



STRENGTHENING CANADIAN DEMOCRACY

Project Outline

SFU

MORRIS J. WOSK
CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE

February 2019



PROJECT RATIONALE

Public opinion research over the past 10 years has revealed that Canadians have become less convinced of the value of living in a democracy as opposed to other systems of government. A 2017 PEW Centre study, for example, revealed that just 44% of Canadians are fully “committed to representative democracy” as a good way to govern Canada; 42% are less committed; 7% support non-democratic forms of government (i.e. military rule, or strong leader without interference from elected officials or courts). Further, an America’s Barometer survey in the same year found that while two-thirds (65%) of Canadians said democracy was preferable to other forms of government, more than a third (35%) doubted the value of a democratic system of government, saying either having a democracy didn’t really matter (22%) or that an authoritarian government may be preferable in certain circumstances (13%). Notably, the number of “democracy doubters” had jumped 11-points in 5 years (from 24% in 2012 to 35% in 2017). In Greater Vancouver, more particularly, the shifts were more dramatic than the national picture.

What appears to be driving these shifts is an underlying sense of disappointment and frustration with the way government works in Canada. Increasingly, Canadians believe their democratic institutions are drifting away from the core set of values and principles so important to a healthy and functioning civil society. This is reflected in a general dissatisfaction with an electoral system they feel does not adequately represent a diversity of voices, with policies that fail to deliver promised outcomes, with governing processes that promise meaningful consultation, but instead deliver one-way communication, and with a mistrust of politicians who are perceived to be working to serve their own interests rather than those of the citizens they represent. In the end, this loss of faith and trust leaves Canadian democracy vulnerable to the forces of division and discontent, emblematic in recent anti-government populism in the U.S. and Europe and in tendencies to authoritarian rule.

While Canadian democracy is not under imminent threat, these trends suggest that active and immediate support is needed to strengthen Canadians’ commitment to democracy before cracks in our democratic foundations

grow wider and bring unpredictable risks to our social and political fabric. In this context, the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue launched its Strengthening Canadian Democracy initiative in June 2017. Based on initial findings and outcomes from an initial phase of scoping and analysis, the Centre for Dialogue is leading a national project to pilot and test intervention strategies (in the form of engagement activities) that could have a measureable impact on the commitment citizens have to democracy as shown through their participation in democratic processes and activities, the value they attribute to democratic institutions, and their embrace of the underlying principles of democracy.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

In order to meet its overall goal, the Project has five main objectives:

- Engage and leverage expertise and assets of community partners in the Project's implementation.
- Understand and explore the commitment Canadians have to Canadian democracy.
- Develop a set of key and relevant indicators to measure the impact of Project activities using an evaluation framework that will isolate and measure the impact of the interventions on commitment to democracy. It is expected that the evaluation framework will make it possible to separate out the specific impacts of interventions from those of other possible factors.
- With community partners, develop and pilot test a core set of activities designed to build commitment to democracy and increase engagement in democratic activities. This will help build an understanding of what types of approaches work in what contexts, and why they work.
- Determine implications of the Project, and make recommendations for how this work could scale to larger populations, including its application in other geographic areas across Canada.





WORK UNDERTAKEN TO DATE & PROJECTED

To fulfil the five objectives, the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue has to date completed the following activities:

PHASE 1 – RESEARCH & CONSULTATION (JUNE 2017-JANUARY 2018)

- **Consultations with Stakeholders:** A series of in-depth interviews with more than 60 individuals in organizations whose work is related to supporting and reinforcing Canada's democratic institutions and processes. A Report of Findings was completed.
- **Draft Concept Paper for Revitalizing our Democracy:** A concept paper that defined a broad vision for a collaborative initiative among key individuals and organizations working on democracy in Canada. A draft Concept Paper was completed and sent out for feedback. A feedback report was also completed.
- **Environmental Scan of Public Opinion Research on the State of Democracy in Canada:** A scan was completed

of 10 major public opinion research studies taken over the past 3-4 years in Canada, with tracking data back to 2006.

- **Stakeholder Conference:** A one-day meeting of more than 70 individuals representing civil society, government, academia, and private sector organizations working on democratic issues in Canada was held in January 2018. Discussions focussed on the path forward for the collaborative democracy initiative. A summary report of the discussions was completed.

