



Submission to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Study on Current State of Civic Resilience in Canada

April 30, 2026

Study on Current State of Civic Resilience

On February 26, 2026 the committee adopted a motion to commence its study of the current state of civic resilience in Canada.

We are writing to provide input into the study so that it takes into account the perspectives of nonprofits across Canada and better understands how they are a key component of civic resilience.

The [Ontario nonprofit sector](#) contributes \$65 billion to the province's GDP, employing 844,000 people.¹ [A third of Canada's nonprofit sector](#) is in Ontario.² As a sector, nonprofits receive less than half of their revenues from government, which we leverage with private grants and donations, the sale of goods and services, and volunteer efforts to create additional value for the communities we serve.

Summary: Nonprofits play a vital role in building and activating civic resilience in communities

At its best, civic resilience props up democracy as a powerful tool for levelling inequality, ensuring equal voice and power, and distributing resources and services equitably. At its worst, disengaged, disenfranchised, and distrustful communities coupled with breakdowns in the rule of law and other democracy safeguards create a perfect storm for a breakdown in civic resilience and thus backsliding in democracy. Democracy is not only under threat, but it's also facing scrutiny regarding its effectiveness in meeting societal expectations and uniting people in working towards the common good.

Coast to coast to coast, nonprofits are on the frontlines of trends that civil society is ringing the alarm on globally, and are also best positioned to activate a healthy democracy which centers civic resilience.

Recommendations to the committee for considerations:

- 1. Nonprofits must be part and parcel of any national civic resilience strategy.**
- 2. Establish a non-partisan Canadian democracy fund.**
- 3. Ensure low-barrier nonprofit advocacy.**

¹ Imagine Canada and Ontario Nonprofit Network, [Ontario Nonprofit Sector Infographic \(English\)](#), March 21, 2022.

² National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations, [The Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector in Ontario](#), 2003.

Fieldnotes from nonprofits in Ontario: Democracy is in crisis

Nonprofits, of all kinds, are on the frontlines of democracy backsliding in Ontario. From observing trends in communities, collecting information as trusted sources, and/or experiencing the impacts of backsliding themselves.

What nonprofits are observing and experiencing is no different than the global trends impacting democracy. [Philanthropy Europe Association's iceberg framework](#) offers a useful lens to map out how democracy is backsliding. It maps root causes driving frustrations, catalysts that thrive in these conditions to accelerate an anti-democratic agenda, and the resulting symptoms of discontent. There is no one-to-one causal relation between drivers and stages, rather there is an exasperating feedback loop.³ Below are the ways in which these elements of the iceberg are showing up for nonprofits.



Fieldnotes from nonprofits:

- **Unmet needs:** [According to ONN's annual state of the sector survey](#), 85 per cent of nonprofits are seeing an increase in demand for their programs and services (year-over-year increase and higher than at the height of the pandemic), while only 20 per cent can meet demand.⁴ Demand does not just consist of an increase in the number of people relying on nonprofit programs and services, but also an increase in complex needs. Increase in demand is reflective of a [weakening social safety net](#), the ongoing affordability crisis communities are facing, the toll politics of division are taking, and the uncertain economy. This is a similar trend for nonprofits in [British Columbia \(BC\)](#), [Alberta](#), and [nationally for charities](#).

³ Philanthropy Europe Association, [Democracy Briefer for Funders : What's Happening to European Democracy and What Funders Can Do About It](#), 2025.

⁴ Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), [2025 Ontario State of the Sector - 2025 Data Tables](#), October 15, 2025. Ontario State of the Sector.



