

OTHER VOICES: Democracy deserves a discussion

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In the middle of this federal election the state of our democracy may be on your mind.

Perhaps you are like me: you want democracy not only to work but to work well.

After all, there's a tangible impact on our lives about how well our democracy functions.

Is my daily commute smooth and enjoyable or an exercise in frustration?

How's childcare working for your family?

Do I have confidence there will be meaningful job opportunities for me when I finish my post-secondary education?

Will I be able to afford to live in my community?

How are we as Canadians represented in world affairs and how do we as a country react to events in other parts of the world?

What's going on with this crazy weather anyway?

The answers to these questions are all impacted in important ways by how our democracy works.

Living in a democracy, we could of course leave all these questions to those politicians whom we have elected to represent us in government. It is, after all, the job we have given them.

But leaving these questions to the politicians assumes two things. First, we actually voted in an election to choose them. And second, matters of important public policy are best left to elected representatives; once we've voted our democratic duty is done.

I say both these assumptions are false.

We know for a fact that voter turnout is on the decline to the point that in the 2011 federal election two out of every five eligible voters in Canada declined to vote.

North Shore voters do a little better on average in turning up to vote than do the rest of Canadians. The North Vancouver electoral district had 66.86 per cent voter turnout in 2011 as compared to 63.29 per cent in West Vancouver – Sunshine Coast – Sea to Sky Country.

Statistics for younger voters are even more troubling. In 2011, only 38.8 per cent of Canadians aged 18-24 voted, with males in this age group voting less (36.9 per cent) than females (40.9 per cent).

Studies suggest young Canadians who are newcomers vote at a rate less than the young Canadians who were born in Canada, raising questions about how to connect new Canadians to public life.

In sum, we need more people to vote in order for our elected representatives to retain their legitimacy as “representing the people.”

But the second assumption (once we vote, our democratic duty is done) is also wrong.

The strength of our democracy is measured not only by how much we vote but how we engage in democratic life between votes. Indeed, the latter is just as important, if not more, than the former to ensuring a robust democratic society.

What can we do to address both of these points (low voter turnout and how we engage in democratic life between elections)? There are lots of possibilities. Possibilities that we are exploring right now at our Democracy Café workshops.

Democracy Café is an opportunity for all North Shore residents (whether you are younger or older, new to Canada or have lived here all your life) to come together to discuss these and other important issues about how our democracy works.

The Democracy Café is happening at five locations on the North Shore until Oct. 8.

A healthy Canadian democracy depends on your participation. Please join us.

Murray Mollard is the executive director of the North Shore Community Resources Society. NSCR along with North Shore libraries and Parkgate Community Centre are hosting the Democracy Café.

What are your thoughts? Send us a letter via email by clicking [here \(http://www.nsnews.com/opinion/send-us-a-letter\)](http://www.nsnews.com/opinion/send-us-a-letter) or post a comment below.

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