

# **SEMESTER IN DEMOCRACY: THE NEXT FRONTIER**

## Research Evaluation

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# Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
Key Findings .....	3
1. Background: What is Semester in Democracy .....	4
1.1 Goal of the evaluation .....	4
1.2 Overview of the course components .....	5
1.21 Assignments .....	5
2. Evaluation Outcomes for the Semester in Democracy Program .....	7
2.1 Students increased their confidence in their ability to make a difference .....	7
2.2 Semester in Democracy humanized politics and led to a more positive view of democracy .....	9
2.21 Mixed results for students' levels of trust .....	11
2.3 Students better understand the complexity of democracy .....	13
2.4 Students expanded their understanding and willingness to participate in engagement .....	14
2.5 Students increased their commitment to local politics and community involvement .....	16
2.6 Students were equipped with transferrable skills .....	18
3. Components of the Semester in Democracy program that produced change .....	20
3.1 Thought Leaders .....	20
3.11 Hosting a Thought Leader .....	21
3.12 Interacting with those directly involved in democracy .....	21
3.13 Diversity of Thought Leaders .....	22
3.2 Youth Engagement Group Project .....	24
3.3 Learning from peers .....	26
3.4 Workshops/Assignments .....	27
3.5 Student driven dialogue of race and the impact of current events .....	29
4. Lessons Learned and Advice from Students .....	31
4.1 Shorter days in Zoom .....	31
4.2 More flexible schedule .....	31
4.3 More broad assignments .....	32
5. Conclusion and Recommendations .....	34

# Executive Summary

The Simon Fraser University Semester in Democracy program (SID) was an immersive 7-week full-time online course created and conducted by the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue faculty that took place in the summer of 2020. The program brought together 21 undergraduate students in a hands-on, collaborative learning experience to examine the institutions, culture and practice of democracy in Canada.

An independent evaluation by the SFU's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue's Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative asked students to complete two surveys: one at the beginning of the program and another on the last day of class. After the program, students were also invited to participate in an interview about their program experience.

## Key Findings

- **94% of students reported the course gave them a more positive view of their role in democracy.** The course increased students' self-confidence through practical knowledge about how Canada's democracy works and applied practice through experimental assignments and workshops. In interviews and surveys, student participants listed new ways they intended to continue to be involved.
- **100% of students have more positive views on getting engaged in democratic activities after the program, and 78% reported a more positive view of elected officials after the program.** Students emphasized that their perspectives changed from viewing politics and democracy as cold or distant to something they saw as human and people-centered because of hosting and interacting with thought leaders and other speakers.
- **94% of students state they increased their understanding of key policy issues related to democracy after the program.** Students reported entering the course with varying understandings of democracy. Students reported the discussions were both insightful and challenging to learn about systemic issues that are limiting Canada's democracy, including contemporary impacts of colonialization and systemic racism. This complexity also led to feelings of overwhelm and a potential decrease in trust in government among the students.
- **100% of students indicate they have a strong understanding of democratic engagement after the program, a 48-percentage point increase from the 52% that believed that before the program.** They credited the course for expanding their understanding and willingness to participate in democratic engagement.
- **After the program, 72% of students agreed that if they had a concern, they knew who to contact and how to make an impact in their local community.** Students reported a higher degree of involvement in their communities after the program, and many specifically listed how they were now, or planning to, participate in their communities and politics as a result of the program— including interest in running for office.
- **Students reported substantial growth in their knowledge of important transferable skills.** After the program, students felt they had strong knowledge and understanding in creating a critical path and writing skills for democracy-related documents such as writing a candidate issue brief, profile and blog posts. Throughout the program, personalized feedback from instructors, subject-experts and practitioners added to their growth.

# 1. Background: What is Semester in Democracy

Every semester Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue (the Centre) offers university students the opportunity to participate in Semester in Dialogue. Semester in Dialogue is a full-time multidisciplinary cohort-based program that provides a hands-on collaborative learning experience for students.

Each semester has a different theme and the Summer 2020 theme was *Semester in Democracy: The Next Frontier*. Semester in Democracy (SID) immersed 21 undergraduate students from different programs and different life experiences in 7-week full-time online course that took place from May 11<sup>th</sup> to June 26<sup>th</sup>.

As a cohort they examined the institutions, culture and practice of democracy in Canada. The program was taught by the Centre's Executive Director Shauna Sylvester and Dr. Daniel Savas.

## 1.1 Goal of the evaluation

The purpose of this report is to present the results of the evaluation research conducted on the SID cohort as part of the Centre's Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative.

At the Democracy Initiative we explore teaching, learning and community activities related to democracy. We want to understand what can influence people's perspectives, understandings and potential commitment to democracy.

We conducted an evaluation of SID's pedagogic approach to gauge its impact on students' commitment to democracy and to the principles and values underlying Canada's democratic system of government.

Our evaluation process included three steps. Participation in each step was voluntary for students.

- First, we conducted a **pre-survey** online on the first day of class and all 21 students participated. The survey asked about students' levels of community engagement, feelings of belonging, self-efficacy and trust in democracy. The survey was implemented by Democracy Initiative staff on May 12, 2020, the second day of the program.
- Second, we conducted a **post-survey** online that 18 students completed and asked the same questions as the pre-survey, plus an additional set of questions related to the learning tools and experiences students used and took part in throughout SID. This survey was implemented on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the second last day of the program.
- Third, we conducted **in-depth interviews** over Zoom with 9 students in July 2020 once the program was complete in order to obtain a deeper understanding of students' experiences in the course, and what elements of the program were or were not informative or successful.

SFU's Office of Research Ethics provided approval to this evaluation research. The program instructors did not collect any data for the project. Students participated on a voluntary, anonymous basis. The Research Coordinator for the Democracy Initiative conducted the interviews using Zoom.

Students' confidentiality continues to be protected in this report. Student feedback presented in this report has been edited to remove identifiable traits and the survey results are only reported in aggregate. We can not

present demographic based outcomes because it would identify participants. There are at least two examples of direct student feedback presented in this report from each of the 9 students that were interviewed.

## 1.2 Overview of the course components

We provide a summary of the key components of the SID course to provide context for the rest of the report.

### 1.21 Assignments

#### *Hosting Thought Leaders*

Each student was required to host a guest speaker, known as a thought leader. A thought leader is defined as someone who has been asked to engage in a dialogue with the class on a specific topic related to issues on democracy covered during SID. Thought leaders included elected officials from all levels of government, Senators, academics and community organizers. This exercise was designed to help students develop skills in facilitation and in organizing group discussion. Students were required to contact and coordinate with their thought leader, write a biography about them and write a brief on the dialogue's topic for the class. Students were then required to design and facilitate the dialogue for that day's topic, and lead a de-brief session following the dialogue.

Guests for each week included:

- Andrea Reimer
- Senator Yuen Pau Woo
- Matthew Mendelsohn
- Jody Wilson-Raybould, Ian Campbell, Mark Podlasly
- Kevin Huang, Miley Leong, CityHive, Ahmen Lelami
- Wendy Mendes
- Leah Bae, Aslam Bulbulia, Jennifer Reddy, Roberto Wohlgemuth
- Janet Moore, Amanda Gibbs, Vanessa Richards
- Javier Ruiz Soler
- Charlie Smith, Farhan Mohammed, Margaret Gallagher
- Shachi Kurl
- David Moscrop
- Maria Dobrinskaya
- Preston Manning, Max Cameron
- Am Johal, Jackie Wong

#### *Small Group Youth Engagement Project*

Students were put into groups to work on a youth engagement project targeting a specific youth target audience of their choosing. Each group developed an online democratic engagement strategy on the topic of the economic impact of COVID-19 on youth. Students partnered with a youth-serving democratic development organization for advice and conducted original research with their target audience. The projects were presented to an audience of peers, youth democratic practitioners and government decision-makers.

#### *Candidate Issue Brief*

Students wrote a brief on a specific policy issue for a hypothetical candidate seeking election. The briefs were verbally presented to a panel of former elected officials for feedback.

## ***Profile on Democratic Champion***

Students wrote a two-page written profile on a person of their choosing that has played a role in Canadian democracy.

