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MORRIS J. WOSK
CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE

“Building Community Democracy”

Review of the 2020 Responsive Neighbourhood Small Grants

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EXEC SUMMARY

Neighbourhood Small Grants (NSG) offer \$500 to community members to hold any activity or event that they believe will help build community in their local area. Since 1999, the program has grown each year and now involves communities across British Columbia. Created, supported and promoted by the Vancouver Foundation, the program has produced countless projects, friendships, and activities that promote neighbourhood belonging and joy amongst its participants.

The Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative at the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue wanted to find out if participation in the NSG program affected project leaders' social capital (human networks), participation in democratic engagement, and motivation to create change.

“I like to think that the work I’m doing is building community democracy. I don’t really believe in top-down democracy, and I don’t believe there’s many systems on the planet right now that are actually working as a true democracy. I can’t affect that, but I can affect my community and hope that my community meets your community, and your community meets the next community. Then if something goes wrong—worse than COVID—there’s now a network we can call on to keep moving forward.”

We found:

Participating in the 2020 Neighbourhood Small Grants did not change how project leaders reported their community participation, or the number of people they knew in their neighbourhood.

We found that 86% of NSG survey participants participate at least somewhat often in their neighbourhood, and 95% know at least a few of their neighbours well enough to ask for help if they need it. This did not change as a result of the 2020 program.

The more social capital and community participation a project leader reported, the more likely they were to have positive views on democracy.

NSG leaders participating in their neighbourhood are also more likely to believe voting gives them a say in how the government runs things. NSG leaders that participate more frequently are also more likely to trust elections, civil servants and journalists than those that participate less often in their neighbourhood.

Project leaders tended to have reciprocal relationships in their communities that made them feel like they belong.

They described serendipitous conversations and supporting one another as significant in this regard. These findings suggest that acting locally, feeling belonging and supporting one another all correspond to stronger levels of democratic engagement and commitment.



Some participants did not see a connection between their project work and democracy.

This disconnect appeared to be rooted primarily in participants' perception of democracy as synonymous with government or institutions and disconnected from grassroots community participation. These participants tended to also have a negative perception of politics.

Participants who linked their project work and democracy identified common values and the empowerment of individuals as the connection between the two.

Participants cited democratic values of inclusion, equity, personal choice, and individual freedom as part of their projects. They also made connections to citizen-led change as key to democracy.

Interviews with project leaders identified the Neighborhood Small Grant Sweet Spot: four attributes and two outcomes that help motivate people to create change in their communities.

Neighbourhood Small Grant project leaders are able to 1) identify issues they care about and 2) connect their response to the issue with something that brings them joy. They 3) embrace the opportunity through an attitude that encourages trying something new and 4) use the grant funds to expand on their own previously developed skills and capacities. As outcomes, project leaders reported increased confidence and positive feedback as motivators for future community involvement.

BACKGROUND

Neighbourhood Small Grants

Neighbourhood Small Grants (NSG) is a grassroots grantmaking program administered by the Vancouver Foundation. The program helps build community and strengthen connections by providing grants of up to \$500 for individuals with ideas to help connect and engage residents within their neighbourhood. It is guided by six principles that emphasize the program's belief that local community building, knowledge exchange and small projects can transform communities.

The six principles are:

1. Everyone has gifts — using an asset-based community development approach
2. Small is beautiful — believing in the power of small-scale initiatives
3. Local decisions are best — supporting local leadership
4. Where we live matters — maintaining a local, place-based approach
5. We learn together — foster skill-building and knowledge exchange
6. Everyone is invited — create accessibility and inclusion

The Vancouver Foundation partners with qualified organizations to administer the grants to individuals across British Columbia. These organizations are often local community foundations or neighbourhood houses, but any charity may become a NSG partner. While applications are submitted through a central online hub, grants are approved by local Neighbourhood Grant Committees and coordinators based in the applicant's community.

About Us

The Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative explores teaching, learning and community activities that can strengthen democracy. We want to understand and promote what positively influences people's perspectives, understandings and potential commitment to democracy.

Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue works to foster shared understanding and positive action through dialogue and engagement. Since 2000, our staff, fellows, and associates have been leaders in a diversity of fields. These include dialogue, climate solutions, diversity and inclusion, public engagement, deliberative democracy, international security, systems change, decolonization, urban design, sustainable community development and strengthening democracy. To learn more about the Centre's Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative visit: www.democracymdialogue.ca.

METHODS

The Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative wanted to explore the effect of leading a Neighbourhood Small Grant on project leaders’ social capital, democratic engagement and their motivation to create change in their communities. Our evaluation had three phases: a pre-survey, a post-survey, and an interview.

Social Capital: In the survey and interviews, we looked at project leaders’ community participation, familiarity with neighbours and how they described the commonalities and feeling of belonging in their neighbourhoods.

Democratic Engagement: In the survey, we asked project leaders about their opinions on different democratic values and trust in democratic actors and institutions like voting. In the interviews, we asked them about their own definitions of democracy, and whether they saw connections between democracy and their projects.

Motivation for Change: In the interviews, we asked project leaders why they chose to participate and the personal outcomes they experienced. We also analyzed how these leaders described developing their ideas and executing their projects.

Participation in each phase was voluntary for all participants. When project leaders submitted their proposal, they were asked if they would like to receive an invitation to participate in a research study. If they accepted, we emailed them an invitation to the pre-survey. Those that completed the pre-survey were then invited to complete the post-survey. The surveys also asked if participants would like to be invited to an interview. If they accepted, we emailed them an invitation.

Figure 1: Participation

Pre- Survey	Post-Survey	Interviews
298	104	16

Participants’ confidentiality is considered in this report. We have edited quotes to remove gender and identifiable traits, but we do share the location of each project leader and details of their project that may make them identifiable. We did not link the survey responses and the interviews in analysis, and survey results are only reported in aggregate.

Survey Analysis

We developed the survey based on questions we asked in a national democratic opinion poll in 2019 and received approval for the questions from the Vancouver Foundation. Questions focused on participants’ connection to their neighbourhood, community and democratic engagement levels, concerns about Covid-19, feelings of belonging, self-efficacy, and trust in institutions. We completed analysis on the 91 participants who

completed both surveys. When we did not find any statistically significant changes between the pre- and post-surveys, we focused our analysis on the post-survey.

Interview Analysis

We completed 16 Zoom or phone interviews with Neighbourhood Small Grant project leaders. Interview participants lived across British Columbia, mostly from Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley, with a few from the Kootenays and Nicola Valley. Ages ranged from 27 to 75.

First, we conducted a general deductive thematic analysis using our interview questions as a guide. We grouped quotes related to neighbourhood descriptions, what created belonging, outcomes and skills developed by the project, and definitions and connections to democracy. The second round of analysis looked for similarities among the project leaders' responses. We sorted these similarities to find insights to theorize causal relationships in social capital, democratic engagement, and motivation to create change.

Limitations

The Covid-19 pandemic introduced a lot of uncontrolled variables into both people's lives and our evaluation. We believe this report contains some valuable insights, but may not represent all NSG project leaders nor the overall NSG program. We acknowledge three significant limitations:

1. Participation in the evaluation was voluntary, and we did not offer an honorarium or other incentives. Participation in the survey and interviews may have been more attractive to certain kinds of project leaders. Only the perspectives of those who volunteered are reflected in our analysis and may not represent all NSG project leaders.
2. The public health rules during the pandemic also impacted community participation. They may have increased or decreased opportunities to meet neighbours outside of the program.
3. World and local events of 2020 also probably had a significant impact on project leaders' opinions, particularly their relationships with democracy and government. To acknowledge this fact, we have provided a timeline below:

Timeline

STUDY	WORLD EVENTS
March 2020- Mid Application Cycle for Neighbourhood Small Grants	March 2020- Covid-19 shut downs begin Communities participate in 7pm cheers
April/May 2020- Relaunched as Responsive Neighbourhood Small Grants	April/May 2020- B.C. Covid-19 Wave 1 CERB is approved
June- Pre-Survey Invites sent out to rolling applicants	June- restrictions in B.C. begin easing
July - Pre-Survey Invites sent out to rolling applicants	
September- pre-survey invites sent out to rolling applicants	October- B.C. Covid Wave 2 CERB ends
June- December 2020- NSG grant projects happen	November- New B.C. lockdown restrictions begin
January 3-10, 2020- Post Survey completed	January 6, 2021- Attack on US capital
January/February- Interviews	February- B.C. Covid-19 Wave 3

INSIGHTS

When we compared the 91 people who took both the pre- and post-surveys, we found no statistically significant change in social capital, commitment to democracy, trust in democratic systems, democratic values, or participation in democratic engagement activities.