- **Unheard emotions:** In Ontario, [coordinated attacks](#) are being launched against nonprofits who serve vulnerable communities, including people experiencing homelessness, people who use drugs, and/or people with mental health challenges.⁵ Shelters, drop-in-networks, supportive housing groups, and nonprofits providing support to those living with HIV/AIDS, for example, are being penalized for meeting their missions. These attacks are not isolated incidents, but rather systematic as they appear across the province. Targeted campaigns against civil society, including nonprofits, are often [part of the far-right playbook](#) in countries such as Europe and the United States (U.S.).⁶ Tactics include surveillance, threats, defamation, legislative control, and egregious investigations. These are some of the same tactics used in the attacks on nonprofits in Ontario. According to the [V-Dem 2026 report, repression of civil society organizations](#) is in the top declining indicators between 2015-2025, deteriorating in 39 countries.⁷
- **Systemic failures:** More and more nonprofits and the communities they serve are struggling to be heard at different levels of government as decision-making power is [centralized from the local to the provincial level](#), [public consultations are skipped and/or rushed](#), legislation is tabled and [passed quickly](#), [transparency is scaled back](#), and elected officials shut out communities and nonprofits, eroding trust in governments. The lack of trust, engagement, and participation in our democratic process by all, and especially those from our most historically under-served communities, compounds other disparities in public policy that have long protected systems that mainly benefit those with wealth and resources.
- **Disinformation & Populism:** Increasingly nonprofits, their workers, and the communities they serve are victims of extreme campaigns built on a global ecosystem of misinformation and disinformation fueled by astroturfing and AI. The campaigns can be targeted, such as the coordinated attacks described above that reproduce problematic narratives about nonprofits and the communities they serve. The campaigns create a deeply intolerant climate for

⁵ Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), [Issues brief about legal attacks on nonprofits in Ontario](#), February 2026.

⁶ The Guardian, [Raise our Heads and Resists: How Europe's civil society is fighting back against the far right](#), 2026.

⁷ V-Dem Institute, [Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling the Democratic Era?](#), 2026.

nonprofit workers to deliver care in. Some frontline workers are being attacked, filmed, and trolled by the broader public for doing their jobs. Nonprofits and their workers are trying to dispel and combat misinformation and disinformation with the limited resources and capacity they have. The same ecosystems of misinformation and disinformation are politicizing and threatening progressive social policy gains made possible by movements spearheaded by nonprofits -led-by, -serving, and -focused on equity-denied communities, including Black, Indigenous, women, queer, non-binary and trans, and immigrant communities.

- **Dissatisfaction, Polarization, Anti-Immigration:** The “othering” narrative surrounding vulnerable populations is surging at a time when there is increased backlash to all equity-driven movements. Anti-immigration, transphobia, anti-refugee, anti-Indigenous, anti-Black, anti-addictions, and anti-poverty sentiments are on the rise, and consequently, some Ontarians are turning against the nonprofits serving these communities. This narrative emboldens a portion of the general public to take more aggressive actions. It is this narrative that creates and reinforces the vicious cycle of public policy that criminalizes vulnerable populations and nonprofits who serve them, and leads to more municipal actions to clean up neighbourhoods and lawsuits against nonprofits. When democracy stalls so does progress on key social issues and movements.

Nonetheless, nonprofits are working to engage in new and innovative collective advocacy for better social policy and ultimately better systems to support their communities across the country. Addressing these systemic challenges requires nonprofits to be part of the larger ecosystem to defend and activate a thriving democracy.

Whose job is it to keep tabs on democracy?

According to the [Civil Liberties Union for Europe](#), the rule of law depends not only on an independent and effective justice system and a free and plural media, but also on a robust system of civil society checks and balances.⁸

Nonprofits make communities vibrant with our parks, accessible and high quality recreational activities, street festivals, and safe spaces for kids before and after school. We provide essential services, including care for the old, young, sick, and frail.

⁸ Civil Liberties Union for Europe, [Liberties Rule of Law Report](#), 2026.

Nonprofits are fundamental in helping communities battle crises, from affordability to public health and climate emergencies. Nonprofits support getting people back to work, delivering meals on wheels, and providing gender-based violence services. As demand rises, nonprofits are also filling gaps for affordable housing, mental health and addictions programs, and settlement services. Nonprofits ensure our communities continuously remain healthy.

Nonprofits also promote civic engagement through programs and activities that engage volunteers and donors, bring community members together, and advance collaborations with other organizations to meet community needs.

Nonprofits, including the ones described above, and the ones focused uniquely on safeguarding and reimagining democracy, are keeping tabs on the state of civic resilience. [Nonprofit media](#) is part of the ecosystem as well as it provides reliable news and information to communities across Canada, focusing on the public interest while strengthening civic life and democracy.