## ***Workshops***

Experts and instructors led a series of skills-building workshops on specific topics throughout the semester, including:

- What is dialogue?
- How to conduct data analysis
- Online facilitation
- How to write a blog post
- Public speaking and giving feedback
- Participatory budgeting
- Youth engagement and COVID-19 public policy
- Democracy skills and competencies
- Student organizing on campus
- Interview skills
- How to write a candidate issue brief
- Online engagement
- How to create a critical path
- Preparing your engagement strategy
- Campaign organizing
- Your role in democracy
- How to write a profile
- Online presentations

## 2. Evaluation Outcomes for the Semester in Democracy Program

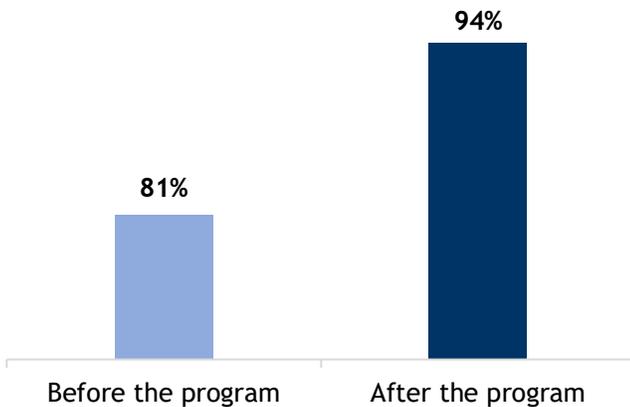
We examined the outcomes for this program based on student responses to the pre-program and post-program surveys and post-program interviews in this section. We investigated how these outcomes were cultivated and developed by the SID program in the following section.

### 2.1 Students increased their confidence in their ability to make a difference

SID increased students' confidence in their ability to make a difference in their community and to influence government.

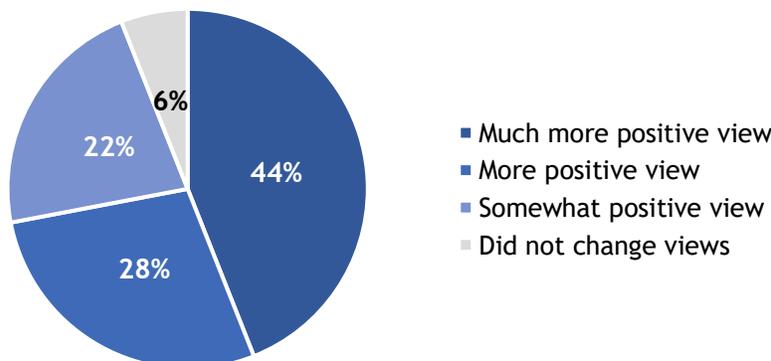
Figure 1 compares the results from the surveys taken before and after the program by students. Figure 1 demonstrates that 81% of students believed citizens can have an influence government when they entered the course. After the program nearly all of the students agreed that ordinary citizens can influence government if they are willing to try. The post-survey results illustrate a **13-percentage point increase** in students' confidence in the impacts ordinary citizens can make on government.

Figure 1 % of students that agree that ordinary citizens can influence government



In our post-survey, we asked students about the impact of SID on how students perceive their roles in participating the democratic processes. Figure 2 illustrates **94% of students** indicated the course gave them a more positive view of their role. Where Figure 1 shows that students are more confident in the ability of average citizens, Figure 2 demonstrates that increased confidence also applies to students' view of their personal capacity as citizens.

Figure 2 How students' view on their role in democracy changed after the program



Our research found students increased their overall self-confidence. It also suggested students increased their confidence in their ability as individuals, as citizens and as youth to make a difference in their government after completing SID. Students reported newfound confidence in their ability to impact their communities and an increased desire to have their voice heard.

In the interviews, students listed the new ways they have decided to get involved in their communities. They have attended protests, participated in engagement projects, signed petitions, started advocacy organizations and considered running as a political candidate. Students also stated being more confident in the ability to have conversations with powerful people and hold space on once intimidating topics.

The student feedback below exemplifies the experiences reported by many students in the interviews. The first student described his feelings of introversion and his disconnection from participating in public activities prior to the course. He goes on to highlight that as the result of the course, he has increased his confidence in his capacity to make a difference and participate.

“I’m a very introverted person normally. Very shy and hesitant to do a lot of things, but I’ve already noticed that I’ve started doing more things and just not stopping. I am realizing that I can do a lot of things and I am intelligent and capable enough to be involved and make a difference. I don’t think I would have had that if it wasn’t for this class.”

Another student explained the discomfort they often experienced before the course when being put in situations around people knowledgeable about politics and democracy. She explained that the course increased her confidence in her ability to have political conversations through the discussions with thought leaders.

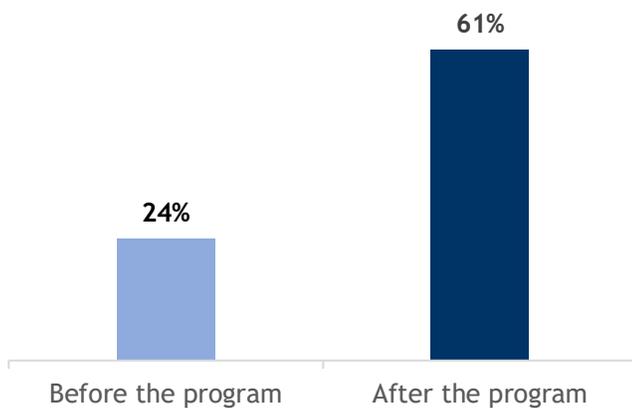
“I didn’t think a lot about Canadian democracy before the course. I was always surrounded by people who are in politics and their expertise is politics, so in conversations I would kind of shy away. Before the program I was a little bit intimidated by the idea of democracy because I felt like I didn’t really understand what it was. However, as the course went on I felt like I watched myself progress in my comfort with talking about democracy and politics and talking to the thought leaders that were intelligent about that kind of thing. I got more and more comfortable speaking to those individuals.”

## 2.2 Semester in Democracy humanized politics and led to a more positive view of democracy

The feedback from students suggests they completed SID with a more positive view of politics, government and democracy.

The pre-survey results displayed in Figure 3 suggest students were quite cynical of elected officials when entering the program with only 24% believing elected officials care. However, by the end of the course there was a **37-percentage point increase** in agreement from students that elected officials care what ordinary people think. This demonstrates a significant increase in the positive sentiment towards politicians and a reduction in cynicism as a result of SID.

Figure 3 % of students that agree elected officials care what ordinary people think



This increase in positivity went beyond just elected officials. The post-survey results also illustrate the increased positivity towards multiple facets of democracy:

- **100%** of students have **more positive** views on getting engaged in democratic activities after the program.
- **83%** of students have **more positive** views of Canadian democracy/strength of democratic culture after the program.
- **78%** of students have **more positive** views of elected officials after the program.
- **72%** of students have **more positive** views of Canadians' commitment to democracy after the program.

The evaluative interviews further illustrate the evolution of students' perspectives. Students emphasized that their perspectives changed from when they viewed politics and democracy as cold or distant, to something they saw as human and people-centered. Students continually highlighted in the interviews how different components of the course humanized politicians including interacting with thought leader and other guest speakers. These experiences led to students viewing politicians as more approachable and politics as more accessible for people like them. This increased their willingness to be part of the democratic process.

The student responses below demonstrate how students were able to change their views on what democracy is and how it works. The program gave students the opportunity to meet online with thought leaders. The more informal setting of a dialogue, as opposed to a lecture, allowed students to converse with powerful people and see the similarities between the guests' experiences and values with their own. In hearing this, students could better relate to the guests and understand they are just people, like them, and like them, students could also be powerful actors.

The first student illustrates how dialogue in these structured sessions gave students the comfort and confidence to deepen their interactions with both presenters and with each other.

“Having all these people in power being in this class let me see these people are open. They're not scary. They're just people. Being able to talk to them and understand their humility as well, I feel like I'm very much more confident in that way.”

The next student described how she went from seeing politics as something unattractive and something she wanted to disconnect from, to seeing politicians as well-intentioned relatable people. She explicitly stated her new willingness to work in government as a result of SID and this humanizing process of dialoguing with thought leaders.

“I've always looked at politics as something very cold and something I did not want to be a part of. But then one of our thought leaders said that politics is actually just humans working with humans. And I was, like, oh, I like humans. For whatever reason that one sentence just flipped everything for me and I realized there's so much humility within politics which is amazing and vulnerability within people. So then I started looking at politics as people instead and now politics is something I could consider working for. I'd be okay working for a government structure – which I never would have said before.”

