
Perceptions and Performance: How Do MPs Shape Up?

Elisabeth Gidengil and Heather Bastedo

Drawing from several chapters contained in Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perceptions and Performance, in this article Elisabeth Gidengil and Heather Bastedo examine citizens' evaluations of their elected representatives and assess several key aspects of MPs' performance in light of these evaluations. Noting some possible reasons for a disjuncture between citizens' perceptions of MPs and how MPs perform their representational roles, the authors suggest some possible avenues for improving MPs' public image.

Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada lags behind a number of other established democracies. In fact, only a bare majority of Canadians (55 per cent) are satisfied with the country's democratic performance, placing Canada in 11th place among 20 countries in which the same question was posed.¹ Moreover, dissatisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada has grown in recent years. Canadians appear to be particularly displeased with the performance of their MPs.² But is their dissatisfaction warranted?

Borrowing from several chapters contained in *Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perceptions and Performance*, we examine citizens' evaluations of their elected representatives and assess several key aspects of MPs' performance in light of these evaluations. We also explore some possible reasons for a disjuncture between citizens' perceptions of MPs and how MPs perform their representational roles. We end by suggesting some possible avenues for improving MPs' public image.

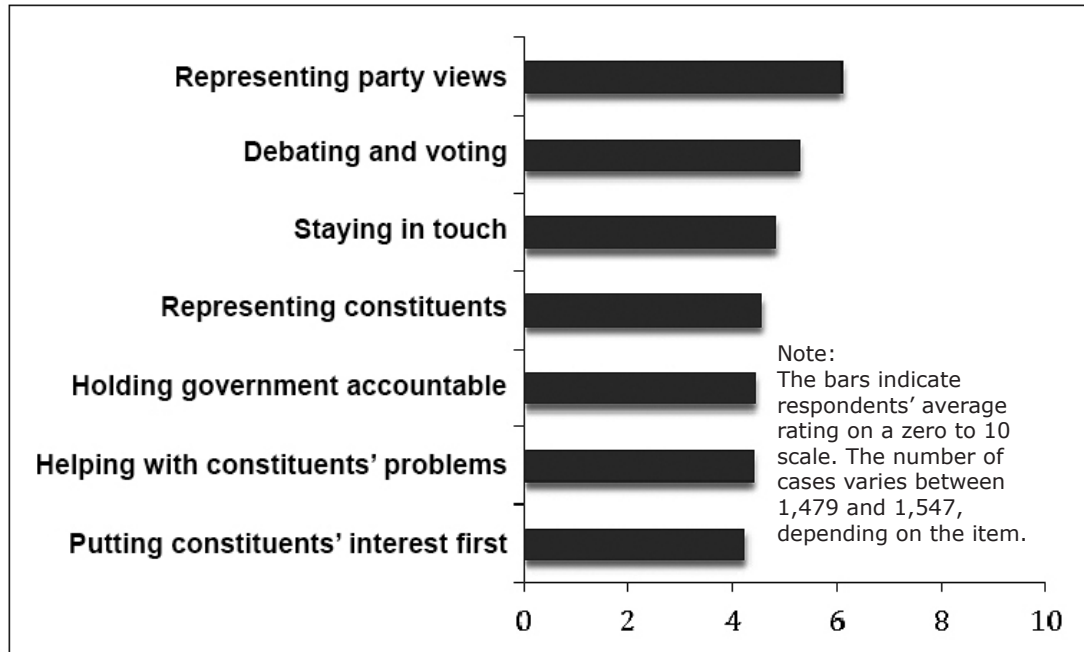
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Public Perceptions

Figure 1 presents Canadians' evaluations of MPs on a variety of dimensions.³ We can see that MPs receive particularly poor ratings (4.2) when it comes to putting constituents' interests ahead of their own. They fare only a little better for dealing with the problems of individual constituents (4.4), representing the views of their constituents (4.5) and staying in touch with constituents and local groups (4.8). These are harsh judgments. Many Canadians seem to view MPs as self-serving and as failing in their role as representatives of their constituencies. Equally concerning is the failing grade for holding the government to account (4.4). Evaluations are somewhat more positive when it comes to MPs' performance with respect to debating and voting on issues in the House of Commons (5.3) and representing their party's views (6.1), but as Rudermen points out, these tasks are relatively removed from the day-to-day lives of constituents.⁴

