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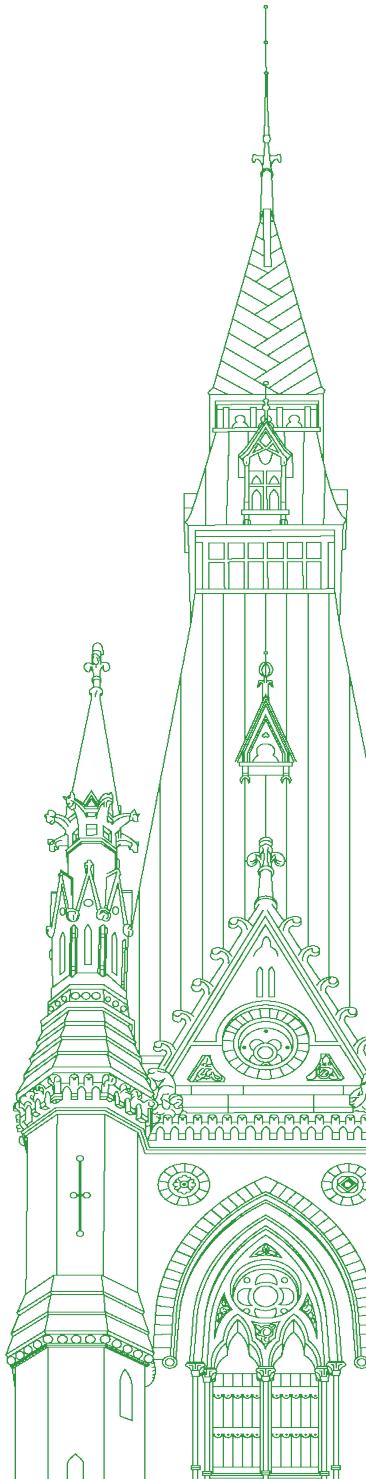

Chair: Chris Bittle

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Tuesday, March 24, 2026

● (1100)

[*English*]

The Chair (Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 26 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3), the committee is meeting today on its study of the main estimates, 2026-27, and the current state of civic resilience in Canada.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the Standing Orders, with members in person and remotely on Zoom.

As per usual, if you want to be recognized, put up your hand, whether you're on Zoom or in person. This is a reminder that all comments should be addressed to the chair. Consult the card in front of you. The guidelines are written on the cards on the table. This is to prevent audio feedback incidents and protect the health and safety of everyone, especially our interpreters.

Before we begin, members have received a copy of a draft budget for the study on the current state of civic resilience in Canada. Is there agreement to adopt the budget?

Is there any opposition? Seeing none, the budget is adopted.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

Back by popular demand, one of our number one witnesses—number one in your hearts—from the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, we have Stéphane Perrault, who's the Chief Electoral Officer, and Marc Limoges, the chief financial officer.

Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Stéphane Perrault (Chief Electoral Officer, Office of the Chief Electoral Officer): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with the committee today about the 2026-27 main estimates for my office and clarify some of our priorities for the upcoming fiscal year.

The Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, which includes the office of the Commissioner of Canada Elections for financial purposes, is funded under two distinct authorities: an annual appropriation, which covers the salaries of indeterminate staff, and an ongoing statutory authority for all other expenses. This funding model ensures the independence of my office by ensuring access to the funds required to prepare for and deliver elections, which may occur at any time.

The annual appropriation for 2026-27 amounts to $69 millions and represents the salaries for some 600 indeterminate positions. This is the amount voted on by Parliament.

Planned spending under the statutory authority is reported annually to Parliament for transparency and accountability. For the 2026-27 fiscal year, the total planned spending is $205.2 million. Planned spending under the statutory authority covers all other expenses and includes work conducted in preparation of electoral events, but not the delivery cost of elections and by-elections, the timing of which cannot be predicted.

As we are under a minority government, Elections Canada's priority is ensuring readiness to deliver an election. This includes implementing measures identified based on lessons from the 45th general election, such as improvements to special ballot procedures and controls identified in a report that I shared with the committee last November.

We have also been engaging with organizations and communities in Nunavik to better serve electors. Notably, we are collaborating with the Kativik Regional Government and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, which is commonly known by the acronym ITK—the national organization that represents Inuit in Canada—to remove barriers to electoral participation and improve the voting experience for Inuit electors. Additionally, we hired a new returning officer who is currently visiting all communities to ensure a better understanding of the reality and resources on the ground. Similar work is being done with indigenous communities across the country.

I would also like to thank the committee for the approval of Elections Canada's pilot project to include Inuktitut on federal election ballots in Nunavut. I am hopeful that I will be appearing later this spring before the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs to seek their approval.

● (1105)

[*English*]

This spring we will also finalize the audits of financial returns submitted by candidates, political parties and third parties for the last general election.

Our new risk-based audit approach, using data analytics, allows us to identify areas of risk in a more efficient manner and to better target our audits. Problematic files can be referred more quickly to the commissioner of Canada elections to ensure fairness and timely compliance outcomes.

As of today, 11 months after the 45th general election, I can confirm that we have almost completed the audits. This is much sooner than in the past, when it would normally take 24 months. I would also like to point out that in 2025, we received funding to increase capacity for the office of the commissioner of Canada elections and to make permanent core staff for our social media monitoring unit.

Finally, as we go through a series of minority governments, it is critical that Elections Canada not lose sight of the importance of renewing and modernizing its infrastructure, with the goal of reducing technological debt, replacing legacy systems and offering better services to Canadians. We are now completing the first phase of Elections Canada's digital strategy, which began in 2022-23, and initiating the second phase. The first phase included the relocation of Elections Canada's data centre and a simplified data architecture to better support our systems. That is complete. A new payroll system for election workers will be completed this year. We will continue the development of a secure online portal for political entities, as well as the use of electronic voter lists to expedite voting operations and reduce administrative errors at the polls.

As we look toward the second phase, we are beginning to plan a second wave of initiatives. This could include, for example, the development of electronic voter information cards, or VICs, in response to growing challenges with the timely delivery of paper VICs. Electronic VICs would serve as a complement to paper VICs, which would continue to be issued.

Thank you for inviting me today. I would be pleased to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Perrault.

I will now turn to Mr. Cooper.

You have six minutes, please.

Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Sturgeon River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

The rogue so-called longest ballot committee is at it again, this time targeting the by-election in Terrebonne. As of this morning, 42 independent candidates have been approved or certified to run in Terrebonne out of 48 or 49 candidates. I understand that the window for certification is up until 2 p.m. tomorrow, but the Elections Canada filing deadline was yesterday.

Approximately how many candidates, fake candidates, can we expect that this committee has put forward?

Stéphane Perrault: The count is final. We have 48 candidates in total for Terrebonne.

Michael Cooper: Of those, 42 are independent.

Stéphane Perrault: I believe that's the case. The total is what matters, from my perspective.

Michael Cooper: Right. Well, of 48 candidates, 42 are independents. We know that the longest ballot committee's activities have created barriers for certain voters. Their actions have made it more difficult for voters to handle and mark their ballots. Voters have experienced longer wait times. It has taken a lot longer to count ballots and get election results.

Given all of the issues that have arisen in past by-elections and elections, what steps is Elections Canada taking to mitigate the potential disruptive effects of the longest ballot committee?

Stéphane Perrault: I decided yesterday, in light of the final count, to opt for the approach we took in Battle River—Crowfoot and have a write-in ballot. This is an approach that did work well the last time we used it. It proved to be satisfactory, and 97% of voters found it easy to use. We had very few complaints about the use of that ballot. We felt that this was a better experience for the voters in general.

As in Battle River—Crowfoot, there will be a list of candidates presented in two formats. It will be presented alphabetically on one side and, on the other side, by candidates affiliated with parties or endorsed by parties and independents. That allows voters to navigate complex information in the manner that best suits them.

Again, that was used in Battle River—Crowfoot, and it worked well.

● (1110)

Michael Cooper: You said it worked well. I would agree with you that it works a lot better than a ballot that's a metre or a metre and a half long, but I would assume that it would still present difficulties for some voters, such as those who might have physical disabilities or those with literacy challenges, among other impediments. I would take it that this is not an ideal situation. It's the best that can be done in a set of difficult circumstances, because of the malicious activities of the longest ballot committee.

Is that fair?

Stéphane Perrault: It is the lesser evil. That's the way I would put it.

Michael Cooper: Okay. Thank you for that.

Moving on to a different topic associated with the longest ballot committee, a complaint had been put forward by Mr. Davies, who appeared before this committee, Ryan Davies. He submitted a complaint on July 25 to Elections Canada. He raised the matter of his complaint when he appeared before this committee. When you came subsequent to his appearance, you said that you first learned of it upon his testifying at committee but that, when you followed up as to where the complaint had gone, it was caught by a security filter.

You further testified that the physical complaint itself was not transferred to the commissioner of Canada elections, but assured the committee that the commissioner was seized with the complaint. However, in an answer to an undertaking you subsequently provided to the committee, you indicated that the report or the complaint had, in fact, been transferred to the commissioner of Canada elections sometime between July 31 and August 11, so there is an inconsistency or a discrepancy between what you first said—that it wasn't physically transferred—and your later undertaking that it, in fact, was transferred to the commissioner of Canada elections. Can you explain?

Stéphane Perrault: I'd have to go back.

