



Samara Centre for Democracy Advises B.C. Committee on Democratic Engagement and Voter Participation

Our Director of Research and Policy Beatrice Wayne was invited to provide expert testimony before British Columbia's Special Committee on Democratic and Electoral Reform to support its study on July 14th, 2025.

Her recommendations, which drew from the Samara Centre's research on the lived experience of politics and youth civic engagement, entailed confronting digital information threats, revitalizing the MLA-constituency relationship, and empowering the next generation of citizens.

Thank you for having me here today. I am the Director of Research and Policy at the Samara Centre for Democracy. The Samara Centre is a non-partisan charity that produces research and events to advance a vibrant culture of civic engagement across Canada. Founded in 2007, our mission is to realize a resilient democracy with responsive institutions, shaped by an engaged public. Through this work, our research and programming regularly serve citizens, educators, journalists, and policymakers. The Samara Centre has appeared before parliamentary committees on the Fair Elections Act, the Reform Act, hybrid Parliament, and working conditions for MPs.

The first issue I would like to address, which the Samara Centre sees as crucial to the topic of democratic and electoral reform, is that of technology's influence on our democratic culture. The Online Safety Action Table convened by the Province in 2024 demonstrated the value—and limitations—of voluntary cooperation with technology companies to address online harms. Despite some positive industry-led actions, the refusal of major tech companies to sign the Province's Declaration on Online Safety for Children, and the absence of binding accountability mechanisms, underscores the deep need for legislation.

Research from the Samara Centre's technology-related projects, alongside much substantive academic research, demonstrates that recommendation algorithms fuel the spread of affective polarization, alienation, and harmful content. At present, the algorithms and design that underpin the most popular digital platforms regularly assist in spreading and enabling digital information threats rather than limiting these harms. By digital information threats, I am speaking about online abuse, mis, dis, and malinformation, and inauthentic engagement like bot activity.

Recently, major platforms including META, X (formerly Twitter), and Reddit, have significantly restricted data access programs, undermining efforts to assess how platform design affects user well-being and democratic health. To effectively identify and understand the scope of harm occurring on digital platforms, civil society must be enabled to investigate these platforms, and must have access to the tools to do so. A duty for digital platforms to retain and share data with independent researchers is essential to restoring positive civic conversation and engagement.

To combat the democratic backsliding exacerbated by digital information threats, British Columbia should follow "design code" and "duty of care"-style legislative efforts popularized by



governments in the UK, EU, Australia, among others. This would require digital platforms to uphold user safety as well as consumer protection and care, while government regulators are responsible for identifying non-compliance with the code and holding platforms accountable. When non-compliant, platforms are responsible for amending their platform design to become compliant again. Platforms that refuse to comply and defy requests from regulators are subject to large fines, usually based on a percentage of global revenue.

Since 2021, through our SAMbot project, the Samara Centre has monitored tweets sent to political candidates and parties during elections, using machine learning to evaluate how likely these tweets were to be toxic or abusive. We have monitored over 4 million tweets across 12 Canadian elections, including federal, provincial, and municipal elections throughout the country.

We have found that online abuse is common, pervasive, and unavoidable - no matter if you are running to be local school board trustee, a city councillor, a member of provincial parliament, or Prime Minister of Canada, online abuse is everywhere. We have found that in addition to being a problem across levels of government, it is also a problem for political newcomers as well as incumbents or political figures with a lot of public attention.

The volumes of abuse detected with SAMbot illuminate the challenging working conditions experienced by candidates on the campaign trail. These working conditions, facilitated by digital technologies, threaten to reduce participation and representation in our democracy. As political newcomers, first-time candidates are the most vulnerable to abuse as they have the least support and experience to help them navigate online (and offline) abuse. Political parties can play a key role in providing first-time candidates with support, as can non-partisan mentorship schemes. Adding protections and expectations of conduct within our public institutions could also help limit both on- and offline abuse.

So we have two specific recommendations to make on the topic of technology's influence on our democratic culture:

The first is to support legislation that requires digital platforms to act with a duty of care, establishing clear duties to protect users and ensure their safety in respect to data privacy, platform design, and content policy. Equally critical is legislation that requires digital platforms to provide data access for civil society-led research purposes, and requires digital platforms to provide information and evidence to an independent, expert evaluator to determine the effectiveness of various safety measures and to identify new risks and mitigation strategies for future work - as described in the Online Safety Action Table Progress Report.

I should acknowledge here that online harms regulations are largely under federal jurisdiction. So our recommendation is that the BC government can and should play a vital role in communicating to Ottawa, clearly and frequently, about their regulatory needs.

At the same time, some technology companies that took part in the Online Safety Action Table expressed a preference for the Province to legislate in areas related to its Declaration, and the



Progress Report stated that the province could explore legislation to "regulate the products and behaviour of technology companies who make their products and services available in B.C," so there remains some jurisdictional role for the province, which we encourage the province to explore.

Our second recommendation is to offer support to first-time candidates who may become particular targets of abuse through mentorship and workplace safety protections.

Now I would like to turn from the topic of technology to focus on strengthening the relationship between legislators and their constituents. Since 2008, the Samara Centre has conducted the first ever systematic collection of interviews with former Parliamentarians in Canada. Today, the project features interviews with over 160 former Members of Parliament from across the political spectrum. Common themes have emerged over time - for example, as highlighted in our 2018 report *Beyond the Barbecue*, many MPs described some long-standing structural challenges within parliamentary life.

