



Conversations That Matter



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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

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The numbers are in and support for democracy in Canada is lower than you would expect. It's rebounding from a low of about 65% in 2017. But it remains low enough that the Centre for Dialogue at SFU launched a study to figure out what is going on and why.

Back in 2005 it looked as if democracies around the world were thriving. Since then the sense that the democracy is the best form of government has been slipping in Canada and globally. When support for democracy slips, other forms of government are often proposed.

If and when there is an openness to accept the idea of another type of governance, that in turn can open the door to anti-system candidates or parties. Trump and Brexit are two examples of anti-system responses. A party, an ideology, or an individual will suggest there is another way to make the country great and that other way is them.

We invited Shauna Sylvester of the Centre for Dialogue at Simon Fraser University to join us for a conversation that matters about the state of democracy in Canada. Shauna Sylvester, welcome.

- Thank you.

- Is democracy under threat in Canada because you've conducted a study. So let's talk about what that study is and does it tell us whether or not democracy actually is under a threat?

- So I wanna go back a little bit before I answer that question, and I wanna go back to what compelled us to start this study. So if you go back, and we did a scan of 10 years of research of democracy in Canada, all the opinion research that had been done, and we started to see some trends that were really concerning. In 2010 most of the democracy trends took a nosedive. Almost everything--

- In 2010.

- 2010 we saw a blip after and I think that could have been post-2008 in the meltdown, but we saw this decline. And then really concerning is the period 2012 to 2017. In that period there was one statistic that was startling to me. We asked the question, are Canadians, do you prefer democracy as your form of government? And there was a decline of 11 points.

- Do we know why?

- Well, it's interesting because we saw an incline in those that didn't care or wanted to see militarism or authoritarianism. Now think of the period 2012 to 2017.

- Okay.

- You see the emergence in global terms. This is Brexit, the rise of Trump. So there's this idea that perhaps maybe a strong person, generally a man, is the way forward, for some Canadians. It went down to 65%. Now the good news, I mean that figure

- 65% support for democracy.

- 65 support for democracy. So you have to wonder what the others were thinking.

- Yes.

- So that raised alarm bells. In 2017 that's what made us at the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue commissioned deep research. We deep it in Metro Vancouver. We've just completed a pan-Canadian survey. And the good news is since 2017 to 2019, to July 2019, we've seen a 12-point increase in that figure.

- Okay, but let's break down that 12-point increase. Is it in older Canadians or is it across the board?

- It shifts. So younger people, ironically 18 to 24-year-olds, actually feel pretty good about democracy. So to--

- Why do you say ironically?

- I should say prefer democracy.

- Okay.

- Because you think we have this myth that young people are just walking away, they don't vote, they don't care. That's not true. 18 to 24-year-olds actually do prefer democracy, and older Canadians prefer democracy, and immigrants, people who are foreign-born Canadians prefer democracy.

- Well, especially if they came from a nondemocratic--

- Absolutely.

- Jurisdiction.

- So if you think about it, those of us who saw our parents or grandparents fight on the frontline for democracy or those of us who may have had our parents in Afghanistan fighting for democracy, there's a general sense that they want democracy. But here's where I wanna get back to your original question. Are we seeing a decline in democracy? Only 10% when asked do you think Canada is governed democratically? Only 10% of us in Canada strongly believe that statement. 43% of us don't think that Canada is governed democratically.

- Is that because of the form of democracy that we have? Because in the United States they have a republic, and so it has branches of government that, despite the fact that we see the rise of Donald Trump, there are still the forefathers or the Founding Fathers of American Constitution foresaw this problem and it's as though they could envision the Trump in the future and say we're gonna put into place those breaks or checks that are gonna prevent that from happening. We don't have that system here. And I think that a lot of Canadians don't recognize how different our system of governance is.