Again, I don't want to mislead the committee in any way, shape or form. What I can say is that all of the relevant information was made available to the commissioner. She is aware, of course, of Mr. Davies. She has the opportunity to reach out to him, and he to her. The controls in place to make sure that no complaint is ever lost or omitted have been implemented. There are regular, hourly checks on the filter, if we can call it that, on the security checks, so that it doesn't go unattended.

Michael Cooper: There are now hourly checks, but there were not hourly checks.

Stéphane Perrault: There were not.

Michael Cooper: Were there any measures in place before to monitor the security filter?

Stéphane Perrault: There were measures, but they had to be prompted to a supervisor in order to.... The decision of the person disposing of a complaint or not looking at it and not referring it could be made alone without necessarily the check of a supervisor. Now it has to go through a supervisor. No complaint that is put in the filter is disposed of or not followed up on unless a supervisor gives it a nod. That would be the case, for instance, if there's absolutely no plausible offence under the act that's the subject matter of the complaint, or it's irrelevant to, in fact, the activities of the agency, which happens.

Michael Cooper: Let me just ask you—

The Chair: Be very quick.

Michael Cooper: Let me ask you this. Were any complaints identified that were trapped in the security filter that were not then forwarded to the commissioner of Canada elections in a timely manner?

The Chair: Give a very quick answer.

Stéphane Perrault: I believe, yes, and that's why we have corrections. I believe she has all the information relevant to those complaints, but it's quite possible that some complaints might not have been transferred.

Michael Cooper: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Ms. Kayabaga, you have six minutes, please.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Welcome again to our committee.

Obviously, we know that Canadians expect two things from Elections Canada. They expect that our elections remain beyond reproach and that our funds are managed responsibly.

In that vein, could you explain how this year's main estimates strike the balance between maintaining constant election readiness and ensuring that we are using taxpayers' dollars prudently, especially when we're not in an election year?

● (1115)

Stéphane Perrault: That's a very important question, and it is a complex one.

Maintaining a full state of readiness, absolutely ready to go, would cost an additional amount of about $200 million per year. My role is to monitor the environment and gauge...in addition to what I have now, which already includes readiness expenditures. My role is to make sure that I can deliver the election, and some deployment decisions take 90 days or 30 days. Recruitment takes a long time.

I can tell you, for example, that right now we have partial call centres. They're not fully staffed, but they have to be staffed to the point where, if an election is called, we can catch up and increase the services. Every two weeks, we meet as a senior committee to look at the environment, look at the deployment options and gauge whether there is a need to make those additional deployments. Otherwise, the spending would be significantly more substantial.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: You identified in your estimates the modernization of information systems as a priority. Maybe you can tell us how these investments will improve efficiency over time, and what we're expected to see in terms of costs.

Stéphane Perrault: I'll give you a good example. We still have, at this point, over 200 databases at Elections Canada. Most of these databases contain essentially the same data elements: the names of people, addresses and additional information, like whether they're contributors or whatnot. Each system tends to have its own database, and each has to be updated and managed separately.

By having a common data infrastructure, which we built, we will be able, as we migrate all of our systems to that new database, to instantly update all of the systems' underlying data at once. It's a lot more efficient, a lot faster and a lot less expensive. That's a good example of how efficiencies can be gained by modernizing our infrastructure.

We are also moving towards common platforms so that we don't have, for each system, a separate data platform or an IT platform that needs to be managed by people with different skill sets and whatnot. One of the goals of the digital transformation initiative is to have a more agile and more efficient IT infrastructure.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: In the estimates, you also mentioned that you plan to spend more than $35,000 on regulatory oversight. Can you tell us what that is and what costs are associated with that?

Stéphane Perrault: I'll let my colleague here look at the cost. It is $37 million.

The way costs appear in the main estimates is somewhat different from the way we structure them internally, but regulatory oversight is essentially political financing, the electoral integrity team and people at Elections Canada who ensure there is compliance with the rules. The commissioner's office also has a role in ensuring investigations and compliance, so it's a mix of the two.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: Everyone right now has had to make cost adjustments. I imagine you have had to make cost adjustments as well. Are they reflected in these estimates?

Stéphane Perrault: They are. I have to be candid here. We are in a minority and I've had to increase readiness costs, so it doesn't come out as clearly. There are limits to those cost reductions in that context. As we have been asked to do, we will be reducing by five the number of executives over the next two years, and I have reduced our investment plan. I talked about the digital transformation. Our investment plan for this coming year is earmarked at around $10 million, and that's down from previous exercises.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: What are the other safeguards? Obviously, if you're making adjustments, as everyone else has been asked to do, there are some safeguards you have to put in place to make sure yours is an institution that everybody trusts, that Canadians trust, and that continues to be above reproach.

How are you managing that? What are the safeguards you're putting in place, and what values are you seeing? What kind of conversation do you want us to have around that?

● (1120)

Stéphane Perrault: As I said, we are not subject to the same constraints that most, though not all, departments are, so we have the ability to maintain our expenditures. I'm conscious of the environment in which we operate, so I've been a bit more prudent on some discretionary expenditures. However, there have been no cuts to any of the control and integrity functions at Elections Canada.

I can tell you, for instance, that by going from 24 months to 11 or 12 months for the audits of financial returns by political entities, we have reduced considerably—I can't put a number on it today—how many consultants we hire to do those audits. It's better from a compliance point of view, but it is also less expensive to run.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: What are the impacts on—

The Chair: I have to cut you off there. I'm sorry about that.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for six minutes, Ms. Normandin.

Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you very much.

Mr. Perreault, it's always a pleasure to have you here.

First, I would like to ask you some questions about a recommendation or, rather, a request that you made regarding Nunavik in relation to the last general election. Members will recall that you did not have authority to allocate funding before an election was called, for example, to make hotel reservations or logistical preparations to deliver an election.

There is no way to predict the exact timing an election will be called, but sometimes, one has a general inkling. I would imagine that the Chief Electoral Officer does not really have a cash flow problem.

In that case, was the problem due to the fact that spending could not be allocated to an election if it was incurred before an election? What exactly was the issue?

Stéphane Perrault: The issue with Nunavik had to do with coordination and poor communication.

There's clear communication now. Teams are currently planning for their travel and potential spending, particularly in the north. In many cases, allocated budgets far exceed what is ultimately spent.

There is a provision for contingencies, but there's absolutely no barrier to spending before an election. That's an exception, obviously, but such exceptions are subject to governance mechanisms for authorization.

Christine Normandin: Then in that case, it was never an issue of spending that could not be authorized before an election.

Stéphane Perrault: No, but we have created a team we call “the northern team” that is responsible for the 17 northernmost ridings in Canada, which have unique challenges when it comes to transportation and associated costs. The team is working with returning officers from each of the 17 ridings to prepare for the next election and ensure that all authorizations and budgets are in place and accessible at election time.

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

I would now like to turn to your recommendations on counting special ballots. One of the recommendations was to automate the printing of return address labels. Do you have an update on the possibility of automating return address label printing on envelopes? I'd like to hear your comments on that issue.

Stéphane Perrault: The recommendations that needed to be implemented in the fall have been completed, and the ones that needed to be implemented in the spring were completed in February and they are now in place for the election.

Automation requires a series of tests that are normally carried out in summer or early fall to avoid issues if a general election or a by-election is called. Furthermore, right now, controls are in place to review postal addresses on return envelopes. All mechanisms are now in place. It's no longer done manually, but they are in place to ensure that there are no mistakes.

Christine Normandin: In the same vein, there was a recommendation to improve staff training and oversight. Can you tell us how this will be implemented, if applicable, for the three upcoming by-elections?

Stéphane Perrault: That has been done. Manuals have been reviewed and training has been expanded to ensure that special ballot supervisors have proper training. That is now in place, and the training has been given.

Christine Normandin: There was a clear will, perhaps, to further centralize some aspects of counting special ballots. Can you give us some information on that? Is that in place for the upcoming elections?

Stéphane Perrault: Indeed, we want to centralize monitoring. Local ballots are counted at the local level, while ballots cast by electors in other parts of the country or abroad are counted in Ottawa, not locally. Mechanisms are now in place. Some will be automated to track the kits that are sent out and the kits that are returned to headquarters.

Follow-up is done to ensure that local authorities and the offices of returning officers have the right number of local return envelopes to ensure the tallying is complete.

● (1125)

Christine Normandin: I want to take that a step further. I believe one of your recommendations touched on better knowledge of the return rate of envelopes. In this connection, are there going to be any changes before the next three by-elections?

Stéphane Perrault: Yes, improved tracking of the rate of return will be done at headquarters, both for ballots cast at the local level and those cast from other parts of the country. That is in place now.

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

I want to go back a bit to the issue of training. Perhaps that's a question for Mr. Limoges. I was wondering what proportion of the expenditures in the main estimates is allocated to training.

Do you always need to release additional funds following recommendations, to provide additional training or to have more preparation time beforehand? How does the funding shuffle for this aspect work?

Stéphane Perrault: We use a mix of funding sources. Some expenditures are provided for under the statutory authority. These expenditures are incurred either during the election—because training is given during an election—or before an election and are funded in accordance with the tariff of fees. These expenditures are provided for in election budgets that are controlled by Elections Canada. As you mentioned, we don't have cash flow problems on that front.

At headquarters, the design and coordination of training programs is done by indeterminate and term employees. Salaries for indeterminate employees come out of the annual voted appropriation, or the $69 millions I spoke to earlier.

Christine Normandin: That means that when you have additional needs for training, it's generally not hard to get the necessary funding. Is that correct?

