

Democratic Action → Fund

CONCEPT NOTE | Autumn 2022

Democracy is at a crossroads. Greater polarization between people, populism that erodes confidence in public institutions and a deeper pessimism about the future is putting our democratic system at risk.

Across most western democracies, disengagement from political processes and civic life is rising. According to the Pew Research Centre, over four-fifths of Americans do not believe that there is an adequate system in Congress to hear the voices of the people and an overwhelming majority of the citizens in developed countries do not believe that elected officials care what ordinary people think.

Many urgent reforms are needed to address the challenges democracies face. Electoral systems need to be upgraded for the twenty-first century. Political parties need to reach out across the whole of society. The corrosive effects of big money and a culture of constant campaigning needs to be tamed.

But strengthening our ‘everyday’ democracy — how people learn, build communities and interact with their elected representatives and public institutions in the space between elections — also provides an important path to renewal.

Vibrant, active everyday democracies are the bedrock on which engaged electoral democracies are built and sustained. This is why we need to invest in civic dialogue and expand the opportunities available for people to participate more meaningfully in policy decisions that shape their lives. Democratic Action Funds (DAFs) provide a mechanism to do this.

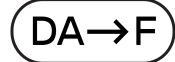
Democratic Action Funds work by providing public resources to processes that engage residents in meaningful ways to address local, regional, and national challenges and which deepen democratic culture.

DAF processes make it possible for residents to closely examine an issue and make consensus recommendations which public authorities can follow. These deliberative processes — often called citizens’ assemblies, citizens’ juries or reference panels — have been replicated hundreds of times in different jurisdictions around the world. The OECD has identified more than 600 similar programs which have taken place in the past decade alone.

These processes matter because they provide valuable advice to decision-makers while also providing members of the public with the space to express their views and practice democratic skills like problem-solving and consensus-building. They tap into the public's skills, insights and concerns and deepen the role people play in a democratic society.

We believe that healthy societies invest in programs that enhance the democratic fitness of its citizens and residents. Like any other skill or way of thinking, democratic skills and mindsets must be practiced. Just as we need to stretch our bodies and our minds, we need opportunities to exercise our voice, perspective and judgment and experience a sense of personal and collective efficacy. When implemented at scale, these processes help to deepen a society's democratic commitments and culture.

This is why a global consortium of organizations focussed on strengthening democracy is asking governments to commit to more active and meaningful engagement with citizens by establishing Democratic Action Funds (DAFs).



We [must] give citizens' panels the time and resources to make recommendations before we present key legislative proposals. Because I am convinced that democracy does not end with elections, conferences or conventions. It needs to be worked on, nurtured and improved every day. — Ursula von der Leyen, President, European Commission

HOW THEY WORK

Democratic Action Funds are administered by arm's length trusts which each year receive a budget allocation equal to five percent of the cost of running elections in that jurisdiction — be it national, regional, local. Government departments, public agencies and lower order governments can apply to the Fund to receive matching grants in support of high-quality participatory and deliberative initiatives which address specific policy questions or concerns. The Fund also maintains expertise in the design and delivery of good deliberative and participatory processes, and conducts independent research and evaluation to ensure that its investments produce results.

Democratic Action Funds help to unlock tens of thousands of volunteer hours to support the work of government and community decision-making by providing a sustainable mechanism for enabling high-quality public engagement across the whole of government.

COUNTRY SNAPSHOT: CANADA

What would a DAF look like? In 2021, Canadian federal elections cost approximately \$600 million to plan, oversee and administer. With a Canadian Democratic Action Fund in place, \$30 million would be allocated to the DAF each year. This would make it possible to

provide 112 grants of around \$250,000 each year while retaining \$2 million to fund research and administration. If 112 citizens' assemblies were funded, engaging 50 residents each, this investment would reach approximately 1.1 million households, create engagement opportunities for almost 5,600 Canadians and return approximately 224,000 volunteer hours dedicated to public problem-solving each year.

By supporting government-initiated citizens' deliberation and dialogue, DAFs create vibrant democracies between elections that provide governments with citizen support and citizens with a seat at the policy-making table. Over time, DAFs foster an environment that promotes citizen representatives active in everyday democratic engagement, who:

- Are informed about social and political issues at the local and national level;
- Build consensus and social cohesion by promoting greater understanding and tolerance of different perspectives;
- Represent a diversity of views and include marginalized groups that are often overlooked and struggle to be heard
- Co-create recommendations that address sticky and timely public problems; and,
- Strengthen the legitimacy and relevance of representative democracy.

