



IMPROVING CANADA'S DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT: TEN IDEAS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

1) CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

Canadians want to be engaged in their democracy because they believe politicians are not talking about issues that matter to them and that they have no real say. More effective ways to engage citizens in decision-making are available. The Institute for Wellbeing's Democratic Engagement Report points to the municipal level as containing some of the best examples of how to better engage citizens, including the use of Citizen Assemblies. B.C. and Ontario both used this method to examine electoral reform, where large numbers of citizens had a chance to "go deep" on electoral representation issues and offer recommendations that can directly influence decision-making.

2) SEED A CULTURE OF ENGAGEMENT IN GOVERNMENT

Democratic engagement is not the business of politicians alone. Government as a whole, including public servants, need to be vital players in fostering democratic engagement in setting priorities, thinking through options and providing feedback on how policies are rolled out. The Democratic Engagement Report points to some examples of how to foster this culture, including embedding principles of engagement into municipal laws. The *Cities Act* in Saskatchewan and the *Community Charter* in B.C. are examples of political commitments to increase accountability and dialogue between government and citizens.

3) ENSURE MORE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY IN POLITICS

Legislation can be a significant tool in ensuring that citizens know what decisions government is making. The *Federal Accountability Act*, introduced in 2006, aims to reduce the opportunity to exert influence with money by banning corporate, union, and large personal political donations; five-year lobbying ban on former ministers, their aides, and senior public servants; providing protection for whistleblowers; and enhancing the power for the Auditor General to follow the money spent by the government. While legislation is important, proper tools and mechanisms for enforcement must be in place to ensure that words turn into action and results.

4) TRACK PROGRESS ON CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

While voter turnout remains low, Canadians' interest in politics is very high: more than 90% indicate interest in politics according to the Democratic Engagement Report. But how would we know what we are doing is right or wrong unless government asks that question and commits to tracking it? How can we learn from what's working? Is there a way for government to "audit" how it is doing when it comes to citizen engagement and to provide a space for discussion, learning and improvement? As referenced in the Democratic Engagement Report, Britain offers one way to tackle this issue through an annual Audit of Political Engagement, a public opinion survey on a range of political engagement issues.

5) INVEST IN CIVIC EDUCATION

Learning about how democracy works and what it does is the first step towards engagement and participation. Civics can be a critical part of core curriculum for students and needs to be a higher

priority in education. As described in the Democratic Engagement Report, Studentvote.ca was an initiative of elections Canada that reached out to thousands of young people in schools and successfully raised the level of awareness about the importance of the democratic process.

6) MAKE VOTING EASIER

Should Canadians look again at the basics of casting a ballot? Can we make voting easier and more accessible? What about looking at the role of advance polling, weekend voting and e-voting as options for busy Canadians who want to make their voices heard?

7) INCREASE DIVERSITY IN POLITICS

Many groups remain underrepresented in political office – women in particular occupy just about 20% of seats in Parliament. Visible and ethno-cultural minorities as well as Aboriginal Peoples are also underrepresented in politics at every level. Changing politics to make it more representative takes effort. Two initiatives that set out to increase diversity in politics deserve a closer look:

- The Maytree Foundation's *DiverseCity: School4Civics* trains and mentors promising leaders from diverse communities to organize political campaigns or run for office.
- *EqualVoice Canada* is a cross-country organization dedicated to promoting the election of more women to all levels of government and ultimately, changing the face of Canadian politics.

In addition, the *Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM)* features good information on diversity and women representation on their website.

8) USE TECHNOLOGY BETTER

The internet offers many new avenues to engage citizens in dialogue, it's a tool for dissemination of information and consultation, as well as a way to make voices heard. Is government doing enough to look at the role of web technology in engaging citizens? The Democratic Engagement Report suggests that Canada should aim to do better at measuring Democratic Engagement indicators on the internet, to help government assess how it's engaging citizens and learn more about how citizens themselves are using the internet to debate political issues.

9) INVEST IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Democracy does not begin and end at the ballot box. The Democratic Engagement Report shows the majority of Canadians (55%) are engaged in political activities, from volunteering in political parties to participating in protests. From media to civil society organizations, many actors play a key role in enriching the democratic discourse and engaging citizens in issues that affect them. Canada has traditionally supported the role of NGOs in research, policy development, public education and engagement but that level of support seems to be on the decline recently. The report points to a number of organizations that are leaders in generating research and policy recommendations about citizen engagement, including the Institute of Wellbeing. Some, like Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) and the Centre for Research and Information on Canada, have recently closed their doors due to lack of funding.

10) ENGAGE CANADIANS ABOUT OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD

The Democratic Engagement Report shows Canada's commitments to Official Development Assistance (ODA) falls short of the standard among rich nations – Canada ranks 16th out of 22 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in terms of gross national income dedicated to international assistance. What are Canadian expectations in this regard? Currently data on the views of Canadians at the global level is largely collected by the world values survey. There could be an important role for Canada to collect information on our citizens' views of global citizenship and our role as a global nation.