

# Digging into Dissatisfaction with Democracy: The Case of Quebec

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**R**ecent evidence suggests that Canadians, especially Francophone Quebecers, may be less than satisfied with the workings of their democracy (Samara 2012). Years of research, however, indicate that more detailed contextual analyses may be required before drawing any major conclusions about how citizens feel about their respective political systems and why they think the way they do (Canache, Mondak, and Seligson 2001; Farnsworth 2003; Linde and Ekman 2003; Norris 2011). Data collected as part of the Comparative Provincial Election Project (CPEP) in Quebec allow us to dig deeper into citizens' outlooks toward the workings of democracy. This preliminary study explores three main questions. Are Quebecers' evaluations of the workings of their democracy consistent across different levels of government? Are Quebecers more concerned about certain aspects of their democracy than others? Finally, what factors best explain any dissatisfaction that Quebecers may have with the workings of their democracy?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Findings reported by Samara in 2012<sup>1</sup> suggest that a thin majority of Canadians (55%), and even fewer Francophones (44%), are satisfied with the way that democracy works in their country.<sup>2</sup> Numerous commentators have suggested that support for political systems has gradually weakened in many established democracies; however, the findings in this case are difficult to interpret. First, Norris (2012, 46-7) has observed that "fluctuations [in political support] over time usually prove far more common than do straightforward linear or uniform downward trends." Second, making sense of people's "satisfaction with democracy" requires accounting for different interpretations and focal points (Canache, Mondak, and Seligson 2001). Third, the amount of dissatisfaction may vary across different levels of government (Farnsworth 2003; Cole, Kincaid and Rodriguez 2004). Farnsworth (2003, 71), for example, notes that "citizens approach the three branches of the U.S. political system in different ways." Canada also has a multi-level system of government, and it is certainly plausible that citizens have differing perspectives on the workings of each of their local, provincial, and federal political systems. "...Likewise, citizens of different ages focus on different things as they evaluate the different parts of government" (Ibid), which illuminates a fourth complicating possibility that public perceptions of different political objects across different levels of government may vary across different groups.

Particularly in Quebec, language differences constitute an important societal cleavage that has direct implications for political decision making and, consequently, political outlooks. Before forcing any major interpretations based solely on cross-sectional or aggregate-level findings, therefore, there is a need for more systematic and detailed studies conducted in a sustained manner. By implementing such an approach, we may begin to derive more reliable and useful insights.

This preliminary investigation centers on the Quebec component of the Canadian population, while broadening the scope of analysis in a variety of ways. First, whereas most previous investigations focused primarily on attitudes toward the federal political system, we explore how satisfied Quebecers are with their democracy at all three levels of government: local, provincial, and federal. We analyze the data by language group (e.g., Francophones vs. Anglophones) to investigate whether French speaking Quebecers are, on average, the group most dissatisfied with all three levels of government—something that previous studies generally take for granted.

Second, this investigation delves deeper into Quebecers' outlooks toward a variety of specific aspects of democracy such as: elections and voting, election spending, party financing, the protection of rights and freedoms, political representation, political decision making, the integrity of political representatives, public spending, political debate and discourse, the delivery of public services, and unconventional political participation. This is not an exhaustive listing of all the different aspects of Canadian democracy that we might consider (or intend to consider in the future), but it covers the core aspects of the Canadian political process featured regularly in public discourse. Our objective in this preliminary exploration is to perform a more controlled comparison of Quebecers' perceptions of specific aspects of democracy so that we can begin to assess any systematic differences that appear across different levels of government and language groups.

Third, this analysis examines the underlying cause of variations in satisfaction with democracy at different levels of government. Similar types of outcomes driven by different determinants would suggest a more complicated story requiring detailed investigation. Our focus here is on the three most commonly discussed explanations within the literature on political support levels (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975; Dalton 2004; Norris 2011). The first explanation centers on underperformance and suggests that people's support for democracy depends on their perceptions and evaluations of

governmental authorities and political institutions (Easton 1965; Norris 2011; Loat and MacMillan 2014). Norris (2012, 24) refers to this phenomenon as “a democratic deficit—reflecting a sizeable and persistent gap between citizens’ aspirations for democracy and their evaluations of the performance of democratic governance.” Other variations on the underperformance argument include the perceived stresses associated with inter-governmental relations (Kornberg, Clarke, and Stewart 1979), mismanagement of the economy and tax dollars (Kornberg and Clarke 1983; Clarke et al. 1996), broad-based corruption (Anderson and Tverdova 2003) and rising levels of cynicism (Blais and Gidengil 1991; Clarke et al. 1996; Hay 2007).