Another widespread perception is that those elected to Parliament fail to keep most of their promises. This was evident when the survey respondents were asked to rate Canada's performance on various attributes. Promise-keeping received one of the lowest scores (5.0) on a zero to 10 scale; only the items asking about the honesty of government officials (4.8) and corruption in politics (4.5) received lower scores.⁵ Parliament itself received a bare pass (5.6) when it came to being representative of Canadian society. Moreover, a majority of respondents (56 per cent) were dissatisfied with the way MPs in Canada are doing their job.

Figure 1: MPs' Report Card



Source: Samara Citizens' Survey.

Comparing Perceptions and Performance

How justified are these negative perceptions? The lacklustre grades for whether parliament is representative are warranted – at least from the perspective of descriptive representation. Descriptive representation is achieved when elected representatives resemble those whom they represent.⁶ The Canadian parliament falls far short of mirroring the electorate. The proportion of women, Aboriginals, immigrants, visible minorities, and young people in Parliament has historically lagged far behind their presence in the population. However, the 41st Parliament did come closer to reflecting the diversity of Canadian society. Moreover, the numerical underrepresentation of women, Aboriginals, visible minorities and immigrants was to some extent offset by prime ministerial appointments. Nonetheless, these groups remained underrepresented in most parliamentary positions.

Descriptively accurate representation, of course, is no guarantee that Parliament will be responsive. Conversely, Parliament may be responsive even if it fails to mirror the electorate. From the perspective of substantive representation, elected representatives are responsive to the extent that they *act for*, and in

the interest of, those who elected them.⁷ Substantive representation is much harder to quantify than descriptive representation but we can gain some insights from a comparison of Canadians' policy priorities, as expressed in opinion polls, and those of parliament as expressed in debates.

To do so, Blidook combined survey data with a content analysis of Question Period, Standing Order 31 Member Statements, and legislative debates in order to evaluate the extent to which MPs' statements reflect the public's priorities and respond to changes in those priorities.⁸ The results suggest that public perceptions that MPs are out of touch and unresponsive to public concerns are unduly harsh.⁹ Certainly, there were some notable divergences between public and parliamentary priorities. Some of these divergences were understandable. Health care is a public priority but it falls primarily within provincial jurisdiction. Conversely, trade is not on Canadians' minds but given its importance to Canada's well-being, it is of concern to parliament. It is more difficult to justify the divergence on crime. However, there were also issues, such as labour and employment and the economy, taxes and fiscal matters where public and parliamentary priorities were fairly closely aligned.

The notion of “acting for” constituents is ambiguous: should MPs feel bound by the wishes and opinions of their constituents or should they act as trustees who do what they believe to be in their constituents’ best interests? There is no easy answer to this age-old question. Eagles and his colleagues employ Samara’s exit interviews with 79 former MPs, conducted in partnership with the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians, to shed some light on how MPs themselves view their representational role.¹⁰

The former MPs clearly differed in the extent to which they had weighed constituency opinion in the legislative process. Some felt an obligation to act on constituency opinion; others saw themselves more as trustees; and several others had tried to balance constituents’ wishes with partisan considerations. Former Reform MPs were the most likely to opt for a delegate role. How much weight these former MPs gave to constituents’ opinions varied, depending on constituency characteristics such as the margin of victory and the homogeneity of the electorate, as well as the degree of party discipline to which they were subject.

