



# CANADIAN VOTE SUMMIT

2023

EVENT REPORT



Faculty  
of Arts





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*"We've trained ourselves in mundane ways to think of our stories as our own — not as a collective story that we're all writing. Democracy is about participating in other people's lives. What are the threads that ground us in a shared "we"? What does Canada's unique democratic story look like? "*

**—Elamin Abdelmahmoud**



## About the Canadian Vote Summit

The Canadian Vote Summit (the Summit) brought together thought leaders, policy makers, and community builders best positioned to build a healthy, vibrant, and inclusive democracy. Organized by the Democratic Engagement Exchange (The Exchange) in the Faculty of Arts at Toronto Metropolitan University, the Summit provided an opportunity for leaders from across Canada representing a wide range of expertise and experiences to share their knowledge and forge valuable connections.

Held on June 19-20, 2023, the theme of the Summit was *Earning Trust—Challenges for Canada's Democracy*. It shed light on the most pressing challenges and opportunities facing Canada's democracy, including polarization, participation, and trust. Recognizing that tackling these issues requires a multi-sector approach, The Exchange brought together people from all regions of Canada. The thought-provoking sessions provided unique insights, enabling participants to better understand the complexities involved in promoting democratic engagement in Canada and approaches to building a vibrant, inclusive democracy.



# HIGHLIGHTS AND KEY OUTCOMES

*“Building and protecting trust is not something we can do ourselves; we have to work with government, academia, media, and civil society organizations.”*

—Stéphane Perrault (Elections Canada)

For the first time, leaders from Canada’s electoral and democratic community were united for a one-of-a-kind event.



*“Health of democracy depends on perspective: what you understand democracy to be and what you see as your place in it. The things that happen in the community that make me care about politics are what make me an active citizen. When we start to have conversations about caring for your neighbours, we’re actually talking about democratic and political values.”*

— As heard on the ‘Supporting Canadian Democracy’ panel



## Earning Trust

*“What we need to have is not so much simple and blind trust in the electoral authorities in those who are running the elections, in the laws or in the outcomes. But instead, we need to have information about the performance of elections in order to judge are they or are they not trustworthy.”*

**—Pippa Norris (Harvard University)**

Canadians’ trust in our electoral process remains strong and those who participate in elections report higher levels of trust after voting than before. Nevertheless, threats to this trust and broader worries about Canada’s democratic institutions require us to adopt policies and develop programs that will earn the ongoing trust of all Canadians.

The Summit highlighted how concerns about trust are being perceived cross-sectorally. Academics explored theoretical and societal aspects of trust, while election management bodies (EMBs) shared their worries about how to maintain trust and be seen as an authoritative voice. Applied researchers also examined impacts of fluctuating levels of trust. Experts highlighted the need for targeted discussions on the real-life consequences of this fluctuation, such as hate mail, misinformation, and polarization. Rapid, transformative changes propelled by technologies like social media and the evolving landscape of communication were identified

as challenges in establishing relationships of trust. The absence of a robust support system to help citizens navigate this shifting terrain contributes to a widening gap between democratic institutions and the people they aim to serve. This matters, as both cynical mistrust and credulous trust are shaped by individual cognitive abilities and the information environment.

Erosion of trust can also be exacerbated by a perception that democratic structures fail to provide a sense of solidarity and inclusion for groups of Canadians. Instead, individuals often feel marginalized and “othered” by these very structures. These structures often struggle to keep pace with the dynamic shifts in technology and the resulting societal changes. Establishing trustworthiness necessitates competencies, such as those exhibited by EMBs, bolstered by integrity and impartiality. Recognizing trust’s pivotal role in citizen engagement and democracy underscores the significance of addressing concerns arising from declining or low trust.

## Election Modernization

*“Trust is a person issue. Trustworthiness is a technical issue.”*

**—Aleksander Essex (Western University)**

Election modernization has the potential to make voting more convenient and improve the integrity of the process.

We heard from a diverse array of experts, including city clerks, chief election officers, former elected leaders, and esteemed scholars who are at the forefront of modernizing elections. Their collective insights underscored a common theme: by leveraging innovative technologies, updating legislative frameworks, and prioritizing robust security measures, electoral systems can effectively adapt to the evolving needs of our society.

While viewpoints varied regarding the advantages and challenges associated with online voting, a unanimous agreement emerged regarding the significance of embracing innovation. This consensus highlights the potential of exploring novel pathways such as online voting and electronic identification. These avenues offer the prospect of increased participation and inclusivity.

By adopting a proactive and collaborative approach, stakeholders have the opportunity to cultivate trust and unleash the transformative potential of modernization efforts in a rapidly changing landscape.

## Building An Inclusive Democracy

*“Representation is the floor, not the ceiling.”*

**—Velma Morgan (Operation Black Vote Canada)**

The Summit consensus is clear: a truly inclusive democracy demands reimagining meaningful representation and fostering innovative inclusion strategies driven by previously marginalized communities. Active engagement of diverse groups—newcomers, Indigenous communities, marginalized populations, racialized minorities, and youth, including students—is pivotal for a healthy and representative Canadian democracy.

Presenters included newcomers, youth advocates and students, Indigenous leaders, scholars who research these communities, and frontline workers who work with them. They highlighted challenges in cultivating trust between these communities and electoral systems. They also pointed to a number of critical issues related to

building an inclusive democracy. A common thread across panels was the need to create opportunities within democratic spaces for diverse voices to feel supported and empowered in their efforts to bring about change. The focus should be on developing meaningful trust-building mechanisms and providing access to legitimate platforms of democratic engagement where people can shape policies that impact their lives. This will motivate active participation from these communities.

Overall, the Summit underscored the need to ensure all perspectives are incorporated into policymaking, strengthening social cohesion, inclusive representation, and the democratic values integral to Canada’s identity.

*“There was a debate amongst our First Nation people on whether we should be involved in the provincial or federal governments. There was some reluctance to be involved, but over the years, that has changed. Our population is much younger and they’re very politically aware. This is great to get us involved and make an impact in provincial and federal elections.”*

**—Chief Peter Beatty (Kawacatoose First Nation)**

## Fostering Democratic Innovation

While elections are a vital tool for citizens to hold their leaders accountable, we must find additional opportunities for Canadians to shape the policies that impact their lives every day.

The Summit provided a forum for local innovators and scholars to share approaches to democratic engagement that strengthens the voice of communities often not included in the policy discourse. We heard from a wide range of leaders who shared their approaches to building trust through effective, engaging methods. These included a city councillor leading a participatory budgeting initiative in Halifax that allows citizens to allocate city

funds to local projects; the executive director of a youth leadership program in Vancouver partnering with municipalities to engage and train youth leaders; and officials in an Ontario municipality rewriting the rulebook on recruitment for local council elections.

These innovative methods empower citizens to have a direct say in their community's development and foster transparency, accountability, and a stronger sense of civic ownership. They exemplify the essence of democratic engagement by enabling individuals to actively shape policies and decisions that impact their lives, further building foundational trust.

## The Response to the Summit

What we heard:

**98%** of attendees made valuable connections outside their network.

**98%** of attendees saw value in hearing cross-sectoral perspectives.

**It was an excellent conference — necessary, informative and interesting. A great opportunity to meet folks working cross-sectorally.**

**Overall super awesome conference. Thank you for bringing a much-needed event like this to the Canadian elections space.**

**Many thanks for hosting this well-organized event. It's so important to carve out space and time to reflect upon and discuss how we can engage our communities. Looking forward to next year!**

**Fantastic conference on the whole! I'm looking forward to exploring some of the ideas in five++ pages of notes I gathered over the two days.**







## Conclusion

The Canadian Vote Summit 2023 served as a rallying point, reminding us of the significance of our work and the need to strive continually for meaningful progress. By building on the momentum generated during this Summit, we can work together to strengthen democratic institutions, empower citizens, and foster a culture of active civic participation.

The Summit marks the beginning of an ongoing dialogue. As Canada's electoral and democratic community, we must continue to convene cross-sectoral conversations to identify emerging challenges, explore cutting-edge ideas, and develop action-oriented, inclusive solutions. By fostering an environment that embraces different voices and experiences, we ensure that our democratic processes are representative, inclusive, and robust.

98% of attendees agree with the need for a sequel for this first edition of the Democratic Engagement Exchange's signature event. Looking ahead, we envision an even bolder Canadian Vote Summit 2024, where participants have an opportunity to dive deeper into the challenges facing Canada's democracy and strengthen a cross-sector community of practitioners and scholars. This is in addition to collaborative initiatives to further amplify our impact. These platforms will provide opportunities to address emerging challenges, share innovative ideas, and forge partnerships that transcend boundaries. Together, we can shape the future of Canadian democracy, ensuring that it remains vibrant, inclusive, and responsive to the needs and aspirations of all citizens.

**As we reflect on the invaluable insights gained, let us remain steadfast in our commitment to making democratic engagement empowering, probable, and possible.**





We would like to thank all the advisory committee members for generously sharing their insight and opening up their networks to build an exceptionally engaging program of participants from across Canada.

**Samantha Reusch**, Apathy is Boring

**Sabreena Delhon and Beatrice Wayne**, Samara Center for Democracy

**Pamela Uppal**, Ontario Nonprofit Network

**Prof. Allison Harell and Prof. Laura Stephenson**, Consortium on Electoral Democracy

**George Carothers**, Institute for Canadian Citizenship

**Prof. Valérie-Anne Mahéo**, Laval University

**Prof. Michael McGregor**, Toronto Metropolitan University

**Elections BC**

**Elections Canada**

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Chaire de recherche sur la démocratie et les institutions parlementaires

# Canadian Vote Summit 2023

## Speakers

- Elamin Abdelmahmoud**, CBC  
**Sam Andrey**, The Dais (TMU)  
**Umair Ashraf**, The Canadian-Muslim Vote  
**Peter Beatty**, Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation  
**Daniel Bernhard**, Institute for Canadian Citizenship  
**Michael Boda**, Elections Saskatchewan  
**Anton Boegman**, Elections BC  
**Élyse Bolduc**, Élections Québec  
**Aeguns Bridgman**, Media Ecosystem Observatory  
**Veronika Bylicki**, CityHive  
**Chief Tammy Cook-Searson**, Lac La Ronge Indian Band  
**Catherine Cullen**, CBC  
**Phaedra de Saint-Rome**, Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy  
**Erika de Torres**, Apathy is Boring  
**Nadia Dubyk**, Grey Highlands  
**Melina Duckett**, Apathy is Boring  
**Supriya Dwivedi**, Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy  
**Oyindamola Esho**, Youth Presenter  
**Greg Essensa**, Elections Ontario  
**Aleksander Essex**, Western University  
**Isaac Garcia-Sitton**, Toronto Metropolitan University  
**Rowan Gentleman-Sylvester**, CityHive  
**Nicole Goodman**, Brock University  
**Julia Hancock**, Digital Governance Standards Institute  
**Allison Harell**, Consortium on Electoral Democracy  
**Mohammed Hashim**, Canadian Race Relations  
**Jesse Helmer**, Western University  
**Erica Ifill**, The Hill Times  
**Danielle Johnston**, City of Vancouver  
**Nicholas Keung**, Toronto Star  
**Jean-Pierre Kingsley**, Formerly Elections Canada  
**Kimberley Kitteringham**, City of Markham  
**Victoria Kuketz**, PPF Digital Democracy Fellow  
**Chief Lee-Anne Kehler**, Kawacatoose First Nation  
**Jack Lucas**, University of Calgary  
**Valérie-Anne Mahéo-Le Luel**, University Laval  
**Waye Mason**, City of Halifax  
**Lais Maurilio**, City for All Women Initiative  
**Stewart McDonough**, Association of Municipalities of Ontario  
**Mike McGregor**, Toronto Metropolitan University  
**John Meehan**, Bill Graham Centre  
**Dave Meslin**, Unlock Democracy Canada  
**Mackenzey Metcalfe**, Canadian Alliance of Student Associations  
**Rizwan Mohammed**, National Council of Canadian Muslims  
**Velma Morgan**, Operation Black Vote Canada  
**Farah Nasser**, Global News  
**Chi Nguyen**, Equal Voice  
**Stacey Nordlund**, Toronto Public Library  
**Pippa Norris**, Harvard University  
**Allan Northcott**, Max Bell Foundation  
**Stephen O'Brien**, City of Guelph  
**Ikem Opara**, Rideau Hall Foundation  
**Michael Pal**, University of Ottawa  
**Stéphane Perrault**, Elections Canada  
**Samantha Reusch**, Apathy is Boring  
**Tanya Rumble**, Toronto Metropolitan University  
**Sanjay Ruparelia**, Toronto Metropolitan University  
**Jaskaran Sandhu**, State  
**Colin Scott**, Concordia University  
**Zac Spicer**, York University  
**Laura Stephenson**, Consortium on Electoral Democracy  
**Pamela Sugiman**, Toronto Metropolitan University  
**Anna Triandafyllidou**, Toronto Metropolitan University  
**Clarissa Unger**, Students Learn Students Vote Coalition  
**Pamela Uppal**, Ontario Nonprofit Network  
**Beatrice Wayne**, Samara Center for Democracy