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A second explanation shifts the blame to various socio-cultural transformations that coincide with the shift from industrialism to post-industrialism, such as: post-materialist value change (Inglehart 1997; Inglehart and Welzel 2005), the decline of deference (Nevitte 1996), increases in cognitive mobilization and political knowledge (Dalton 2004; 2006; Cook, Jacobs, and Kim 2010), the growing efficacy gap (Nevitte and Kanji 2002), and declining levels of inter-personal trust (Putnam 2000). These are all well-documented and extensively analyzed developments that may have important implications for levels of political support.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, there are a host of more specific contextual factors that have previously been noted as relevant in explaining various political outcomes in Quebec. These include nationalist versus federalist sentiments as well as other socio-demographic indicators, such as: age, sex, language, income, place of birth, and voting preferences (Blais and Gidengil 1991; Anderson et al. 2007).

#### Data

The data for this investigation came from the Comparative Provincial Election Project (CPEP),<sup>4</sup> a Canada-wide study that utilizes a standardized survey instrument to examine electoral behavior and outlooks regarding democracy on a province-by-province basis. The Quebec component of this project employs an expanded

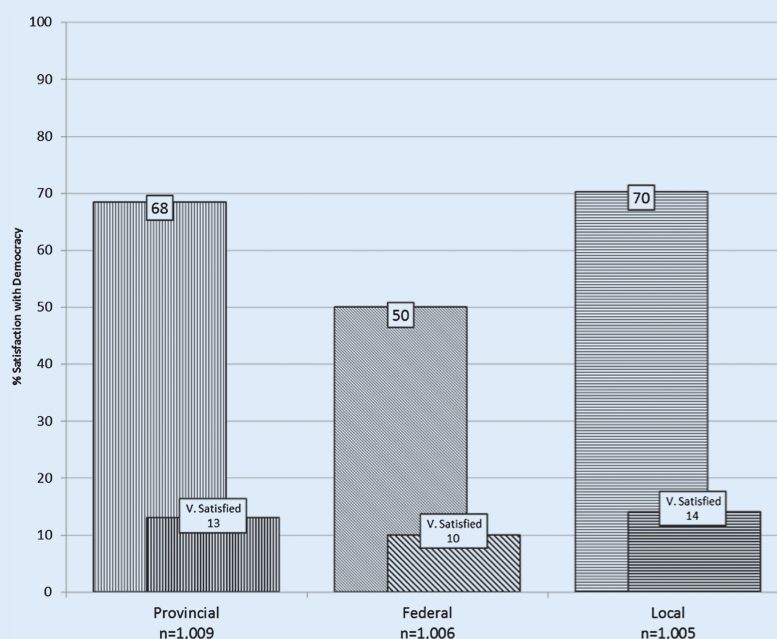
questionnaire that permits in-depth investigations of people’s perceptions of different political objects across a variety of levels of government while also providing for the possibility of controlling for potentially explanatory factors. The CPEP is administered entirely online by Abacus Data in both French and English after provincial elections. This investigation uses information from the 2012 Quebec post-election survey, which launched immediately after the September 4 provincial election and remained in the field for just over a month. The large majority of the 1010 respondents sampled (n=728) were drawn from a randomly selected panel of Canadians compiled through phone invitations.

The remaining respondents were randomly selected with the use of Interactive Voice Response technology.

#### FINDINGS

When comparing Quebecers’ general perspectives on the way that democracy works across different levels of government, two main findings emerge. The first (see figure 1) is that views on such matters are hardly consistent. Although only half of Quebecers are satisfied with the way that democracy

**Figure 1**  
**Satisfaction with the Way Democracy Works across Different Levels of Government**



These results report the total proportion of respondents who are either “very satisfied” or “fairly satisfied.” Note: Local-federal and provincial-federal differences are significant at  $p < 0.001$ . Source: CPEP Quebec 2012.

works at the federal level, they are more positive about the way that democracy works locally and provincially. Seven in ten are satisfied with the way that democracy works at the local level and nearly the same proportion—68%—are satisfied with the way that democracy works at the provincial level.

