

Does Sense of Belonging Strengthen Democracy?

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Why democratic culture matters

Democracy is in a state of disruption around the world, whether through attacks on evidence-based information, interference with elections or the divisive rhetoric of race-based populism.

Attempts to measure the health of our democracies often focus on specific laws and institutions, such as access to information legislation or the existence of an independent judiciary. Less prominent in the international indices maintained by organizations such as Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit are measures of democratic culture—those beliefs, norms and behaviours that animate democracy in practice, and in doing so, help to sustain the resilience of our institutions and the democratic system more broadly.

We first set out attempting to measure the state of Canada's democratic culture in summer 2019 through a national opinion survey.

Was Canadians' commitment to democracy still declining, as the Americas Barometer had found in 2017? Did a relatively stable democracy such as Canada have reason for concern based on the experiences of our peers?

While similar questions about democratic culture have been asked by others in isolation, this was the first attempt that we have observed to bring together such a wide range of indicators to explain what is driving present-day attitudes and behaviours among Canadians. Inspired by the groundbreaking work of Vancouver Foundation on the issue of urban isolation, we also decided to include questions to tease out whether a relationship existed between Canadians' sense of belonging and their attitudes toward the system of democracy.

Committed but cynical

The good news is that the number of Canadians who believe that democracy is important has increased by twelve points since this question was asked by the Americas Barometer in 2017. Canadians are also largely committed to democratic values such as gender equality, free and fair elections and freedom of speech.



This is counterbalanced, however, by a majority of Canadians who believe that democracy is not working to meet their needs; only 34 per cent trust their elected officials, and a slight majority feel unheard and powerless within their democratic system. Even more concerning is the critical mass (34 per cent) who do not believe in equality of citizenship for immigrants, and a slight majority who support nativist messaging such as “Canada First”, even where this damages relationships with allies.

Sense of belonging as democratic antidote?

The survey also found that more than four in every five Canadians feel a sense of belonging to their country, while 73 per cent feel attachment to their local community. Moreover, Canadians who have a stronger sense of belonging hold more positive views of democracy than those with weaker attachment. They are also more likely to trust our democratic institutions and actors, they are more engaged in democratic and community activities, and they are more likely to believe that their actions can make a difference. In fact, when measured across twenty-five indicators of the strength of Canada’s democratic culture, the average increase is 17 percentage points compared to those with a weak sense of belonging.

What’s going on? It’s possible to speculate that feelings of belonging nourish a sense that “we’re all in this together.” From here, the link to democracy is not that tenuous; having a sense of belonging forges relationships that can be activated and re-activated when problems arise that require neighbours, friends or colleagues to work together to find solutions. SFU’s Centre for Dialogue is not alone in seeing the link. As stated by the Centre for Public Impact in its *Finding Legitimacy* initiative:

Belonging to our communities and seeing that we can all contribute to and gain from them not only enhances the legitimacy of governments but can also increase our understanding of others.

Belonging Matters Most at a Local Community Level

While sense of belonging to Canada, province/territory, or neighbourhood are all associated with an increase in Canadians’ commitment to democracy, a closer look suggests that attachment to the local community has even more impact than feelings of belonging at the national level. For example, those with a very strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhood are almost three times more likely to believe that elected officials care what they think compared to those with a very weak sense of belonging, and are twice as likely to attend a public consultation meeting.



Deepening our understanding of belonging and democracy

Much remains to be learned about the relationships between belonging and democracy. Does a heightened sense of

If sense of belonging to the local community has a greater impact on democratic culture than sense of belonging to the state, does this mean that democratic engagement is also most impactful if undertaken at the neighbourhood level?

Over the next two years, Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue will continue to explore these issues by piloting and evaluating a range of democratic "interventions" that seek to increase citizens' commitment to democracy. In late 2019, the Centre will release an evaluation toolkit that will support those working in the field of democratic engagement to contribute their own evidence to this discussion, as well as the related fields of civic education, public participation and online misinformation.

What is increasingly clear is that belonging will remain an important metric for us when measuring the health of our democracies, and that the continued resilience of our democratic institutions will depend upon us finding new ways to nurture a positive democratic culture that we all feel part of.