



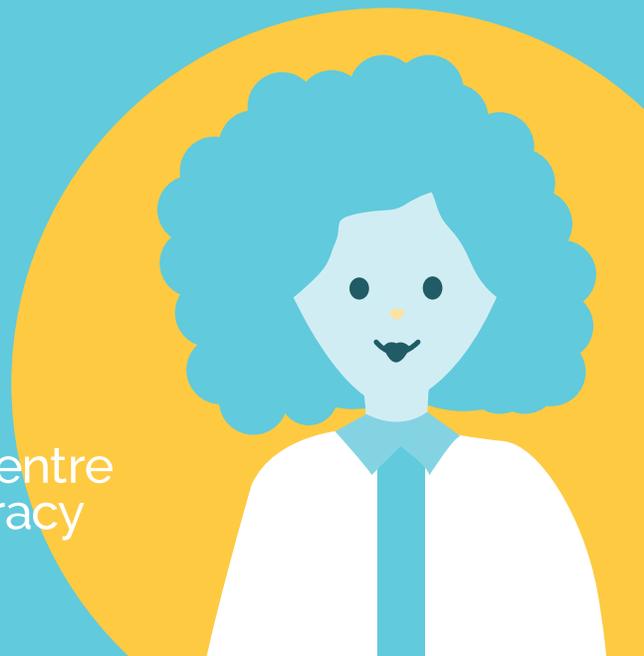
TEMPERATURE CHECK



CANADIAN DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES IN A PANDEMIC



 The
Samara Centre
for Democracy





The Samara Centre for Democracy is a member of the Consortium on Electoral Democracy (C-Dem). C-Dem is reimagining election research in Canada by developing a pioneering consortium model for researchers, electoral management boards, policy makers, and civil society organizations to build upon mutual interests and pool resources and knowledge to investigate the health of democracy across the country and over time. C-Dem is a dynamic research network across Canada that addresses urgent questions about political engagement, underrepresentation, levels of government, the evolution of public opinion between and across elections, and data collection practices with an evidence-based, cooperative approach to studying electoral democracy, during federal elections as well as subnationally and between elections. To learn more, visit c-dem.ca.

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Executive Summary

The Consortium on Electoral Democracy's Democracy Check-Up surveys offer a unique look at how Canadians' attitudes toward their democracy changed with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data, which tracks the views of Canadians in spring 2019 and spring 2020, show that during this period:

- 1 Canadians' satisfaction with democracy reached new highs.**
- 2 Canadians gained more trust in government, and in one another.**
- 3 Canadians became somewhat less cynical about leaders, less nostalgic for the past, and considerably less likely to express populist sentiments.**
- 4 Despite major positive change in public attitudes, Canadians were no more likely to feel that they have a say in what governments do.**

There have been plenty of opportunities to spoil these effects, as governments are caught flat-footed in the face of a second wave. But we need to rethink the "decline of trust" story. Even accounting for a "rally 'round the flag effect" caused by the pandemic, the movement toward trust and cohesion has been comparatively strong in Canada. Ordinary Canadians have not (yet) lost faith in the system *en masse*, and in fact—in one of the most difficult years in memory—they have felt more positive toward their leaders and compatriots. It is time for leaders to return that trust: to recognize that Canadians can be asked to take on a challenge, and should be given a more central role in designing the post-pandemic society.



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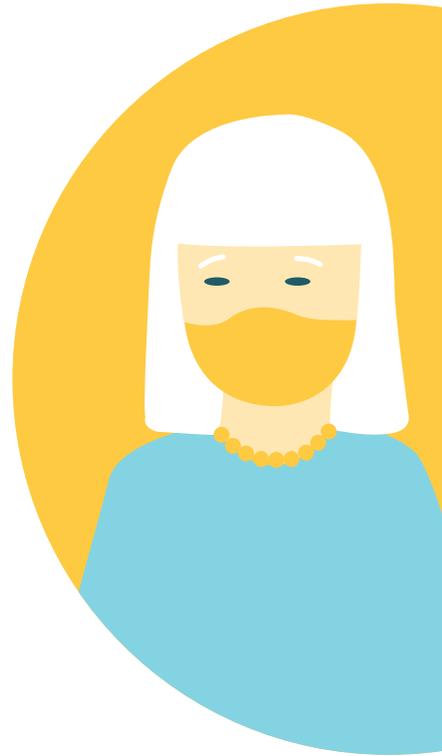
Introduction

Times of emergency put unique strain on democracies—which can erode trust and shatter social cohesion, or actually bring citizens together.