Stéphane Perrault: Funding is never an issue when it comes to training challenges. The issue is often to do with staff availability. We recruit 230,000 people during an election period. Recruiting people who have limited availability cannot be done in advance, so when it comes to training, the main challenge is time management.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll go back to Mr. Cooper for five minutes, please.

Michael Cooper: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Perrault, I just want to pick up where we left off, to make sure that I understand your testimony correctly. With regard to the security filter, it's my understanding that there were some complaints that were caught by the security filter, but that were not identified because Elections Canada did not have in place processes to monitor the security filter. Consequently, they were not forwarded on to the commissioner of Canada elections. Do I have that right?

Stéphane Perrault: That is correct.

Michael Cooper: Okay.

How many complaints were caught by the security filter and not passed on to the commissioner of Canada elections?

Stéphane Perrault: I would have to come back to the committee. I'm happy to do that.

Michael Cooper: Are we talking about a handful? Are we talking about—

Stéphane Perrault: I'm not aware of any other than the one we mentioned. As I said, the protocols have been revisited so that there's closer scrutiny on that.

Michael Cooper: Do you know when these date back to? Presumably, the security filter is not a new issue.

Stéphane Perrault: That's correct.

I'm not sure what was in the letter in my testimony, but we had protocols in place. We now have much stricter protocols in place, following the last election, to make sure that we don't lose sight of any complaints.

Michael Cooper: Since there were certain complaints that were caught, have any been transferred, since the check was done on the security filter, to the commissioner of Canada elections?

Stéphane Perrault: The complaints that would have been disposed of are not retrievable.

I believe—and again, I believe—this is the case for the one from Mr. Davies. There were several sources of information from Mr. Davies and others, including social media, so the information that he had was transferred. However, the physical complaint itself, I believe, was not transferred and was disposed of at the time. That's to the best of my recollection.

Michael Cooper: That was the case in his complaint, but what about other complaints?

Stéphane Perrault: I'm not aware of any other complaints, but I cannot assure you of that, at this point.

Michael Cooper: Okay.

Can you undertake to provide this committee any additional complaints that were caught by the security screen but were not identified, when they date back to, what their status is now, including when and if they were transferred to the commissioner of Canada elections, and whether those complainants have been informed that their complaints to Elections Canada went into a black hole? That's precisely what would have happened. Will you undertake to do that?

● (1130)

Stéphane Perrault: I'll undertake to look into that. I think it's likely not possible for the following reasons. There's a judgment that is made in examining that security filter as to the relevance of a complaint. In the context of elections, we get all kinds of complaints—complaints about a news outlet being unfair or a politician being rude or inappropriate—that have nothing to do with our mandate or the mandate of the commissioner. If those kinds of complaints—

Michael Cooper: I'm not asking about complaints that Elections Canada is looking at. That's not the issue here. The issue here is that complaints went into or may have gone into a black hole. In other words, they were not acted upon.

Stéphane Perrault: If those complaints are disposed of because they are irrelevant, they are judged to be irrelevant to the mandate and I can't have a trace. Again, I'll look into it.

If I do have a number, it's my understanding that this number would include all of those complaints that are not germane to our mandate, and there would be no way of reopening those complaints to examine. There's a judgment made in the thousands of complaints that we receive. Some of them go into the filter for security reasons.

I'll look into that to try to answer as best as I can, but if the judgment was that this was not a relevant complaint and it was disposed of, then that's the end of that story.

Michael Cooper: It seems to be less than desirable that we have complaints that went into a black hole. We don't know how many. We don't know whether, in fact, they were not germane and, therefore, disposed of or whether they, in fact, were germane and not attended to.

Who, by the way, was making a determination as to whether the complaint was germane or not germane when it's not even within the jurisdiction of your office to deal with complaints? That falls within the jurisdiction of the commissioner of Canada elections. Why aren't all those complaints passed on to her office?

Stéphane Perrault: Any complaint that seemingly falls into her jurisdiction would normally be transferred. We're aware of one situation where it was not, but all of the information was transferred. We do get many other complaints that are not relevant to my mandate or her mandate and these would be disposed of.

You listed, Mr. Cooper, a long list of questions. I may have answers to some of them, but maybe not others. I said I will look into it and try to inform the committee to the best of my ability.

Michael Cooper: What would you—

The Chair: Thank you. We're well over.

Mr. Louis, you have five minutes, please.

Tim Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses, Mr. Perrault and Mr. Limoges, for appearing before our committee today.

We know Elections Canada plays a fundamental role in ensuring that our federal elections are administered fairly and efficiently and in a manner that maintains public confidence in our democratic system. I appreciate the work that you do to maintain that.

You're here because, as parliamentarians, we're reviewing the main estimates. It's important to understand how your agency is preparing operationally and financially to continue to deliver accessible elections across a large and diverse country. This discussion is helpful in our committee's oversight of Canada's election readiness, modernization efforts and the stewardship of public funds related to electoral administration.

I would like to start by focusing on the modernization efforts. You mentioned in your opening statement that you have a core staff for social media—a social media monitoring unit. Can you explain the scope and size of that, its function and how fast a team like that can be scaled up in the case of an election?

Stéphane Perrault: That's a very good question. We do have a core staff that we amplify, basically augment, as we prepare for the election. That core staff used to be funded only through the statutory authority. We began this in 2019 and then continued, in a minority context, to fill those positions with terms.

The good news is that in 2025 we did receive funding to convert 13 of these positions into indeterminate positions. We normally top that up to roughly 20 or 22 positions when we're in full election mode. Of course, it takes roughly three months to staff positions, but these can be more complicated positions to staff depending on the linguistic profile, so that is a ballpark explanation.

● (1135)

Tim Louis: Can you explain for us the function of a social media monitoring unit?

Stéphane Perrault: Yes, it's an important thing. The role of the unit is to look out for misinformation or disinformation on the voting process. The role of the unit is not to look out for misinformation or disinformation on candidates, parties or issues that may be relevant to political discussions or political choice. It's strictly on the electoral process.

One of their important functions ahead of the election is to understand the misinformation and disinformation environment around the world—there are often some narratives that permeate different jurisdictions—and to prepare for that. In the lead-up to the last election, we were able to provide tools for Canadians, including a tool we call “ElectoFacts”, where we listed some common misinformation or disinformation narratives with the correct information. That was produced as a result of identifying the main trends and risk areas for misinformation. It's a proactive role that they help conduct. Of course, during the election, they monitor and will either engage social media platforms when they see significant risk to the elector's ability to cast a ballot or, typically, push out additional information to correct the information.

Tim Louis: You mentioned that you're moving toward common platforms for digital transformation. In the departmental plan for the fiscal year 2026-27, you mentioned plans to modernize information systems. You talked about replacing legacy systems, a digital strategy and finishing that first phase by simplifying the data architecture. Can you explain what phase two would look like? You mentioned it briefly, but can you expand on what's next? What systems are being modernized, what the importance is and what the challenges are?

Stéphane Perrault: I wish I were able to tell you that. This June, we'll be sitting as a team to look at priorities for phase two. What we do know is that we want to maximize our investments in the first phase. The data infrastructure has been created, but not all systems operate or, in fact, have not migrated to the new data infrastructure, so we need to take care of that migration.

We need to prioritize systems that are becoming obsolete and look at how we would replace them. We need to look at ways to become more agile. We increasingly have seen over the years successive minorities. We talked about readiness and what it means. Our ability for a quicker return to readiness will also be a critical criterion.

At this point, we have general direction, but we haven't landed on these specific initiatives. I mentioned electronic VICs because I think that's a likely candidate as we are facing a changing environment. As I've testified on several occasions before this committee, it's not so much the Canada Post challenge—though it's part of that—but the difficulty in securing polling locations means that we have much less time to send those cards to voters. Having the electronic version helps. Currently voters can go online and proactively get that information, but they're not getting any alerts, for example, of that. This is the kind of evolution that I'm talking about.

Tim Louis: I appreciate that. That's the question I was about to ask when I ran out of time.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Looking at the time, what I'll do is give everyone another minute-ish in their remaining slots. That'll take us into a break as we prepare for the next panel.

Madame Normandin, you have three and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Perreault, you answered a question from my colleague Mr. Cooper and said that given the high number of candidates in the riding of Terrebonne, electors will write in the name of their chosen candidate on a blank ballot, somewhat similar to what happens at a returning officer's office in advance voting. I seem to recall that during the last general election, there was some uncertainty in some areas as to whether the name of the party, rather than the name of the candidate, was sufficient.

Could you explain what the rules for this by-election will be?

Stéphane Perrault: The rules are very clear. The name of the party is not allowed. There was one location where electors were misinformed by a poll worker. Given that votes were cast on the basis of the information that was received, I adapted the rules so that the ballots in this specific case could be counted. However, that happened solely because electors relied on inaccurate information.

An elector must vote for a candidate. It's important to know that spelling errors are not taken into consideration. The important thing is for us to be able to identify the candidate the elector intends to vote for. As I said, there will be documentation to help electors make their choice.

● (1140)

Christine Normandin: Thank you for that answer.

I'd like to hear your opinion on the recruitment of poll workers. During our study on the longest ballot committee, we said that having ballots that are more difficult to count and having to work late into the night could make it more difficult to recruit people. In addition to that is the fact that the Terrebonne riding has had four elections in the space of just over a year. There was a municipal election, a general election, a provincial by-election and now a federal by-election.

How are things going with the recruitment of poll workers in the Terrebonne riding?