PHASE 2 – DEMONSTRATION PROJECT IN METRO VANCOUVER (MARCH 2018-SEPTEMBER 2018)

- **Best Practices Consultations:** A series of in-depth interviews was conducted with stakeholders to determine the most effective approaches for successful civic engagement, what measures are used to determine impact and success, and what key democracy themes could be used to attract citizens to become involved in the Project.

- **Public Opinion Survey of Metro Vancouver residents:** A survey of a representative random sample of 1,506 Metro Vancouver residents was conducted to gauge the commitment residents have to democracy as shown through their participation in democratic processes and activities, the value they attribute to democratic institutions, and their support for the underlying principles of democracy. The survey also helped to develop a series of key baseline measures that will be used to evaluate Project interventions as well as to contribute to metrics for the Project's national roll out.

PHASE 3 – IMPLEMENTATION (JANUARY 2019 - ONGOING)

- **Community Partner Intervention Design:** Two community partners – City Hive Vancouver, and the Vancouver Foundation – have been selected as the first of potentially four community partners whose civic engagement interventions will be measured for their impact on participants' commitment to democracy and involvement in democratic activities. Project design commenced in January 2019.
- **Upcoming Project Activities:** The Centre's Project Plan envisages the following activities in 2019:
 1. March-April 2019 – a national public opinion survey of Canadians to gauge Canadians' commitment to democracy and their involvement in democratic activities. The survey will establish a set of attitudinal and behavioural baseline measures of commitment to democracy that will be used to evaluate the impact of specific Project interventions.
 2. March – September 2019 – implementation of City Hive Vancouver and Vancouver Foundation Project interventions.
 3. March – December 2019 (Projected – pending funding) – work with partners to launch an initiative on digital disinformation and its impact on Canadian democracy. SFU's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, SFU Public Square, l'Institut du Nouveau Monde, and the BC Libraries Cooperative propose a citizen-powered anti-disinformation project designed to raise awareness of online disinformation, support digital literacy and increase the resilience of Canadian democracy



through direct citizen action. Reaching all regions of Canada in both official languages, the Project will: spark discussions about disinformation through a national poll and awareness campaign; crowdsource approaches to digital literacy through “kitchen table” conversations; convene young people to receive training as digital literacy ambassadors; and catalyze citizens in responding to fake news in real time during the 2019 federal election.

4. March 2019 – December 2019 (Projected – pending funding) – Work with partners (SFU Public Square, Institut du Nouveau Monde, BC Libraries Cooperative) to design and implement a national project to raise awareness of online disinformation, support digital literacy, and increase the resilience of Canadian democracy through direct citizen action.
5. March 2019 – June 2020 (Projected – pending funding) – selection of 2 additional community partners for Project interventions.

PHASE 4 – KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE (JANUARY 2019 - ONGOING)

Upon completion of the implementation of Project interventions, and their subsequent evaluation, the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue will report out its findings to key stakeholders working to strengthen Canadian democracy. This will include individuals from governments at all levels, community organizations working in democratic engagement, and other higher educational institutions with an interest in research on democracy.

Knowledge exchange can take many forms. At this point, the Centre envisions three main areas:

- Provide open access to all documentation of the Project, to be set up through a portal on the Centre's website. Notify all stakeholders of the portal.
- Convene meetings with key stakeholders to share findings, and to discuss implications for uptake in other geographic centres.
- Provide opportunities for academic research conducted through the Project to be shared with other interested post-secondary institutions.

PROJECT IMPACT – WHAT WILL HAVE CHANGED?

With the implementation of the Democracy Project, the Centre envisions the following impacts:

- A significant contribution to the understanding of government and organizations that support democratic development as to what interventions work to increase citizen commitment to democracy and their involvement in democratic activities, in what contexts they work, and why they work.
- Increased democratic capacity among Project participants and Canadians as measured through changes in key behavioural and attitudinal indicators measuring commitment to democracy.
- Increased collaboration and engagement among community partners and SFU (faculty, staff, students, alumni) regarding issues related to democracy in Canada.



**PROJECT DOCUMENTS
AVAILABLE UPON
REQUEST**

Revitalizing our Democracy – Research, Development & Design (In-Depth Interviews – Final Report of Findings, 26 October 2017).

Revitalizing our Democracy – Environmental Scan of Public Opinion Research on State of Canada’s Democracy – Final Report, 16 January 2018)

Strengthening Canadian democracy – Civic Engagement Best Practices (In-Depth Interviews – Final Report, 21 May 2018)

Metro Vancouver Residents’ Views on Democracy (Report of Public Opinion Survey – September 2018)



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