At the Samara Centre for Democracy, we have been closely studying how Canada’s democratic institutions have adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic. But what about Canadians themselves? Have our democratic attitudes and beliefs shifted under the overlapping pressures of fear, uncertainty, lockdown, and recession? Will those changes linger, and what implications does that have for our post-pandemic democracy?

To answer these questions, the Samara Centre collaborated with the Consortium on Electoral Democracy (C-Dem), a partnership of academic researchers and civil society groups conducting an ongoing, intensive study of Canadian democracy through public opinion polling. C-Dem’s Democracy Check-Up is an annual, large-scale, online study. The 2019 Democracy Check-Up gathered 5,074 responses from May to August 2019. The 2020 Democracy Check-Up was run in May 2020, and collected 8,170 responses. Spanning the periods before and soon after the arrival of the pandemic, comparing the two survey datasets offers unique insight into how the Canadian democratic mindset changed.

The data show that the pandemic produced a unique civic moment, and Canadians should consider what to do with it.



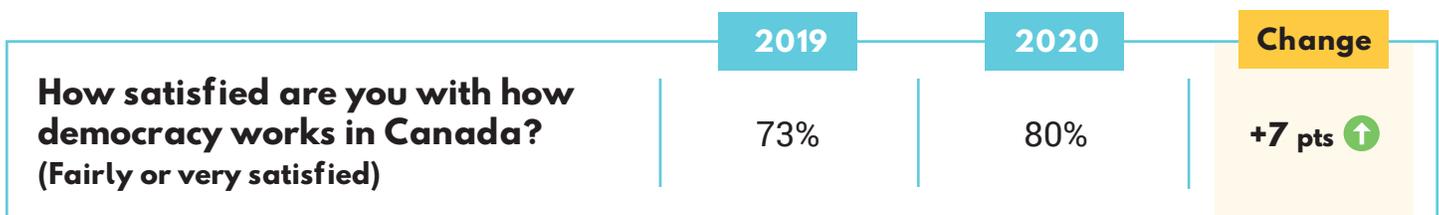
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The data show that the pandemic produced a unique civic moment, and Canadians should consider what to do with it.

So, how have feelings toward Canadian democracy changed during the pandemic?

A clear and consistent shift has taken place, which is, in some ways, paradoxical. Canadians are experiencing one of the hardest years in memory. Governments are asking more of us, limiting our movement, shrinking our social circles, and imposing on us much more heavily than is typically the case. Along with a pandemic, we're experiencing a historic economic contraction, causing hardship that is likely to endure for many people.

In the midst of all of this, Canadians' satisfaction with their democracy reached new heights—at least for a moment.



Eight in 10 Canadians reported being very or fairly satisfied with their democracy in 2020. That's a marked jump from just the year before. This same question has been asked in surveys going back at least 50 years in Canada, and rarely has a larger share of Canadians registered satisfaction. Moreover, the gain in satisfaction held true across important divisions in society like partisan affiliation, albeit in different degrees.

Note: Don't know/Prefer not to answer responses included in calculation of above figures

Party affiliation	Change in democratic satisfaction, 2019-2020
Liberal	+6 pts ↑
Conservative	+3 pts ↑
NDP	+11 pts ↑
Bloc Quebecois	+13 pts ↑
Green	+13 pts ↑

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Canadians are notably happy with the state of our democracy, in the abstract.

In 2020, a significant majority of Canadians—67%—also say that the Canadian political system operates as it should (a comparable data point from 2019 is not available).