Second, very few Quebecers were “very satisfied” with the way that their democracy works on any level: locally, provincially, or federally. Only 14% of Quebecers say that they are very satisfied with the way that democracy works locally, 13% provincially, and 10% federally. Most positively disposed respondents are only “fairly satisfied.”

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The preceding evidence suggests that outlooks toward the workings of democracy differ not only across levels of government, but also in degree. Moreover, after examining dissatisfaction levels within different language groups, we find additional complexity. Specifically, the evidence in table 1 shows that while less than half of Francophones—48%—indicate that they are satisfied with the workings of democracy at the federal level, 72% are satisfied with how democracy works at the local level and 69% are satisfied at the provincial level. By comparison, approximately three in five Anglophones say that they are satisfied with the way that democracy works, regardless of whether it is at the local (60%), provincial (63%) or federal level (62%). Thus, although Francophones are not as consistently disappointed with the workings of democracy across all levels of government, Anglophones evaluate the workings of democracy more evenly across all levels of government.

We turn next to how Quebecers feel about eleven specific aspects of democracy. These findings, reported in figure 2, also indicate that Quebecers’ views toward their democratic process may be more differentiated than otherwise suggested

by aggregate findings. We find that Quebecers are more satisfied with some aspects of their democracy than others, with notable discrepancies across different levels of government. For example, we find that Quebecers are much more satisfied with the protection of rights and freedoms, elections and voting, and the delivery of public services than they are with other aspects. This holds regardless of the level of government that we consider. On average, however, Quebecers are more satisfied with the workings of different aspects of democracy at the local level—62% of the time—than they are at either the provincial or federal levels—45% and 50% of the time, respectively. Echoing the aggregate findings, no more than one in

five Quebecers—with one exception—are “very satisfied” with how any particular aspect of democracy functions at local, provincial or federal levels of government.

Probing these data in more detail reveals other interesting nuances. For instance, at both the local and federal levels, Quebecers appear almost equally satisfied with the protection of rights and freedoms (local: 78%; federal: 74%), and elections and voting (local: 76%; federal: 75%). At the provincial level, however, there is a much greater discrepancy between how satisfied Quebecers are with elections and voting (74%) and the protection of rights and freedoms (65%). Likewise, significant proportions of Quebecers are satisfied with the delivery of public services, but again, there are significant differences between local (70%), federal (64%), and provincial (59%) levels of satisfaction.

With regard to political representation, 63% of Quebecers are satisfied with their political representation at the local level, whereas they are less so at the federal and provincial levels—57% and 49%, respectively. Similarly, 60% of Quebecers are satisfied with unconventional political participation at the local level, 56% are satisfied at the federal level, and only 51% are satisfied at the provincial level.

At the local level, the evidence suggests that 58% of Quebecers are satisfied with election spending and the integrity of their political representatives. At the federal and provincial levels, satisfaction with these aspects is much lower. When it comes to political decision making, 58% of Quebecers are satisfied with this process at the local level but many fewer feel the same way at the federal (45%) and particularly the provincial (37%) levels. Although 54% of Quebecers indicate that they are satisfied with party financing at the local level, only 28% indicate that they are satisfied with the workings of this process at either the provincial or federal levels. Finally, our evidence indicates that 52% of Quebecers are satisfied with both public spending and with political debate and discourse at the local level. At the federal level, only 43% are satisfied with political debate and discourse and 28% are satisfied with public spending. Provincially, only 35% of Quebecers are satisfied

Table 1

**Satisfaction with the Way Democracy Works across Different Levels of Government and Language Groups**

	Provincial	Federal	Local
Quebec	68%	50%	70%
Francophones	69%	48%	72%
Anglophones	63%	62%	60%
n	1,009	1,006	1,005

Note: These results report the total proportion of respondents who indicate that they are either “very satisfied” or “fairly satisfied.” Differences at the federal level are significant at  $p < 0.01$ , and at the local level are significant at  $p < 0.05$ . For Francophones, local-federal and provincial-federal differences are significant at  $p < 0.001$ .

Source: CPEP Quebec 2012.

with political debate and discourse and 22% are satisfied with public spending.