It is worth noting that party discipline does, however, aid in fulfilling election promises. Canadians gave MPs a bare passing grade when it came to keeping promises. However, these negative perceptions appear to be somewhat at odds with the objective record. Pétry has compared specific pledges in the Conservatives’ 2011 platform with the party’s record in government during its first year in office.¹¹ His analysis reveals that many Conservative campaign pledges had actually been fulfilled: early in its mandate, the Conservative government had kept or partially kept almost 65 per cent of its platform commitments.¹²

The greatest divergence between perceptions and MPs’ performance is apparent for constituency service. The interviews confirmed that many MPs devote a good deal of their time and energy to helping their constituents to resolve problems.¹³ It is also clear that many of them find this to be the most fulfilling part of their job. However, some MPs resented having to spend their weekends on constituency matters and

a few were skeptical of the notion that MPs enjoy this work and spend a lot of time on it, which is important to note. The extent and nature of constituency service varied considerably depending on whether the MP had represented a rural constituency or an urban one. A Winnipeg MP also observed that constituency service was particularly important for “... MPs coming from seats where they had squeaked through and there was a narrow margin of victory or who were relatively new and felt the need to be in the riding more and trying to cater to that and to allow them to build up their credentials in their riding.”¹⁴

What is Driving Negative Evaluations of MPs’ Job Performance?

MPs’ commitment to constituency service is strikingly at odds with the perceptions of many Canadians who gave MPs failing grades on dealing with the problems of individual constituents and staying in touch with constituents and local groups. Canadians evaluate MPs most poorly in precisely those areas to which MPs claim to devote so much of

their time. Similarly, the widespread judgment that those elected to parliament fail to keep their promises and do not pay attention to what Canadians think appears to be too harsh. The question is: Why are so many Canadians getting it wrong?

Is it a Lack of Political Awareness?

It is possible that Canadians’ negative evaluations of MPs’ job performance reflect a lack of political awareness. Some Canadians may be evaluating MPs poorly because they lack basic knowledge about MPs and what they do. Blidook, for example, suggests that many Canadians may think that MPs are unresponsive to their concerns because they are simply unaware of how much responsiveness actually occurs in Parliament. There is no shortage of information about what transpires in Parliament but there does not appear to be much appetite for watching streaming online video of the proceedings or visiting citizen-initiated websites that provide information on what MPs are doing. As Blidook observes, “Parliament is not particularly interesting or engaging for most citizens.”¹⁵

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People are apt to compensate for their lack of information by relying on stereotypes.¹⁶ If negative evaluations of MPs' job performance simply reflect ill-informed stereotypes of politicians as uncaring and only out for themselves, we would expect to find a strong relationship between low levels of political knowledge and poor performance evaluations. Ruderman and Pétry have both explored this possibility and find little support for the argument. Contrary to expectations, Canadians who remember the name of their MP are significantly less likely to believe that politicians keep their promises and they evaluate MPs' overall job performance more negatively. Moreover, overall evaluations are unrelated to general political knowledge. It seems that low levels of knowledge are not the reason for public dissatisfaction with MPs' performance. We have to look elsewhere.

Is "Attack Journalism" to Blame?

A plausible candidate is the way that the media report on Parliament. Media coverage of parliamentary proceedings focuses overwhelmingly on Question Period, where the most partisan exchanges take place. As a former NDP MP complained, "...it's Question Period exchanges that are combative that get in the news. It's not serious debate or information going out to the people of Canada on complex issues. Most media trivializes important matters of public policy; they not only trivialize, but they polarize and emphasize the negative."¹⁷ The venues in which much of the 'real work' of Parliament goes on are much less likely to attract media attention. Moreover, instances of politicians keeping their promises are unlikely to qualify as very newsworthy. Certainly, they are less likely to garner the attention of the media than broken promises. As Pétry notes, "Media reporting of promises kept is likely a relatively rare occurrence."¹⁸

Scholars are divided over the impact of news media on public disaffection with politics. Some speak of a "spiral of cynicism."¹⁹ These scholars argue that media coverage is unduly focused on the partisan game and that this fuels political cynicism on the part of the public. Other scholars posit a "virtuous circle."²⁰

According to this view, news media consumption enhances interest in politics and political engagement.