Canadians are notably happy with the state of our democracy, in the abstract. More Canadians are also expressing trust in public institutions. The 2019 and 2020 surveys asked respondents which institutions they had a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in. Confidence in governments is dynamic, and can rise and fall with the news of the day. But even taking the May 2020 survey results as a single snapshot in time, the increases in confidence in both federal and provincial governments are striking.



	2019	2020	Change
Courts	57%	60%	+3 pts ↑
Federal government	38%	59%	+21 pts ↑
Media	42%	45%	+3 pts ↑
Provincial government	41%	65%	+24 pts ↑
Public health officers	N/A	78%	N/A

Feelings are moderated by partisanship, but the trend line itself defies partisanship. Across party affiliations, confidence in the federal government as an institution was up considerably.

Party affiliation	Change in confidence in the federal government, 2019-2020
Liberal	+7 pts 
Conservative	+7 pts 
NDP	+13 pts 
Bloc Quebecois	+20 pts 
Green	+21 pts 

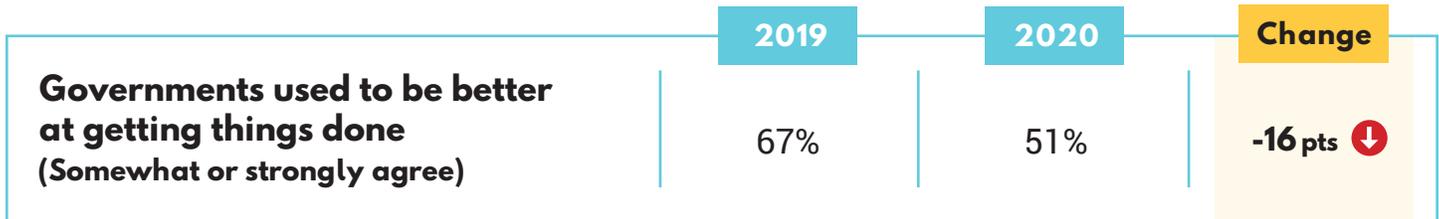
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And Canadians in every province signalled greater confidence in their provincial institutions, though the extent of the change varied considerably.

Province	Change in confidence in the provincial government, 2019-2020
British Columbia	+24 pts 
Alberta	+8 pts 
Saskatchewan*	+23 pts 
Manitoba*	+9 pts 
Ontario	+35 pts 
Quebec	+13 pts 
New Brunswick*	+35 pts 
Nova Scotia*	+31 pts 

* Small sample sizes
 Note: Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, and the Territories excluded due to sample sizes smaller than 100

There are also some other indications that Canadians are appraising leaders, institutions, and “the system” differently in 2020. For example, increasing confidence and satisfaction is accompanied by a steep decrease in nostalgia for governments of the past.



Barely half of Canadians think governments “used to be better at getting things done,” compared to two-thirds just a year ago. This is a remarkable shift to observe in a year when life became almost universally more difficult.

The magnitude of some of these changes is striking. That the same questions asked the same way to largely the same respondents would yield such different responses suggests that the pandemic has indeed brought profound change in the hearts and minds of Canadians, at least momentarily.

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What happened to the populist wave?

Levels of trust and satisfaction with the system are often linked to the threat of populist disruption. The spectre of populism has cast its shadow across the democratic world, particularly since the election of Donald Trump. Populists describe society as caught in a battle between elites and the Real People—and only the People can legitimately govern. While populism is not always intrinsically anti-democratic, populist leaders can damage democracy by undermining our trust in institutions, leaders, and each other, dividing society and capitalizing on those effects to build unchecked power.

The Samara Centre has suggested in the past that the evidence for a populist wave in **Canada is fairly weak**.¹ While we have seen some movement in attitudes that are associated with populism—like polarization on issues like immigration—actual populist attitudes have not been on the rise.

The COVID-19 crisis is a unique stressor, however. It places expert elites front and centre, and demands that citizens closely follow their direction on public health protocols. It has given life to lingering resentments and innumerable conspiracy theories spread widely on social media. And it has produced new economic hardships which, it is often suggested, fuel populist anger.

Has the pandemic given oxygen to populism in Canada?