Stéphane Perrault: The good news is that all indicators are looking good. Recruitment for advance voting is done, and workers have been assigned. Recruitment for election day is under way. We hope the long ballot will not dampen people's interest in working for us. I think the experience from the by-election in the Battle River—Crowfoot riding showed that the model is fairly manageable. I'm quite confident as we move forward.

Christine Normandin: Is that the case with securing locations?

Stéphane Perrault: Yes, everything is in order. Voter information cards for the three ridings were sent out on time, which is notable because we had some challenges with that during the last general election. Right now, the cards for the three by-elections have gone out. We have also secured the locations we needed.

Christine Normandin: That's great.

I have a final question for you. Are any of the proposed expenditures in the main estimates conditional on legislative amendments, or can everything that has been requested be obtained without legislative amendments?

Stéphane Perrault: No. Authorities for indeterminate employees will be voted on. If, for instance, any future amendments to the legislation were to require additional resources, then we would make the request at that time. The ongoing statutory authority allows us to respond fairly quickly and recruit term employees if we need more staff as a result of legislative changes.

Christine Normandin: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: We have Mr. Kram for six minutes, please.

Michael Kram (Regina—Wascana, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for joining us today.

Mr. Perrault, in your opening statement, you talked a little bit about the by-election in Terrebonne. I'd just like to follow up on that a little bit. I understand that particular by-election is going to have write-in ballots, the same system that was used in Battle River—Crowfoot. Could you just explain a little about how that works? In particular, what happens if an i's not dotted or a t's not crossed, or there's a minor spelling mistake in the candidate's name?

Stéphane Perrault: That's a very good question. As was the case then, variations in name, spelling or errors are not problematic. They are not a fatal flaw. The important thing is that there could be a clear identification of the intent of the voter. I can tell you that in Battle River—Crowfoot, the rejection rate was 0.41%, which is one of the lowest we've ever seen. It's much lower than the national average on regular ballots with a check box, which is typically around 1%. It was effective. Hopefully, it will be as effective as it was then. There was a very low rejection rate.

Michael Kram: Okay, but it is more than zero.

Stéphane Perrault: It's always more than zero.

Michael Kram: My concern is that in Battle River—Crowfoot, the result was a bit of a landslide. In Terrebonne, there was a by-election because of one vote. Are we not setting ourselves up for more opportunities for disputes in the actual counting of the ballots and even yet another by-election based on the change in the voting system?

Stéphane Perrault: I would not use language of "setting ourselves up". I think we have good controls in place. It is possible that it's going to be a tight race. It's possible there will be rejected ballots; there always are. However, there were more rejected ballots in Battle River—Crowfoot in the general election with the traditional ballot than there were with the write-in ballot. Some of those may be protest votes. We can't assume they're all mistakes or improperly marked ballots.

Michael Kram: Can you provide any more insight? For instance, I don't understand why the reject rate would be higher for just marking an X versus writing someone's name. Could you explain why that would be possible? Do you think that these are all protests, or were there maybe fewer disputes in the by-election for some other reason?

● (1145)

Stéphane Perrault: It's a fascinating area of study. The rejection rates vary considerably between provinces. We know that for a fact, and that's hard to explain, though there are some explanations. There are typically two reasons to reject a ballot: if there's more than one mark, or if the mark is outside of the circle. Courts have tended—but there's no uniformity—to accept more than one mark if the intent is clear. If the voter scratched off, for example, all of the candidates and put an arrow and said "this is my choice", or they said "error" and scratched one and said, "here is my choice", the courts tend to accept that—but not consistently.

Conversely, they tend to reject marks outside the ballot—and we saw that in Newfoundland, in Terra Nova—even though the intent is clear. That's an area that Parliament may want to reconsider because we don't have consistency among the judges and, in some cases, from the same judge. There are all kinds of factors that play into that. In Newfoundland, in provincial elections, voters mark the ballot, but there's no circle. You can understand why there might be a tendency to use the same way of voting.

That is all to say, I really don't know exactly. We can't predict exactly how it's going to go.

Michael Kram: Can you elaborate on what is being done to ensure a greater degree of consistency in accepting and rejecting ballots?

Stéphane Perrault: That goes to the training, but again, the area that I'm concerned with is the inconsistency among judges and between those who do the count and the judges. If we had consistency among the judges, we could instruct our poll workers in a given way. Without that consistency, it's very hard to do. We tend to be closer to the rule than the judges are, but that's a general trend. In the case of Battle River and again in Terrebonne, we will provide additional training for the counting, as we did, and that may well explain why there was such a low rejection rate. We did provide additional training to the poll workers and additional information and instruction to the voters. There was a high level of awareness around that election on how to vote and how to count those votes.

Michael Kram: That perhaps explains the lower rejection rate, but that's speculation of course.

At this committee we've had many discussions about the longest ballot committee and proposed changes to the signature sheets for becoming a candidate. Would you be able to table with this committee the signature sheets for the Terrebonne by-election?

Stéphane Perrault: Certainly, they are publicly available and we will make them available to the committee.

Michael Kram: Very good.

Mr. Chair, how am I doing for time?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds left.

Michael Kram: In that case, I would like to thank the witnesses for their time and insights.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I'd like to thank Mr. Kram. He was very optimistic when he woke up this morning. It was -7°C and he picked out his springiest of ties. I do appreciate that.

We'll turn to Mr. Wilkinson for six minutes, please.

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson (North Vancouver—Capilano, Lib.): Thank you very much.

There are obviously some voters for whom there are accessibility concerns, whether they are indigenous electors living on reserve, residents of long-term care facilities, students at college or university or, of course, persons with disabilities. I'm assuming that for each election there is an assessment of what has been done and perhaps what more could be done to make these more accessible. Maybe you could talk a little bit about your assessment of the last election and whether there are additional improvements planned going forward.

Stéphane Perrault: There were a number of initiatives that we did in the last election to reduce barriers. I'll mention the two main ones.

One was to have the vote on campus program in a snap election context, which we had never done before. We were able to do that in this election. We had 109 campuses across the country that supported vote on campus. We're going to continue to build on that.

If there's an election this spring, we would have notionally the same institutions. If the election is later on, we'd have the opportunity to expand. That involves buying more resources and doing engagement, potentially, with new campuses.

In the last election, we also put a lot of emphasis on pre-event engagement in indigenous communities to offer them advance voting. In many cases, there was not in-community advance voting, which in fact for remote communities meant there was no advance voting because they would have had to fly in or drive hundreds of kilometres. It was a bit of an insult to put on the voter information card that they could vote at advance polls so far away from their homes.

We were able to more than double, increase by 127%, the number of early voting opportunities for indigenous and remote communities. We know that this did not work out in Nunavik, and we are working to remedy that as we move forward.

At this point, we do not have new initiatives; rather, we are trying to perfect and expand on the initiatives that we brought in at the last election.

● (1150)

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson: With respect to long-term care, many have voting stations in the care facilities. Is that something that is done for all? How do you choose which ones get a polling station and which ones do not?

Stéphane Perrault: We try to offer it as much as possible in long-term care facilities. There are some situations where we want to have some flexibility for the timing of that. This is a recommendation that I've made in the past—that we can determine with the local care facility the best timing between advance polls and ordinary polls, depending on situations or staffing capacity, for example, in long-term care facilities.

With the current limitations, we can't do that, except we did in a pandemic context with special adaptations. There is a bit of rigidity around that system that I would like to have more flexibility on in order to improve the service.

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson: Madame Normandin talked a little bit about Terrebonne and perhaps some of the barriers there.

We have three by-elections going on right now. Obviously, top of mind in terms of issues that you may have to deal with, because of course you don't know when by-elections are being called, would be the renting of space and the recruiting of workers. Have there been issues with that? Are there any other issues that you've encountered that you have had to address as you've tried to ensure that we will have a good outcome from a process perspective?

Stéphane Perrault: Issues are issues. They arise when you least expect them.

In all cases to date, we've had no issues in securing.... We're able to secure the RO offices, to equip them, to find the polling locations and to do the recruitment. As I said, recruitment is not complete. In all cases, the recruitment is complete for advance polls, and they're making good headway for ordinary polls.

At this point in the three by-elections, there has not been any significant issue in terms of the administration of the vote.

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson: I have one last question.

I noted that there is a planned workforce reduction from about 1,502 people to 1,469 full-time equivalents going forward. Is this associated with the modernization from an IT perspective that you've talked about? How are you going to make sure that as you reduce staff, the services you are providing are as fulsome as they have been?

Stéphane Perrault: Our staffing varies during the electoral cycle. In terms of the number of people on strength during the election, it goes up to around 1,900. We're talking everybody: term, casual and contract. Then, of course, we reduce immediately after the election. Depending on the environment, we ramp up. Because these are people who are there for a very short period of time, it reflects differently on annual equivalents, what we call FTEs, full-time equivalents. You'll see variations in our staffing all the time based on the electoral environment.

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We will suspend for a few minutes to set up the next panel.

● (1150)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1200)

The Chair: Welcome back.

We'll now proceed to our next panel. We'd like to welcome our witnesses for our study on the current state of civic resilience in Canada.

From Equitas—International Centre for Human Rights Education, we have Odette McCarthy, the executive director. From New Majority, we have Amanda Munday, the executive director. From Samara Centre for Democracy, we have Sabreena Delhon, chief executive officer.