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GLOBAL MOMENTUM

The 'deliberative wave' continues to grow and change how democracy is done in many jurisdictions. Early experiments, as in Ireland, have led to large-scale national exercises. Their success is now being codified in new structures that provide citizens' with a voice in policy-making.

From the Citizens' Commission in East Belgium, to the hybrid deliberative committees in the French-Brussels Parliament, to the Citizens' Council of the City of Paris to the German Bundestag Citizens' Assembly, new democratic innovations continue to emerge that complement and strengthen representative democracy. "We have much to learn from citizens," says Leon Eckert, a member of the German Bundestag. "Ultimately," added Helge Lindh, another member, "we see this as strengthening democracy."

DAFs will accelerate the pace of innovation and equalize opportunities for engagement across jurisdictions making it possible for more responsive democratic processes to evolve.

Democratic Action Funds strengthen the connection between citizens and their representatives, provide meaningful voice to citizens, create greater buy-in and legitimacy in solving pressing public problems, generate stronger policy outcomes, and enhance public trust in democratic institutions.

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q. What is a Democratic Action Fund?

A Democratic Action Fund is a grant-making fund established by governments to invest in citizen problem-solving and dialogue. Democratic Action Funds help to ensure strong and meaningful public participation in the work of governments and public agencies as they tackle public challenges and reform policy in between elections.

Q. How does a Democratic Action Fund work?

A Democratic Action Fund is administered by an arm's length trust which each year receives five percent of the cost of running a national, regional or municipal election. Government departments, public agencies and sub-national governments apply to the fund to receive grants in support of high-quality deliberative initiatives such as citizens' assemblies, public problem-solving panels addressing regulatory, parliamentary, or constitutional issues.

While the scope of initiatives is meant to support non-electoral processes, in some cases, deliberative innovations might be combined with referenda to engage the larger public on important policy measures.

Q. Why are these Funds essential?

By combining commitment with action, Democratic Action Funds are an important response to the challenges faced by democracies around the world. They create more seats at more tables for citizens and provide the resources necessary to engage residents in shaping the policies that shape their lives. By tapping into the capabilities of people we can ensure public institutions are more responsive to public concerns and rebuild trust.

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Q. How many people would be engaged?

Democratic Action Funds will unlock hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours to help solve policy challenges. Here's how this might work: in Canada, as an example, the cost of running the 2021 national election was approximately \$600 million. With a Democratic Action Fund in place, \$30 million would be allocated to the Fund each year. This would make it possible to make approximately 140 grants of around \$200,000 each year while retaining \$2 million to fund research and administration. 140 Citizens' Assemblies, with an average size of 48 members, would reach 1.4 million households and create service opportunities for almost 7,000 Canadians, returning 268,000 hours of voluntary time dedicated to public sector problem solving and trust-building

Q. Can regional and local governments create Democratic Action Funds too?

Yes. Any jurisdiction can establish a Democratic Action Fund and use the funds to invest in civic dialogue and deliberation.

Q. What kinds of initiatives qualify for support?

Evidence suggests that deliberative initiatives and collective decision making are best for solving sticky societal problems and the allocation of resources.

Democratic Action Fund grants are made to government departments and public agencies to principally support deliberative initiatives like Citizens' Assemblies and Reference Panels but they may also be used to support public dialogues, participatory budgeting, or other initiatives that seek to advise governments by helping residents to learn from one another, share their perspectives, and find common ground.

While the scope of initiatives is meant to supplement electoral processes, in some cases, deliberative innovations might be combined with referenda to engage the larger public on important policy measures.

Q. How can I help?

You can help spread the word about Democratic Action Funds by talking with local, regional or national politicians, writing an opinion piece in your local newspaper or promoting the concept using our social media tools.

Q. How can I contact you to learn more?

You can reach the DAF team by sending an email to outreach@demafund.org. We are always happy to speak with democracy organizations, researchers as well as public officials and elected officials who are interested in learning more about the DAF concept.