When it comes to Canadians' evaluations of MPs' job performance, the evidence points in favour of the "virtuous circle" hypothesis. People who are exposed to more news on television and in the newspapers tend to give MPs higher grades for keeping their promises. Ruderman, meanwhile, finds no evidence that those who consume more news evaluate MPs more negatively. On the contrary, consumption of Internet news is a particularly strong predictor of positive evaluations of MPs' overall job performance.

Of course, it is possible that the politically disaffected are less likely to consume news about politics because they have been turned off by coverage that is sensationalistic, unduly negative and overly focused on the horse race aspect of politics. However, analyses conducted by Bastedo and her colleagues produce a more nuanced evaluation of the quality of political coverage.²¹ Much of what we know about

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the nature of media coverage comes from studies conducted during election campaigns, but they chose instead to analyze coverage of three bills that dominated the federal government's legislative agenda in fall 2011.²² The majority of the coverage, especially in the press, actually focused on process or policy. They also report that the negativity bias is not as pervasive as critics

often contend, especially on television. Their findings suggest "a critical and responsive press, rather than a hostile one."²³ On the other hand, coverage of the three bills did not prove to be particularly informative.

Frustrating Experiences with Government?

Studies conducted for *Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perspective and Performance* suggest that Canadians' evaluations of MPs are strongly influenced by their everyday experiences with government. As Joe Soss has observed, "Legislatures may host more dramatic political activities, but the police station, the motor vehicles office, and the Internal Revenue Service are more likely to supply citizens with lessons about government that ring with the truth of first-hand experience."²⁴ When people have frustrating experiences with service providers

or experience difficulty navigating the bureaucracy, they are apt to conclude that the political system is unresponsive. It appears that people generalize these personal experiences to government and politics at large. Many of the focus group participants recounted their experiences with a seemingly unresponsive bureaucracy and it was clear that these negative experiences contributed to their disaffection with politics and politicians.²⁵ Moreover, Samara survey respondents who had had unsatisfactory experiences with government offices were significantly more likely to give MPs poor ratings overall, and they were also more likely to rate MPs poorly for promise-keeping.

Countering Negative Perceptions of MPs

There is cause for concern when so many Canadians appear to be dissatisfied with MPs' performance, even though some of these judgments appear to be more negative than the data presented here would seem to warrant. A degree of skepticism about elected representatives is probably healthy but dissatisfaction can undermine support for the system if it becomes too widespread. In the nature of things, MPs are unlikely to receive top marks from the electorate but we can suggest some steps that might help make for a better report card in the future.

The 41st Parliament shows that affirmative action can be effective in producing a parliament that is more representative of Canadian society. The increase in the number of women elected as MPs was largely a result of the NDP's commitment to having more women on the ballot; prime ministerial appointments also helped to ensure more proportionate representation of historically under-represented groups among the ranks of cabinet ministers and parliamentary secretaries.

A greater challenge will be resisting increasing encroachment by political parties upon venues where MPs have traditionally been less constrained by party discipline. One of the key findings to emerge from Blidook's study is that the degree of congruence between public priorities and parliamentary priorities tends to be greatest in venues such as Private Members' Business, Members' Statements and Routine Proceedings. From the perspective of responsiveness to public priorities, the April 2013 ruling by the Speaker that reaffirmed the Speaker's authority to decide who is recognized to speak in the House is a positive step. However, the onus is on MPs to stand and be recognized and it remains to be seen how many will risk sanctions to speak without the approval of their party's whip.

Using "10 per centers" and householders for their proper purpose—informing constituents and soliciting their opinions—and not for blatantly partisan purposes could help to counter the perception that MPs do a poor job of staying in touch. More generally, MPs would do well to find ways of improving communication with their constituents and enhancing awareness of their constituency service.

Finally, MPs need to understand how the design of programs and the delivery of services can influence Canadians' perceptions of politics and politicians. As the tasks confronting lawmakers become ever more complex, it is likely that many Canadians will continue to judge their elected representatives not so much on the basis of what they do but on how citizens are treated in their day-to-day encounters with government.