Of constituency work in particular, they shared, and these are direct quotations: that "it's easy to get burnt out" and "if you want to do everything well, it's overwhelming." A common observation is that constituents do not distinguish between levels of government in their search for help. One ex-MP recalled feeling like a "glorified city councillor" in constituency work. There is evidence of a gap between the types of services that citizens are demanding and what the government currently provides, and constituency offices are increasingly filling that void.

I think it is important to acknowledge that accessing public services is often the only direct contact citizens will have with their MPs. Getting public service delivery right plays a really crucial role in strengthening and repairing citizens' trust of government and this in turn will allow MLAs and their staff to refocus on stronger democratic engagement. Constituency offices therefore ought to be centrally managed from the non-partisan Legislative Assembly, rather than leaving MLAs to fend for themselves.

If MLAs and staff are relieved of some of their casework responsibilities, the resulting new capacity must be committed to placing constituency offices at the centre of more sophisticated democratic engagement, through public learning, consultation, and sophisticated participatory processes. This is where representatives can learn what issues matter most to their constituents, and also bring home province-wide debates. Former politicians described convening issue-based committees to examine evidence, discuss priorities, and consider how legislative action could support their goals. Such groups could provide opportunities for substantive community-informed discussion, which can support tangible action by the MLA.

The legislature itself can help ensure that MLAs are trained to use new tools. Specifically, the Legislative Library of British Columbia could, in collaboration with experts, develop non-partisan local engagement, public learning, and consultation supports for MLAs. The legislature supplies MLAs with funds to communicate with constituents, through householders and advertisements, and this would allow MLAs to take the next step.



To summarize, our recommendations to increase trust and communication between legislators and constituents are as follows: clear casework from constituency offices by transforming these offices into civic hubs and outposts of the Legislative Assembly. This would involve 1) establishing permanent offices centrally managed by the Legislative Assembly, 2) participation from Service BC to enable cross-collaboration and seamless service to residents, 3) integrating municipal representatives to ensure access to support across levels of government, and 4) developing system-wide solutions to address common public service issues raised by constituents.

Out of this flows our second recommendation: Focus MLAs and their staff on democratic engagement by establishing a centre of excellence for democratic engagement, housed within the Legislative Library of British Columbia and accessible to all MLAs. Enable the Library, in collaboration with experts, to develop resources that support local engagement, public learning and consultation, including tools for citizen reference panels, participatory policymaking, youth councils, and technology-enhanced town halls.

Our final sets of recommendations relate to the topic of youth civic engagement, a major focus of Samara Centre research and resource creation. Young people are less likely than older generations to vote or join a political party, but that does not mean they are politically disengaged. According to research from Elections Canada, young people raise and donate money more, they volunteer more, they boycott and they march more. British Columbia has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to revitalize democracy by solidifying youth civic engagement as a democratic competency.

Our 2022 report *Learning Loss as Civic Loss* outlines the centrality of civic literacy to supporting youth civic engagement. Our report emphasizes the importance of focusing on what education researchers call ‘civic intentionality’: bringing people together to find solutions to social problems and creating spaces for dialogue and meaningful, sustained engagement. Strong civic literacy involves understanding policies and knowing how government functions, but it also entails being socialized into our political environment. ‘Soft skills’ that support civility and build confidence to participate in decision-making processes are key. This approach is aimed at enabling a healthy democratic culture, one in which people understand how to disagree in a respectful manner, how to respond to conflict and communicate in an effective way, and how to work together to find solutions to society’s pressing problems. Experiential and project-based learning are really critical to achieving this goal, and should be a central pillar of civic education curriculum.

The Province’s existing focus on digital literacy, critical thinking, and democratic competency in schools provides a strong foundation for an expanded role of youth in democratic engagement and decision-making. In line with this objective, a growing number of municipal councils, including Vancouver, Saanich, Vernon, Invermere, Victoria, and Penticton - along with the Union of BC Municipalities - have called on the provincial government to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds.



The Northwest Territories' chief electoral officer recently recommended the change, concluding that “[i]n the jurisdictions where they have lowered the voting age, what they've found is that 16- and 17-year-olds vote at a higher rate than 18- to 24-year-olds... but they're also more likely to vote in the next election, and the one after that.” Evidence from Austria and Scotland confirms that extending the voting age substantially aids young people in establishing lifelong voting habits.

Neuroscientific and social science research demonstrates that 16-year-olds match adults in the quality of their vote choice. Canadian scholars have found that 16- and 17-year-olds are not less politically developed than adults, and, depending on the topic being addressed, they are more knowledgeable or as knowledgeable as adults. 16-17s are just as interested, if not more, in participating in various forms of political activity, including voting and non-electoral civic activities. Introducing the vote at 16 would enable meaningful participation while students are still supported by educational institutions, and ensure that their voices are represented in shaping the future they will inherit.

Our recommendation is to strengthen civic education across the K–12 system by embedding it in cross-curricular learning, ensuring dedicated support from the Ministry of Education and Child Care, and developing robust, age-appropriate content and experiential and project-based learning that equips students with the knowledge and skills (including ‘soft skills’) needed for democratic engagement.

We also recommend (alongside investing in robust civic education), in extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds.

This was a snapshot of Samara Centre’s recommendations. I will add we are willing to partner to support enhanced voter participation and democratic engagement should the Committee see a role for us. Thank you for your time, and happy to address any questions you may have.