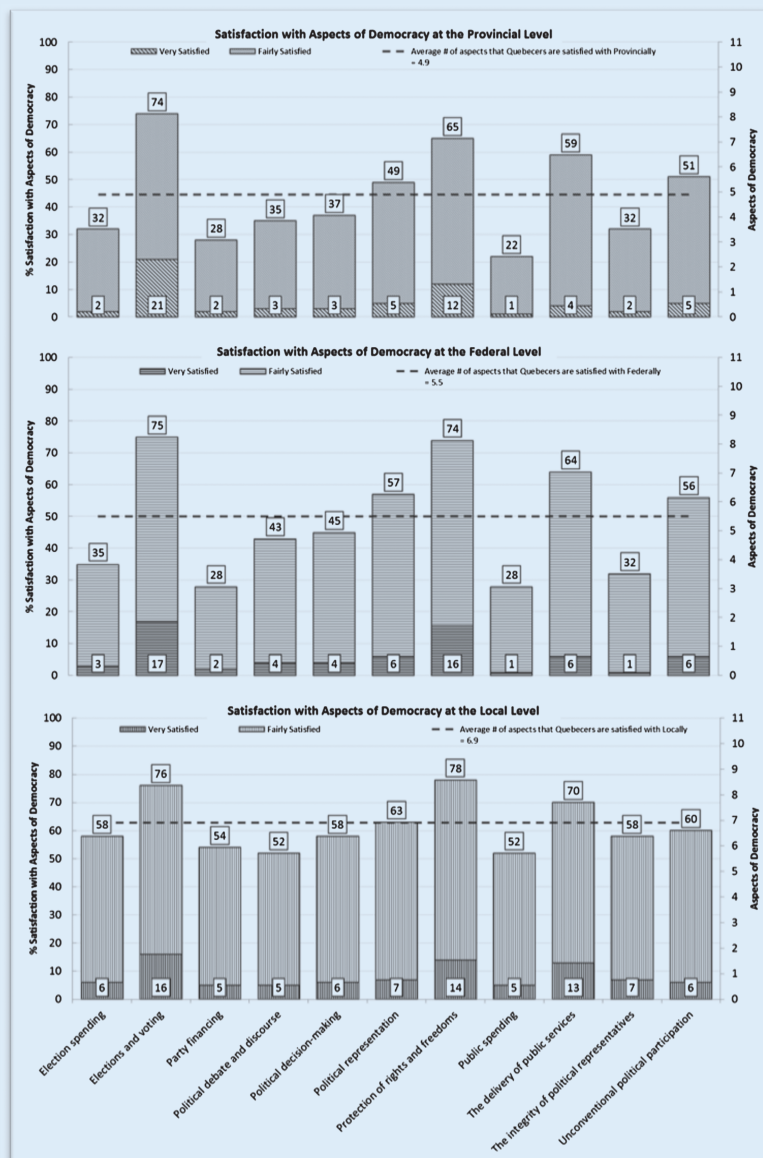
As shown in figure 3, we find differences in satisfaction between language groups. For instance, Francophones tend to

be more satisfied with the protection of rights and freedoms than Anglophones at both the local and especially at the provincial level. Francophones are also more satisfied with the delivery of public services than Anglophones locally and

*As shown in table 2, we find that the narratives differ depending on the level of government, but overall performance measures are amongst the most consistent and robust determinants, more so than either socio-cultural or contextual factors.*

Figure 2

### Satisfaction with the Way Different Aspects of Democracy Work across Different Levels of Government



These results report the total proportion of respondents who indicate that they are either "very satisfied" or "fairly satisfied." Source: CPEP Quebec 2012.

provincially, but only significantly so at the provincial level.

On the other hand, Anglophones are more satisfied than Francophones with the integrity of political representatives at the federal level. Anglophones are also more satisfied than Francophones with election spending and party financing at the federal, local, and especially the provincial level. Similarly, we find that Anglophones are more satisfied with debate and discourse at the provincial level than Francophones and that they are also more satisfied with public spending at the federal level than Francophones.