We will go in that order, so we'll start with Ms. McCarthy for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Odette McCarthy (Executive Director, Equitas - International Centre for Human Rights Education): Mr. Chair and committee members, thank you for inviting us to contribute to this important study on the current state of civic resilience in Canada. My name is Odette McCarthy, and I'm speaking on behalf of Equitas, an international centre for human rights education.

A Canadian, John P. Humphrey, one of the co-authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, co-founded Equitas in the 1960s. He understood that it was not enough to adopt international declarations and conventions, and that it was important for people to be educated about their rights, so they could understand how these rights relate to every aspect of their daily life and how they could use them to build more democratic and inclusive communities and lives.

For close to 60 years, Equitas has been working in Canada and around the world to strengthen democracy and human rights through education. We work with over 200 partners across the country. Our experience shows that civic education is one of the most powerful tools for building connected communities, strengthening social cohesion, renewing democratic participation and building a stronger Canada.

However, there are some challenges. According to the latest V-Dem report, which was just released, entitled “Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling The Democratic Era?”, democracies around the world are facing increasing pressures. No country can take its achievements for granted. While Canada maintains a strong position as an electoral democracy, it's important to remain vigilant, especially in light of the rapid deterioration of the situation in the United States and in other countries in just one year.

Like many democracies, Canada is facing rising polarization, distrust in institutions and growing social fragmentation. Statistics show that the level of polarization and distrust in institutions is higher among young Canadians than older generations. More than half of Canadians say they feel disconnected from their community. That affects nearly seven in 10 people among 18- to 34-year-olds. It's also obvious that young people really want to get involved. Three out of four young people say that it's important to participate in their community life. As such, civic education programs, which are key aspects in civic resilience, are essential because they bridge this gap, by turning young people's interest into action and giving them the confidence, skills and opportunities needed to take on leadership roles. This gap between interest and actual opportunities to participate is precisely where education plays a transformative role.

Today, I'm going to talk about why civic education is absolutely vital. By civic education, we mean more than what happens within school walls. Formal education is essential, obviously, but learning about democracy and exercising that democratic muscle, that skill set, so to speak, is crucial in community spaces and between elections.

When Equitas works with young people in communities across the country—such as in Burnaby, British Columbia, Montreal, Quebec, and Winnipeg, Manitoba—and provides them with training on human rights and democratic engagement, the young people ask us to do more. They actively look for more resources and opportunities to get involved. Our training teaches young people about the governance structure at the federal, provincial and municipal levels, and this somewhat strengthens their identity. It gives them a deeper understanding of civic engagement, critical thinking, action, democratic participation, the role of decision-makers and ways to get involved. Our experience shows that when young people take part in civic and community activities, the impacts extend far beyond the immediate action. The participation is essential to build a stronger Canada. It is felt during and between elections. Where this link exists, citizens, young people in particular, are more inclined to vote and to engage in the democratic process. For democracy to work, young people must understand what democracy is all about. They need to feel connected and they need to know that their voice matters.

Taking action to strengthen democracy happens each and every day. Resilient democracies are built before the vote, on election day and between elections.

● (1205)

Canadians need concrete opportunities to put democracy into practice by discussing issues, deliberating on matters irrespective of their differences and differing points of view, and getting involved in decisions that have an impact on their lives.

However, today, some democratic skills appear to be weakening. Polarization and divisive rhetoric are undermining these democratic skills. Canadians must be able to come together to analyze complex issues, disasters, migration, economic crises and conflicts, and they need to find ways to implement collective solutions.

A key skill that is often overlooked is the ability to engage with each other across differences and to have—

[*English*]

The Chair: I apologize. You are over your time, but you'll have plenty of questions during which you can present the rest of your ideas and thoughts.

[*Translation*]

Odette McCarthy: In closing, we need to really strengthen these skills.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll now turn to Ms. Munday for five minutes, please.

Amanda Munday (Executive Director, New Majority): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the committee for this invitation.

My name is Amanda Munday. I'm the executive director of New Majority, which is a national, non-partisan organization that conducts in-person youth voter mobilization at scale.

I'll be honest. I'm not an academic expert and I haven't spent decades in civil society. I spent my career in tech and founded a brick-and-mortar small business that navigated COVID lockdowns, wage subsidies, rent relief and all of that fun. I came to lead New Majority because I understand what it's like to want to feel heard but be excluded.

There's no denying that youth are distanced from traditional democratic institutions. Voter turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds was only 46.7% in 2021. Go to a city council meeting and you'll be surprised to find a young person there. The more we are disconnected from democratic practices, the easier it is not to notice when we lose them.

Participation, however, is not tied to a lack of motivation. During canvassing shifts, our team checks with field managers at the end of their shifts. One question that I often ask of field managers is this: How many people that you talked to today knew an election was happening? Consistently, the answer is about half—although it was admittedly higher during the last federal election. That said, 50% of the young people that we meet on campus, outside gyms and in parks do not know an election is under way.

I want this committee to sit with that number, because it reframes this entire conversation. It is not apathy that's gnawing at civic resilience and social cohesion. We have perception problems, access to quality information and logistical challenges.

Young people are not disengaged from issues. Youth unemployment last summer hit 17.9% for returning students. They are overwhelmed, anxious and facing unmet promises from institutions they do not trust.

In the eight months between September 2024 and the federal election last April, my team talked to 760,000 young people. In the federal election, we worked across nine provinces, on 22 campuses and in 50 ridings. In a bright spot, Elections Canada's most recent 2026 report confirms that 18- to 24-year-old voter turnout jumped 9.2 percentage points to 55.9% in 2025. First-time voters leaped from 44.8% to 55.3%. That's the highest overall turnout since 1993.

Voting is gateway behaviour. We're not just increasing turnout; we are building active citizens. A young woman named Kaneera, who met her MP through our volunteer program, told us that the experience helped her to realize that politicians are committed to the same communities she's a part of. They report to her—not the other way around. Sixty-five per cent of our program participants reported increased hope after that single meeting with their elected official. Eighty-two per cent reported increased involvement in Canadian democracy.

Authentic participation fosters a renewed democratic landscape. I'm not stubborn enough to believe or insist that voting is a panacea, but not investing in civil society organizations that are bolstering democracy means that it will be far harder and more expensive to rebuild if civic engagement continues to spiral.

I have two recommendations for this committee.

First, reduce barriers to participation in electoral democracy to intentionally rebuild trust with younger voters. “Vote anywhere” can do that. No eligible voters should decide not to vote or have trouble voting simply because they showed up at the wrong location, avoided a faith or education building or just needed somewhere closer to work. Elections Canada has never studied how many voters are lost at the door for arriving at the wrong polling station, but we hear it anecdotally all the time.

Mandate that party platforms be released before advance voting begins. In the last federal election, advance voting ran from April 18 to 21. Two party platforms dropped on April 19—the second day. Another wasn't released until April 22, which was after advance voting had closed. Before the parties had published a single page of policy, 7.3 million Canadians cast advance ballots. If we want truly informed voters en masse, we need to mandate access to quality, verified information in time for them to cast their ballots.

Bolster programs like vote on campus, which, by the way, are my world series days during any writ period. They are hugely successful and require resources.

● (1210)

Second and finally, establish a non-partisan Canadian democracy fund and engage philanthropy across many issues Canadians care about. I am one of the co-developers of the national endowment proposal. We are calling for a federal investment of $20 million a year, a fraction of what one federal election costs to administer, to support participation year-round, not just during a 28-day writ period. Canada's philanthropic sector is ready to support democracy programs at scale. What's missing is the government signal that creates the match. A federal commitment sends a message to foundations, corporations and institutional donors that this is a national priority.

Hope is not soft. Hope is the mechanism, and it requires your direct investment.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We now go to Ms. Delhon for five minutes, please.

Sabreena Delhon (Chief Executive Officer, Samara Centre for Democracy): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's a pleasure to speak to the committee today.

My name is Sabreena Delhon, and I'm the CEO of the Samara Centre for Democracy, a non-partisan charity dedicated to strengthening Canada's democracy through research and public engagement. Next year, we'll celebrate our 20th anniversary.

My message to the committee today is that Canada has been complacent about protecting our democratic resilience, and we're paying the price with our national security and social cohesion. Fortunately, in this moment there is an awakening that we must do better and can seize this moment to realize the next golden age for Canada's democracy.

I offer three practical recommendations that can guide our efforts.

First, we do not have a robust infrastructure to support an informed Canadian citizenry who are inoculated against threats to our sovereignty and democracy. As a result, Canadians are largely defenceless and ill-equipped to identify foreign information, assess inauthentic behaviour online and evaluate good information from bad. Our civic education offerings are deeply under-resourced across provinces and territories. This is hindering our ability to engage in healthy, evidence-based civic dialogue across differences.

We can learn from fellow middle powers by investing in civic education as a national defence measure. We can secure a population of digitally literate critical thinkers by committing to a robust revitalization of Canadian civic education. Picture children in elementary school learning digital media literacy across subjects from social studies to math. All Canadian students should have access to a curriculum that teaches them to understand and critically evaluate media content and disinformation in a Canadian context. This should be a crucial piece in our country's national defence plan against foreign threats and active disinformation campaigns.

Second, every day millions of Canadians' lives are shaped by foreign-owned social media platforms that limit access to credible Canadian news online while reducing fact-checking and content moderation. The proliferation of disinformation through bots and astroturfing is urgent and dangerous. These platforms must be regulated with significant economic consequences for non-compliance with safety requirements. In this new world order, Canada should coordinate with other values-aligned countries that are actively drafting design-code policies that regulate digital platforms in the public interest.

