottawa have never met before, but you wouldn't know it from all the laughter. After the facilitator starts the meeting, all the students are asked to identify themselves and a social or political issue that concerns them. The students have a wide range of issues on their minds – rising tuition costs, international development, job security, and employment – the same kinds of issues that would likely emerge in a discussion with almost any group of Canadians.

The last person to introduce herself is Lisa.<sup>1</sup> She says she is concerned about the environment, and then she laughs. “Really? Or you're kidding?” the facilitator asks. “Really,” she said. “I've written letters to the prime minister about it.” Lisa tells the group that as a child, she travelled to Quebec and came across an old pulp factory emitting a terrible smell. When she expressed concern, her mother suggested she write to someone about it, so she did. Now, almost a decade later, she has written to three successive prime ministers about specific environmental concerns and has yet to receive an answer that satisfies her. “The responses I got back were just, ‘Oh we're trying,’” she said. “One time they sent me a picture of themselves and a pin.” It has been a few years since Lisa tried contacting a government official. When asked if she ever would do so again, she said, “I would, but it makes no difference.”

Lisa told her story at one of a series of conversations hosted by Samara, the non-partisan charity I founded in 2009 that is dedicated to increasing political participation in Canada. Over the last year, in partnership with a range of nonprofit community groups, Samara facilitated discussions with nearly 200 Canadians from Newfoundland to British Columbia in an effort to understand their experiences with politics and the barriers they face to political participation. We call these discussions *Democracy Talks*, and from stories like Lisa's we are learning a lot about what needs to be done to inspire more active citizenship in Canada.

### THE POWER OF CONVERSATION

The health of a democracy depends on citizen engagement, which can take several forms. Citizens can engage with each other around public issues, as they do in many nonprofit community groups. They may – as individuals or as groups – seek opportunities to share their views with elected officials or public servants. But perhaps the most direct measure of citizen engagement is voter turnout.

ALISON LOAT is the Executive Director and co-founder of Samara, a charitable organization dedicated to increasing political participation in Canada. In April 2014, Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan will publish *Tragedy in the Commons: Former Members of Parliament Speak out about Canada's Failing Democracy*, which is based on Samara's Member of Parliament Exit Interviews, conducted with nearly 80 former Members of Parliament who gave unprecedented access and insight to the inner workings, successes, and shortcomings of Canada's political system. Samara has also published original research on political engagement in Canada in the form of six Democracy Reports. Currently, researchers at Samara are analyzing data for the Samara Index, Canada's first-ever annual index of political engagement, and advising on a text book for Ontario's new civics curriculum. *Democracy Talks* will be expanding to new communities this year and is always looking for community partners who are interested in this work. Email: [alison.loat@samaracanada.com](mailto:alison.loat@samaracanada.com) .

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Voter turnout in Canada has been sliding for a generation; the 2011 federal election saw the third-lowest turnout in Canadian history. Furthermore, Samara's most recent public polling shows satisfaction with Canadian democracy is at an all-time low – 65% of Canadians report being dissatisfied with the way our democracy is working: <http://www.samaracanada.com/what-we-do/current-research/who%27s-the-boss->.

These troubling indicators of the health of Canadian democracy led us at Samara to develop the *Democracy Talks* program. The premise of *Democracy Talks* is that there is a meaningful correlation between citizens' engagement with each other on public issues and their political participation (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). The challenge for Samara and other nonprofits that hope to increase political participation is that only 40% of Canadians report they have even discussed a societal or political issue in person or on the phone in the last year. Despite claims by pundits, social media doesn't seem to be the solution either. Only 42% of Canadians reported discussing politics online in any way.

*Democracy Talks* is designed to encourage political participation by extending an invitation to talk about politics in an approachable, non-partisan space. Participants do not need to have a deep understanding of political parties or the political system to join in the conversation. They need only bring their personal experiences with the political system and their ideas for improving it. During this past year, Samara's efforts were targeted at three demographic groups: university students, low-income youth, and new Canadians. The one thing that all of these groups have in common is that they've recently gained the right to vote.

For many participants, Samara's facilitated discussions were the first time they had ever been asked to share their views on politics, to think critically about their relationship to MPs and political parties, or to imagine what their role in Canada's democracy could be. During the discussions, participants were asked about their personal experiences with politics and barriers to participation. They were also asked for their advice on how to engage new voters like themselves.

#### **BARRIERS TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

The barriers that the new voter participants in *Democracy Talks* identified were at times simple and at others surprising.

One topic that came up again and again in conversations with newcomers was the lack of civics education provided during the settlement process. Lowie, a Filipino-Canadian who attended a *Democracy Talk* in Hamilton, particularly stressed this problem. Lowie moved to Canada from the Philippines eight years ago at the age of 21 and now studies at Brock University. Though he has always been interested in politics, he said he struggled to understand the Canadian system, which seemed "entirely different" to him than the one he knew at home. The one resource he was given, the *Discover Canada* citizenship study guide, did not provide any information on democratic engagement beyond voting.

Another participant, Harry, who joined a conversation in Brampton, cited the same concern. He spoke of his surprise when a friend told him he could join a political party, something no one had mentioned during his settlement process. One of the participants

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noted during a *Democracy Talk* that her *Discover Canada* guide actually contained the same number of paragraphs on beavers as it did on political participation.

University students echoed newcomers' concerns about their limited civics education. One student in Hamilton told us that her high school civics classes left her thinking citizens' role in the system was "as voters and not much else." Uninspiring civics education, combined with observations that political conversations are considered impolite in Canada, led both New Canadians and students to infer that "being political" just doesn't seem like something Canadians value. As a result, there is little social encouragement, let alone pressure, to participate.

Another recurring theme in the discussions was participants' frustration with the political process and a general feeling that engaging with politicians is ineffective. While Lisa, who tried multiple times to engage her representatives about environmental degradation, maintained that she would continue trying, many others who had had similar experiences said they would not.

A number of participants in the groups of low-income youth and newcomers said they felt that not only were political powers unresponsive, but that they also actively work *against* their interests. One young participant poignantly stated, "I think, when you look at society, for example, the laws, the tax breaks for the big guys, [it] reflects who is important to the government and who is not important ... They know about the problems the poor people face, but do they care? If they did, we would see it." Those who felt that the political power deck was stacked against them seemed to feel it was a waste of time to even try to influence political decisions.

In general, participants expressed little faith in the political system and found few incentives to get involved. While many pundits explain disengagement as apathy, Samara's work with new voter communities suggests that declining political engagement is, at least in part, based on rational assessments of a political system that has provided citizens with concrete and disappointing experiences of politics. Without a clear starting point or a friendly face to show new voters how to get involved, it is unlikely that those who face these barriers will take steps to participate politically on their own. This is a problem that should concern all Canadians. Every voice that is absent from the political process ultimately lessens the legitimacy of Canada's representative democracy.

#### **A SILVER LINING IN COMMUNITY GROUPS**

Canadians give more of their time to the nonprofit sector than they do to organized politics. While only 10% have volunteered on a political campaign in the last five years, 55% reported that they volunteered for a nonprofit in the past year. An even larger percentage, about 58%, reported being involved with a nonprofit community group. A number of *Democracy Talks* participants explained that the social aspect and participatory nature of working with community groups makes them much more inviting than political offices or parties. In contrast to the frustration or power imbalance they have felt with political organizations, they feel welcomed and encouraged by community groups to make a difference on their chosen issue. According to the 2013 Edelman Trust Barometer, the nonprofit sector is the most trusted sector in Canada, with 73% of people saying they

put some level of trust in nonprofits. Only 58% felt the same way about government. Given the confidence that nonprofit community groups enjoy and the fact that many are formed around issues that are inherently political (such as neighbourhood safety, the environment, or international development), nonprofit community groups are well positioned to help their members engage in political issues. By bringing discussions about politics into their programming, community groups can normalize such discussions for their members and reinforce the idea that political participation is socially acceptable and desirable. As community groups continue to provide these opportunities, the members who take part become more likely to translate their discussions into political engagement (Klofstad, 2009).

