



Samara Centre
for Democracy

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Fall 2025 Budget

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With support and input from Apathy is Boring

August 1, 2025

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SUMMARY

Recommendation 1: Establish a Canadian Democracy Endowment and commit to an initial investment of between \$75 million and \$200 million. Establish the Endowment as a permanent, non-partisan funding mechanism for the creation of democratic infrastructure, civic capacity-building, and the funding of civil society organizations to produce applied research and deliver evidence-based programs.

Recommendation 2: Invest in robust enhancements to civic literacy as a national imperative and security measure. Outputs should include enhanced, curriculum-connected civic education and digital literacy programming for K-12 students across Canada and made available to learners of all ages through cross-sector community partnerships. Civil society organizations should be centred to ensure materials are responsive to this moment of democratic backsliding and delivered in a coordinated manner that ensures broad uptake across communities.

Recommendation 3: Modernize the culture of politics in Canada by supporting non-partisan mentorship schemes, professional development programs, mental health supports, and digital safety resources for first-time political candidates and newly elected officials at all orders of government. Civil society organizations can provide a coordinated and informed approach to deliver these supports which respond to feedback from former elected officials.

Recommendation 4: Support the civil society organizations that are producing applied, non-partisan research about technology's influence on Canada's democratic culture. This will enhance the country's democratic resilience through subsequent informed policy development and transfer of knowledge to journalists, educators, community organizations and the public at large.



Introduction

Founded in 2007, the Samara Centre for Democracy produces ground-breaking research, dynamic events and educational resources that advance a vibrant culture of civic engagement across Canada. Our mission as a non-partisan charity is to realize a resilient democracy with responsive institutions that are shaped by an engaged public. Michael MacMillan and Alison Loat were the co-founders of the Samara Centre and their efforts were prescient. Eighteen years ago concerns for Canada's democracy were limited, but today our purpose is readily understood and appreciated as foreign interference, rising polarization and threats to our sovereignty have shaken the foundation of civic life in Canada.

This era demands a renewed and strategic commitment to securing a resilient democratic culture that centres the vital work of civil society organizations whose contributions foster social cohesion, enhance public trust, and bolster civic participation. Sustainably scaling the impact of civil society is essential to a productive government and a shared Canadian identity.

With the right support, civil society organizations can be equipped to strengthen Canada's democracy with the ambitious and strategic cross-sector collaboration that this moment demands. Our pre-budget submission outlines a set of pragmatic recommendations to better equip Canada for the challenges ahead: a Canadian Democracy Endowment, a stronger and better informed citizenry, an evolved practice of politics that attracts and retains diligent leaders, and the tools to address online harms. These recommendations directly link democratic renewal to government priorities of security, unity, and prosperity.

Recommendations

1. Establish a Canadian Democracy Endowment and commit to an initial investment of between \$75 million and \$200 million. Establish the Endowment as a permanent, non-partisan funding mechanism for the creation of democratic infrastructure, civic capacity-building, and the funding of civil society organizations to produce applied research and deliver evidence-based programs.

Non-partisan civil society organizations play a critical role in countering foreign interference, misinformation, and polarization - challenges identified by [CSIS](#), [Policy Horizons Canada](#) and [Elections Canada](#) as threats to national sovereignty and security. Establishing a Canadian Democracy Endowment would support the scaling of civil society innovation and broad public participation - while delivering fiscally responsible results through matched funding and multi-sector partnerships. This Endowment would fund the development of democratic



infrastructure, such as non-partisan civic education hubs, curricula, digital civic tools, community engagement networks, and local journalism. It would also support applied research to respond to emerging challenges.

While the government has made important strides in funding democracy-strengthening initiatives - such as the Digital Citizen Contribution Program - grants have increasingly been directed towards universities at the exclusion of civil society organizations. This is disruptive, resulting in a 'double dipping' circumstance where academics are accessing funds not only from Canada's three federal research councils but also from the limited funding pools that are open to non-profits and charities. In this circumstance civil society organizations do not have reciprocal access to the federal research councils. It is time to reset this dynamic.

While scholarly work is of tremendous value and has a key role to play in securing a healthy democratic culture, the abundance of pro-democracy resources that flows to academics should not come at the expense of informed, rigorous and readily applicable policy-relevant insights produced by civil society organizations. This is a moment to move beyond problem definition in order to prioritize the testing and scaling of solutions. We urge the government to address this funding imbalance in order to ensure that civil society organizations are not further displaced in a moment where our research, programs and community partnerships are needed more than ever.

A Canadian Democracy Endowment is the best response to the pressing civic needs of Canadians and will also serve elected officials, the Canada School of Public Service, Elections Canada and other government entities that are seeking consistent access to expertise and empirical evidence from practitioners involved in safeguarding Canada's democracy. By working together to rebalance support and recognize the value of civil society, we can ensure public funds are focused on results that best serve our democracy.