Finally, an informed and digitally literate citizenry needs access to social infrastructure where people can contribute to and benefit from a vibrant culture of civic engagement. Committing to civic capacity building is how we will secure social cohesion, enhance public trust and bolster civic participation. This means having spaces like civic hubs where Canadians can connect with their representatives and receive coordinated public services. It's about accessible spaces where Canadians can be in community together and where disinformation can be checked through in-person conversation. It's about programs that enable active citizenship.

To truly address the pressing civic needs of Canadians, we must invest in the chronically underfunded civil society organizations that are doing load-bearing work to shore up our democracy. We can scale the impact of civil society through the creation of a Canadian democracy endowment, a permanent, non-partisan, arm's-length funding mechanism that would help to sustainably support Canada's civic resilience.

In this moment of global democratic backsliding, many Canadians feel overwhelmed and disempowered. We can have an ambitious, bold and strategic response by investing in robust civic education, forward-looking design-code legislation and civic infrastructure that will imbue Canadians, young and old, with the confidence that the future of our country is secure and ours to shape.

Thank you.

● (1215)

The Chair: We will now turn to Mr. Jackson for six minutes, please.

Grant Jackson (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you very much to the three witnesses for being here today.

I have a number of questions. There was some very interesting testimony. I think perhaps I'll start with Ms. Delhon, who went last. I'm curious about your comment that Canada has been complacent and that democracy and cohesion have suffered. Do you have specific examples of other places or countries that have done a better job of regulating this than we have and what that would look like in the Canadian context?

Sabreena Delhon: Absolutely. We can look to Finland and Estonia for examples of how civic education has been prioritized with lifelong learning and been centred in a commitment to national security. This has been in response to foreign threats and disinformation campaigns from Russia. Because of this decades-long commitment to civic education, these countries have very high rankings in terms of resistance to disinformation.

Grant Jackson: I am concerned about the impact of disinformation on Canada, in particular the fact that, as you mentioned, there are new strategic partnerships with some countries that are, as we are well aware, some of the largest interferers in Canada's elections. Do you have any specific concerns about what a change in Canadian foreign policy towards a closer alignment with those countries will mean for Canadian voters?

Sabreena Delhon: We need to think about what our information ecosystem is. How can we keep it healthy and secure? How can we think about what is in the best interests of Canadians?

Is your question about whether we should strengthen ties with countries that are interfering with our democracy?

Grant Jackson: That's correct.

Sabreena Delhon: We should really focus on platform regulation in this regard and look to the EU for some cues here, because they established the Digital Services Act a few years ago, which has served as a really important vehicle for EU countries to be able to move forward in positive ways.

An example right now is how France is exploring how to address disinformation in municipal elections across platforms. Many of those are foreign-owned in this instance. We've also seen recently the Netherlands confirm that Meta must provide chronological, not algorithmic, feeds. Germany has also confirmed that X has to provide access to researchers, so this is an avenue through which we can look at the kind of borderless impact of misinformation and disinformation in the digital—

● (1220)

Grant Jackson: I guess my question on that then is, given how badly the digital services tax went when the Liberal government tried to impose that tax on, as you call them, foreign-owned social media platforms, do you have any confidence that the government could achieve any meaningful success? It has resulted in media organizations not being allowed to share their information on these platforms. As that's been proven out, Canadians have not stopped using these platforms just because they can't access that information from those sources on social media platforms.

Sabreena Delhon: My position here today is about upholding the public interest. This is a non-partisan issue. It's a multi-generational issue. It's really up to us to hold platforms to account to behave in pro-democracy ways within our country.

To expand on what I said about design-code legislation, this is about placing the responsibility on the platforms themselves to protect users from harm. I think it's important for us to hold the platforms to account, because that often gets lost in the shuffle. There is design-code legislation as a way for us to look at laws, regulations and frameworks that are focused on user safety, privacy and accessibility. This is about being responsive to the concerns of voters.

As I mentioned, they feel overwhelmed, ill-equipped and not safe online, and there's plenty of research and evidence to indicate that's been the case. Therefore, what is the response to supporting Canadians, and how can we ensure that they are safe online and have access to high-quality information in those spaces?

Grant Jackson: It's an interesting question, and that kind of segues to Ms. Munday, because I am concerned about the quality of information—perhaps, specifically if there are targeted campaigns on social media by foreign state actors.

You raised the issue of the party platforms and when they were unveiled. I'm curious if you think the scheduling of the leaders debate also matters for young voters.

Amanda Munday: Absolutely. The more credible information that's verified by the parties themselves that we can get to voters the better, especially outside of social media.

Grant Jackson: I agree, but I'm also concerned about where the leaders' debates are streamed and about access to them. I am 29, and Ms. Kayabaga and I often debate about whether that makes me a millennial or a gen Z. We're not going to get into that today, but the point is that I don't subscribe to cable, and most of my generation and those younger than me don't.

I'm wondering if you have specific suggestions on accessibility regarding these types of, as you call them, party credibility.... I forget how you exactly worded it, but would you have a comment on that?

Amanda Munday: To the impact of debates, one of the things we hear.... New Majority's audience are unengaged voters. These are voters who have never voted before, whom we consider.... We often say that we work on campus. They're not the poli-sci students. They're not the ones who are engaged. They don't go to debates, and they often find that the debates themselves don't speak to policy promises so much as they are conversations between the candidates, which can be sometimes isolating for a new voter who's just getting into Canadian democracy and says, “I have issues. I'm concerned about X—whatever their personal issues are—and I'd like to see what the answers are.”

I also believe that we absolutely need to create more access for all eligible voters to hear from all parties well in advance of advanced voting days, so that they have as much information as possible and do not need to rely on outside sources. We know that on Meta, you can't get outside news links, so you have to rely on unverified information.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for six minutes, Mrs. Brière.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière (Sherbrooke, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Witnesses, thank you for joining us this afternoon.

The three of you have set the stage by talking about growing polarization and fragmentation, and the need to strengthen democracy and safeguard the integrity of democratic institutions. People feel disconnected, but they also want to be involved.

What are the most underestimated barriers to civic participation right now? What can be put in place in a positive and productive manner to bring down these barriers?

Perhaps you can answer that question, Ms. McCarthy.

● (1225)

Odette McCarthy: Yes, thank you.

The challenges we have encountered clearly point to the issue of polarization, namely, having opinions that are very divisive in nature. As we have illustrated with specific cases, this is fuelled by misinformation and disinformation.

On top of that are inherent barriers to an individual's identity, depending on where they live, their identity and their economic status. All of these barriers can also have an impact.

When it comes to what we call civic engagement with very young people, we've seen that the process is much more participation-based. Introducing the principles and values of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights immediately sets the stage for a basic exchange of information.

We have some take-aways from all the sessions on having difficult conversations. Young people don't necessarily come away agreeing more with each other, but they do say they may have been misinformed, that they need to check their sources more, and that they can respect different points of view. They understand one another and empathize with each other's experience.

That builds what we call democratic skills, which will come in handy later if these individuals end up in decision-making positions. People will be more involved in the electoral process as voters or as candidates. These skills are extremely practical.

Concretely, that means strengthening civil society organizations that are doing the work, as well as the school curriculum. There's significant room for improvement on that front, particularly with regard to citizenship and more active participation.

We could also create public spaces, much like in Brazil and South Africa, where people can express different points of view. These spaces can shape democratic culture, and they need to be strengthened.

Finally, we need to really strengthen young people's ability to identify spaces where they can influence decisions that affect them between elections, at the community, municipal, provincial and federal levels.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Thank you very much.

You talked about funding. Your organizations have all signed the statement on a Canadian democracy fund. I know the answer to my question, but I'm going to ask it all the same. How would this fund increase civic engagement, and what initiatives would you implement through that funding?

Ms. Munday, you can go first.

[*English*]

Amanda Munday: Thank you for the question. I'll answer it in English, if that's okay.

It's difficult for any civil society organization to rely on only one stream of funding. We have a mix of government and philanthropy funds. Certainly, what we see the endowment fund doing is supporting civil society organizations long term, not just during the boom-and-bust cycle.

In the case of philanthropy, many of our organizations end up being funded on project-based short-term funding. It might be for a few months, for a year or, at best case, for over two years. What we're asking for with the endowment funding is $20 million a year, which is a fraction of what we just heard in the previous testimony from Mr. Perrault on the costs of an election.

Being able to carry out civic engagement work year-round, in the case of my organization, means doing work on the ground and connecting people to democracy work outside of elections, like meeting with your MPs or attending a budget consultation or a committee meeting. Many young people don't know about the different ways to participate in democracy outside of voting, and we need the funding to be on the ground, doing that work every day over the long term.

● (1230)

[*Translation*]

Odette McCarthy: I would add that the very interesting thing about this fund is that obviously, it actually leverages public funds—that demand is on the table—and private-sector funds. It's a very interesting blend, because we believe that the various players in our society need to play a role in strengthening democracy.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Normandin, you have the floor for six minutes.

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much to the three of you. It's quite enlightening to hear your remarks.

I have questions for all of you, but I'll start with you, Ms. McCarthy.

We know that democratic participation goes beyond voting, but nevertheless, voting is an essential element. We also know that habits solidify over time. Once someone votes for the first time, they're more likely to vote in the future.

When it comes to young people specifically, and this may be a two-part question, should the voting age be lowered to allow them to vote when they're still in school and to raise their awareness through school?

Additionally, should there be more mock elections and other such initiatives? Élections Québec gives young people the chance to accompany their parents and cast a ballot on generic questions, but that's a start.