A recent American study clearly shows the impact that the nonprofit sector can have on citizen engagement – in this specific case, on voter turnout. In the 2012 general election in the U.S., the group Non-Profit Vote studied voter registration and found that turnout for those who had been registered by a nonprofit was significantly higher than turnout in the general population – 74% vs. 68%. They also found that because of nonprofits' reach and roots within communities, they were particularly good at mobilizing segments of the community who are usually underrepresented in politics. It is well known that personally asking someone to vote is the most effective way to influence them to do so (Gerber & Green, 2000). However, because underrepresented groups are often seen as having a low propensity to vote, political parties tend to ignore them when registering voters. Non-Profit Vote's study shows that nonprofit community groups can effectively step in to fill this pivotal role.

*Democracy Talks* capitalizes on the role that nonprofits can play in encouraging political participation in the time between elections. Many participants in the 20 Democracy Talks workshops held in partnership with nonprofit community groups would never have taken part in a discussion about politics without the urging of peers in their local group.

#### POLITICAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH NONPROFIT COMMUNITY GROUPS

Through *Democracy Talks*, we met two individuals whose experiences capture the impact that community groups can have on democratic engagement. Uzma Irfan is a Pakistani-Canadian who has lived in Malton, Ontario, for 14 years. Today she is a leader in her community and works with local city councillors and MPPs on a wide variety of initiatives. Yet she told us that only one year ago she felt “hesitant to talk to political leaders [due to] a lack of confidence.” Her turning point came when she joined a local group called the Malton Women Council. The council provided her with training and trusted her with opportunities to represent their needs in high-level meetings with her political representatives. Now she says she can “talk to politicians easily.”

James Wattam had a similar experience. He joined an Engineers Without Borders (EWB) campus group at his university in Saskatchewan, where he received specialized training in interacting with MPs. He says the training made him “more comfortable with raising [his] voice.” James now serves as the campus group's vice president of advocacy, regularly meeting with MPs throughout the province and pushing forward EWB's international development goals.

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Through their nonprofit community groups, both Uzma and James learned the skills needed to engage with organized politics. Further, in both cases the nonprofit groups provided them a platform from which to constructively contribute to public policy development. Their experiences illustrate an important pattern noted in Samara's public polling: 73% of those who report having been active in a nonprofit group in the past 12 months also report that they voted in the last election. By contrast, just 62% of those who had not been active with a group said they voted.

## THE WORK AHEAD

To be in the room during a Democracy Talk is to witness the impact that one conversation can have. At the end of one talk, Samara's facilitator asked participants if there was a particular moment from the workshop that stuck out. One young woman said, "I think for me it ... was reminding myself that I do have opinions and it's not impossible for me to get engaged because I do care about things. I'm not totally apathetic – there's hope for me still!"

Mistrust of the political system often grows from negative lived experiences. That is why it is so important that the invitation to engage comes from a trusted source such as a nonprofit community group. The comfortable spaces that community groups provide combined with a deep knowledge of issues that interest their members allows them to create empowering opportunities for those who might otherwise be frustrated, intimidated, or hesitant to get involved.

Most research on the role of community groups in increasing political engagement has been done in an American context, while attention in Canada has largely focused on increasing voter turnout. The fact that turnout levels remain low indicates, however, that traditional approaches to mobilizing voters are not working as well as we might hope. By the time an election rolls around, the barriers discussed above may have already led Canadians to disengage from politics. It is for this reason that *Democracy Talks* works with nonprofit community groups on political education and mobilization between elections, starting with something as simple as an invitation to talk about politics.

In the coming years, Samara will work closely with community partners, settlement agencies, ESL teachers, and campus groups to continue to facilitate conversations that open up the world of politics to Canadians who are too often left out of political discussions. The proportion of the Canadian public engaging in public policy and politics over the past 30 years has been on the decline. Hopefully, if we can tackle the roots of citizens' disengagement by connecting with citizens in the nonprofit groups they themselves choose, it won't take another 30 to turn things around.

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## NOTE

1. In the interest of confidentiality, some participants' names have been changed for this article.

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