All of these different types of nonprofits, as part of broader civil society, play a critical role in activating a healthy democracy because they are:

- **Expressions of democracy:** Nonprofits are accountable to community members, and are governed by volunteer boards of directors that are democratically elected.
- **Sturdy and reliable bridges between people and policy, facilitating participatory democracy:** Nonprofits engage and amplify community voices, help people gather and organize, contribute knowledge through research, provide unique public policy insight stemming from communities, and hold governments and decision-makers accountable.
- **Trusted local sources:** The unique role of nonprofits in community allows organizations and grassroots groups to share information as trusted sources, increase awareness and understanding of community issues, identify emerging needs, and enable confidence in communities to speak up. Research shows that nonprofits hold higher levels of public trust than government institutions, media, or political parties.⁹ They are seen as grounded in community interests, mission-driven, and oriented toward service rather than self-interest.

⁹ Proof Cantrust Index, [2025 CanTrust Index Results Report](#), February 25, 2025.

Examples from [France, Poland, and Ireland](#) illustrate the value of nonprofits in civic resilience.¹⁰ In France, fast political organizing by civil society, supported by philanthropic funds focused on democracy paved a pathway to defeat the far right in the 2024 legislative elections. In Poland, issues organizing around gender and democracy supported by collaborative philanthropists renewed democratic hope. In Ireland through partnerships between civic groups and the government, a widely supported tradition of citizen assemblies was established, successfully dealing with contentious issues such as abortion, gender equality, or drug use.

Unleashing the full potential of nonprofits in the fight to safeguard and reimagine democracy in Canada

Nonprofits are trusted, credible voices on civic resilience. We have the opportunity - and responsibility - to ensure everyone we serve knows their civic power. Even with limited resources and capacity, during an uncertain time, nonprofits are stepping up to safeguard and reimagine democracy off the side of their desks. There are significant opportunities to support existing work, scale up efforts in a systematic manner, and thus create a well-nurtured ecosystem of civic resilience and thus democracy.

Advancing civic engagement

During election cycles at all levels of government, nonprofits are educating communities, especially hard to reach, those distrustful of institutions, and equity-denied communities, about upcoming elections, [encouraging more](#), and [diverse](#), people to run for office, hosting candidates events (debates and forums), publishing candidate and [party platform](#) research, educating on [voting processes](#), providing election day support, and launching [get-out-the-vote campaigns](#) using newsletters, [social media](#), [community meetings](#), service interactions, and trusted messengers to keep [voting visible and accessible](#).

As institutions that are embedded in the communities they serve, nonprofits are uniquely positioned to advance civic engagement. They speak the language of their constituents, understand local barriers, whether transportation, language access, disability accommodations, voter ID confusion, or simple distrust born of past exclusion. Nonprofits can normalize voting as part of community life, framing it as a

¹⁰ Philanthropy Europe Association, [Democracy Briefer for Funders : What's Happening to European Democracy and What Funders Can Do About It](#), 2025.

shared responsibility which is not about telling people who to vote for, but rather reminding communities that their vote matters and working to counter disinformation and misinformation.

According to [U.S.-based research](#), voting reinforces a virtuous cycle of community engagement as compared to nonvoters, voters are more likely to volunteer. According to [Nonprofit VOTE](#), prospective voters contacted by nonprofits about voting are 10 percentage points more likely to vote than those who are not.

Fostering participatory and deliberative democracy

Participatory democracy enables communities to make the decisions that impact their lives, together with government, and nonprofits as the bridge between. Already, nonprofits are advancing [participatory budget making](#) by turning community needs into budget proposals at all levels of government and [participatory policy-making](#) by channeling what's happening on the ground to advocate for public policy change.

Scaling these methods in breadth and depth and implementing other tried and tested methods like [citizens juries and assemblies](#) and [legislative theater](#) are possible with nonprofits, when they are adequately resourced.

Combatting misinformation and disinformation

Nonprofits are tackling misinformation and disinformation, leveraging their role as trusted intermediaries in communities. They are creating tools and resources to help voters [understand and recognize](#) misinformation and disinformation, and educate them on how to find good sources of information, how to fact check, and how to identify bots. Nonprofits are filling the data voids with [accurate content](#), including briefing notes, blogs, and factsheets.

Advancing public policy for the public benefit

In ONN's 2025 [State of the Sector survey](#), 59 per cent of respondents reported that it's important for their nonprofit organization to increase its level of participation in public

policy dialogue.¹¹ In the same survey, 93 per cent of respondents identified engaging in activities that could constitute lobbying, such as meeting with government officials.¹²

We all benefit from a strengthened voice for nonprofits in our democracy. Nonprofit organizations typically engage in public policy discussions to share frontline knowledge about community needs and program impacts. Through consultations, policy dialogue, and participation in advisory processes, nonprofit organizations provide governments with practical insights drawn from their work in communities across the country.

