

RESEARCH

RELI

Online tool touted as aid to democracy

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Distrust of democratic institutions. Low voter turnout. Debate stifled by monolithic media and multimillion-dollar ad campaigns.

The researchers were describing some of the challenges faced by Latin America's fledgling democracies, but the comparisons to Canada less than a week before a federal election were just as relevant.

"What we've found from the Latin American context is equally true in the North American context," Stephen Randall, dean of the University of Calgary's faculty of social sciences, said Tuesday.

Randall and a team of researchers were at the university Tuesday to launch an online tool charting the relationship between media, advertising and voting decisions in the Americas.

The result is access to information that can be used by governments and political activists seeking to improve their system of democracy, said Shelley McConnell of the Atlanta-based Carter Center.

"We need to constantly monitor the situation no matter how consolidated we think our democracies are," she said.

Researchers from the U of C's Latin American Research Centre, the Ottawa-based Canadian Foundation for the Americas and the Carter Center — a non-partisan organization founded by former U.S. president Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn — developed interactive maps to plot demographic, electoral and media data for 12 countries in the Western Hemisphere.

By going to the project's website, www.mediamap.info, and clicking on an electoral map of Canada, for example, a user can simultaneously view how a riding voted, what the turnout was, how many TV stations there are and who owns them.

"It's the first time these data sets have been combined with geography as a common denominator," said Laurie Cole, a senior analyst at the Canadian Foundation for the Americas.

Small political parties unable to afford network or newspaper advertising could benefit, McConnell said, by using the maps to target voters in areas of low turnout who might be more willing to vote for an alternative party.

The possibilities intrigued James Kohut, a Canadian Action Party candidate.

"We might be a little too small to use this now, but I bet this will be a useful tool for us in the future," said Kohut, who is running in Calgary Centre-North.



Darwin, left, Hanna, right, by Airlia Hansen. The dog is in downtown Calgary.