

STRENGTHENING CANADIAN DEMOCRACY

Purpose of the Initiative

Effort is needed to strengthen our democratic culture, in addition to improving the systems of government. The initiative emphasizes the everyday experiences of democratic culture and awareness of why these experiences matter.

The Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue's Strengthening Canadian Democracy initiative's goal is to create a more resilient democratic culture across all communities in Canada. To achieve these goals, we work with researchers, practitioners, public servants, and members of the public across our nation to spark conversations about why democracy matters and what we can do to make it stronger. Our mission is to understand what works, when, and how, in creating a more resilient democratic culture among citizens.

WHY THE INITIATIVE

Trust in Canada's democratic institutions and elected officials is fraying. In a national poll conducted during the summer of 2019, the initiative found that Canadians are committed to democracy, but often feel the system is not working for them. Feeling unheard and unable to create change, Canadians are becoming cynical, disillusioned, and wary of their democratic system. The behaviors of their institutions and elected officials are not helping.

Many groups across the country are working to improve separate aspects of Canada's democracy (institutional reform, voter turnout, political systems, or diversifying representation). We complement their work and improve Canada's democracy through a focus on the everyday experiences of democratic culture and growing awareness of why these experiences matter. By strengthening Canada's democratic culture, the initiative improves the foundations of our democracy.

Visit www.democracydialogue.ca to sign up for our newsletter, learn more about the initiative, find reports and our growing list of resources. To contact the initiative, please email our Project Manager, Dr. Jennifer Wolowic at jwolowic@sfu.ca.

FOUR FOUNDATIONS OF CANADA'S DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

Based on two years of research from interviews with 52 experts in the field, workshops with national stakeholders, and a scan of 10 opinion polls from the last decade, we have identified the four foundations of Canada's democratic culture. By fortifying these foundations, our democratic institutions, actors, and culture will remain strong.

Social connection

Democracy means "the people". If individuals do not feel connected to each other and their communities, democracy cannot survive. The regional variations in Canada require strong local and national relationships.

Citizens and government

Citizens must work, act, and engage with government, at all different institutional levels, in both formal and informal channels.

Civic education

In addition to knowing the nation's democratic systems, effective civic education also emphasizes engagement and real-world practice in decision making systems.

Public discourse and misinformation

For democracy to work well in the 21st century, citizens must learn about and discuss issues, in person and online, in ways that prioritize evidence-based truth and respectful behaviour.

PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Democracy is a complex topic with many elements and moving parts and it can be difficult to measure the impact of a strategy or intervention. To make it easier, we use five principles of democratic engagement to guide our work and evaluations.

In conjunction with our upcoming Evaluations Toolkit, these five principles of democratic engagement can guide intentions and evaluative processes. By working with these tools, and reflecting on outcomes, it is possible to understand and evaluate much of what strengthens or weakens Canadian democracy.

1. Build capacity to participate

Programs, strategies, and interventions should grow the capacity of governments and citizens to engage and participate.

2. Foster commitment to democratic values

We must intentionally share our commitment to democratic values and feelings of ownership over our democratic system.

3. Deepen relationships and social connection

We should consciously work to deepen relationships, increase social connection, and create a sense of connected networks.

4. Be inclusive and accessible

We must create opportunities for all citizens, including equity-seeking, underserved, and marginalized communities.

5. Establish accountability

Our processes seek to earn trust by being responsive and accountable to peoples' needs and expectations.

WHAT WE DO

The initiative works to deepen Canada's commitment to democratic values in several ways:

Piloting and spreading democratic innovations	<p>Collaborating with library systems to grow democratic engagement-focused programming through accessible Democracy Spark Grant pilot and evaluation.</p> <p>Case study on neighborhood-based micro-grants to test causation links between an individual's social connections and democratic opinions.</p> <p>Creating an open-source Democratic Engagement Evaluation Toolkit to help practitioners design and evaluate their work.</p> <p>Supporting the growth of Participedia; an online platform for sharing knowledge and stories about public participation and democratic innovations.</p> <p>Exploring the possibility of fostering the growth of participatory budgeting as a mechanism for secondary school civics education.</p>
Building a movement for democracy	<p>Investing in the infrastructure of democratic renewal as a co-presenting partner of the 2020 DemocracyXChange in Toronto.</p> <p>Increasing funding opportunities by organizing summit meetings for members of the Community Foundations of Canada and the Philanthropic Association of Canada.</p> <p>National opinion poll to identify strengths and weaknesses in Canada's democracy. It also acts as a baseline to measure effectiveness of the initiative five years from now.</p>
Teaching and learning	<p>Sharing knowledge via webinars, speaking events, podcasts, and workshops across Canada and internationally. These include events for the PCO, participatory democracy conferences, OECD, library systems, journalism organizations, and more.</p> <p>Engaging with big data researchers to help apply dialogue best-practices to online environments and creating the tools to understand and combat online misinformation.</p> <p>Investing in students through graduate research opportunities, interdisciplinary opportunities, and an undergraduate Semester in Dialogue course focused on democracy.</p>
Creating democratic champions	<p>Partnership with The Honourable Janet Austin, Lt. Governor of British Columbia to develop and promote "Let's Talk Democracy". Public sessions held across the province will create a public conversation on democracy and actions to support the skills required to engage in our most pressing problems.</p> <p>Building a collaboration with Memetix and the CBC to support the Canada Talks project; a nationwide program in 2020 that will inspire Canadians to meet and talk with those who have different opinions than their own.</p>

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY MORRIS J. WOSK CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE

Since 2000, the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue has focused on democracy. The centre creates real-world impact for society's most pressing challenges by using dialogue and engagement to co-create solutions, exchange knowledge, support community-engaged learning, and build the capacity of others.

Our staff, fellows, and associates are leaders in a diversity of fields. These include dialogue, participatory democracy, climate solutions, diversity and inclusion, public engagement, deliberative democracy, international security, systems change, decolonization, urban design and sustainable community development.

VALUES THAT GUIDE THE CENTRE

Transparency: We earn trust and legitimacy by proactively disclosing our motives and by transparently communicating the outcomes of our work.

Diversity: We believe that success and innovation require the participation of diverse peoples, perspectives and ways of knowing.

Curiosity: We host respectful conversations without pre-determined outcomes, where collaborative inquiry serves as an alternative to adversarial approaches.

Equity: We support participants in achieving equal voice by removing barriers to participation, reducing power imbalances and counteracting systems of harm.

Impartiality: We hold neutral space for others to express their ideas, while recognizing our responsibility to ground these discussions in evidence-based information.