Should we encourage more of these kinds of initiatives?

Odette McCarthy: Thank you, Ms. Normandin.

I'll answer the second question and let my colleagues answer the first one.

Indeed, exercises such as mock elections or mock decision-making by boards are meaningful and effective. This type of activity could absolutely be included in all school curriculum, so that young people know what democracy is when they're asked a question about it.

To experience that fully, Canadians across all generations should be able to define democracy in their own words, so this would definitely be a worthwhile initiative. However, more initiatives are needed. We need more spaces for participation where young people can talk about their concerns and problems, have their voices heard and share how they want to shape the world. That's a crucial point, and it helps them build the skills to take more tangible action as they get older.

Christine Normandin: My next question might be for you, Ms. Munday. I wanted to ask a question about the leaders' debate, but someone beat me to it. I'd like to hear your thoughts on the issue of election platforms.

For example, it might be easier to ensure that the leaders' debate takes place before the start of advance voting. However, when it comes to releasing election platforms, do you have any suggestions on how to require parties to release them faster? There's no way to stop someone from standing for election because they have not released their platform.

Have you given any thought to solutions for that?

[*English*]

Amanda Munday: Especially in the case of a snap election, as we saw at the last federal election, having all of the materials for voters available before advance voting days is complex, and I understand that.

That said, the challenge that we saw on the ground in the last federal election was that advance voting days happened before party platforms were officially released, which meant that it was very difficult for us to make information from all parties available to voters who had no prior experience in voting. What we often find with younger generations, the 18- to 24-year-olds, is that they're not card-carrying party members. They potentially don't talk about being part of a party as a household. It's more about the issues themselves and the issues that are facing them in real time and in their future.

When it comes to debates and party platforms, what we hear most often from unengaged voters are questions about how the candidates who are running are going to help with the challenge or issue that they're facing right now. The challenge for organizations like mine and for others who do non-partisan work is that we can't point to some candidates or party platforms and not to the others. We refer to Elections Canada's website as the main resource for all information, but it does not have information about the candidates' platforms. We direct people to the party websites to get their information.

We do encourage that they look towards debates, but as has been noted here, if the debates are only on cable or are not streamed online or are not accessible, it is possible that a young person will then look to unverified resources to make their decision. It leaves organizations like ours—organizations that are non-partisan and are not working on persuasion—left to point to Elections Canada as our only resource. Elections Canada's mandate is not to help voters with the platforms themselves.

● (1235)

[*Translation*]

Christine Normandin: Would it be a good idea to make all the platforms available in one central location, similar to CBC's Vote Compass tool, for example? Candidates are asked questions they may or may not answer, and if they don't, too bad for them.

This would help people better understand all the platforms, and it would be up to the candidates to answer questions. For example, the candidates could be asked a simple question, and they would have a maximum number of words for their answer. That would give electors a better idea of candidates' positions.

[*English*]

Amanda Munday: I think the vote compass is on the CBC/Radio-Canada platform.

Again, any information that gets all party platforms to voters well in advance of advance voting days is my priority. The medium or the channel that it's on needs to be open for all eligible voters. To me, it can't be restricted. It can't be on only some social media platforms and not others. Perhaps it shouldn't be on only social media at all. We need to make sure it is within news organizations and that the news organizations have the ability to reach all eligible voters in the places they are, the places where they get their news sources.

We know young 18- to 24-year-old voters are getting most of their news information from social media. If verified news links are blocked, then they can't get verified news information and they'll be linked to non-verified or non-credible sources, which is why we're asking that the information from parties be on their party websites ahead of advance voting days so that organizations like mine can link to the official sources and don't have to rely on whether or not a news source has that information.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're going to go into the next round. I'm going to be uncharacteristically strict with the timing so that we can get in a full round of questioning.

We'll start with Mr. Van Popta for five minutes, please.

Tako Van Popta (Langley Township—Fraser Heights, CPC): Thank you to all the witnesses for being here and for sharing your wisdom and knowledge and experience.

Amanda Munday, I'll start with you.

You were quoted in a CBC article by Natalia Goodwin on April 7, 2025, just three weeks or so before the election. In it, you are quoted as stating, “It is a misconception that youth don't want to vote,” and I agree that it is a misconception. Certainly in my experience in the most recent election, in 2025, that was particularly so. Young people seem to have been quite engaged.

I think that bears out in increased voter participation among young people, particularly first-time voters, as you pointed out. I went to quite a few political rallies, and there were lots of young people there. I actually had quite a team of young people—university students, even high school students—out campaigning, door knocking, etc. What I heard them talking about was affordability, and I think you agree with that too. In the same article you were quoting affordability as being the top concern for the young people you were engaged with.

Today we're talking about civic resilience. I'd like tie it to economic security, or the lack thereof. Young people these days are the “left behind” generation. They're feeling that they're not going to be as well off as their parents. Perhaps you could talk about the connection between a sense of financial security on the one hand and civic resilience and engagement on the other.

Amanda Munday: When we're talking about civic resilience and engaging with young people on the issues they care about, this is ultimately a conversation about trust in institutions: Will my elected official or elected officials at all orders of government—federal, provincial, municipal—respond to the issues I'm facing?

One of the activities that my organization does outside of elections is to survey young people on exactly this: “Are you planning to vote? Do you know an election is happening? What are the top issues that you care about?” Their answers shift and change over time, but you're right. I have noted that affordability, mental health and climate tend to come up in the top three, and not just with my organization. We see this across a lot of youth-led organizations.

In connecting civic resilience and those issues, the question is whether elected officials are answering the questions and concerns that young people have and whether they are following through on the promises of change. That's critically important when it comes to civic resilience, because what we have is a lack of trust in institutions. It's “Yes, I'll vote, but will my vote contribute to solving the actual issues that I'm concerned about right now?”

To me, the focus when we're talking about civic resilience needs to be on what we are doing to rebuild voters' trust in institutions, especially for new voters.

● (1240)

Tako Van Popta: This is a good segue for me to quote a trusted institution—at least, I think it's a trusted institution—in Canada, and that is the Bank of Canada.

I want to quote Carolyn Rogers, who is the senior deputy governor of the Bank of Canada. This is a two-year-old speech that she gave about productivity or lagging metrics of productivity. “Productivity” is a term economists use in measuring how efficiently the economy is running. Is it running on all cylinders, or is it sputtering along? She said, “an economy with strong productivity can have faster growth, more jobs and higher wages with less risk of inflation.”

That's why I wanted to talk about Canada's long-standing poor record on productivity and slow growth.

Again, this is the economy that young people are growing up in. Is there some tie-in between that and their disconnection from wanting to be engaged and their distrust in institutions?

Amanda Munday: I can't speak to economic policy. I'm an expert on mobilizing young people to the polls and what needs to happen to mobilize unengaged young people specifically. It's that audience, that 50% now—the last one was 45%—of young people who didn't vote and don't know an election is happening. The way to mobilize that audience is logistical in nature and not connected to motivation or persuasion on why or how someone should vote.

My expertise is on finding the voters who don't know an election is happening or are overwhelmed by the process and act of voting for the first time.

You're right. As I quoted in my opening remarks, youth unemployment for returning students last year was 17.9%. We see—

The Chair: I'm true to my word. I apologize. I'm going to be ruthless in this round.

We'll turn to Mr. Louis for five minutes, please.

Tim Louis: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses appearing before this committee and also for your contributions within your organizations to improving civic life in Canada.

We're talking about healthy democracy. It depends on strong institutions but also on active participation in public decision-making. This study is an important opportunity to explore how community initiatives and civic education can help Canadians feel more informed, included and confident in participating in our democratic process, so I appreciate your recommendations on how to strengthen social trust and increase civic engagement.

It's not lost on me that we have a panel of strong women here. At the same time, women in Canada continue to be under-represented in many civic and political spaces.

I would start with Ms. Delhon.

Back in 2014, Samara produced a book called *Tragedy in the Commons*. One of the topics discussed was toxic parliamentary culture.

We haven't talked about this. What is the responsibility of elected officials, including parliamentarians? Exiting MPs consistently described Parliament, specifically question period, as childish, immature, counterproductive and a spectacle that discourages citizens from following politics and reinforces cynicism.

What responsibility do elected officials have to set an example so that people want to get involved civically and will put their names forward so that we can get more women in politics?

Sabreena Delhon: Thank you for that question.

That book is part of our long-standing project—the MP exit interview project. A couple of years ago, we released a podcast with more recent interviews. It was called Humans of the House. We heard our interviewees use words like “nightmare” and “cage match” to describe their conditions of work. We've also monitored abusive tweets that candidates have received online in Canadian elections. There's plenty of evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, about how dire and arduous these conditions of work are.

When we think about Parliament as a workplace, that can seem like a really disruptive notion because the work that happens in Parliament is exceptional and important, but it has to be grounded in a standard of labour that is effective and productive. Ensuring that is a way to demonstrate respect to the electorate. The health of the culture of work for our elected officials is directly tied to the health of our democracy. That's then linked to the trust that the electorate has in their elected officials. In terms of policies, that would make a big difference. I was a witness previously before this committee, looking at the MP harassment policies and regulations and what can be done on that front.

Also, I want to speak to the fact that the public really isn't interested in partisan sniping, getting clips for social media and all that kind of stuff. The public just wants to know that there is an effective, collaborative and efficient orientation amongst their elected officials—that there's collegiality there.