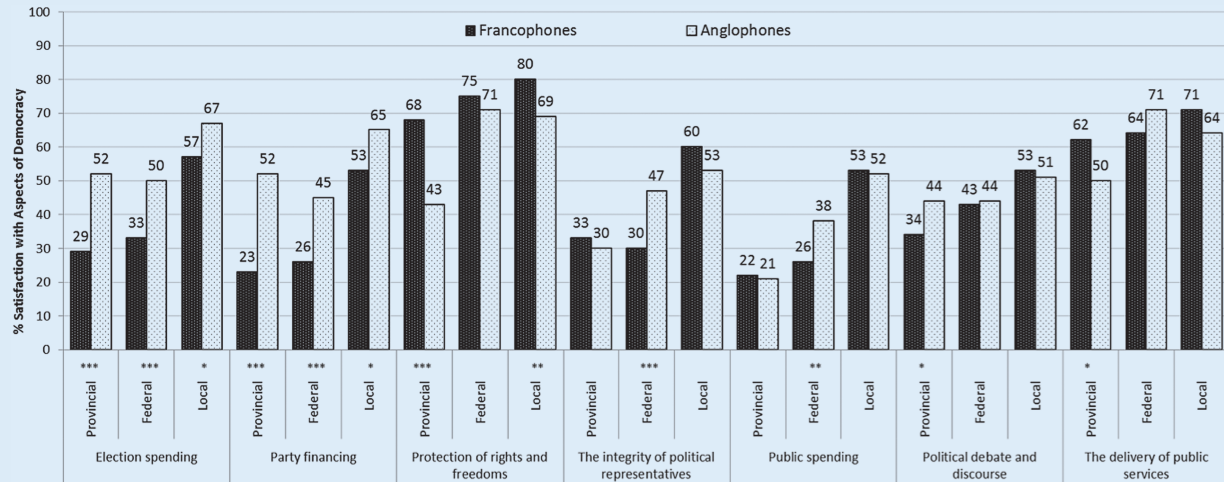
What accounts for these variations in Quebecer's perspectives toward different aspects of democracy across the local, provincial and federal levels of government? As shown in table 2, we find that the narratives differ depending on the level of government, but overall performance measures are amongst the most consistent and robust determinants, more so than either socio-cultural or contextual factors.

For instance, Quebecers' evaluations of the performance of their various political authorities and governmental institutions, their viewpoints on inter-governmental relations, and their cynical outlooks consistently shape their assessments of different aspects of democracy across different levels of government. However, the magnitude of these effects varies considerably. Specific support



Figure 3

Satisfaction with the Way Different Aspects of Democracy Work across Different Levels of Government and Language Groups



Note: These results report the total proportion of respondents who indicate that they are either “very satisfied” or “fairly satisfied.”  
 Note: \*significant at  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*significant at  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\*significant at  $p < 0.001$ .  
 Source: CPEP Quebec 2012.

for authorities and institutions has much more powerful implications locally than it does federally, and more powerful implications federally than provincially. Likewise, perceptions of the functioning of inter-governmental relations have stronger effects provincially and federally than they do locally. Cynicism has more powerful negative effects at the federal level than it does provincially or locally. Notice too, that when Quebecers feel that people in government waste tax dollars, it detracts from satisfaction with different aspects of democracy at the provincial and especially the local level, but not at the federal level. Furthermore, we find that improvements in retrospective economic outlooks have only modest effects provincially, and no significant effects locally or federally.

Table 2 also suggests that different socio-cultural factors have varying effects. For instance, the growing internal-external efficacy gap (Nevitte and Kanji 2002) detracts from satisfaction at the federal level. Increasing levels of cognitive mobilization (Dalton 2006) have a similar effect at the local level. Provincially, we find that post-materialists are less likely to be satisfied than materialists and that deferential Quebecers are more likely to be satisfied than their less deferential counterparts.

Finally, contextual factors play a greater role federally than they do either provincially or locally. For instance, Quebecers who voted for the governing party are more likely to be satisfied federally, but not provincially or locally. Nationalists and federalists are less likely to be satisfied with federal processes than independentists (i.e., separatists and sovereigntists), and English language speakers are more likely to be satisfied than Francophones when it comes to the workings of different aspects of democracy at the federal level. At the provincial level, we find that federalists are more

satisfied with different aspects of democracy than independentists. This evidence further suggests that making broad-gauged generalizations about Quebecers’ satisfaction levels with democracy can be risky business, and that what is required are systematic and sustained investigations conducted at a more detailed level.

CONCLUSIONS

Interpreting peoples’ assessments of their political systems is no easy task. This is especially true in societies such as Canada that have multiple levels of government and varied political interests that coexist across different divides. In contexts such as these, analyses need to dig much deeper. One of the only consistent findings that emerges from our investigation is that very few Quebecers indicate that they are “very satisfied” with the workings of their democracy, regardless of the level of government or the specific aspect of democracy that we probe. Most positively disposed respondents are only fairly satisfied. Our evidence also indicates that Francophone Quebecers’ dissatisfaction with the overall workings of democracy is not generalizable across different levels of government; they are more satisfied with the overall workings of their local and provincial democratic processes than they are with the workings of their federal democracy. In addition, our evidence suggests that Quebecers are more satisfied with certain aspects of democracy than they are with others and they see some aspects of democracy working better at certain levels of government than they do at others.

Furthermore, our findings indicate that different social groups evaluate various aspects of democracy differently across different levels of government. Francophones are not always the least satisfied with how different aspects of democracy

Table 2

## The Determinants of Satisfaction with Various Aspects of Democracy across Different Levels of Government

Determinants Performance	Provincial B (SE)	Federal B (SE)	Local B (SE)
<i>Specific support (high for authorities/institutions)</i>	<b>.213 (.062)***</b>	<b>.403 (.065)***</b>	<b>.784 (.060)***</b>
<i>Intergovernmental relations (working well)</i>	<b>.363 (.052)***</b>	<b>.339 (.055)***</b>	<b>.216 (.055)***</b>
<i>Management of tax dollars (a lot of waste)</i>	<b>-.100 (.030)**</b>	.003 (.031)	<b>-.212 (.028)***</b>
<i>Retrospective economic outlooks (improved)</i>	<b>.062 (.026)*</b>	.031 (.029)	.012 (.030)
<i>Integrity of politicians (honest and ethical)</i>	-.046 (.048)	-.039 (.052)	.053 (.051)
<i>Cynicism (high)</i>	<b>-.355 (.049)***</b>	<b>-.418 (.051)***</b>	<b>-.223 (.047)***</b>
<b>Socio-cultural</b>			
<i>Political knowledge (high)</i>	.034 (.046)	.005 (.049)	.014 (.047)
<i>Efficacy gap (high)</i>	-.045 (.058)	<b>-.158 (.061)**</b>	-.034 (.059)
<i>Cognitive mobilization (high)</i>	-.067 (.056)	-.035 (.054)	<b>-.137 (.048)**</b>
<i>Post-materialist (vs. materialist)</i>	<b>-.053 (.027)*</b>	-.025 (.028)	.017 (.027)
<i>Deferential (vs. not deferential)</i>	<b>.071 (.025)**</b>	.020 (.026)	.006 (.026)
<i>Trust (vs. don't trust others)</i>	.023 (.016)	.004 (.017)	.017 (.017)
<i>Media exposure (high)</i>	-.022 (.059)	.034 (.062)	.024 (.061)
<b>Contextual</b>			
<i>Winners - federal/provincial elections</i>	.030 (.032)	<b>.094 (.035)**</b>	.023 (.034)
<i>Female (vs. male)</i>	-.006 (.016)	.008 (.017)	-.016 (.017)
<i>Young (vs. old)</i>	.037 (.023)	-.036 (.025)	.036 (.024)
<i>Nationalist (vs. separatist/sovereigntist)</i>	.032 (.022)	<b>-.053 (.024)*</b>	-.018 (.023)
<i>Federalist (vs. separatist/sovereigntist)</i>	<b>.092 (.022)***</b>	<b>-.063 (.023)**</b>	.022 (.022)
<i>English (vs. French)</i>	.053 (.029)	<b>.109 (.030)***</b>	.044 (.030)
<i>Allophone (vs. French)</i>	.066 (.045)	.069 (.049)	.077 (.048)
<i>Immigrant (vs. Canadian born)</i>	.006 (.035)	-.021 (.037)	-.002 (.036)
<i>Rich (vs. poor)</i>	-.001 (.026)	-.022 (.027)	-.011 (.027)
Constant	<b>.368 (.084)***</b>	<b>.469 (.086)***</b>	<b>.301 (.080)***</b>
R <sup>2</sup>	.428	.412	.612
N	716	722	712

OLS Regression \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001.

Source: CPEP Quebec 2012.

function; there are occasions where Anglophones are in fact more dissatisfied than Francophones. Also, different determinants account for variations in satisfaction with different aspects of democracy at different levels of government. This suggests that dissatisfaction with different aspects of democracy may be rooted in different causes, which makes it all the more necessary to investigate these viewpoints more closely and systematically in order to make better sense of such idiosyncratic patterns. ■

### NOTES

1. See Samara Report #4, 2012.
2. See Samara's 2012 Citizens' Survey.
3. For a summary of why these factors might be relevant, please see Kanji et al. (2015).
4. See: <http://cpep.ualberta.ca/>

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