In a series of questions gauging Canadians' cynicism toward politicians and experts, the data show an almost across-the-board reduction in populist attitudes. The changes range from modest to major.

The most significant change: just a third of Canadians say they prefer “the wisdom of ordinary people” to elite opinion,

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	2019	2020	Change
I'd rather put my trust in the wisdom of ordinary people than the opinions of elites and intellectuals	47%	34%	-13 pts ↓
Ordinary people, not career politicians, should make our most important policy decisions	57%	49%	-8 pts ↓
The government doesn't care what people like me think	71%	63%	-8 pts ↓
Those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people	80%	74%	-6 pts ↓
Politicians lie to get elected	91%	87%	-4 pts ↓
People like me don't have any say about what the government does	54%	53%	-1 pts ↓

down from nearly half last year. Fewer Canadians are persuaded that “ordinary people” are better suited than career politicians to make policy decisions, too. And more Canadians feel that the government cares about what people like them think.

Certainly, cynicism about politics and politicians remains. It is deep, abiding, and shared by the vast majority of Canadians. We find these attitudes to be structural, entrenched, and enduring. But fewer Canadians are inclined to reject elites and “the system” than they were just a year ago.

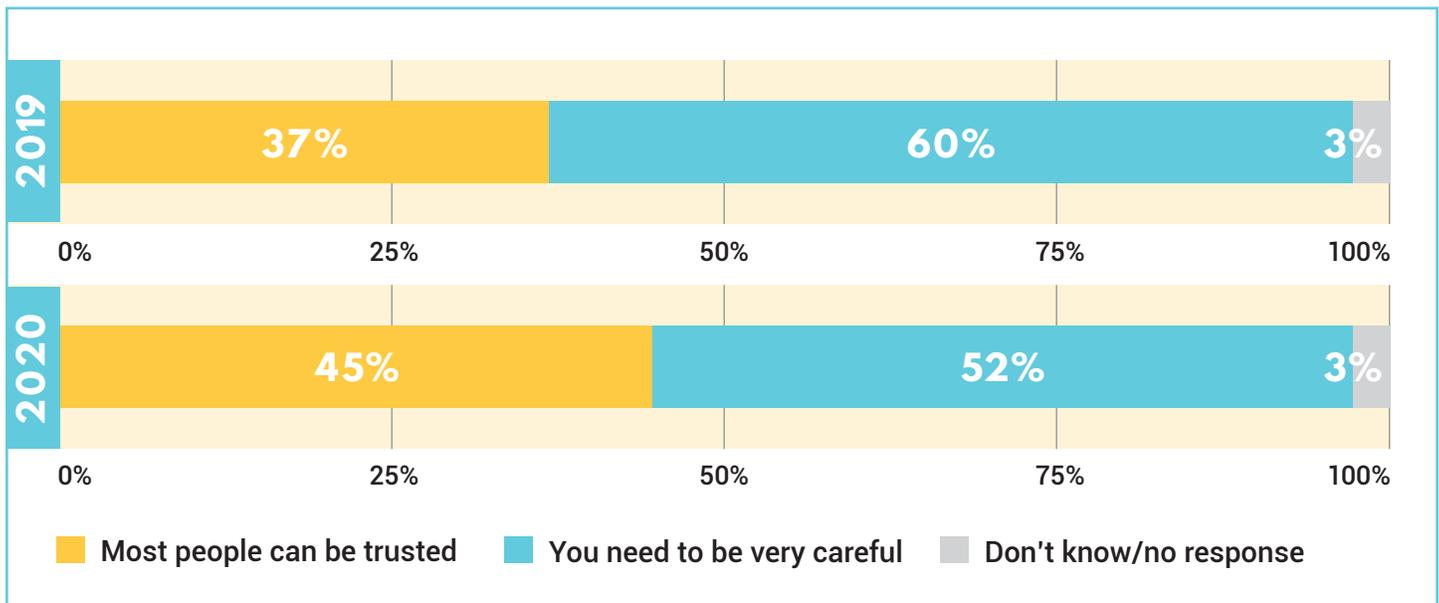
The only question where there has been no real change asked if Canadians feel like they “have any say about what the government does.” This is a concern, explored further below.