When we analyzed the post-survey and interview results to identify what project leaders had in common, we were able to develop insights about their social capital, democratic engagement and what motivates them to create change in their communities.

NSG and Social Capital

On its website, Neighbourhood Small Grants are described as helping “residents of any age, experience, or background take part in building community.” The grant program is built on the belief that “magic happens when neighbours connect.” Social scientists and theorists call this “magic” social capital. Basically, it is the ability someone has to make something happen based on the qualities and effectiveness of their social networks. The stronger someone’s links to norms, values, and associations that facilitate cooperation among people, the higher their social capital.

We found project leaders believe in this magic and tend to participate often in their communities. We also heard that human connection, casual conversation, and reciprocity help them feel like they belong in their neighbourhoods. They used the NSG projects to increase theirs and others’ social capital through community participation, even if their survey responses showed no change. More importantly, we found their levels of social capital correlate to a stronger belief that Canada is democratic and that Canadians have shared democratic values.

In this section, we explore the similarities among project leaders regarding their social capital. We identify what helps them feel belonging and their higher levels of community participation. We also outline how their levels of social capital connect to Canada’s democracy and democratic values.

Neighbourhood Belonging

During our interviews, we asked participants to describe their neighbourhoods and the people who lived there. We also asked them to answer, “what makes you feel like you belong to their neighbourhood?” Overwhelmingly, interview participants replied by emphasizing the importance of people and relationships rather than architecture, landscape, or other neighbourhood features. Participants described serendipitous encounters and reciprocal relationships with people they knew as core to their feelings of belonging in their neighbourhoods.

For example, one project leader in the Vancouver neighbourhood of Kitsilano told us,

“the way you see that you belong, you walk on the street and you can bump into people that you know. And that is just an incredible feeling. And people ask for help and have a relationship with your neighbours— just being needed and being able to contribute, and also being able to ask someone for help.”



In a more rural community, another project leader described it as,

"Sometimes you don't see each other for a while. You just kind of wave on the road, and then other times, if you're going for a walk, you'll end up chatting. I'm closer with some neighbours, and don't know the other ones as well. I feel like everyone knows everyone else's name, at least and probably a bit more about them. But it's a small town, so it comes with it, living here."

While interview participants shared different stories and encounters, knowing names and chatting with others were core to their feelings of belonging and their social capital.

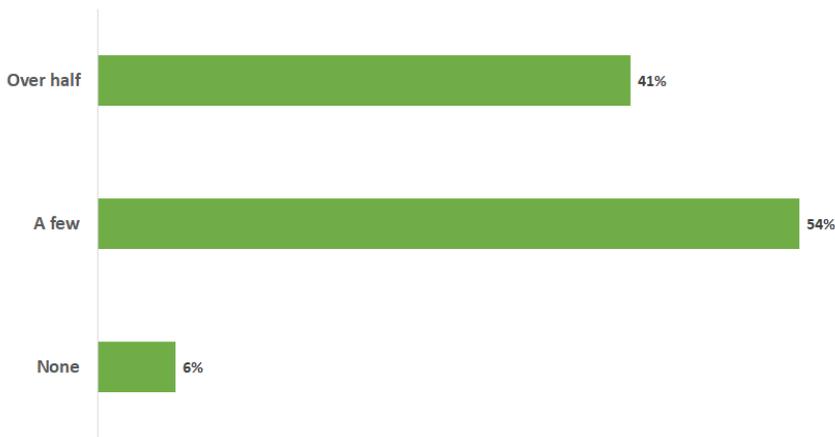
Participants also named reciprocal relationships and shared values as key to feeling like they belong in their neighbourhoods. For example, when we asked a project leader in Tsawwassen about what they had in common with their neighbours. They replied,

"Our neighbour had a fall and went to the hospital, and she called us. When she had surgery, we gave her meals and things. And then she does things for us. She watches who's coming and going. She used to take care of our dog when we went away on longer trips and weren't home. So I think from a values perspective, although we're two different types of people and two different families, I think we have the same values about taking care of people that take care of you."

This project leader wasn't alone. Other participants also described reciprocal relationships that contributed to a sense of belonging in their neighbourhoods, including neighbours running errands for one another or offering different kinds of help.

The survey responses support this association between belonging and reciprocity. For example, Figure 2 displays the percentage of survey participants that know their neighbours well enough to ask for help. The figure demonstrates that 95% of NSG participants know at least a few neighbours well enough to ask for help, with 41% knowing over half their neighbours on this more profound level.

Figure 2 % of neighbours participants know well enough to ask for help if they need it



Feeling comfortable asking a neighbour for help relates to the project leaders' level of social capital and trust in their neighbours. One project leader from southeastern B.C. summarized the relationship between reciprocity and belonging.



"For me, I think, just how I could contribute and also benefit. There's a feeling— this reciprocity— that there was a space for me and I could learn and grow here and that I was supported. And that there were going to be opportunities for me to support others in turn."

Others similarly described having enough trust among neighbours to help fulfill each other's' needs, such as taking care of a pet while one is away. The surveys and the interviews confirmed that their social capital was related to project leaders' sense of reciprocity and belonging in their neighbourhood.

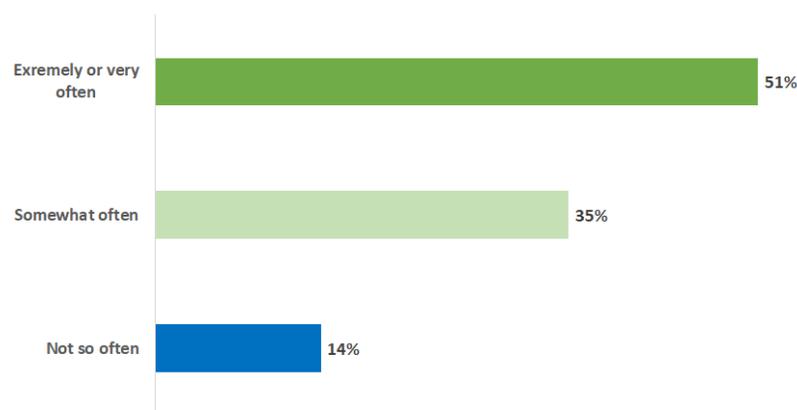
Community Participation

Project leaders also told us they valued community participation and care for their community. A project leader from Kitsilano said it best:

"I care about my community, and I believe that change starts at home and my project was 'get to know your neighbours'— something that I'm very passionate about. People want to connect and contribute. This is just giving them an opportunity. So it wasn't hard. It wasn't an effort. It was just a solution, essentially, to what they've been looking for."

In fact, all 16 of our interview participants named some kind of community participation prior to their NSG project in 2020 and about half had previous experience as a NSG project leader. The survey also showed high rates of community participation among project leaders. Figure 3 shows how often project leaders participated in activities before the Covid-19 pandemic

Figure 3 Before COVID-19, how often did you participate in activities in your neighbourhood?



We found 86% of surveyed project leaders participated at least somewhat often, and over half participated extremely or very often, but the kinds of community participation varied. Some project leaders emphasized their identity as artists and experience organizing shows and performances. Others started non-profits or coordinated events as part of their professional life. A few were very well-known organizers in their communities. Those with children described their involvement in youth activities or sports. Their participation didn't always revolve around their physical neighbourhood. Still, they all shared previous experience participating and coordinating activities and events for their communities.

Project leaders also shared how their grant project helped increase community participation and social capital by creating opportunities for communication. For example, one leader from Surrey described building contact lists during neighbourhood events related to their neighbourhood block watch. They said,

"I was able to update some contact info there, which in turn has allowed us to communicate with each other on that email level. So, yeah, and I think people are more comfortable talking now to everybody else."

Another in Vancouver, who organized sweater mending lessons, described,

"I saw a woman on the street the other day; she said, "oh, I just finished fixing a sweater that I haven't been able to fix before!" And she had a kind of excited about it too. It became like a conversation starter... I think it just made the newer people especially more comfortable being able to come up and talk to us on the street when we can."

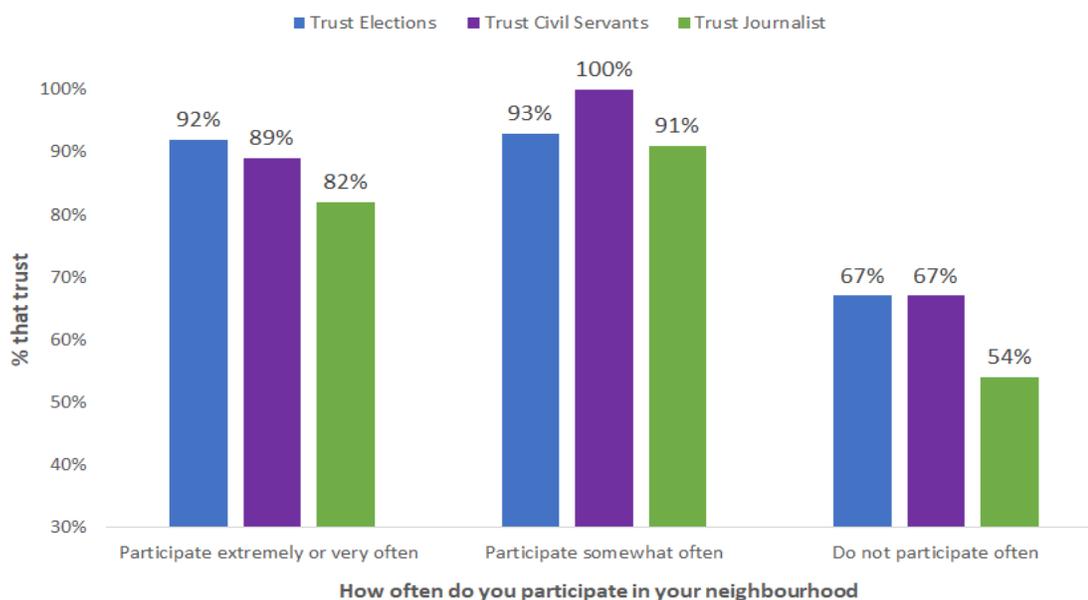
Project leaders valued community participation and created opportunities that inspired future communication. They used and grew their social capital to put on events and build relationships that may lead to future reciprocal actions.

Why Social Capital Matters for Democracy

While our survey findings did not show change over time, the survey results help explain why these social capital and human connections are essential for Canada's democracy. We found evidence that people who were more active in their community, reported stronger relationships and social capital also had more trust in democratic actors and commitment to democratic values.

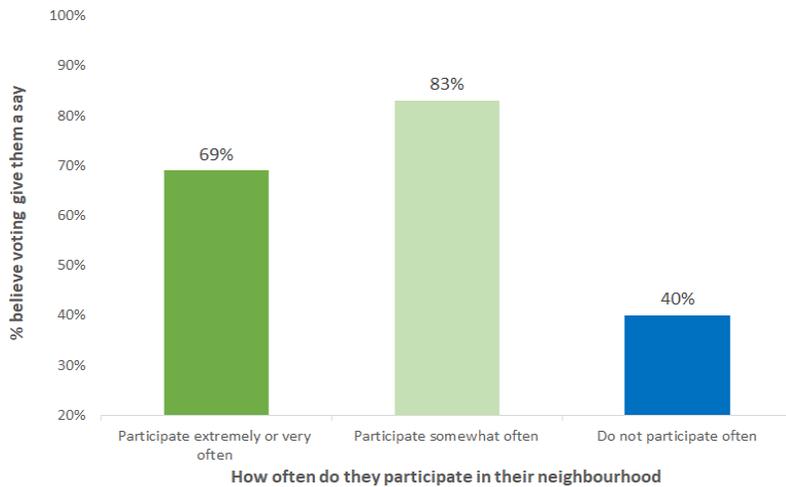
We asked how often project leaders participated in their community to measure aspects of their social capital. Our analysis found a statistically significant relationship between participants' level of neighbourhood participation and their level of trust in some government actors and institutions. For example, Figure 9 shows that survey participants who are more active in their neighbourhood are more likely to trust elections, civil servants, and journalists. Only 67% of participants who were not usually active in their community trust elections or civil servants; 54% trust journalists. In contrast, between 82% and 100% of participants that are somewhat or significantly active in their neighbourhood trust the same actors and institutions.

Figure 4 % that trust each democratic institution or actor based on level of community participation



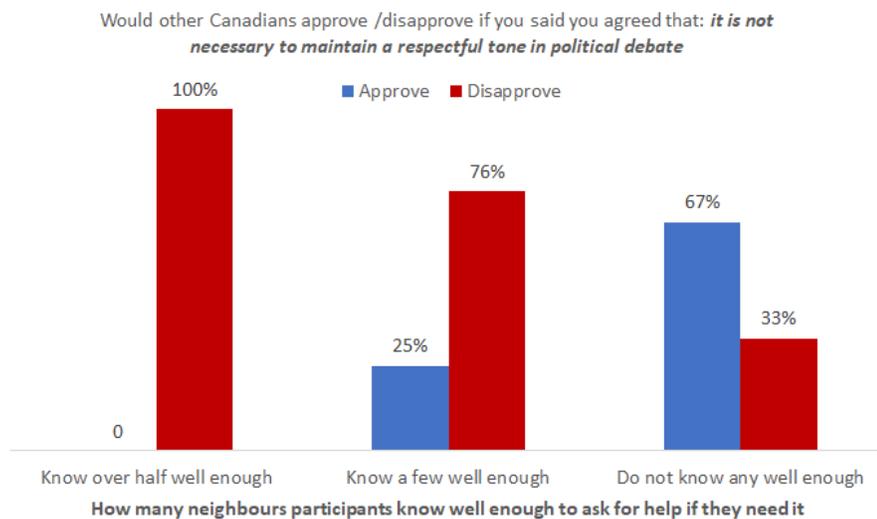
Our analysis also found that, among NSG survey participants, higher levels of engagement correlated to stronger trust in the electoral system. Figure 5 compares survey participants' level of neighbourhood participation and their belief that voting gives them a voice. As we can see, participants with moderate to high levels of involvement felt that voting was much more effective and representative than those who do not participate often.

Figure 5 % that believe voting gives them a voice based on level of community participation



One way we measured social capital was by asking how many neighbours participants knew well enough to ask for help if they needed it. The question quantifies how many trusting and substantial connections participants have in their immediate neighbourhood. The number of people that project leaders knew and could call on for help tended to correlate with participants' view that Canadians share a belief in critical democratic norms and behaviours. For example, Figure 6 illustrates the relationship between social capital and whether it is necessary to maintain a respectful tone in political debate.

Figure 6 How democratic participants view respectful tone in political debate based on level of social capital

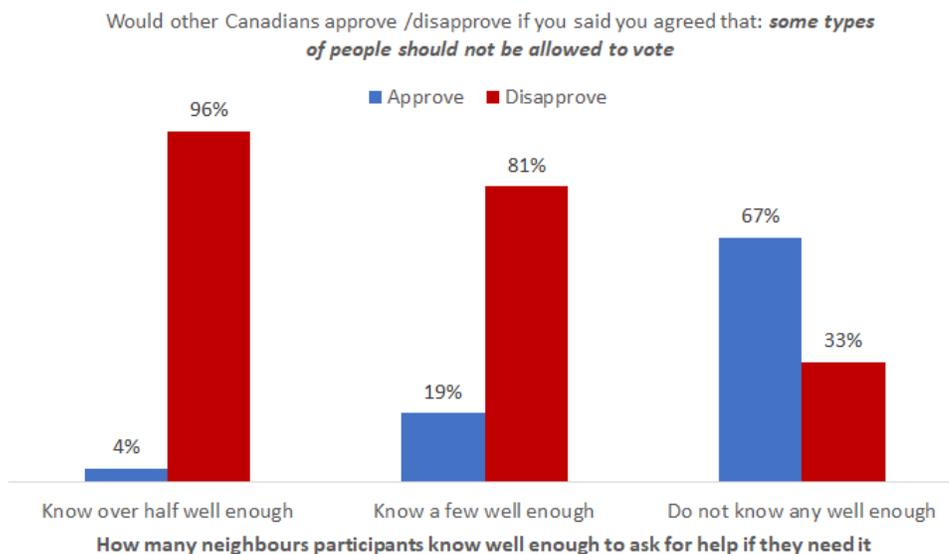


All participants who said they know over half their neighbours also said they believed other Canadians would agree it is essential to maintain a respectful tone in debate. In contrast, two-thirds of participants that do not have any strong connections believed other Canadians wouldn't disagree with the same statement. Basically, we found a linear relationship. The more people project leaders felt they could ask for help, the more likely they were to believe Canada has shared democratic norms of behaviour.

Norms of democratic behaviour matter because a lot of our guidelines for democratic decision-making do not exist in written law. Norms are the unwritten rules or social standards that shape behaviour. They are beliefs and models of behaviour that are crafted or eroded over time. While our findings cannot suggest that robust social connections and social capital cause strong belief in democratic norms, the linear associations point to their importance.

In addition to behavioural democratic norms, we also asked about Canada's shared democratic values, such as the right to vote. Figure 7 depicts this relationship. In the survey, 96% of participants with stronger neighbourly connections were more likely to assume other Canadians would also disapprove of this statement. However, 67% of participants who did not know anyone well enough to ask for help thought other Canadians would agree that some people should not be allowed to vote.

Figure 7 How democratic participants view the right to vote based on level of social capital



Again, there is a linear relationship between how many people project leaders knew and whether or not they believed Canadians had shared democratic norms and values.

These findings suggest that the stronger their relationships and social capital, the stronger their trust in democracy and belief we have shared democratic norms and codes of conduct. From our survey responses and interviews we found project leaders' participation in reciprocal relationships seems to align with participants' opinions of democracy. These findings suggest that acting locally, feeling belonging and supporting one another all have ties to democratic engagement and commitment to core democratic values.

NSG and Democratic Engagement

It is common for people to think of democracy as a political system characterized by institutions and the mechanics of government. They think of formalized processes to influence decision-makers, such as elections, referendums, and representative politicians. However, democratic engagement can also mean building bridges between people and communities, creating opportunities for social change, practicing values of inclusion and more. While the latter kind of engagement may not be political, it plays a pivotal role in strengthening communities and interpersonal bonds that serve as the bedrock of a vibrant and resilient democracy.¹

As part of our evaluation, we wanted to know if participating in NSG affected project leaders' interest in democratic engagement. Therefore, we asked about project leaders' intentions to participate in more traditional forms of democratic engagement. We also gathered stories of bridge-building and engagement in local change-making. Our findings show that project leaders tend to be more interested than the general population in both forms of democratic engagement.

While our participants express greater interest and aptitude in democratic engagement, our evaluation findings also suggest why democratic renewal is difficult. Some struggled to draw connections to democracy because of their poor opinions of government and politics. Yet, others could draw strong connections between their experiences and the grant program's relationship to democracy. The mixed views of our participants provide insight into challenges and opportunities for democratic renewal.

Our interview findings suggest the positive experiences in the NSG align with what people believe are good democratic values. This points to openings for further work towards democratic renewal. This section will unpack this opportunity by identifying what participants in our survey and interviews have in common and exploring the connections participants made between NSG and democracy. First, we share survey findings on what kinds of people tend to participate in NSG and how their interest in democratic engagement generally compares to Canadians. Then we explore how participants in our interviews drew connections or resisted the relationship between their project, the program and democracy.

Profile of our survey participants compared to average Canadians

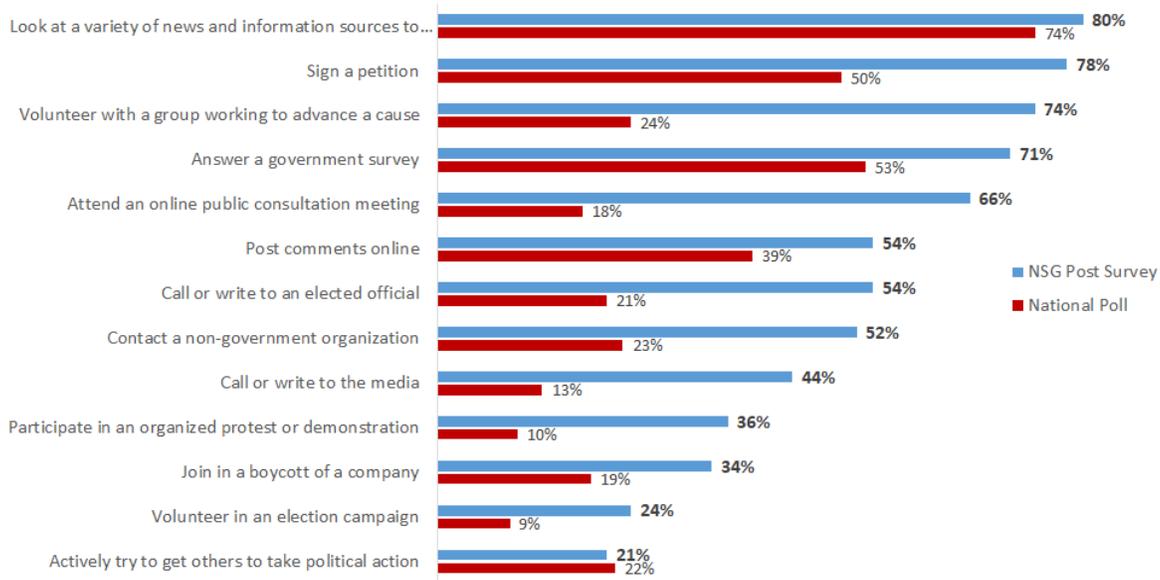
As mentioned earlier, our survey results did not demonstrate that participation in the small grants program increased or decreased participants' democratic engagement. Participants reported similar responses to the questions in our pre-survey and our post-survey. Then we looked at the results of our post-survey compared to the questions and results of the Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative's 2019 national opinion poll on democracy. What we found may suggest that NSG participants tended to have more interest in democratic engagement than average Canadians.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we asked NSG participants their intention to participate in democratic engagement in the next year. We then looked at the national averages from the national poll from a similar question that asked if participants had experienced different forms of engagement in the last 12 months. While these two questions are not directly comparable, the results suggest a high level of interest among the NSG project leaders. Figure 8 compares responses to similar questions in the NSG post-survey to those collected in

¹ Talisse, Robert. 2019. *Overdoing Democracy*. London: Oxford Press

the SFU Centre for Dialogue’s representative national poll in 2019 about participation in different kinds of democratic engagement.

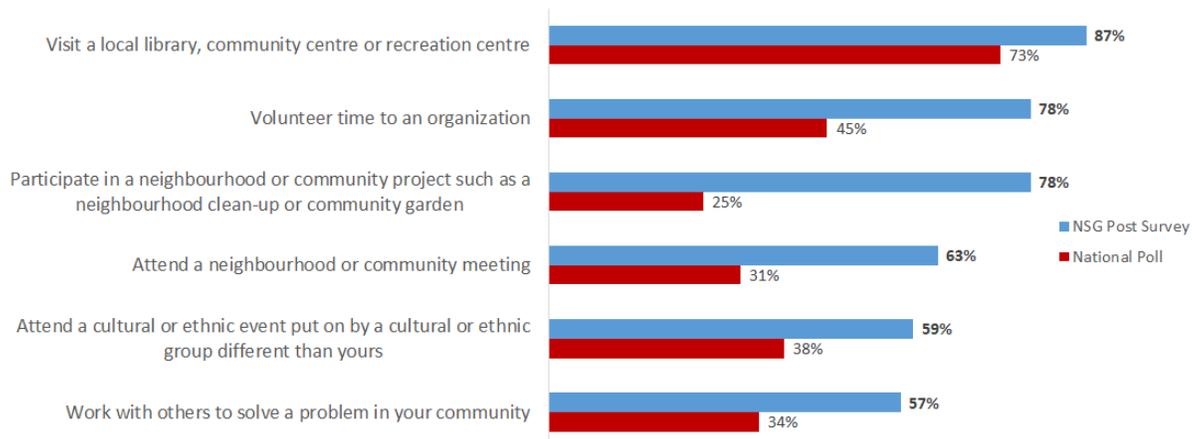
Figure 8 % that in the next 12 months would consider doing each of the following activities



While intent is different from actual action, results may suggest NSG survey participants generally have a strong interest in democratic participation. They report a strong intention to participate in passive activities like signing a petition and more active democratic exercises like attending a public consultation or participating in a protest or demonstration.

Our survey also asked about project leaders' intent to participate in different kinds of community-based democratic activities. We compared the answers to the 2019 national poll question about community activity participation in the last 12 months. Again, the questions are different and cannot be compared directly. Figure 9 compares responses to similar questions in the NSG post-survey to those collected in the SFU Centre for Dialogue’s representative national poll in 2019.

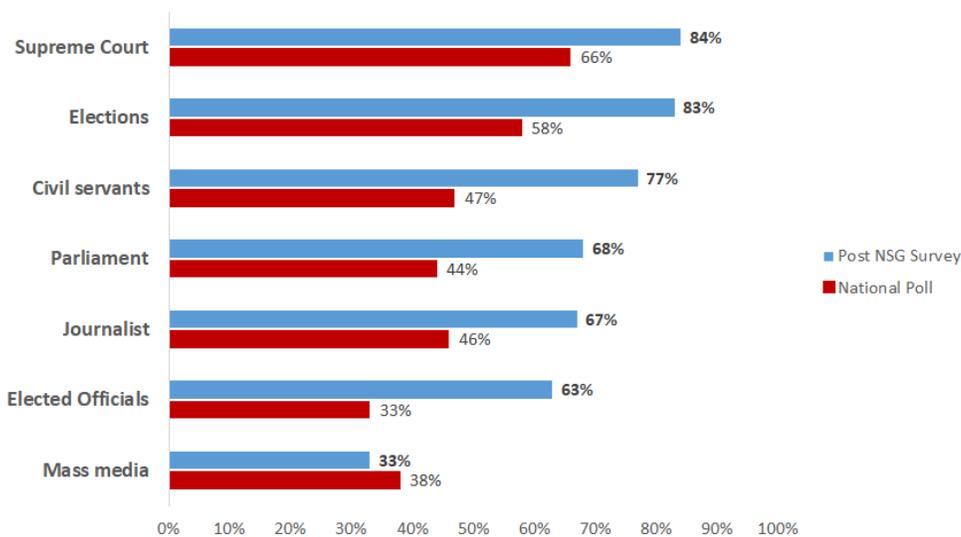
Figure 9 % that in the next 12 months would consider doing each of the following activities



Again, findings show a strong intent among the NSG project leaders and may suggest NSG survey participants are more likely to be interested in their community than most. NSG survey participants show extreme interest in volunteering for an organization, attending a community meeting and participating in a neighbourhood project compared to the national average of those who did these same activities in 2019. This implies that those who are likely to participate in the NSG project are probably more likely to be enthusiastic about their respective communities.

NSG project leaders also share a stronger level of trust for democratic actors than national averages. We compared the same questions in the national opinion poll to the NSG post-survey results. Figure 10 shows that project leaders reported a higher level of trust in all democratic actors and institutions, other than the mass media, compared with most Canadians in 2019.

Figure 10 % of participants that trust each democracy actor/institution



NSG survey respondents tended to have significantly more prior experience with engagement than the average Canadian. However, survey results did not demonstrate any significant change in how participants answered questions related to their commitment to democracy, trust in democratic systems or values. It also did not impact participation in democratic engagement activities linked to their involvement in NSG. However, our results imply a positive relationship between active engagement in one's community and participation, belief and trust in democratic institutions and processes more broadly.

Democratic Disconnects

The results of our surveys and interviews suggest NSG project leaders were significantly more involved in community and democratic engagement than most Canadians. However, our interviews also revealed a surprising trend: several participants did not see or were confused by the suggestion of a possible connection between their work and democracy.

The participants we interviewed had a range of experiences with NSG and did projects representing different amounts of collaborative effort. About half of those interviewed had never done an NSG project before. Some first-timers and returning project leaders did collaborative projects such as creating learning circles for sharing expertise or events that brought people together. In contrast, others did efforts that they could do

alone such as distributing flowers or re-distributing food. We found no pattern in who could make connections to democracy based on the nature of their project.

Instead, we found the disconnect was often rooted in whether project leaders thought of democracy as primarily a formal, procedural system. They saw less connection between NSG and democracy if they thought of democracy as only a political system that citizens interact with via institutions and formalized processes. For example, the participant from Southeastern B.C. struggled to answer the question of connection, and then attempted to relate NSG to democracy by referencing the funding structure of the Vancouver Foundation.

"Connecting to democracy. Hmm. Well, I don't know how to put that. I mean, it's just one thing that the political party in power, I guess, is allowing the funding for. I don't know where the Vancouver Foundation money comes from. Is it a government source?"

In the interview, this participant struggled to see the connection and linked democracy to funding structures, making an incorrect guess that the funding for the grant project might have come from a government source.

Others also struggled when they tended to view democracy as a synonym for government. For example, one participant from southern B.C. expressed that they felt they could only participate democratically through electoral politics, saying,

"I do get out. I always get out and vote. But to me it's just, like I say, having the right to express yourself and having the right to choose, and I don't really know how to express myself other than that."

Both examples illustrate how project leaders struggled to connect community-based projects with a broader conception of democracy.

For other participants, the disconnect between NSG and democracy was rooted in negative perceptions of politics and Canada's governing structures. For example, the project leader from Tsawwassen felt that 'democracy' was a tainted concept, representing a broken system. This project leader offered the following insight:

"I think there's a feeling that the democratic process of people having the ability to choose has somehow been perverted. So you don't feel in control of your choices anymore."

Another project leader, this time from Vancouver, expressed similar disillusionment with electoral politics by saying,

"Communities pretend to be democratic. But the structure isn't actually very democratic. Yeah, so to me true democracy means that people have equitable access to decision making and power. I don't know anywhere where that actually happens."

While this participant made a reference to the democratic value of equity, they didn't feel that this aspirational value was a reality for Canada's democracy. They thus struggled to make the connection between NSG and democracy.

Our survey results demonstrate that NSG participants tended to be more engaged already when compared to the average Canadian citizen. However, despite this, some participants saw democracy as exclusively

procedural or had negative opinions of politics more generally, which led to their viewing NSG as utterly distinct from democracy.

Opportunity for Democratic Renewal

Those who did see connections between democracy and NSG appealed to specific democratic values. They still saw a difference between community building and democracy, but could draw connections between the two. They believed democracy is strengthened by community projects like those made possible by NSG. These connections suggest how project leaders are participating in democratic renewal.

The democratic value of inclusion was one factor that project leaders used to connect NSG and democracy. The grant's relatively low barriers to participation resonated with project leaders as reflecting the vital democratic principles of equity and inclusion. This was exemplified by the following insights from the project leader from Southeastern B.C.:

"For me, it really comes down to [NSG] taking away any sort of barrier. I mean, so many people have computers or have access to one or would know someone that they could go to for Internet for the day or whatever. And so that being like the only sort of tool required, it was just kind of like anyone could feel free to sign up. And I think that at the heart of a good democracy is that there's this equality no matter your background and your race, gender, ethnicity, all that sort of stuff. That things are equally distributed or available. "

In this example, they make a connection between NSG and the values that constitute "the heart of a good democracy."

Other interview participants made values-based connections between NSG and democracy by referring to the values of individual freedom and personal choice. For example, one project leader from the Greater Vancouver Area highlighted this connection by noting the creative freedom that NSG had allowed them:

"Neighbourhood small grants give people the liberty and the option. The grant program didn't tell me, 'oh, you must provide a movie night.' They gave lots of options. They left it up to us, you know. They gave us our own authority to choose how we wanted to do it."

This connection between NSG, democracy and individual freedom was referenced multiple times by interview participants. For example, another participant from Vancouver drew a relationship between democracy and personal choice:

"People can choose what they want to share with others. It's a complete democracy. And then you can pick and choose what you want to learn and attend. It gives people more choice, I think."

Project leaders valued the empowerment of choice and personal agency that they felt is key to both democracy and the grant program.

Another critical area of connection between NSG and democracy that participants identified was empowering citizens to make change. Many of the grant recipients we interviewed expressed that NSG gave project leaders the chance to make a real difference in their communities. For example, one project leader from Vancouver expressed this connection with the following statement:

"If we don't have our own sense of community and we don't bring things to help improve where we live, in our own house or in our own neighbourhood, then we aren't actually making a difference to the



world around us or we don't-- maybe we don't feel we are. So I think having a Neighbourhood Small Grant that brings people together and helps change a community for the better, hopefully most of the time, actually helps people understand that they do have a role in the world around them. And that is democracy. They get to do stuff to make their life better.”

They related a sense of empowerment to what they saw as a central pillar of democracy: people-led change.

Individual empowerment was a theme reflected in the comments of many of our interviewees. For example, another project leader, who is from New Westminster and who also sits on their local grants committee, said the following about the relationship between NSG participants and democracy:

“I feel like they see change. They see something they want to change. And they figure out how to do it. And they-- and we give them the money to do that, right. 'Cause I think democracy isn't just about the status quo. It's about knowing that you can change something, whether it's big or small. So I think that that probably is the core of this. And they have to prove their, you know, justify why they want that money. Yeah, so I think that that, for me, is probably the piece. Normally people just say, oh, I want to do this or I don't want to do this or I want to change things, but I don't know-how. And I think that's the first step in democracy.”

This alignment between democracy and the values embodied in NSG suggests how the grants can support democratic renewal. By increasing people’s awareness of how their activities represent shared democratic values, the grants can create more links between the positive experiences of the projects and leaders' belief in democracy. This can increase the overall, already strong levels of commitment and faith among project leaders and potentially spread that to project participants. It may offer a way to both increase democratic engagement and strengthen communities in the process.

NSG AND MOTIVATION TO CREATE CHANGE

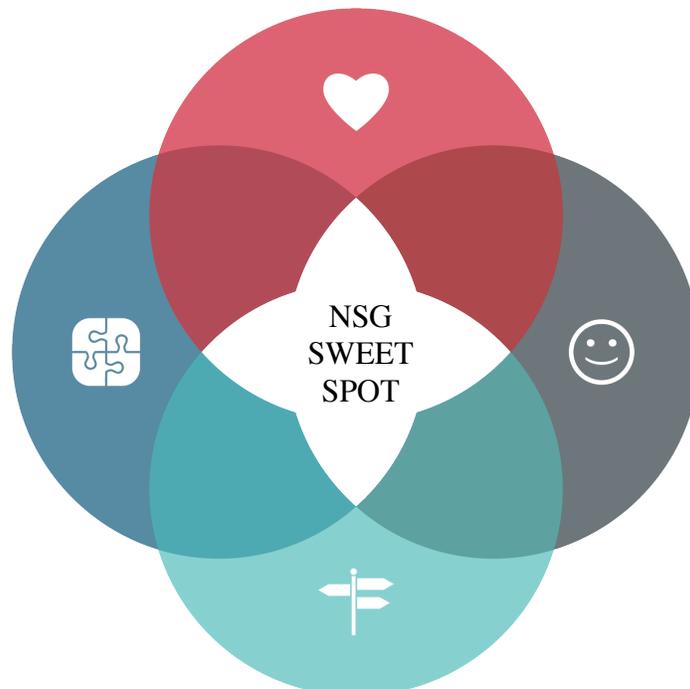
Based on levels of community participation and interest in democratic activities, NSG seems to activate already motivated people in ways that produce change, large and small, in their communities. As discussed in previous sections, 86% of NSG survey participants reported participating "at least somewhat" often in their communities, with that number rising to 100% of interviewees. Thus, this evaluation could not reliably prove that the program alone motivated individuals to create change in their communities. Instead, we heard a list of specific personal attributes and outcomes that helped motivate project leaders. In this section, we describe these attributes as the NSG Sweet Spot and explain how particular outcomes experienced by project leaders help motivate them for future participation in creating change.

NSG Sweet Spot

When we talked with project leaders, we kept hearing the same four attributes over and over again. We call them the Neighbourhood Small Grants Sweet Spot.

-  **Pursue Issue with Vision:** Project leaders were able to identify an issue in their neighbourhood or community that they cared about.
-  **Create Joy:** They were able to connect their response to that issue with something that created joy.
-  **Leverage Existing Skills:** They leveraged their previous skills and knowledge with the opportunities created by the \$500 grant to execute their project.
-  **Encouraged to Try:** Throughout the entire experience, they embraced an attitude that encouraged themselves and others to try something new.

Figure 10 Venn diagram of NSG Sweet Spot





Pursue Issue with Vision

When asked why they chose to participate in the NSG, many began by describing a particular context or issue that mattered to them and their community. They shared what impacted them, what they observed and what they cared about. Project leaders also possessed the ability to envision a solution and propose an idea that might help address the issue. Their interest in these issues and their pursuit of solutions formed the basis of their projects.

For example, one participant in Abbotsford identified with an issue they saw in the community. They told us,

"The community here is an agricultural community, historically. But there's a hunger for more innovative things, new things, research and higher education. There's a lot of younger families moving from Vancouver to this area, so it changes the demographic."

As a recent immigrant, the project leader identified with the newer demographic and shared a hunger for non-agrarian events and topics to discuss. They identified the need for different kinds of programming as an issue in their community and how to help resolve it.

Other project leaders identified issues they cared about that did not directly impact them. For example, a project leader in New Westminster shared,

"I applied for a program with our community policing program to purchase food for our unhoused population— specifically food that is soft— because a lot don't have teeth. I specifically wanted to use the money to help with something that was really dire and that people kind of forgot about."

Even though they were not strongly involved in the unhoused community, they cared about the issue and recognized the small grants as a way they could help.

In Vancouver, another built their project around an issue related to their personal dislikes. They said,

"I hate throwing things away and I don't like shopping. I have clothing here that I know I could do something else with. And I thought, 'what if we all got together; we could inspire each other.' So my neighbour Nancy and I both leapt on it. The idea is to be able to mend or repurpose your own clothing so there'd be less clothing going to the waste site."

They combined their dislike of shopping with the issue of waste. By creating an opportunity to learn how to mend or repurpose clothing, they saw a solution to a problem they cared about that might help others reduce waste as well.

Each project was very different, but all project leaders could identify an issue they cared about and a possible solution. Project leaders share a characteristic that helps them identify and propose solutions to an issue, and use that as a jumping-off point for their projects.