2. Invest in robust enhancements to civic literacy as a national imperative and security measure. Outputs should include enhanced, curriculum-connected civic education and digital literacy programming for K-12 students across Canada and made available to learners of all ages through cross-sector community partnerships. Civil society organizations should be centred to ensure materials are responsive to this moment of democratic backsliding and delivered in a coordinated manner that ensures broad uptake across communities.

Currently, Canada's civic learning offerings are piecemeal, under-resourced, and often uninspiring - leaving young people disengaged from traditional democratic processes and vulnerable to online mis- and disinformation, as highlighted by the findings of the Foreign Interference Commission. The convergence of pandemic disruption and the dominance of



foreign-owned digital platforms in young people's lives has deepened this crisis - leading to polarization, distrust in institutions, and a generational decline in informed citizenship. While education falls under provincial jurisdiction, the federal government can fill a critical gap by investing in civil society organizations that are producing and disseminating accessible, engaging, made-in-Canada civic education materials for all ages. Importantly, these resources meet needs identified by educators, and empower young people to foster civic engagement in their intergenerational and diasporic households, helping to build a more informed electorate and resilient democracy. This recommendation is responsive to teachers, professors, librarians and other professions of democracy who are seeking informed and engaging civic learning materials that invigorate how we develop an informed citizenry in Canada.

3. Modernize the culture of politics in Canada by supporting non-partisan mentorship schemes, professional development programs, mental health supports, and digital safety resources for first-time political candidates and new elected officials at all orders of government. Civil society organizations can provide a coordinated and informed approach to deliver these supports which respond to feedback from former elected officials.

Since 2008, through its MP Exit Interview project the Samara Centre has interviewed over 160 former Members of Parliament from across the political spectrum to learn more about the practice of politics in Canada. In these interviews, former MPs from across parties have expressed concerns about their conditions of work. They fear that a failure to improve Parliament's workplace culture will undermine the faith and the trust that Canadians have in this institution, and call for modernization in the form of more flexibility and updated human resources policies. Research shows that when people are happier and feel psychologically safe, a workplace thrives and becomes dramatically more productive – therefore, a safer and more effective parliamentary workplace is a critical step for the government's results-focused agenda.

The effect of online harassment from the digital campaign trail to elected office is also a recurring theme in the MP Exit Interview project and relevant at all orders of government. Individuals who are from minoritized communities, are political newcomers or first-time candidates are the most vulnerable to abuse as they have the least support and experience to help them navigate online (and offline) harassment. These poor working conditions can prevent people from entering and staying in politics, there is also a broader chilling effect on political participation from the electorate.

Public servants, though not always direct targets, are also deeply affected by the toxic and polarized workplace they're expected to navigate, improve, and remain productive within - an environment that hinders innovation and collaboration. If the House wants to attract and retain high-quality individuals with varied training and innovative problem-solving abilities, it



needs to be a safer, more psychologically supportive workplace. Civil society organizations can play a key role in developing and delivering training and other professional development support that facilitates a culture change for the practice of politics in Canada.

4. Support the civil society organizations that are producing applied, non-partisan research about technology's influence on Canada's democratic culture. This will enhance the country's democratic resilience through subsequent informed policy development and transfer of knowledge to journalists, educators, community organizations and the public at large.

Technology-facilitated violence is becoming more pervasive around the world and increasingly large digital platforms are taking legal action against the small non-profit organizations that are compellingly demonstrating the harm perpetuated by these companies. A key way forward is for the government to require digital platforms to be more transparent and provide broad data access for civil society researchers. This is crucial for ensuring that Canadians have a trustworthy, non-partisan way to understand how politics is playing out online. It is also central to having timely empirical evidence about how digital technologies affect our social fabric, in order to guide the development of informed, effective digital policy. A duty for digital platforms to retain and share data with non-partisan, civil society researchers is essential to countering foreign interference and protecting Canadian sovereignty.

Conclusion

Civil society organizations are making vital contributions in spite of being chronically underfunded. In a moment where many are fearful about what Canada's democratic future holds, we urge the government to respond with meaningful and sustained funding for these efforts. Otherwise, private philanthropy will set the terms of support for Canada's democratic renewal which risks fragmenting and distorting public-interest work, leaving it vulnerable to shifts in donor priorities and ideological filters. More importantly, it limits the government's ability to shape and scale strategic, evidence-based efforts to engage Canadians in a time of global disruption and domestic uncertainty.

For the Government of Canada, civil society organizations are essential partners - never more so than during times of national transformation. In a period where democracy is under strain, and both internal and external threats risk undermining the government's core priorities, these recommendations offer a strategic path forward to strengthen Canada's democratic infrastructure and reinforce national resilience.