- Yes, so we have a different system, and we didn't study the US, we were studying Canada, we were trying to understand that. And certainly 44% of us don't think voting matters. Here's where I think it gets really concerning when you get to, I think it's 50, I'm gonna look at it, 56% of us don't feel like we can influence government even when we try. And this is the big one, 68% of us don't believe that elected officials care what we think.

- Gotta get you to hang on for a second when we take our quick commercial break. We'll be right back.

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- So Canadians prefer--

- Those are disturbing numbers.

- They were disturbing numbers. They are disturbing numbers. I think it's quite fascinating that when you ask who do you trust? Judges and academics come out on top. Elected officials are at 33%. So our trust of institutions and the actors in those institutions are declining. And I think what we're hearing, and when we look at the study and we probe it, what we're hearing is that actually Canadians want in,

they believe democracy is worth fighting for, but they want a voice. And the way that democracy is being practiced in Canada is not good enough. They want authentic engagement, and that's one of the lessons from this study.

- I was doing research for a conversation that I had with Jody Wilson-Raybould, and a lot of it was around what is the role of the law in a democracy. How does it ensure that democratic principles remain intact? Is it the balance or the check to the system? And what I found interesting is Beverley McLachlin when she was still Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada wrote this fascinating piece talking about the role of democracy and law. And she said that it is the law alone that stands up against stark majoritarianism.

- Yeah.

- And this is the challenge. Does a majority government in, let's say, the Canadian political landscape have the ability to run roughshod over all of the things that we think we hold dear to our concept of democracy?

- Well, I think democracy particularly in Canada, we're a constitutional monarchy, we have a constitution, we have a culture that recognizes the rights of minorities, and I'll get into some of the concerns we're seeing in this study, but to get to your question about the law, there are a number of what I would call fundamental institutions to our democracy. Certainly the judiciary is one of them but so too is the media.

- Yes.

- The media is part of what holds account. And now our study, we have a number of people that look at democratic institutions in this country, and we think it's very important, but it is not what a democracy is in and of itself. So the institutions of democracy are part of it, but the culture, the values, the behaviors are also a big part of our democracy. And that's what we're trying to understand here is what is our democratic culture here in this country? And it's a fascinating--

- Well, that is a really interesting question 'cause you're saying that, you're talking about this decreasing faith in democratic institutions in Canada during a period in which we've seen a dramatic increase in the role or the role that social media plays.

- Yeah.

- And so then you go to media and you say, well, the media plays a role. Well, if you take a look at most mainstream media organizations, their influence is diminished significantly.

- Yes. Now there is some good news. We're not quite the same as the US here. If you had somebody that stood up and started to bash the media as a candidate, 58% of us, majority would not vote for that person. Similarly if they bash government, because we have this, is it good order?

- Yeah.

- I'm forgetting the line, that we believe in institutions. 71% of us would not vote for that candidate. So those are important statistics

- Okay.

- In the sense that we are different.

- Right.

- Now it's a little bit different in Quebec. There are some differences there. But you talked about specifically the issues related to social media. There are 79% of us who believe that the existence of this notion of false or misleading information is a serious problem for democracy. And 56% of us believe it's having an impact on our confidence in our elected officials and on the impact of our government institutions. And the other part of this which I think is perhaps something we're learning more about is that 71% of us believe social media has increased the risk of foreign interference in our elections. And similarly 71% of us feel that it is, there's risk of manipulation by our elected officials using social media. So there's a bit of literacy there but

- Okay.

- Serious concerns.

- So there's an interesting component in this especially if we're taking a look at democratic societies, and one of those is, well, what are the responsibilities of you as a citizen in a democracy? We forget that we have a set of responsibilities as an individual, and one of them is that we go through the process of discerning whether or not this is legitimate information or not. Does the rise of social media and this panoply of different lesson and perspectives now force us to take responsibility to discern is this legitimate or is it not?

- Well, certainly I think it does. We've asked Canadians what do you think we should do about this, and I think we're not sure, 44% think that government should regulate, 20 think that companies should self-regulate, and 14 says don't do anything. But the question you're asking, should I discern as a citizen? Well, I'm gonna be really open and honest about this. I don't know if I have the skills to do so. Where would I have gained those media literacy skills?

- Right.

- Where would I have learned? Like how many times, and I think I'm a pretty intelligent person.

- Right.

- How many times have I been frauded online? Whether it's an online, somebody offering me services that I think are legitimate, and I go and do some background research, I think they're legitimate and they don't turn out to be.

- Yeah.

- And I think of myself as having a, I used to teach media literacy. I ran a media development company or an organization. And I can't tell the difference. So I think while we, yes, we do have responsibilities as

citizens, this is a fast-evolving situation. And we are being, I might argue, manipulated in so many different ways.

- Well, I'll agree with you. And I think part of the problem is that, and it's not new, I remember thinking about this when I was doing Daily News, you'd go, okay, well, I can't discern whether or not you're telling me the truth or not. I don't have the time to do all the research, so my default mechanism is just outright skepticism. Well, how does that get me closer to understanding where some kind of legitimate form of the truth exists? We're bombarded, we're overwhelmed, and so how do we get there? When I post the question earlier, I'm kind of going how do we get there?

- Well, it's interesting because we're asking the question what works when and why

- Yeah.

- In increasing democratic engagement? We wanna see that number. We want the number of democratic champions took a lot, but obviously we don't want democratic champions that don't really understand the value of democracy, and I wanna dig into some of that. While we do think that democracy is the preferred form of government, this is the scary part, one in three of us, even in Vancouver and across this country, don't believe that foreign-born Canadians should have the same say in their government as people who are born here. So this notion of democracy which determines we are equal, some people are now

- You, you.

- More equal than others. So that is a basic break with democratic values.

- Yes, it is.

- One in four of us think that there are too many protections for minorities. One in four of us, and it will go to 40% in other parts of the country, thinks that there's too many protections for religious freedoms. And you see that right now playing out in Quebec with the Secular Law.

- Yes.

- That we're starting to see what may have always been there but is being daylighted now what I think are cracks in the foundations of democracy. We're seeing the beginnings of a race-based populism emerging. And that has me, and I know my colleagues at the Centre for Dialogue seriously concerned.

- Is there a second break? We'll be back in a moment.

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- And we don't have the answer to that, but there are some interesting things in this study that give us indications--

- Well, I actually wanna follow up on that a little bit because if you go back to Plato's new Republic, there he is in discussions with Socrates, and they're talking about forms of government and what will bring

them down, and the worst forms of government they laid out were an oligarchy followed by democracy followed by tyranny. And the oligarchy fails when there's too much emphasis on just the riches of the elite, and the democracy fails when there are too broad and liberal distribution of rights across society that you then create the perfect environment for tyranny to enter, and left unchecked or unnoticed, that's when you create an opportunity for a tyrant or a potential tyrant to materialize.

- Question you're asking is has a pendulum where we are providing rights created an environment where we're sowing the seeds for tyranny? And if that is where we are going, I am deeply, deeply concerned. And I will do everything in my life to ensure that that doesn't happen.

- So what do we do to ensure that that doesn't happen? Because I agree you, it's fundamentally important. I can't imagine a system of governance that's better than democracy.

- Well, and Winston Churchill said it may not be a perfect system but it's better than all the others.

- Exactly, yes.

- I want to present the notion of democracy is not voting, it's part of that. Democracy is not just representative democracy and what we do in those. It's not just the judicial, et cetera. Democracy is constantly an act.

- Participatory, yes.

- It's an act of constantly creating and recreating a sense of justice. So I have an idealized notion of democracy that I work towards and I think that that's important to say. It's not what's actually going on right now in Canada. And so I think that there are many circles where we have to try and bring democratic principles and values into those circles where they don't exist. And it's a constant, constant standing up for what is right. And some of the principles I would look at is I would look at human rights as part of that. I would look at civic responsibilities, civic education. Now one of the things we try to do in the study is to understand where are we seeing signs of increased democratic engagement, and this was interesting. You know because you've been working for some years that we have an issue around social isolation in the Metro Vancouver area.