Create Joy

As interview participants described their projects, they often talked about how their responses to issues created personal joy. Most project leaders found joy in particular hobbies and structured their grant projects around those interests. Others found joy in hosting events. Some found joy in knowing they had done something nice for someone else. Project leaders connected their issue-inspired projects to the things that made them happy; a connection that seemed to propel many of the project ideas forward.

For example, a project leader in East Vancouver who participated in a series of concerts in a park, said

“I like performing because I connect with other people and explore other cultures. And also because I think it is like medicine. People like it. People get inspiration from that, and it’s a good moment.”

The project leader used “a good moment” to summarize the joy they felt performing at events and the joy they observed in others. The Abbotsford project leader similarly told us how bringing people together around research issues created inspiring conversations that they enjoyed. Other project leaders described art shows as joyful events. These sources of joy helped motivate and shape the way project leaders convened groups of people.

Other project leaders also used joy to design how they could help build community during a pandemic. One leader from Southeastern B.C. created a project around food security in their apartment building. They told us,

We started talking about what would be a healthy approach for our unit, in response to some of the anxiety that’s being felt. And so food security was one of the issues. In tandem with that, a number of the women here are elderly and, in their day, had these great gardens. And many of them said, ‘oh, we just miss growing things.’ We all have balconies and now people grow as much as they can on their balconies. Now, I get to enjoy the smell.

In this example, creating joy appeared in two forms: first, the project connected to the gardening hobbies of their neighbours— an activity that produced joy. Second, it connected to the joy they experience smelling flowers and seeing food grow on their balconies. Other hobbies, such as sewing, weaving, painting and cooking were enjoyable activities that project leaders often used to create projects. These hobbies became part of the solutions to social isolation during the pandemic.

Project leaders also described a desire to bring joy to *others* as a motivator for their projects. Some gave their neighbours flowers, decorated a popular walkway with lights, or talked about the pleasure they felt knowing they had provided food to the unhoused. Others combined hobbies with the joy they could give others. For example, a New Westminster grant committee member told us,

“Gosh, we approved a lot of painted rocks. And I didn’t realize people loved painting that much, but they do apparently.”

People painted rocks and then placed them in neighbours’ yards and around town to be discovered. The project leader went on,

“And so I can see how that engages the community in terms of loneliness. I’m getting out there and seeing the appreciation of people when they put it on Twitter.”

The pictures of painted rocks posted on social media showed how the projects created joy for those who painted the rocks and for others in the community as well.

Project leaders tackled isolation, waste, food security, discourse and other issues during the pandemic by creating activities, events, or gifts that brought joy. Combining their solutions to problems with activities that brought them joy helped motivate them to organize the people and resources to succeed in their projects.

Leverage Existing Skills

As mentioned in the social capital section, many interview participants already participated and organized events or activities in their communities. They hosted shows as artists, supported youth programs or coordinated projects for work and already had the skills and agency to make things happen in their communities. The \$500 small grant was just enough to increase their capacity and motivate them to host events or share kindness in their communities.

During our interviews, musicians and artists told us they already knew how to organize events. One from Vancouver even outlined some of the logistics required in a previous event they hosted.

“Every time is different but, for example, there was one that we did at UBC with a friend of mine that-- he’s an art teacher. He got the place and then I went and organized the place. And another friend that was helping me. She brought all her art. Another friend helped me with the sound. And he helped me with the signs, and we put up different things for people to paint in the venue. And then just organizing. Like telling different people like, okay, you go from eight to nine and from nine to ten, please. And like that.”

Project leaders already knew how to bring people together, and schedule, find, and fill space. The NSG activated these skills for new projects.

Many project leaders used their previously acquired skills to organize events and leveraged the \$500 small grant to access different speakers. For example, the project leader in Abbotsford had organized TedX style events before and used the Neighbourhood Small Grants to pay speakers. Others used the funds to connect teachers with different communities. For example, one participant in Southern B.C. told us,

“I didn’t realize that the Vancouver Foundation funded smaller communities to do things. And when I found that out, I was encouraged by a friend to try applying. So I asked the local dance teacher if that would be something that they would be interested in going and performing. And then I applied. And I got the grant. And so I did it mostly for the seniors in the seniors’ homes and asked a local dance teacher to use the funds to pay for professional teachers to train a group together.”

Another paid for a yoga instructor to create online classes to get people moving and laughing in New Westminster. Other project leaders used the funds to pay experts to teach cooking or sewing and share skills they did not have. Based on these examples, project leaders already knew how to bring people together, and the small grant helped them access other experts and skills in their communities.

Most leveraged the grant to make events bigger and better than they could afford to do independently. When project leaders already knew how to invite performers, organize vendors and create events, they leveraged the funds to increase the possibilities. For example, an organizer in Newton, said

“I’ve thrown six block parties in my low-income housing. We have 140 children who live here that hardly see or do anything outside of this complex. And so I’ve brought live music, a fresh cotton candy machine, stilts and just tons of fun and art supplies and got people together from different cultures that don’t always talk to each other here.”

The project leader brought in entertainers and resources to the people in ways that would not have been possible without the funds.

Some used the NSG funds to share their own skills and capacities with others. For example, one project leader in Kerrisdale told us they use the grant each year to share different food recipes. They use the funds to buy ingredients and supplies for those who attend. Similarly, the weaver bought supplies for her participants. They said:

“I had been doing some free little weaving classes, little kind of tidbits. I thought if I can reach a greater audience and then be able to be compensated for my time and have it more focused and create this sort of session around it, then why not. That was kind of the impetus to just step up what I was already kind of thinking about doing.”

The grants were an impetus— a motivator— that made the effort more accessible and worthwhile. In all these examples, the funds made it easier to afford the supplies so people could engage in an activity together and take home what they made.

Project leaders activated skills they developed elsewhere and used the grant to reduce the financial barrier of putting on events by compensating their own or others’ time and supplies. As the final attribute, leveraging skills and the grant funds extends project leaders’ capacity a little further and helps them turn ideas into action. The \$500 was a catalyst that helped them succeed in their events. The importance of these funds in gaining access to experts, performers, and supplies cannot be overlooked when thinking about civic engagement and community change.

Encouraged to Try

During interviews, Neighbourhood Small Grant project leaders described how they embraced an attitude that welcomed organizing new activities. Many called the grants “an opportunity” or a chance to try something. Others saw the pandemic as an opportunity to embrace a new challenge or experiment with bringing people together in new ways. Encouragement to try was an attitude that permeated their motivation to participate and encouraged others to help with their projects.

External encouragement to try was often a project leaders’ entry into the NSG. More than one project leader told us they decided to apply for their first Neighbourhood Small Grant because a friend encouraged them to try it. For example, a musician applied because a friend recommended it as a means of getting paid for playing their music. Another interview participant told us they were part of an issue-based Facebook group. After sharing an idea with the group, they were virtually approached by a community grant coordinator and encouraged to apply. Others had joined previous projects as participants and were then encouraged by friends or acquaintances to try for their own project. Most of these first-time applicants received a little encouragement to try and do something new that led to their participation.

Some project leaders were simply open to challenging themselves to try something new. For example, one project leader in Southeastern B.C., who taught weaving classes and learned about the program through Instagram told us,

“I hadn’t heard of it before...When this grant opportunity came up, I was like, ‘Okay, I don’t think I can do what I usually do.’ I’m going to have to simplify and find a way to share the thing that I love. It’s quite accessible, but in a way that we could just kind of share over screen time. It was really neat to challenge my own skillset to be able to make it accessible for people in their own homes.”

While the grant helped them share their craft, their openness to new challenges motivated them to apply and complete their project.

In 2020, many of the project leaders we interviewed told us the shift to online events during the pandemic was the new thing they were open to trying. During their projects, they encouraged themselves and others to embrace the new medium and their mistakes. For example, one leader in Vancouver described,

“When I was designing my program, I decided I would offer cooking lessons. And so I specifically was going to do them on Zoom. In the workshop description let people know that I was really new at this platform. And that we were going to try and figure out how to do this together. Thankfully the first session only had four participants. I was initially disappointed, but it was okay because I was able to personally connect with each of the participants and get some feedback from them about how to do future workshops.”