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What about broader civic attitudes toward our communities?

Has there been any change in how we feel about each other, and the society we share? The surveys provide hints.

Just as Canadians are more likely to trust institutions in 2020, we have also become somewhat more likely to trust one another.



The share of Canadians who think “most people can be trusted” has improved from 37% to 45%, matched with a decline in the percentage of Canadians who instead believe “you need to be very careful.”

Also, although many Canadians are personally enduring new hardships—with finances, job prospects, personal health and safety all in turmoil—there are indications of an increase in a kind of egalitarian, society-building impulse. For example, 81% of respondents agree that “we should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups,” up significantly from 65% in 2019.

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What does all this mean for our democracy, in the pandemic and beyond?

It is certainly possible to read too much into these changes in Canadian civic attitudes. For one, some of these effects—particularly relating to how Canadians evaluate their governments—have likely dissipated somewhat already. Governments enjoyed goodwill during the first wave of the pandemic that is in deservedly shorter supply in the second wave.

The changes are also not wholly surprising. Journalists and some political scientists often talk about the “rally ‘round the flag effect,” where in crisis moments people become more patriotic, and leaders and governments more popular and trusted. This is a widely observed phenomenon and, again, it generally does not prove lasting.

Indeed, a similar shift seems to have taken place in other democracies during the pandemic. But even if the Canadian experience is not unique, it’s not inevitable either—and in fact, the movement toward trust and cohesion appears particularly strong in Canada. For example, the Edelman Trust Barometer, which regularly measures trust around the world, **found that Canadians’ surge in trust of government during the pandemic was the second largest** out of 11 countries studied.² Another example comes from the Pew Research Center, which asked



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residents of 14 democracies if the pandemic had left their countries more or less united residents of 14 democracies if the pandemic had left their countries more or less united.³

From this field of countries, Canadians were second most likely to answer that their country was more united, behind only Denmark and well ahead of the other countries.

What lessons can be taken from the data? We have some suggestions:

First, the ubiquitous narrative about how we are living through a period of declining trust in public institutions is not helpful, because it simply isn't accurate. Canadians' trust in the system has, at the very least, held steady in the recent past, and in this moment—however brief—it is quite strong. But that ever-popular declinist narrative is a problem because it causes us to miss real problems, to tack toward wrong solutions and, often, to elevate voices of rejection and conspiracism that actually represent just a small number of Canadians.

Second, the realization that a reservoir of trust exists in Canada should inform whatever policy choices shape the post-pandemic future. Whether that is asking people to pay for a more robust or equitable recovery, or asking individuals and civil society to step up in other ways, Canada's political leadership can begin to shake off the notion held across the ideological spectrum that you should never ask too much from citizens. The fact that Canadians became more satisfied with the system even as life got harder and impositions became greater suggests that citizens may deserve



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more credit than they are often given. In the past six months, they have demonstrated that they can make reasonable choices when they are given information, and mobilize when given a compelling reason to do so. Above all, the data shows that Canadians can be asked to do difficult things, and that they will not necessarily resent it.

Third, the downside to trust is complacency and

deference. If Canadians are unusually trusting of institutions and leaders during this crisis, we have all the more reason to ensure our democratic institutions are fully operational and that governments continue to be held accountable. Parliament, the provincial and territorial legislatures, and municipal councils must now figure out how to uphold the entirety of their roles within pandemic constraints, if they have not already done so.

Fourth and finally, the real trust issue may run from leaders to citizens, and not the other way around.

Canadians are engaged, invested, and ready to help. But our data suggests that they still do not feel like they have a say in what governments do.

We are approaching a pivotal moment—still mired in the pandemic, but ready to start thinking about building our post-pandemic country. The federal government reportedly canvassed senior public servants for bold ideas, and caucus members have pushed for transformative change in social policy.⁴ But no government has a direct mandate from the people to seize this crisis moment and boldly reimagine our country alone. The people are ready to contribute, but they need to be asked.