Endnotes

- 1 Lawrence LeDuc, and Jon H. Pammett. "Attitudes toward Democratic Norms and Practices: Canada in Comparative Perspective" in Elisabeth Gidengil and Heather Bastedo (eds.), *Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perceptions and Performance*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014.
- 2 Nick Ruderman, "Canadians' Evaluations of MPs: Performance Matters" in Elisabeth Gidengil and Heather Bastedo, eds., *Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perceptions and Performance*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014.
- 3 The data are drawn from Samara's Citizen Survey, an online survey with Canadians across the country that was conducted between March 19th and April 2nd, 2012. Samara is a charitable organization that works to improve political participation in Canada. The survey was conducted by Feedback Research Corporation under the direction of André Turcotte. A total of 1,915 Canadians completed the survey, representing a response rate of 43.1 percent. After data cleaning, the effective sample size was 1,761 respondents.
- 4 Ruderman.
- 5 LeDuc and Pammett.
- 6 Hanna F. Pitkin. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Research involved a computer-assisted content analysis of the words of all speakers in the House of Commons as recorded in Hansard during three four-week periods during the 2012 parliamentary calendar year. Spanning 54 days out of a total of 135 sitting days, these three periods represent 40 per cent of the time that the House was in session

- that year. Approximately 3.7 million words were analyzed using a topic dictionary adapted from the Policy Agenda Project (www.policyagendas.org).
- 9 Kelly Blidook. "Democratic Responsiveness in the House of Commons" in Elisabeth Gidengil and Heather Bastedo (eds.), *Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perceptions and Performance*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014.
 - 10 Munroe Eagles, Royce Koop and Alison Loat. "MPs on the Home Front: How Constituency Characteristics Influence Representational Approaches" in Elisabeth Gidengil and Heather Bastedo (eds.), *Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perceptions and Performance*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014.
 - 11 Analysis is based on a content analysis of laws and regulations, throne speeches and budget speeches, and annual reports from government ministries and agencies.
 - 12 François Pétry. "A Tale of Two Perspectives: Election Promises and Government Actions in Canada" in Elisabeth Gidengil and Heather Bastedo (eds.), *Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perceptions and Performance*, University of British Columbia Press, 2014.
 - 13 Also see: David Docherty, *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa: Life in the House of Commons*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997.
 - 14 Eagles et al., p. 204.
 - 15 Blidook, p. 217.
 - 16 Kuklinski, James, and Paul J. Quirk "Reconsidering the Rational Public: Cognition, Heuristics, and Mass Opinion" in Arthur Lupia, Matthew D. McCubbins, and Samuel L. Popkin (eds.), *Elements of Reason: Cognition, Choice and the Bounds of Rationality*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
 - 17 Blidook, p. 218.
 - 18 Pétry, p. 242.
 - 19 Joseph N. Cappella, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
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 - 21 Heather Bastedo, Quinn Albaugh and Alex Marland. "The Story Behind the Story: Evaluating the Content of Political News" in Elisabeth Gidengil and Heather Bastedo (eds.), *Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perceptions and Performance*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014.
 - 22 This analysis includes the omnibus crime bill and the bills abolishing the Firearms Registry and the Canadian Wheat Board's monopoly over sales of western wheat and barley, and was based on a study of 2,806 newspaper articles published in 42 daily newspapers between September 1, 2011 and November 30, 2011 and transcripts of 174 stories broadcast on seven national television news programs over the same period.
 - 23 Bastedo, Albaugh and Marland, p. 142.
 - 24 Joe Soss. "Lessons of Welfare: Policy Design, Political Learning, and Political Action." *American Political Science Review* 93(2), 1999, p. 376.
 - 25 Heather Bastedo, Wayne Chu and Jane Hilderman. "Outsiders: Agency and the Non-Engaged" in Elisabeth Gidengil and Heather Bastedo (eds.), *Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perceptions and Performance*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014.