The student response below also emphasized that this course provided a unique experience of getting to meet and see the human side elected officials. This allowed him to realize they are all well intentioned, no matter their political perspective.

“I realized politicians are just people when you meet them. It's not something that I really ever thought about. I also think no matter what for most politicians they are trying their best and they all do want this no matter what end of the spectrum.”

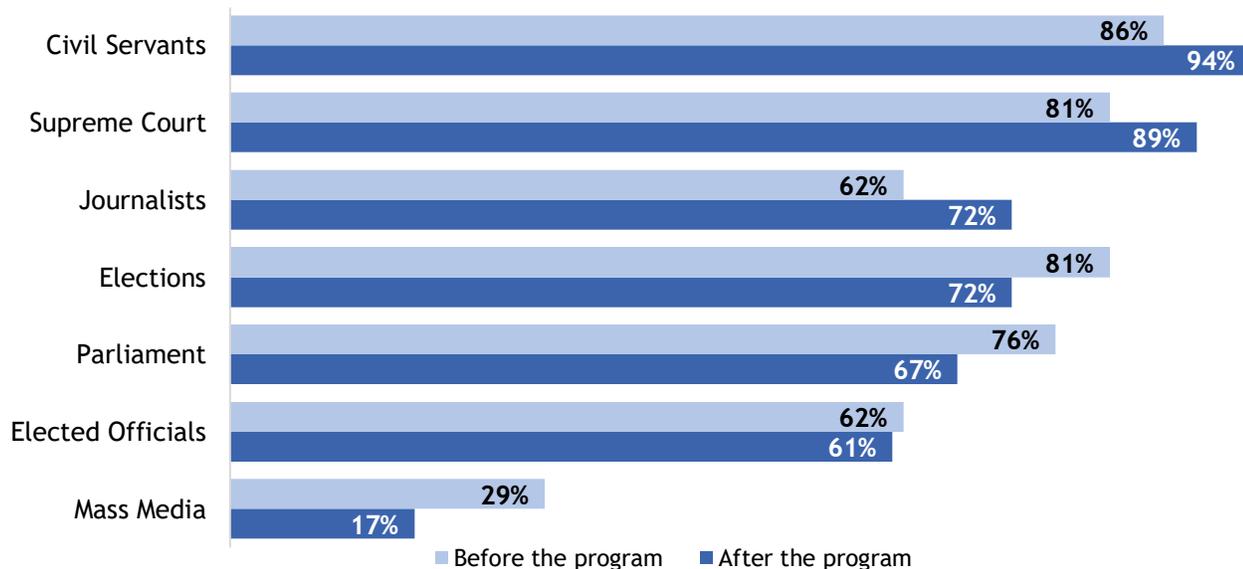
The next student’s feedback exemplifies how the experience of connecting with guests on a personal level allowed students to develop more empathy towards other public officials that the students never got to meet. This student heard the relatable challenges one guest was experiencing, and it allowed her to realize the humanity of other people in power, like the Prime Minister. Therefore, the positive and empathetic feelings developed through getting to know a few public officials on a personal level were effectively internalized and generalized to the wider public.

“I learned how everyone that’s a part of this democracy are human beings. It definitely humanized politics. Now I realize that [Prime Minister] Justin Trudeau’s a real person. I remember realizing when Renee Saklikar came in and she’s the wife of [BC Health Minister] Adrian Dix and she can’t go see her mom because he’s the health minister, I realized they’re just like all the real people out here. Just living life, and Renee was so fun and funny and cool. And Adrian Dix, I always had this perception of him from TV and I was, like, this is his wife? Like, oh, wow. It’s just weird to see people’s real lives and their real. It was cool. That was probably the biggest thing and that really helped me change my perspective on how we look at politicians.”

## 2.21 Mixed results for students’ levels of trust

Students gained a more positive outlook on both democracy and democratic actors, but also expressed decreased trust towards multiple democratic actors and institutions. This finding is suggested by the pre- and post-survey responses displayed in Figure 4. The results indicate students decreased their trust in elections, Parliament, and mass media. The only actors and institution to gain trust were civil servants, the Supreme Court and journalists.

Figure 4 % of students that trust each actor or institution



The only actor to maintain the same level of trust was elected officials, at 61% of students trusting this group. The lack of a decrease in trust in elected officials can be interpreted as further evidence of the positive feelings towards politicians, as this is the democratic actor students interacted with the most. Students’ increases learning and interaction with elected officials may have prevented a decrease in trust, unlike other actors.



One reason for the decrease in trust may be the fact that many students admitted to having an overly idealistic view of Canada's democracy prior to SID. In learning more about the complex realities of Canada's democracy throughout the course, students may have become more skeptical of actors and institutions. Skepticism is beneficial to democracy because it shows signs that citizens are critically analyzing the actions of government and therefore able to hold them accountable.

However, if students were becoming more cynical of democracy, which is the belief that the entire system does not work and cannot be trusted, that would be harmful to democracy. The evidence of this evaluation does not suggest students are becoming more cynical, because the previously mentioned findings demonstrate students have an overall more positive view of politics and democracy.

Idealism and blind trust are also not good for democracy because citizens are less likely to be involved and are not holding government to account if they just assume everything is great. Therefore, this decrease in trust towards some actors can be seen as a positive outcome for students and democracy.

In the interviews, several students stated feelings of "overwhelm" in learning about the many challenges currently faced by the Canadian democratic processes and institutions. These statements may indicate to their feelings of lack of trust. The student feedback presented below exemplifies this feeling of powerlessness to systematic challenges facing Canada's democracy that was highlighted by other students as well.

"In seven weeks my perspective of Canada, of colonization, on race, on Indigenous rights and relations – all completely did a one-eighty. I think I feel a little bit overwhelmed now with a lot of insight into what's actually going on and what other people's lives look like. I don't know how to make it better. And I don't know how it's going to be better. There was a lot of learning for me about my privilege and about what other people's experiences in the same democracy look like."

## 2.3 Students better understand the complexity of democracy

Our research suggests SID equipped students with a deeper understanding of the complex reality of Canada's democracy. We learned students entered the class with varying levels of understanding of democracy. Even those who entered the class with a high level of theoretical understanding of Canadian government reported completing the course with a more practical understanding of how Canada's democracy functions. Students reported having multiple opportunities to better understand the challenges facing Canada's democracy and gained knowledge and connections with those trying to solve those problems.

The survey results demonstrate a significant increase in students' understanding of how to address the challenges to democracy:

- The percentage of students that identified as having a **strong level of knowledge of strategies to strengthen democracy** in Canada increased from 33% to **95%**.
- **94%** of students stated they **increased their understanding of key policy issues related to democracy** after the program.
- **89%** of students indicated they were able to **develop strategies to address the economic impact of COVID-19 on youth** after the program.

Students were made more aware of the challenges facing Canada's democracy as part of the SID course. As previously mentioned, some students had a very idealistic view of Canada's democracy before the program and left the course with a more critical understanding of it. Students reported in the interviews it was both insightful and a challenge to learn about systemic issues that are limiting Canada's democracy including contemporary impacts of colonialization and systemic racism.

The student feedback below described the difficulty of grappling with knowledge of the continued injustice experienced by people in Canada and abroad. They also illustrate the common sentiment among students that SID provided a valuable space to discuss these challenging topics with peers and guests. Although students reported the burdened with this knowledge, they also felt emboldened to make change as a result of the course.

"You hear a lot of things about challenges with democracy. We had a discussion about Black Lives Matter and police brutality in the States, it's hard to contemplate how do you keep going living your life knowing that there's injustice in the world. You can't disassociate from it because that's how we got into this problem. But how do you move on? Or how do you continue to live in a world when the world is crap? This class gave me the opportunity to discuss it with fellow peers and with other people who are a lot more engaged or aware of the topics than we are. So, while I come out of it more bogged down and thinking more about it, it's also a good thing because I'm thinking about it. I'm actually trying to change it."

"I definitely feel more committed to democracy as a result of this program. I am also a little bit discouraged because before I thought it was this impermeable higher being that existed in Canada until I met a bunch of politicians over Zoom and learned a lot about the reality of the system. I realized that democracy is a lot closer to home than I thought it was, but also a lot messier...it humanized the system for me. I feel more engaged in democracy for sure and also kind of like overwhelmed by what I think needs to happen. But that's a good thing."