As lobbying laws centre more administration and/or threats of investigation, the more the sector faces an advocacy chill that is difficult to shrug off. As a result communities loose out on a critical bridge between themselves and public policy making.

Participating in institutional reform

Evaluating institutional reform can be supported by nonprofits, and many nonprofits are currently advocating and building awareness of institutional reform. Nonprofits and grassroots groups have historically been integral to encouraging the expansion of democratic rights and representation through institutional reform. Nonprofits are partners in institutional reform, and can share insights from their communities and, in turn, disseminate changes or updates to their communities.

Grassroots campaigns advocate for reforms like [proportional representation](#). And, nonprofits have been advocating for lowering the minimum [voting age](#), which would lead to better representation of [young people](#) and their interests.

Nonprofits are integral to ensuring civic participation and in addressing the ongoing evolution of our democratic future. Traditional and long-standing democratic institutions must evolve to continue to meet the needs of their communities and nonprofits are partners in this work. Globally, including in [Australia](#), [Europe](#), and the [U.S.](#), nonprofits are seen as partners in both defending democracy and transforming democracies to continually improve and meet the needs of citizens.

Recommendations

¹¹ Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), [2025 Ontario State of the Sector - 2025 Data Tables](#), October 15, 2025. Ontario State of the Sector.

¹² Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), [2025 Ontario State of the Sector - 2025 Data Tables](#), October 15, 2025. Ontario State of the Sector.

Public policy that enables nonprofits to lean into their role in activating a thriving democracy will ensure the symbiosis continues between a vibrant democracy and engaged communities.

1. Nonprofits must be part and parcel of any national civic resilience strategy.

Develop a national civic resilience strategy to strengthen civic participation and rebuild social trust. Backed by strong political will and financial resources, such a strategy should centre the agency of the people and bring together national and provincial governments, civil society, academic institutions, cultural leaders, and the private sector to support the institutions and networks sustaining civic life.

2. Establish a non-partisan Canadian democracy fund.

To truly address the pressing civic needs of Canadians, thoughtful investment is needed in the chronically underfunded civil society organizations, like nonprofits, that are doing load-bearing work to shore up Canadian democracy. ONN supports the calls for a Canadian democracy endowment, of at least \$20 million per year for five years, that is a permanent, non-partisan, arm's-length funding mechanism that helps to sustainably support Canada's civic resilience. Over time, this investment should grow into a permanent Canadian democracy endowment, providing stable funding for democratic infrastructure that outlasts any single government. More than 130 leaders from across Canada have endorsed this proposal.

3. Ensure low-barrier nonprofit advocacy.

The statutory review of the Lobbying Act (LA) is currently underway, the results of which could potentially cause a nonprofit advocacy chill for years to come, negatively impacting Canada's civic resilience and the role of nonprofits in our democratic systems. The recommendations below balance the need for transparency and accountability with the need to ensure there is limited administrative burden on nonprofits and to prevent an advocacy chill:¹³

- Return the minimum threshold of lobbying activities to the more meaningful 32 hours in a four-week period rather than the incidental 8 hours a month.
- ONN strongly endorses recommendation 4 of the Commissioner of Lobbying to carve-out routine communications with government to apply

¹³ Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), [Submission on the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics](#), March 20, 2026.



for grants and contributions by stating that it is not mischaracterized as lobbying for the award of a grant or contribution under s.5(1)(a)(v).

- Exempt public benefit nonprofit corporations from any requirement to register volunteer corporate directors as lobbyists.
- Do not add costly compliance measures such as the requirement to register each separate grassroots lobbying effort in detail.
- Clarify the treatment of coalition and sector-wide advocacy.

Conclusion

ONN is the independent nonprofit network for the over 58,000 nonprofits and charities in Ontario. We are focused on policy, advocacy, and services to strengthen the sector as a key pillar of our society and economy.

Our work alongside partners in civil society in every Canadian community is integral to civic resiliency, and the ongoing work of reinforcing and reimagining our democracy and democratic systems.

Please let us know if you have any questions. We are available to clarify any part of our submission.

Sincerely,

Pamela Uppal-Sandhu
Director of Policy, Co-Executive Director (Interim)
Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN)