



Statement to the Procedures and House Affairs Committee Conduct of a Federal Election during the COVID-19 Pandemic

December 3, 2020

Thank you very much Madam Chair and Committee members for the invitation to speak with you today.

The pandemic has re-engaged Canadians. During this extended emergency 36% are now more confident in Canada's institutions.¹ Trust in one another and the government has also gone up. This positivity during a tremendously difficult time indicates that Canadians can be "asked to take on a challenge, and should be given a more central role in designing the post-pandemic society."² To do so, they will need more mechanisms to contribute. Strengthened community ties, clear messaging and flexibility with election administration can make the difference.

My name is Sabreena Delhon, I am the Open Democracy Fellow with the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, Open Democracy Project and Massey College. I am here on behalf of [DemocracyXChange](#) which is Canada's annual democracy summit.

The following recommendations have been informed by the DemocracyXChange community, current research about democratic engagement and the understanding that the health and safety of Canadians exercising their right to vote is paramount to a strong democracy. This material has also been shaped by the fact that the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on low income and racialized communities³, long-term care home residents⁴, frontline workers⁵ and incarcerated individuals⁶. Across these categories, women are bearing the brunt of adverse outcomes⁷. These groups are also most likely to face barriers to casting a ballot.⁸

I would like to acknowledge the recent October 2020 Special Report of the Chief Electoral

¹ [Bechard, M. \(June 2020\). "O Canada: Canadians, Our Public Institutions and the Pandemic." Ottawa, ON: Rideau Hall Foundation.](#)

² [Morden, M \(2020\). "Temperature Check: Canadian democratic attitudes in a pandemic." Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy.](#)

³ [Guttman A, Gandhi S, Wanigaratne S, Lu H, Ferreira-Legere LE, Paul J, Gozdyra P, Campbell T, Chung H, Fung K, Chen B, Kwong JC, Rosella L, Shah BR, Saunders N, Paterson JM, Bronskill SE, Azimae M, Vermeulen MJ, Schull MJ. \(September 2020\). "COVID-19 in Immigrants, Refugees and Other Newcomers in Ontario: Characteristics of Those Tested and Those Confirmed Positive, as of June 13, 2020." Toronto, ON: ICES.](#)

⁴ [Rocca, R \(November 2020\). "A look at what has gone wrong in the Ontario long-term care amid the coronavirus pandemic." Toronto, ON: Global News.](#)

⁵ [Brophy J, Keith M, Hurley M, McArthur, J \(November 2020\). "Sacrificed: Ontario Healthcare Workers in the Time of COVID-19." *New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupation Health Policy*.](#)

⁶ [Paynter, M and Mussell, L \(October 2020\). "Worsening Conditions in Prisons During COVID-19 Further Marginalize Criminal Women." Halifax, NS: Dal News.](#)

⁷ [Trichur, R \(May 2020\). "Women missing from the workplace can't be the new normal." Toronto, ON: Globe and Mail.](#)

⁸ [Research on Electoral Participation \(May 2020\). Elections Canada.](#)

Officer.⁹ It presents a range of measures to effectively administer an election during a pandemic. This includes increasing the number of voting days, holding the election over a weekend and preparing for a major increase in mail-in ballots. We enthusiastically support approaches that will provide a safe, efficient and easy experience for voters.

With this context established, we present the following to address the challenges of engaging voters in the electoral process during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. **Work with a wide range of community-based organizations** that focus on engaging voters over specific issues or demographic variables. The work of groups like [Future Majority](#) and [Canadian Muslim Vote](#) are of note here. These groups can help to prepare voters for the experience of voting during the pandemic, for the process of obtaining and submitting a mail-in ballot and can also help to manage expectations related to the counting process. These groups can also reinforce messaging related to physical distancing, masks and other precautions.

The pandemic has affected different groups in different ways. For instance, as students may not be able to vote on campus, they will require targeted outreach to clarify where to vote and how. Coordinating with community groups, nonprofits and other entities will be key to disseminating crucial information about process and precaution to distinct populations.

Throughout the pandemic, community organizers have demonstrated incredible ingenuity. Their knowledge and relationships are key to connecting with people in a manner that makes voting relevant and appealing.¹⁰ We advise relying on the local level relationships of trusted intermediaries in community centres, nonprofits and libraries. Organizations like [Apathy is Boring](#) and the [Democratic Engagement Exchange](#) can serve as a bridge between innovative community groups and the electoral process.

We understand that Elections Canada hires Community Relations Officers for this outreach function. We advise that Officers be hired well in advance of the writ period so that outreach to stakeholders can be actioned quickly. We feel that this is foundational to ensuring engagement and would be worth making legislative adjustments to accommodate.

2. **Ensure key messages acknowledge realistic fears and emphasize that voting is easy and safe.** It is critical to counter the American narrative that voting is difficult and that registering to vote is onerous. Research shows that first time and frequent voters overestimate how difficult and time consuming the voting process is.¹¹ For the vast

⁹ [Perrault, S \(October 2020\). *Special Report of the Chief Electoral Officer: Administering an Election during the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Ottawa, ON: Elections Canada.](#)

¹⁰ [Distant, Not Disengaged. \(September 2020\) "COVID-19 and the Future of Democracy." Vancouver, BC: SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue.](#)

¹¹ [Sevi, S \(August 2020\). "Do young voters vote for young leaders?" *Electoral Studies* 10\(16\).](#)

majority of eligible voters it is very easy. This needs to be conveyed clearly along with the fact that there are different ways to vote to suit your needs and circumstances. As noted, community groups play an important role in carrying forward these messages. Another point is to emphasize the identity of *being* a voter above the act of voting.¹² Research has shown that this has a positive effect on engagement. This can be built upon by calling or texting individuals to support the creation of a voting plan.

- 3. Consider lowering the voting age from 18 to 16** and making voting part of the secondary school curriculum.¹³ This demographic is highly engaged in social issues but feels disconnected from traditional forms of democratic engagement. As the pandemic will have a considerable impact on future generations, their input going forward should be harnessed.

We are willing to partner to help support a safe, effective and inclusive election should the Committee see a role for us. Thank you very much for your attention and I'm pleased to answer any questions you may have.

¹² [Morden, M and Urban Crawford, M \(February 2017\). "Low voter turnout tends to produce bad government, so how do we get more Canadians to the polls?" Toronto, ON: Mowat Centre.](#)

¹³ Ibid