## 2.4 Students expanded their understanding and willingness to participate in engagement

The course expanded students' understanding and willingness to participate in democratic engagement activities. When we asked in the pre-survey how knowledgeable students are about their role in democracy, approximately half of the students indicated they had some understanding of their role, whereas in the post-survey **100% of students** indicated they have a **strong understanding of their role in democracy in Canada**.

Knowledge of democratic engagement also significantly increased after the class. **100% of students** indicated they have a **strong understanding of democratic engagement**, a **48-percentage point increase** from the 52% that believed that before the program.

Additional post-survey results demonstrate the learnings students gained related to democratic engagement:

- **100%** of students indicated they were able to **gain new skills related to democratic engagement**.
- **100%** of students suggested they were able to **explore formal and informal ways of getting involved in democratic activities**.
- **94%** of students suggested they were able to **increase their understanding on why democracy matters**.
- **89%** of students specified they were able to **explore ideas for young peoples' democratic participation**.
- **83%** of students indicated they were able to **provide input to government decision making on COVID-19 impact on youth**.

Our interviews with students indicated that they increased their interest in participating in democracy after expanding their understanding of what actions are considered 'democratic.' For many students, voting was the only activity they participated in that they considered 'democratic.' However, SID expanded their definitions to include a wide range of activities and approaches that would be considered democratic. Students reported that learning the different ways to get involved helped them better understand where they fit and can participate in their democracy as a result of SID.

Students suggested learning what forms of engagement were effective in making change was also an important factor in students wanting to be more involved. Students listed many ways each of them is now getting involved in politics and their communities including attending protest, participating in online engagements, starting new organizations and contacting elected officials. Students emphasized the activities and learnings from SID increased their willingness to engage in their democracy and influenced the new approaches they are taking to be involved and heard.

The first student below illustrates the common experience of her peers that voting was the only activity she did that she considered democratic. However, she elaborated that SID expanded their knowledge on the ways to get involved and demonstrated that participation can effect change. This student felt empowered to get more involved because they are confident that it would make a difference and she would be heard.

“I was very unengaged in our democratic system. I voted in all the elections, but other than that, I haven’t done a lot. Now, I’ve learned a lot of the ways that exist to engage in democracy and that they work. I learned people are listening. I definitely feel more equipped to call up MP’s and I know that that’s actually something that you can do and maybe they will listen. I had no idea about any of that. I didn’t know that protests worked. I didn’t know that petitions worked. I didn’t even know what an MLA was.”

The next student described the importance of learning the different ways to participate in democracy. She especially valued that the course provided opportunities to actually put these techniques into practice. The combination of learning a variety of approaches with the hands-on training equipped her with the confidence to get involved.

“Actually, my perspective on the democracy changed a bit. I think I didn’t have enough understanding about what it looks like, so by actually participating in it, I see there is a way how I can make a difference. How I can, for example, participate in a campaign. How I can make my voice heard. How I can suggest a new policy even. Actually, by participating shows me how these are the channels and ways I can make a difference.”

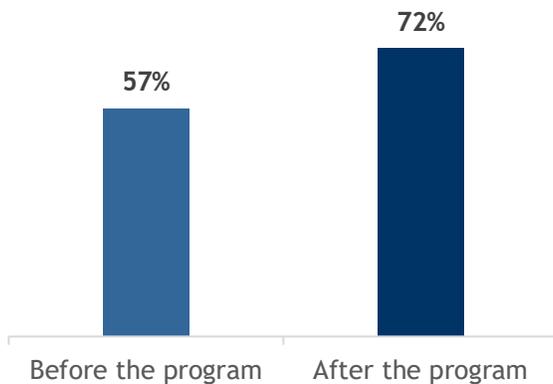
Both students’ feedback highlights the importance of learning about the effectiveness of civic participation in making change. SID convinced students that public engagement matters, and it works. This can be linked to students’ increase in confidence that they can make a difference and their increased desire students have to be involved.

## 2.5 Students increased their commitment to local politics and community involvement

Students reported increasing their commitment and the value they see in local politics and community involvement as a result of the SID course.

Figure 5 illustrates the **15-percentage point increase** in students' confidence in being able to know who to contact in their community. **72%** of students agreed that after the program that if they had a concern, they would know who and how to contact someone. This survey result suggests students were equipped with increased knowledge of local systems and that they cultivated a deeper connection to their local areas.

Figure 5 % of students that agree that if they have a concern in their community, they know who to contact



In the post-program interviews, students reported having minimal knowledge or interest in local government when entering the program. As a result of the activities, guests and learnings from SID, students reported leaving the program with a deeper understanding and greater interest in local engagement. This increased knowledge and commitment to local politics can be connected to that increase in confidence students left the program with, because democratic involvement became much more accessible and approachable when experiencing the local opportunities to get involved.

Many students specifically listed how they were now, or planning to, participate in their communities and politics as a result of the program. This first student's response described his increased interest in running for local office despite cynical advice from previous professors. He illustrates students' increased confidence in their ability to make a difference, as he acknowledges there are challenges to that role, but he is confident he would be effective at it.

“During the class I started getting involved with local political parties a little bit more and potentially putting my name forward to become a candidate and stuff like that. In the my first poli sci class at SFU, I remember my prof saying political scientists rarely ever become politicians because they realize all the problems with it. However, after taking this class and realize, yeah, I think I'd actually be pretty good at it. So trying to give it a go.”

The student feedback below exemplifies a common theme amongst the students interviewed that they started the program with minimal interest in local politics, but left seeing the greater importance and impact that can be made at a local level. They both emphasize their deeper understanding of the interconnected importance between local and high levels of government. They also both state their desire to participate at the local level due to both its importance and proximity.

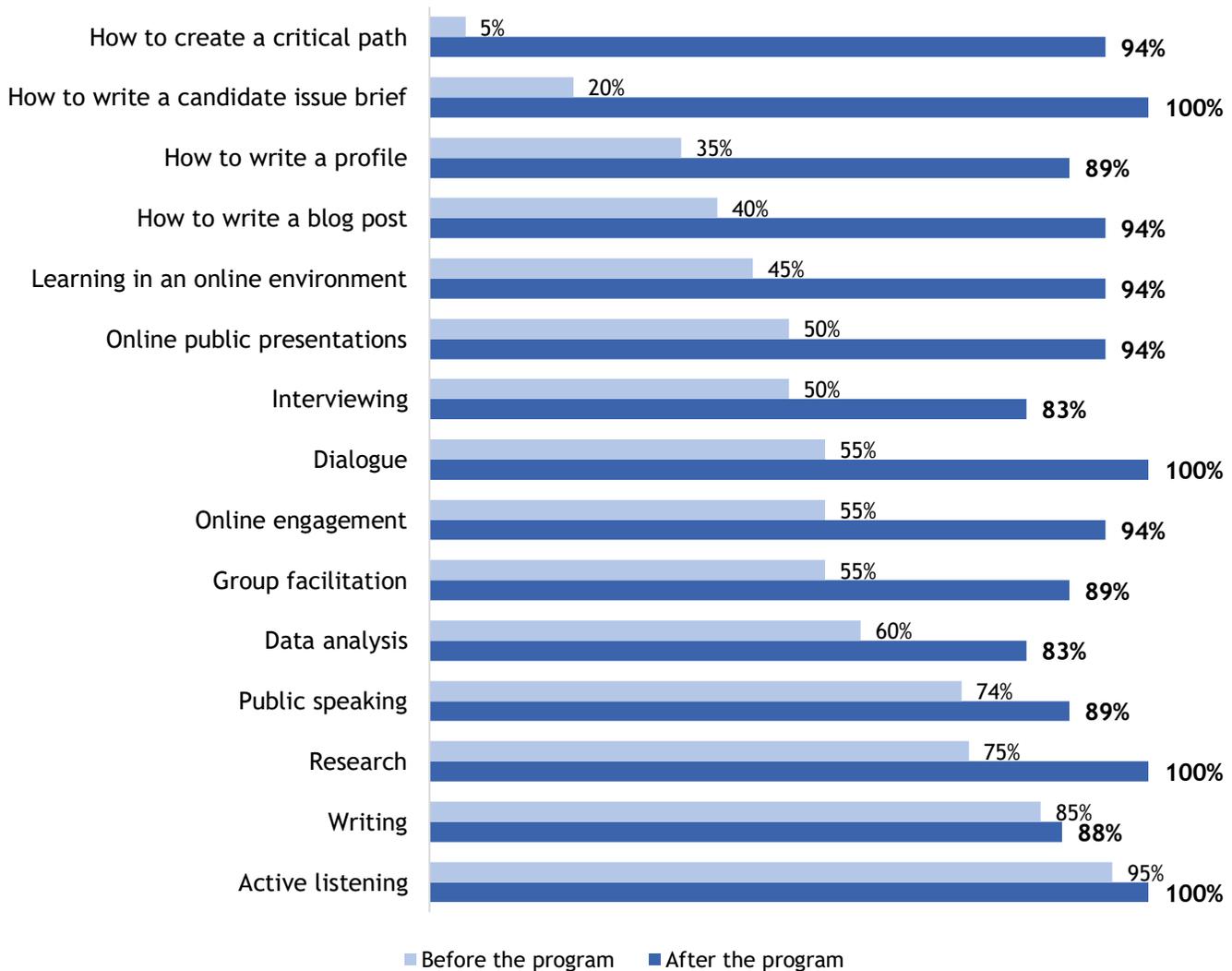
“I feel more committed to democracy in like the realest way. I care more about things I never cared about. I never realized how important the city is. I was a political snob and saw city stuff as so boring. Now I realize, no – the province and the city and the towns, that’s interesting and so pivotal to our own lives. It’s integral to start within-- know your individual stuff and then you vibrate out to your family and it needs to vibrate out to your own community and your city.”

“I’m much more interested in the local level politics now which I wasn’t before. I kind of disregarded it. It always sounded boring, but now I have been looking up my city councillors, the mayor and even though I don’t live in Vancouver I’ve just been really interested in making sure to play more of a role in municipal politics. Because the local affects the national, and the national affects the local, and it all affects the global as well. So it’s all interconnected, and I think it’s so important for me not to overlook that again.”

## 2.6 Students were equipped with transferrable skills

Students were able to develop and put into practice a variety of valuable skills throughout SID. Figure 6 illustrates the significant increases in students' knowledge on most aspects of dialogue including online facilitation and online engagement, and aspects of research including data analysis and interviewing. The survey results also depict substantial growth in the understanding of creating a critical path and writing skills for democracy-related documents such as writing a candidate issue brief, profile and blog posts.

**Figure 6 % of students that rate their knowledge level as high in the following topics**





Our interviews found that students valued developing transferrable skills during the program. Key skills mentioned in the interviews included those related to facilitation, public speaking, dialogue and research. Students also reported already using their SID experience to apply to jobs and other opportunities. Students additionally highlighted that learning and being able to apply these skills in class increased their confidence and desire to seek out new opportunities.

Both the examples of student feedback below describe the transferability of the skills they learned throughout SID. They suggest these skills have opened up new opportunities for them, both as a result of their increased capacity but also their increased confidence in said capacity.

"I think a lot of the skills that I gained here will most definitely be used in some capacity. I've already got it on my resume. Definitely the training on facilitation skills and stuff like that is insanely valuable. I never realized how many applications that I was applying for were looking for a skill like that and how valuable it was with a lot of things."

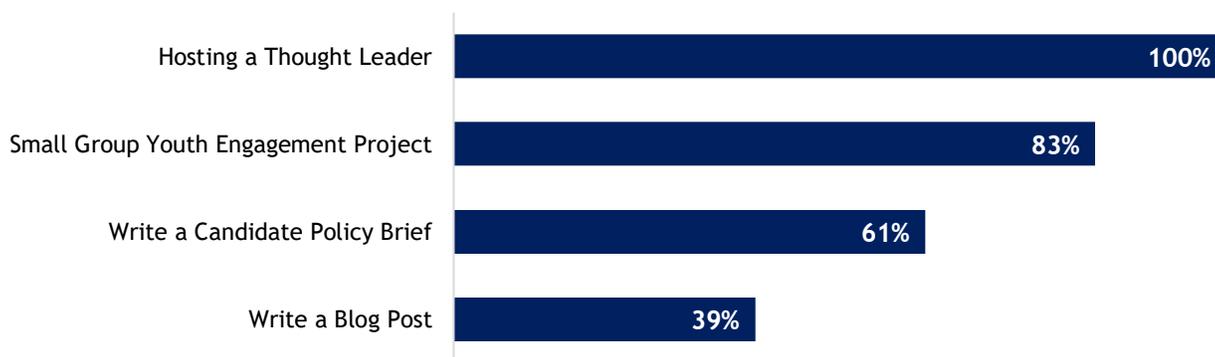
"I actually just applied to a job yesterday and it wasn't for an Arts student, it was for communications student. With my facilitation and dialogue and public engagement skills that I learned through this class I felt more capable. I imagine things like that in my career will be more accessible to me."

### 3. Components of the Semester in Democracy program that produced change

Next, we analyzed the evidence collected throughout our research to determine how SID made the outcomes highlighted in the previous section possible for students.

In our post-survey we asked students to select the components of the course that they found most valuable to their learning. Figure 7 illustrates that all the students surveyed believed that hosting a thought leader was the most valuable experience, followed by the youth engagement project and writing the candidate policy brief.

Figure 7 % of students who selected each assignment as most valuable for their learning

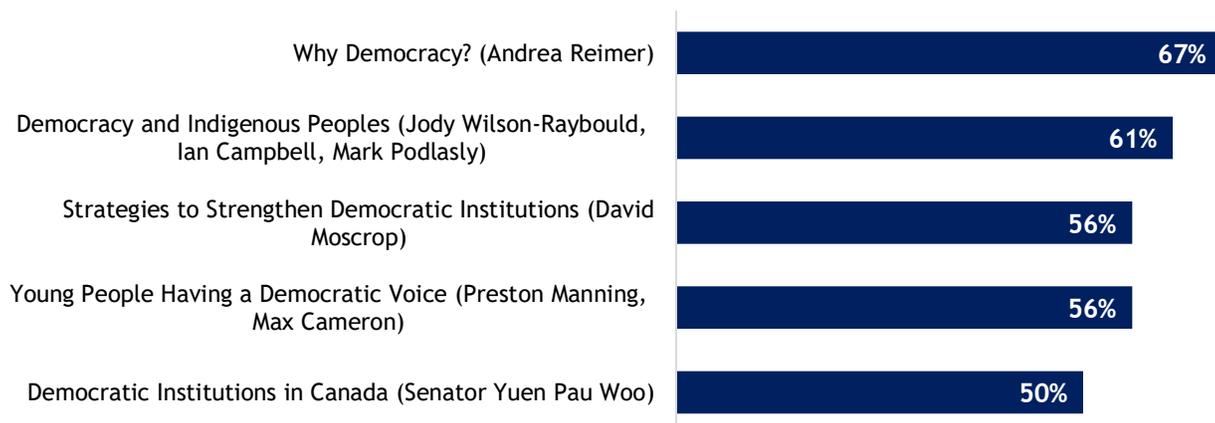


Our interviews with students provide further insights into what they perceived as the primary sources of their learning, growth and ultimate increase in commitment to the democratic system.

#### 3.1 Thought Leaders

Figure 8 depicts the thought leaders dialogues that students found most valuable. The results demonstrate a diverse range of topics students enjoyed including those on the ideas of democracy, Indigenous People and democracy, and democratic institutions.

Figure 8 % students that selected each thought leader session was most valuable



### 3.11 Hosting a Thought Leader

As our post-survey results in Figure 7 demonstrate, all the students indicated that hosting a thought leader was the most valuable component of the course.

Students expanded in the interviews that hosting the thought leaders was empowering. This next student's feedback describes the empowerment they experienced from the significant responsibility put on students to host these high calibre guests and lead a dialogue over Zoom.

"Hosting a thought leader was a highlight of my experience because you never have that opportunity in a class to take that much responsibility for something. It was three hours that were completely up to you to run the class essentially, which you would never get in a different class. No prof would hand over the reins for three hours and say okay, teach, run the dialogue, meet these people and organize these things. So that was a really cool experience getting to structure a dialogue and then getting to actually run the dialogue with the people. Also, just the calibre of the guests; the fact that our thought leaders were such influential, informative, inspiring people was definitely a highlight of the course."

### 3.12 Interacting with those directly involved in democracy

In addition to hosting thought leaders, having conversations with guests was emphasized by many students in their interviews as the key part of their learning. Students believed the thought leaders truly listened and valued what they had to say. Students stated in the interviews that they particularly appreciated being able to ask questions and discuss topics with these guests. These informal interactions helped humanize them and made democracy more tangible because they illustrated for students the potential paths they could take to get involved.

The student feedback below describes how elected officials in particular were able to humanize politicians as "just normal approachable people". Connecting with elected officials in a relaxed setting allowed students to feel more engaged and heard. This student was empowered and hopeful to learn just how many people are committed to citizen engagement.

"We've had some experience with politicians, and while some of them I do agree with, some of them I don't agree with, I can say that all of them have the best interests of the people. They might not fully agree with you, but they will be willing to sit down and listen to you and talk to you and ask you questions. So, I'm more engaged that way. I also found that there's a lot more people who actually are trying to help democratic engagement across the city, across the country."

Many student respondents expressed the value of their exchanges with Shauna Sylvester, Executive Director of the Centre for Dialogue, and co-instructor of the program. They valued learning about her personal experience when she ran for Mayor of Vancouver in 2018. Students spoke of their trust and relationship with her as a factor that aided with learning.

### 3.13 Diversity of Thought Leaders

Students also reported that the diversity of thought leaders in terms race/ethnicity, age and gender, as well as representation along the political spectrum added legitimacy to the program and their learnings. Students expressed that this enhanced legitimacy increased their positive view of politics, as they were able to connect with people across different groups, parties and professional backgrounds. This further exemplified for students how people from all experiences could be involved in democracy. Students also implied being able to connect with people across the political spectrum reduced their polarization and made them more open to perspectives from differing viewpoints.

The student's feedback below shows how hearing from diverse perspectives helped her better connect with the idea of democracy. It expanded her understanding of democracy beyond the narrower definition she held before the class. She heard how interconnected democracy is and that helped her, and other students better understand their role and were they fit in democracy.

"I would say definitely the thought leaders were the most impactful because they all brought a really different perspective and a different interpretation of what democracy is. As the program went on I felt like my definition of democracy and the boundary that I put it in continued to expand because everyone who came in either had a different idea about what it was and had a different way that it applied in their life or career. Which was really cool to see that it really bleeds into a lot more things than I thought it did."

The students' response below emphasizes how the inclusion of diverse guests and concepts cultivated greater trust in the integrity of the program. Other students shared that learning from a variety of perspectives strengthened their confidence that what they were learning was more universal and acknowledged many points-of-view.

"I think the thought leaders are the ones that stand out most, all the different people. With Indigenous governments, with youth leaders and then we had some on populism, nativism, which I thought was really interesting. Democracy and technology, just surveillance misinformation - that was one of the ones I was most interested in. We also had democracy and journalism, so we had people from the CBC and local newspapers. We also had, like, former leader of the opposition. We had Preston Manning which was really interesting. I think what stands out for me kind of was the diversity of opinion and it felt very nonpartisan just who we had. We had people from on all ends of the political spectrum."

In the interviews, students highlighted a variety of different thought leaders that they each developed a personal connection with, and often continued to interact with after the program.

As Figure 8 (above) showcased, the dialogues with Preston Manning and the other with Jodie Wilson-Raybould and Indigenous leaders were two of the most valued thought leader sessions. These two sessions in particular were mentioned by nearly every student we interviewed as their most impactful experience of the program. Both dialogues are examples of students making the strongest connections specifically with leaders that were far outside their typical networks of knowledge or connections before the program.

As the student's comments below highlights, students reported being surprised by the Preston Manning dialogue because of his political leanings. As a former Reform Party leader and Conservative Member of Parliament, few students anticipated connecting with him, as they mentioned not aligning with the political views of those parties. However, students reported strongly connecting with him and were engaged by his discussion on collaborative non-partisan solutions to challenges to democracy.

"We had a thought leader session with Preston Manning, and before we were given the impression that he was very right wing and a lot of the class being in university and younger skewed a bit towards the left. The thought leader topic was about problems with democracy in Canada and that thought leader session was completely not what I expected it to be. Preston Manning didn't so much push his agenda, which I thought he would. He highlighted, these are some problems that I see in our current system. These are some ideas that we could fix it. It was more problem solving. I really found that helped because it was not entrenched, his ability to work with us and discuss with us. So we were, like, what, 50 years younger than he is? It's really interesting because he valued, and he took what we had to offer as good ideas, what if we joined together? I was ready to be defensive, kind of like argue with him, but I didn't need to at the end because he was just so open and welcoming to different ideas."

Whereas the Indigenous dialogue stood out for focusing on topics many students were not familiar with before into the program. Students reported leaving the program more knowledgeable and curious about the topic. The student comments below depict the impact conversing and learning from Indigenous leaders had on the shape of the class going forward. Students were more conscious of the persistency of colonization, and more purposeful with their territorial land acknowledgements. This student reemphasizes that learning about the sinister reality of the systemic challenges in Canada's democracy was distressing but also empowering for students. They state they want to work to break these cycles of continued oppression.

"We had a thought leader session on Indigenous Peoples and governance. I thought that was really helpful, because we don't get a lot of that even in high school, even in universities. It's never a required course or it's never something that's been introduced in our academic lives. I thought that was really helpful just to have those key figures like Jody Wilson-Raybould come in and talk about their achievements and also the constant struggle that they go through. It's just shocking to me that's never been immediately addressed in big institutions -- even though they do celebratory stuff, but that's just big fluff. If no one's actively thinking about it, you're really not doing anything. I thought it was really nice that they added this in and going forward we're so conscious of that, having land acknowledgements in formal class setting as well as thought leaders. I thought that was really beneficial just for my mental knowledge chest."

## 3.2 Youth Engagement Group Project

Our survey results presented in Figure 7 (above) and our discussions about the youth engagement project with students during the interviews demonstrated it was a critical experience for students. The project increased students' skills and knowledge, as well as their confidence in their own power.

Many students reported in the interviews that this was their first opportunity to do their own independent research. They described the experience as empowering to design and collect original data and know that is something they are capable of doing.

One student's feedback highlighted below emphasizes the consensus among students that this was a project on youth, by youth, which resulted in students feeling equipped with confidence in their power to support peers and contribute to society. As showcased by this feedback, students not only valued making their own voice heard, but wanted to support other youth being more involved and heard as well. This student is one a many in the class that continued their project after the class, illustrating how important and real these projects were to students.

“One big theme in our class was civic engagement and getting youth engaged and mobilized into their politics and their democracy. One of the projects I'm working on is the extension of my group project and a big section of that is we want to work on civic engagement with students. We want to have their voices heard in media and in plans. I think taking away from this class, one thing I learned was about how important that is. I definitely learned the importance of civic engagement and having youth engaged. I think that's one of the biggest things that I'm going to take forward is working with youth to have those opinions heard.”

Our research found the presentation to actual elected officials was also an essential component of the project. It solidified how meaningful the project was. It allowed their research to be heard and demonstrate that it mattered.

Below, this student highlights how the discussion of continuing the project outside of the classroom with instructor Shauna Sylvester allowed them to realize their power and capacity to make something real. He emphasizes this conversation helped remove the internalized belief that he could not create something. This illustrates both the value of the project, as well as the positive impact one-on-one feedback with the instructors had on students.

“When Shauna said, hey, there is a potential that you can make your project into something real, something tangible, like, an organization, that just made me realize, why didn't we think about that earlier? As if that organization is so far away from us. That's my perspective in the past. Someone creates something and that's so distant. That's not me. I am not involved. But during that moment we realized, I can start something too. There shouldn't be that much of barrier. Maybe one of the main barriers comes from within myself, like thinking that I can't do this. Having that conversation made me realize that, yeah, there actually aren't that many barriers. A lot of the barriers are actually created internally. I realized making a change is not that distant, is not that far away from me. So that would be a-ha moment.”

The next student's response demonstrates how the youth engagement project helped further develop important transferrable skills for future opportunities including problem-solving, collaboration, facilitation and willingness to hear other points of view.