- Yes.

- Interestingly enough there is a relationship between a sense of belonging to ones in community and a sense of democratic engagement. If you belong, if you have a sense of belonging to your neighborhood, then you are two to six times more likely to engage democratically. Your trust levels go up. Your sense of agency and influence in public decision making goes up. So belonging, dealing with connectivity, dealing with social isolation seems to be one of those gates that we can go through to see if we can increase democratic engagement.

- Does that then come back to your earlier point about the fact that so many Canadians believe that it doesn't matter that they vote and that once someone is elected, they're not gonna listen to me anyways. So is it that sense of belonging or is it also partly the system under which we are governed?

- There's no doubt about it that electoral reform, voting, increasing the numbers that vote are really critical issues. I don't wanna take that away.

- Yes.

- But what we're interested in doing is saying, okay, what are all those other behaviors? We're thinking about this in four ways. There's citizens and their government, so that gets at the institutions. There's civic discourse and how we deal with what's going on right now and the ways in which we are being manipulated. Civics education is another big piece of this, and connecting to community, so that belonging piece. So it's one of the entry ways but we think all of those four are critical at this time. You've gotta be working at all levels if you really want to save and preserve our democracy.

- Okay, so if somebody is watching this and they go, okay, that's great Shauna, but how? How do we make that happen? We have engaged individuals like you, but the average person, what can we empower them to do that will make a difference?

- Let's start with our own neighborhood. Do you know your neighbors? Do you have a conversation with them? Do they feel comfortable coming over and borrowing a tool if they need it? Have you had a conversation in your building if you live in a building about what happens in case of a disaster, a natural disaster? Who's got water? Who's got food? Because chances are very, very good in the case of a natural disaster, it's gonna be a neighbor, not a first responder, that's gonna get to us and to support us.

- Right.

- So we know from our own research that the stronger those social bonds, the more resilient that community is and the more democratic it is. That is the kind of basic. Anyone can do it.

- Yes.

- Did you invite anyone over for dinner?

- Yes.

- Have you had a community gathering in any way? So start small. The reality is it doesn't take much. It doesn't take much at all to start involving, and then the moment people start to feel involved, then they're bolstered in feeling comfortable talking about the issues that they care about. And who knows maybe one day they'll run for office?

- Third and final break. We'll be right back.

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- Well, maybe, and wouldn't that be fantastic? That I mean I have great enthusiasm for anybody who chooses to put their name forward to run for office because what you in essence are saying is I want us to live in a better community. I don't wanna tear down what we have. I wanna contribute. And so coming back around to, I know that I touched on the idea, do I have a responsibility as a media consumer to be discerning? But really what you're saying is as individuals I have a responsibility to my community and by extension to society as a whole, and that when we embrace that obligation, we then bolster democracy.

- We do. Now I think that we also have a responsibility to educate. Where is civics education in our upbringing? We don't have it in a big way. I think it's like an hour out of one program. I think civics education has to be brought in very, very early into our K to 12 curriculum. I think it needs to be--

- If not earlier.

- If not earlier exactly. In early childhood education, great point. I think that learning how to be a citizen, what it means, the responsibility of citizenship. I think too much, I think it was Yann Martel that said it can be sometimes like a hotel that you come in Canada, you come in, you check in, and you leave. How are we really, really ensuring that people who are here, who have chosen Canada, who live here, who have become citizens have a deep commitment? Now it's interesting when you look at immigrants, they tend to have a stronger sense of that commitment than average Canadians.

- Well, because they come to this fantastic environment and go I want more of this. And your study demonstrates that we have to be vigilant and that we all need to get involved. Thank you for sharing this with us.

- Thanks so much Stu.

- Yeah.