One thing that does come through our exit interviews with former members of Parliament is when they speak about how much satisfaction they drew from committee work, how the informal instances of their engagement with one another was really productive and really underscored that their commitment to public service was an important one. If there's a way for us to expand on that, scale that and make that the story the public hears about their elected officials—that they're responsive to their needs and that they are working hard—instead of a lot of what we end up seeing on social media, that would make a big difference.

I would also note that women don't decline opportunities to run for office because they're shrinking violets or because they're not sure. They can be treated better and get paid better elsewhere. It's a very strategic decision. The need for public service is absolutely there. The interest is there. The passion is there. The community is behind them. However, they really have to take a moment to consider whether they want to expose not just themselves but their families and loved ones to the inevitable vitriol that they will receive.

Our research has also shown that what women receive as candidates and elected officials is far more personal and misogynistic than their counterparts who are male.

● (1245)

Tim Louis: I did read the book in 2014. It was one of the drivers that led me to put my name forward, so thank you for that.

I'm out of time.

The Chair: You are out of time.

Tim Louis: I have many more questions, but thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Madame Normandin, you have two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

I have a question for you, Ms. Delhon, and it might be fairly specific.

We've talked about disinformation and social media. For instance, Facebook requires a political entity wishing to run an ad during an election campaign to first identify itself as a party or candidate on their Facebook page. There are very strict rules, in contrast to a context where anyone can post whatever they want.

Should we also examine what can or cannot be posted on social media during an election campaign, without restricting content from identified sources, to prevent bots from amplifying certain messages, for example?

[*English*]

Sabreena Delhon: I think your question is about the digital literacy of Canadians, because many Canadians don't know that if you're putting anything on Facebook that has a political dimension, it has to be shared, and then you enter into a kind of complex bureaucratic space where you have to try to figure something out. Similarly, many Canadians don't know that you can't share news on Facebook. If we could enhance the digital literacy of Canadians across generations, that would make a big difference in ensuring that citizens are discerning as they navigate political conversations across different platforms.

Another aspect that's coming out of our discussions today is that we don't have to be bound to these existing platforms. Canada has a fantastic history of technological innovation and public broadcasting. We can have our own social platform. We can be in alignment with other middle-power countries that, similarly, are exploring pro-social platforms, instead of bending these existing platforms to fit into or align with our democratic values. If they won't do it, then we have to make a decision that's in the best interests of Canadians and our democracy. It's not a bridge too far to consider that we have our own platform that becomes a reliable source of information and young people know they can go there to watch the leaders debate and get the information they need. It's something that is responsive to the needs of Canadians.

Our democracy is so important that I think it's really a shame that we are letting a company like Meta decide what information we are able to share with Canadians. I think we really need to shift this and ensure that we have a digitally literate population that is discerning across these platforms, and that we be ambitious and courageous about the kinds of spaces we want to have to support the democratic participation of our citizens.

● (1250)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Mr. Cooper, you have five minutes, please.

Michael Cooper: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

I'm going to direct my questions to Ms. Munday. I thought I heard you say in your opening statement that Canadians' civic engagement continues to spiral downward. If I heard you right, on what basis do you draw such a conclusion? What metric are you using?

Amanda Munday: When we talk about civic engagement, we're looking at all the places where young people in particular are participating in democracy. Voting and turnout is one metric, and it did go up in the last federal election. That said, if you look at municipal elections, the national average for turnout in municipal elections sits at around 33%. When we look at budget consultations, city council meetings, many different areas, such as meetings with MPs—not to lobby on a specific platform or policy issue, but just to meet your MP and say, “I am a constituent in your riding, and these are the issues that matter to me and I'd like to understand how you're governing and for you to get to know me as a person”— especially when you're in a smaller community.... We hear this a lot from smaller communities and young people who want to know who's leading us.

Michael Cooper: It seems rather anecdotal, your conclusion that civic engagement continues to spiral downward. You cite municipal elections. It's not new that there's low participation in municipal elections. Looking a voter turnout, I can look at my province of Alberta, for example, and go back to the 1986 election when voter turnout was under 50% forty years ago. We've had much higher turnout in more recent elections in Alberta.

What prompted my question as to how you drew that conclusion was your highlighting that voter participation amongst 18- to 24-year-olds increased by 9.2% in the 2025 election, and that for first-time voters it was up from somewhere in the mid-40s range to the mid-50s range. That doesn't sound like civic engagement is spiralling downward. It sounds like there are some positive trends.

Amanda Munday: There are positive trends, and we'll always celebrate the positive. It is still also true that voter turnout for 18- to 24-year-olds is 10 points behind voters aged 35 to 44. We still have work to do when it comes to engaging young people. If more than half or close to half of a voting population isn't turning out at the polls, we still have an issue.

Also, as my colleagues noted here, civic education in schools needs to be updated. Awareness of elections can be updated. We have lots of areas where we need to bolster civic engagement so that we can support lifting turnout to way higher than 55%.

Michael Cooper: I agree with you that at 55%, there is work to do. However, looking at the positive trend from the 2025 election with increased participation among young people, what went right? What can we learn from 2025 to build upon for greater participation in future elections?

Amanda Munday: That's a great question.

One of the things we've noted from Elections Canada is that the return of the vote on campus program in the 2025 election was a positive. I would absolutely echo the sentiment that having vote on campus is critical. Elections Canada noted that they were on 109 campuses across the country for the federal election. There are more than 109 campuses across this country, but what we need is time to prepare and support from the institutions to be able to have the vote on campus program in more places so that students, the young people in that demographic who are the lowest voting demographic, can vote easily. It's why I support vote anywhere and vote on campus.

● (1255)

Michael Cooper: I'll just invite the other witnesses to pick up on this if they have any thoughts on trends, what went right and what opportunities there are to build upon greater participation in the democratic process.

Sabreena Delhon: Perhaps it's that the discourse around the election was speaking to the dire and urgent concerns of young people that Amanda has indicated. Also, I would just add that when young people are onboarded to the role of active citizens, they benefit everyone around them—their peers and the adults in their lives who might be feeling intimidated or disaffected by the political process.

Odette McCarthy: I would just invite all members of this committee, if they haven't had a chance yet, to read "Unraveling The Democratic Era?", the latest democracy report written by V-Dem. It provides interesting information on the overall trends happening worldwide, which we can agree or disagree on, but the report gives a sense of the trends and some metrics related to them.

I'd finish by saying that Canada can exist fully and embrace its democracy if it's living in a worldwide community of other democracies, so it's really important for Canada to play that leadership role with other countries to continue to preserve that.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for five minutes, Mrs. Brière.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Witnesses, thank you for participating in this very interesting discussion.

Countries with strong civic participation have three elements. First, there is a high trust in institutions when it comes to transparency, integrity and proximity. Second, citizens have real power. We have heard, among others, of town halls where people discuss sensitive issues, such as abortion, medical assistance in dying and the climate. We've also heard about citizen-led budgeting, which is designed to give citizens a real say in financial decisions. Third, participation in these countries does not require a lot of effort, meaning that it's easy and accessible.

First, do you think these elements are consistent? Can they be applied here in Canada to bolster participation?

Odette McCarthy: I'm going to quote an indigenous student from Hazelton, British Columbia, who took part in an activity series we put on:

> This work is really empowering for young people, because they get to exercise their human rights in ways that deepen their sense of worth as a person. They emerge with more self-confidence, higher self-esteem and a stronger sense of responsibility for building the community they want to live in.

That dovetails with what you said about the importance of confidence.

When efforts are made to nurture that within organizations and school settings, it can boost young people's self-esteem, and increase their confidence in the process and their involvement in their community. Yes, we have that in Canada, but not in a big way. It takes resources. It definitely requires support from the government and the private sector, as we said earlier, to strengthen the muscle and make more use of it. We take great pride in our system as Canadians, and we can feel it in this committee, but we have to admit that it's fragile. If we stop maintaining and strengthening that system, it may get weaker.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Thank you.

Would you like to add something, Ms. Munday or Ms. Delhon?

[*English*]

Sabreena Delhon: I would add that civic resilience and active citizenship is more than just voting in elections. Canadians, especially young people, are looking for opportunities where they can be heard and have that responsiveness. It's not necessarily that they would get whatever they want, but that they just feel a connection to the process.

In terms of the Canadian democracy endowment, it's not just about government support but the huge potential to unlock philanthropic support for the scaling of civil society. From some of the people that you've heard on this study, there's some private support. I know in the instance of the Samara Centre that's not reliable and that can change with the weather. Philanthropic and government support and other community partnerships are really integral to ensuring that non-partisan civil society work can be scaled in a meaningful way.

● (1300)

Amanda Munday: I want to add that when we're talking about trust in healthy democracies, we also need to look at polarization. I have an interesting study from January 2026 from Digital Public Square. It released that the average Canadian rates our country's polarization at 6.5 out of 10, and 55% believe it's getting worse. Actually, the report also found that Canadians are far less ideologically divided than they perceive themselves to be. This is interesting, because what that means is that the perception of citizens being polarized is greater than how polarized they actually are.

When we're looking at democratic engagement programs, especially outside of electoral engagement, we need to address the perception of being polarized. It's the same way that if you are building an AI learning course or program to study misinformation, you want to look at whether you feel you're susceptible to misinformation and to not spotting a deepfake, because AI changes so fast.

We really need to look at how we are addressing the way Canadians feel about our institutions and the perception that they're more polarized than they actually are.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for an excellent discussion.

This committee stands adjourned.