“I learned a lot of soft skills in the class, like facilitation, public speaking and how to work under pressure in group work. It's a lot of skills I can bring to other groups in my future, such as the ability to facilitate, directing conversation, probing. When I have conversations with people, instead of just being more surface level, we can actually dive a couple of levels deeper and see why we think the way we do. My thinking is also different where I'm able to understand the opposing perspective a little bit better. It's still difficult, and it takes a lot of time. It's something that I'm more willing to do now, to dive a little deeper into someone else's viewpoint and why they think that way.”

### 3.3 Learning from peers

Another source of capacity building suggested by students in our interviews was learning from the experiences of their peers. This included both peers in the form of classmates and youth guest speakers.

As the student response below emphasizes, all the students interviewed reported that making meaningful connections during a time of such isolation (with the COVID-19 pandemic) was impactful. This student describes the strengths of the relationships developed between classmates and how their online space became their home. She also illustrates how students appreciated the opportunity to learn from classmates from across different academic disciplines, backgrounds and life experiences.

"Having that variety of groups and interdisciplinary students at one place was the best place to conduct social experiments because we all came from different places in our lives. There were immigrants. There were people that are so close to their local heritage and all those varieties. It was the best place to have them beside me to do this together as a group. I really strongly think that because we're doing this now in a pandemic, in an online space, and having those thought leaders coming into our space, we're basically inviting them into our little home, that really set up the precedent to this program to be so successful. I was so beneficial to me personally and I feel really thankful. I think this could have not done in a better timing, to be honest, even though that sounds so weird."

This next student's response highlights the shared importance all students attributed to the dialogues and conversations with classmates. This student found the dialogue environment shaped their views. They appreciated that the class provided the space to have difficult conversation with peers.

"The conversations with other classmates were probably the most impactful things. Learning from them, getting to hear their opinions and a lot of the conversations that we had were probably the things that I'll take the most with me...What I'll remember the most would be the toughest conversations that we had as a class and learning from them will probably have the biggest impact. That's the stuff that changed me more which led me to do the things that I'm doing now. I realize that I can continue to do the things that I'm doing now."

Youth speakers who were part of the workshops and acted as thought leaders were also reported as distinctly influential to students' learnings. Students could more closely identify with their experiences and better see how they could model similar actions. The next student's feedback showcases how hearing about the lack of youth voices and the importance of having those voices expanded their views on their own capacities to make a difference.

"When we focused on youth in government, we had DailyHive people come in and thought leaders from various local NGO's and we'd discuss the youth role in democracy. I thought it was really interesting when we had one thought leader who talked about how she was the only one at these citizen assemblies under the age of 40, I think she said she was 18 or 19. So I thought that was really interesting and made me reflect on my own role of what I could have been doing and I can still be doing."

### 3.4 Workshops/Assignments

Our research demonstrates that students’ practical understanding of different forms of democratic engagement were also developed through the course’s other workshops and assignments, beyond those already featured. These activities provided students with hands-on experience using different engagement tools. They also allowed students to receive direct feedback from instructors and practitioners in the field.

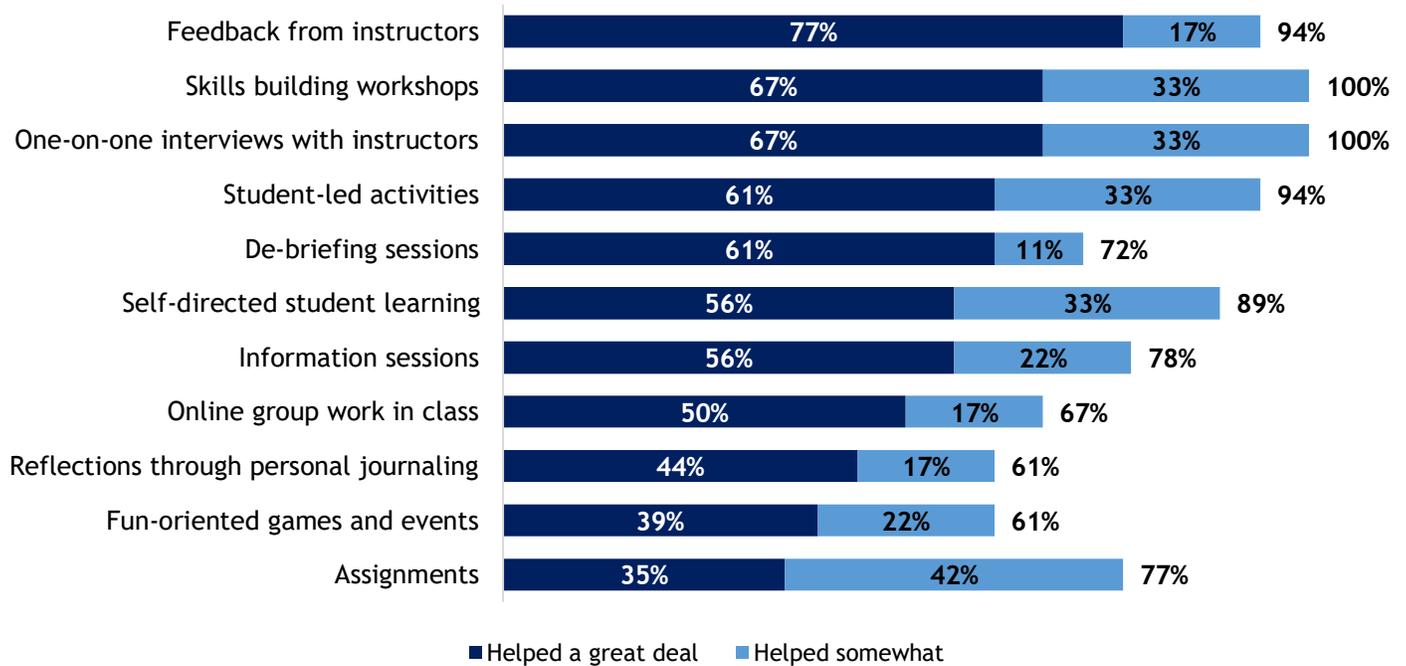
Figure 9 depicts the skill building workshops students assessed as the most valuable. The top 5 workshops share the common feature of being focused on broad and transferrable skills than some of the relatively more politically-oriented workshops. The workshop on dialogue stands apart as the favourite workshop selected by students. The other top workshops received more similar levels of support included the workshops on data analysis, online facilitation, public speaking, and writing a blog post.

**Figure 9 % of students who chose each workshop as most valuable for their learning**



Figure 10 highlights what learning tools the students found the most helpful during the SID program. Students highly valued the feedback and one-on-one time with instructors, as well as the workshops, student-led activities and self-directed learning.

**Figure 10** Extent students viewed various learning tools were helpful to their overall learning



### 3.5 Student driven dialogue of race and the impact of current events

The course was impacted by the reality that it took place during critical world events including pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong, the death of George Floyd and the responding Black Lives Matter (BLM) and anti-police brutality protests, and this all taking place during a global pandemic.

Students reported in our interviews that the world events provided opportunities for learning on the importance of democracy and impacts of democratic actions. However, these unexpected events also created challenges for the instructors.

In our interviews, students explained that they initiated an unscheduled dialogue around systemic racism and BLM in the wake of George Floyd's murder and corresponding protests. This collective push from students to have that conversation demonstrates the empowerment they gained throughout the program and their ability to identify the needs of their peers. All the students interviewed emphasized this dialogue as either the highlight or most memorable part of the program.

This first student's comments speak to the unplanned nature of the dialogue and the pressure students collectively put on the instructors to make it happen.

“There was definitely a class consensus to have more discussion on race, especially with what was going on in the States at the time, and we made that dialogue happen. It definitely wasn't something that the instructors wanted to save that space for us to have that dialogue and so we kind of pushed back and made it happen.”

This next student shares how important it was to the class to hold this dialogue. Other students also vocalized that they thought the class needed to have this discussion on race and considered ignoring the topic as perpetuating the harms the students wanted to address. This student highly valued that students were able to open up and discuss these challenging topics. This speaks to the interpersonal connections students developed with each other throughout the course. They were able to see the needs of their peers and pressure the authorities in the class to meet those needs. It also speaks to the powerful online space SID generated for students to want to hold these uncomfortable conversations together. Although this was not a planned part of the course, SID gave students the tools and confidence to initiate and hold a conversation like this together.