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But our data suggests that they still do not feel like they have a say in what governments do.

How can citizens feel more involved?

Despite some shifts in a positive direction, the majority of Canadians surveyed by C-Dem in 2020 still believe that the government doesn't care what they think, that it is out of touch with the public, that politicians lie to get elected, and that citizens don't have a say in what the government does. Here are a few ideas that can be implemented quickly to help foster a greater connection between elected representatives and Canadians in this key moment:



Citizens' Assembly for Rebuilding: Citizens' Assemblies allow for a group of randomly selected Canadians to meet regularly, learn about a topic, discuss it, and finally make policy recommendations. They are increasingly moving into the mainstream of democratic practice around the world, and should take on new importance at this critical juncture. Canadian elites are seized with the question of how to “build back better,” debating various bold visions from universal basic income to reordering the federation. But little effort has been made to actually ask Canadians what they want. Before all the big decisions are made, Canada's Parliament should commission one or a series of Citizens' Assemblies to consider a post-pandemic future. Ideally, this would be the first step in carving out a permanent, institutionalized role for citizen deliberation, connected with our legislative institutions.



Digital Tools for Politicians: The pandemic has interrupted the regular methods elected representatives use to stay in touch with their constituents and those methods needed

upgrading anyway. Representatives have been adopting new technologies to engage their constituents, and they are keen to keep learning and innovating.⁵ Parliament, legislatures, and local councils should be sufficiently resourced so that politicians and their staff can be trained in and equipped with more sophisticated digital tools for communication and engagement.⁶



Take-note Debates and Petitions: Elected representatives should grant Canadians greater control over what gets discussed in Parliament and the legislatures. Such a shift should be possible, given that pandemic has greatly reduced the legislative agenda in most places. For instance, the House of Commons can enhance its e-petition system to host “take note” debates (debates which do not come to a binding vote) on issues raised in petitions that receive enough signatures. Other international Parliaments have created space throughout the crisis to ensure citizens’ issues are discussed, in order to demonstrate concern, attentiveness, and responsiveness.⁷

Of course, there are other changes—both from our elected representatives and from the public—that would greatly improve the feelings Canadians have towards their government and towards politicians, but these will take more time. The above recommendations would jump-start us on our way to a stronger citizen-representative relationship, as we navigate this unique moment.

Methodology

The Consortium on Electoral Democracy (C-Dem) is led by Laura Stephenson (University of Western Ontario), Allison Harell (Université du Québec à Montréal), Peter Loewen (University of Toronto), and Daniel Rubenson (Ryerson University).

The 2019 C-Dem Democracy Check-Up was an online national survey that was fielded from May to August 2019, and gathered 5,067 responses. The 2020 C-Dem Democracy Check-Up was an online national survey that was fielded in May 2020, and collected 8,170 responses.

Responses were weighted to ensure they reflect a national representative sample of Canadians. Weighting was done with respect to gender, region, age group, and official language community. “Don’t know” and no answer responses are included in the results reported here.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Laura Stephenson and Allison Harell for their generous assistance and editorial support in drafting this report.

End notes

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DEMOCRACY MONITOR

THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN A STATE OF EMERGENCY

As the coronavirus pandemic continues, democracies around the world are being forced to adapt. Legislatures are putting aside their usual processes to urgently approve support for citizens while also trying to maintain physical distancing. But balance is required: the need for rapid action shouldn't mean democratic representation or government scrutiny are abandoned, and some jurisdictions are finding innovative ways to ensure this does not happen.

This report forms part of the Samara Centre's Democracy Monitor, an ongoing research series that examines the state of democracy in a state of emergency, tracking the ways in which political leaders and institutions are reacting to the crisis, and looking at how elected representatives are engaging with constituents during physical distancing.

Explore the series at samaracanada.com/democracy-monitor.



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The Samara Centre for Democracy is a non-partisan charity dedicated to strengthening Canada's democracy, making it more accessible, responsive, and inclusive. The Samara Centre produces action-based research—as well as tools and resources for active citizens and public leaders—designed to engage Canadians in their democracy.

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