Not only was this project leader open to trying Zoom, but they created a space where people could try together and then sought to learn and improve the experience. They displayed an attitude that was open to new things, imperfections and learning.

Finally, project leaders also actively encouraged others to try something new. For example, one leader in Burnaby shifted an in-person to online art show and told the following story:

“One of the artists was elderly— very scared of technology. And many times throughout the process she said, ‘I don’t think I can do it. I want to pull out.’ And I said, ‘okay, I am going to let you, like, if you don’t want to, I’m not going to push you, but can we just talk for a little bit.’ And we talked and I was just telling her, ‘I am just trying to keep you in because I think it’s so important for older people to see that it’s not intimidating. And that you could break these barriers by doing art. And that’s what you want to show. You want to show them your art and the love you have for doing art and how art has been so good for you during this time of the pandemic’ ... So then she got convinced and then she did it. So her husband actually made a little stand with wheels for her iPad. And then she will roll the iPad around to show people her artwork in her studio. And that was so amazing.”

Project leaders embraced new challenges and spent time encouraging others to try something new as well. They spent time guiding participants through new processes in ways that encouraged participation and an attitude that embraced new things.

An openness to try, fail, learn and complete a project was an attribute shared among project leaders. This attitude was activated and demonstrated throughout their Neighbourhood Small Grants participation. It supported their motivation to tackle issues in ways that used their skills, their capacities and the production of joy through their events.

Outcomes

The project leaders we talked to often named personal outcomes from their projects that motivate them to be involved in the future. While we can’t say for certain that their experiences represent all project leaders, their similarities suggest particular outcomes that create motivation. In particular, our interview participants pointed out their growth in confidence and the positive feedback they received.

While project leaders already had skills that supported their projects, they named an increase in confidence as a positive personal outcome. For example, a project leader in Kitsilano told us,



“I think [the grants] inspire people and it gives them this chance to be a citizen, again, an active citizen, and contribute to their community. It’s amazing, and it’s great and it gives, in my case, it gave me the confidence that this work is important. This work is needed. And the desire to pursue it. And it’s a power to connect people.”

Others also talked about feeling more confident after their projects. Confidence and continued desire to connect people seemed to help fuel project leaders’ motivation to continue creating change in their communities.

Many project leaders also talked about the positive feedback from neighbours and participants as an outcome they valued. For example, the project leader in Burnaby talked about the compliments they received.

“The emails that we’ve been getting and everybody just emailing me and saying, ‘you’re amazing. I can’t believe that you actually did this in these times.’ And how much, like, joy has provided them for these two weeks and how much energy. I’m re-energized. I never thought I was going to feel this way right now.”

Another project leader said they received phone calls expressing thanks from neighbours, even though they had no idea how their neighbours had gotten their phone number. The feedback was so positive she told us she would do it again with her own money. These project leaders and others gained energy from the positive comments and gratitude, which seemed to help motivate them to do the same project again or try something new.

Those who were already very involved in their communities also provided evidence for how confidence and positive feedback can encourage growing participation over time. The project leader in Kitsilano shared that each activity they do is part of:

“Building the foundation. Because trust is built over time. It’s not, you know, we did this project and everyone is best friends. But at least it allowed us to build upon. And later on in the summer we had our summer barbeque, socially distanced, as part of the Open Table B.C. And more people showed up and they commented how great the challenge was and how much fun they had... And for myself, it just gave more reinforcement, positive reinforcement, and confidence that this work is needed and this is important.”

Others told us, with pride, how many people came to know their name over time. Another project leader shared that they had received an award from the city after being so involved. The growth in social connection and recognition provided positive encouragement to do more things and get more involved.

Experiences within and beyond the NSG program showed how personal outcomes are part of project leaders’ ongoing motivation. The NSG Sweet Spot may have catalyzed project leaders to succeed in their projects, but the growth of confidence and positive feedback project leaders felt doing projects motivated them towards their next project. These attributes and outcomes may help identify the elements individuals and organizations can support in order to encourage people to lead change in their communities.

CONCLUSION

“What has it taught me? Even during COVID times we can still have fun. People like to be included. People like to have a sense of community. People like to brag about their sense of community that they have.”

The Six Principles Are Active

Throughout our interviews, we heard stories that reminded us the six Neighbourhood Grant Principles are active in the project leaders’ activities and attitudes. Even though we didn’t specifically evaluate these principles, we heard how assets were activated and increased by the program through small actions. We also heard how small local conversations created belonging and sharing new skills increased social capital. Inclusion was a value that project leaders used to connect their projects to democracy. Project leaders also believed in bringing people together through events and activities to spark their own and others’ joy. We are confident in and inspired by the project leaders and these six principles for small community actions.

Good for Communities; Good for Democracy

There is often a correlational relationship between a commitment to democratic engagement and participation in local community projects. Yet less is known about whether participation causes democratic commitment or if democratic commitment causes participation. Unfortunately, our findings did not show causation either, but they do demonstrate why NSG is a fantastic program for community-building and our democracy.

The grants activate a particular segment of the population who want to use their assets to address the issues they see. It creates positive feedback for these organizers that inspires them to return to the project or create other opportunities. The project leaders activate social capital in ways that create new opportunities for others. They also tend to trust and participate in our democracy more than the average person. Any program that increases their capacity to bring others together is a benefit to all.

On its own, social capital is an essential part of building community trust, relationships and actions. The results of our evaluation support the findings of the Vancouver Foundation’s NSG annual report, which notes the importance of these efforts and their positive outcomes for communities and neighbourhoods. The positive feelings produced also align with the need to engage with each other in non-political activities to continue strengthening shared beliefs in democratic values.

Framework for Organizers

The Neighbourhood Small Grant Sweet Spot may provide a helpful framework for grassroots organizers. Identifying issues people care about, creating joy, using their already-existing skills and leveraging opportunities to grow capacity, as well as fostering a willingness to try, are all key characteristics among the project leaders we interviewed. While further research would be needed to confirm what we heard in the interviews, the sweet spot suggests attributes to look for and organize around in order to activate individuals in different communities.



Organizers can use the framework to identify strengths and gaps in their current efforts to motivate people to participate in activities that produce change. To encourage participation, organizers should find ways to incorporate what brings participants joy, such as cooking or arts and crafts, as a way to get people involved.

Incorporating hobbies, crafts and joy into change-making efforts while providing some funds to support these efforts makes it easier for already motivated people to connect with others.² Looking for those who already know how to coordinate activities and encouraging an attitude that supports trying new things can help motivate people towards organizing efforts. Finally, creating ways for those involved to reflect on the positive feedback and growth in confidence they receive by participating, can also keep people motivated.

Opportunity for Future Evaluation

Future evaluations and research could test the four attributes of the NSG Sweet Spot and two primary outcomes. Surveys could include questions that ask project leaders to identify what issues, hobbies, encouragement and skills project leaders bring or use in the program. Asking what made them feel joy and whether or not they received positive feedback and felt their confidence grow could be included in future surveys. Responses could inform why project leaders return or grow their involvement in NSG.

Research and evaluations like ours often reveal a correlation between community-building activities, organizing hobbies, and democratic engagement. Yet, researchers continue to struggle to identify what causes some people to be more active in their communities.³ Using the proposed NSG Sweet Spot and outcomes as a starting point for future research and evaluations could provide insights into what causes civic participation. Understanding the various drivers of people's participation would help efforts for democratic renewal, and could ultimately be scaled for larger systems change.

²Hendriks, Carolyn M, Ercan, Selen A. and Boswell, John (2020) *Mending Democracy: Democratic Repair in Disconnected Times*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

³ Glover, Roy, Kimberly Shinew and Diana Parry. 2005 Association, Sociability, and Civic Culture: The Democratic Effect of Community Gardening, *Leisure Sciences*, 27:1, 75-92