"I will say dialogue about the race issue was the most memorable. All the students are opening up, and it made me realize that there may be problems hiding underneath the surface. When we pretend that nothing has happened, it doesn't mean that nothing has happened, but when one of my classmates actually said that, hey, I think we need to talk, that really gave me some inspiration in how a group of people should function. If someone's feeling something uncomfortable, then we should look at it. We should not ignore it. The dialogue became very fruitful and it really helped to address what we actually think, what we actually feel like. For example, the white people in the class may not be aware how their behaviours may have influenced the people of colour. We talk about the idea of being nice. Is being nice really the way to solve all the problems? It is important to express our true feelings, to talk, to understand each other, to see each other's perspectives. So that's why I am saying that's also a very memorable moment.”

The next student's comments further stress the unique and valuable opportunity the practice of dialogue taught in SID provided. In a standard classroom, there is not nearly the same level of comfort or opportunity for students to discuss these topics in such a personal way. This student acknowledges it is that personal aspect that made the dialogue so meaningful and memorable.

"The most memorable component would be one the dialogue on race. It was interesting because it's not like I didn't know a lot of that stuff that they were saying. In poli sci we talk about this stuff a lot, but it was in the context that we were talking about it that was different. It wasn't just discussing the issues from a practical or academic perspective, this was an emotional, personal perspective listening to people from these backgrounds talk about their background in a more genuine sincere way than I had been exposed to before. It had that little bit more oomph and definitely makes you remember it a lot more and really cements the value in it a lot of the time when you're not talking about it from just an academic perspective that's supposed to be neutral."

This final student's comment illustrates how beneficial these world events were to their learning in SID. These critical events allowed students to see in real time the impact of protest and importance of democratic rights. For this student, and many others, this reinforced their learning about engagement and their role in democracy. Being in a space focused on the practical, rather than theoretical side of democracy during these events provided an exceptional learning opportunity for students.

"I think the fact that the class was in a unique situation a lot of the time because during the two months that the class was happening a lot happened with the George Floyd protests, with COVID still happening, with Hong Kong, with protests around the world, and all these other things going on. We were fortunate enough to -- one, have the ability to be in that setting. And two, be in a setting that was having conversations about it and realizing the significance of it. The overlap that happened between those two events kinds of was a fortunate coincidence for me insofar as my thinking and the biggest impact for me on everything that was happening in this topic and my role in democracy. I don't think that would have happened had it not been at this particular moment because it was like a shock to the system. We were watching all of these flaws in the systems that we had established kind of unfolding and the cracks being lit up. Almost like that liquid you drink with an x-ray and you can see exactly where all the problems are. That's kind of what was happening while we were taking this class and we were able to kind of dissect that. So that general experience would probably be the most impactful thing on my thinking and my role in democracy. In poli sci classes like you talk about the issues, but you don't really experience it. It's just something that you read in a textbook, you write it on a test and then you forget it. But it doesn't happen in the same way that this happened with all of these things happening at the same time, putting a shock to the system and then me being in a situation where we were able to dissect what was happening on a day-to-day basis."

## 4. Lessons Learned and Advice from Students

SID was the first-time Semester in Dialogue was held fully online. World events previously mentioned also created unexpected external influences on the program. These factors required instructors and students to adapt to a new and evolving environment. We examined the challenges students identified in our research and present the lessons can be learned for designing future programming in this section.

### 4.1 Shorter days in Zoom

Students reported that they struggled to adapt to being in Zoom for 8 hours a day, particularly in the opening weeks.

The student comment below captures several common complaints including: the physical discomfort and mental fatigue of attempting to remain present online for full days. They, along with other students, suggested that the days should be shorter, especially in the opening weeks. This student in particular wanted to quit the course after the first few days. This illustrates the barrier the long online days created. It also restates the importance of the personal connections that convinced this student to continue the program.

“Honestly, the first two weeks were really, really rough. After the second day I was, like, no, I’m out, I’m not doing this. But then I talked to a couple other students, and I saw who was coming to the course and realized maybe I should do this...I would say don’t start with the nine to five right away. Start with a nine to one or two because the first week I remember specifically was the day that we always went nine to five or beyond five, and the intensity on your eyes, your back... I don’t even know what kind of headaches I was having. I never had those kinds of headaches before. I know other people were getting migraines and stuff too. So, I think the first two weeks were very difficult.”

### 4.2 More flexible schedule

Students reported that the rigidity of the schedule made it difficult to adapt to unplanned developments and the immediate needs of the class. As the student feedback below highlights, students wanted to have a greater say and more collaboration on the focus of the course. Increasing the opportunities for students to build their own course would have further embedded the goal of youth empowerment and practicing democracy.

"I thought that we could have had more time to discuss things that we wanted to discuss. Especially after the first few weeks, the tone of the class seemed to be set more as a this is your class and we can make it how you want it to be. But then we never actually got the chance to make it what we wanted it to be. I think that’s what I disliked the most...it definitely felt very rigid and preplanned.”

One frequently cited example in this report was the desire from students to discuss George Floyd's death and the related BLM movement. Students reported that they experienced some resistance from instructors to allow this. Students interpreted this resistance as partially because of the pre-scheduled events for that day. In that case, the student feedback below summarizes how the class pressure succeeded and led to the impactful dialogue previously mentioned in this report. This student emphasized the behaviour of the instructors was not unexpected from a typical class, but because SID had cultivated an open and connected environment, students had higher expectations. This illustrates how students were comfortable and confident enough to challenge the instructors. They pushed to address the needs of their classmates, even if that involved significant discomfort.

"A lot of issues came up during our semester around social justice. We were right in the crux of Black Lives Matter, George Floyd, and we touched upon all those things and we had people in our class that it was very personal to and felt that we needed to talk about it with. Sometimes it felt like we didn't have the time or the space to talk about it. They did carve out some time for it which we did appreciate very much. But it was so structured in the sense that we had so many things to do every single day and it was all on a schedule. Which I get is normal courses, but it feels different when you're in a class online with this many people for this long. If there's things that you feel the group needs to talk about it it's hard to not have a flexible day where students get to choose what they talk about and this is the dialogue we want to lead on this day. Eventually we kind of got there and carved out a morning for that and it was amazing and we really appreciated that day. However, it was really challenging not having that space because everything was so scheduled."

### 4.3 More broad assignments

Some of the students who were not studying political science, including the one's who comments are captured below, reported that they thought some of the assignments were too specifically politics orientated. They stated they would have preferred broader assignments that would be transferrable to other fields of study. This student described that either the transferability of assignments needed to be more explicit or assignments needed to be made more generally applicable. Figure 9 (above) illustrated that broader assignments were more highly valued by students than the more politically specific workshops.

"I struggled a little bit in the workshops because I felt like some of them were really specific. It would be things like how to start an activism campaign, but there wasn't a lot of foundation that was laid for the workshops before they started. I'm not interested in getting into politics and I'm not interested in being a politician or running an activism campaign. That's not really my direction. I felt with those sometimes either they needed to be tweaked a little bit to be more universal or just a little bit more foundation beforehand like having a little bit more of a briefing about how it can be applicable in different streams of life. Even if you aren't necessarily going into politics."

## 4.4 Increased training and action related to racism

While all the students we interviewed identified the student-initiated dialogue on racism as the most memorable, it was also flagged as an emotionally draining experience for some students that identified as Indigenous, Black or People of Colour. Some students reported they wanted these conversations to take place but did not believe the instructors approached it appropriately. A recommendation from multiple students is to have training on anti-racism and decolonizing in the beginning of the program for both students and instructors to set a better foundation.

This student's comments describe the complexity of power dynamics within the SID program. Students were equipped with the skills to challenge authority throughout the course and used that 'esteem' to challenge the instructors. She described how this was met with some resistance but highlighted the effectiveness of the course in increasing students' confidence and capacity.

"I think that because Semester in Dialogue is such a progressive educational space, sometimes I think Shauna and Daniel gave us all of this esteem from the beginning. They wanted us to have it. But I think they got caught off guard eventually when that esteem made us be people, not just students under their authority. It was, like, oh, you're really doing it. They were great overall, but every time we would as a class challenge their egos, we would sometimes get under their skin, both of them. I think they could have used more elasticity in that way. I think they were caught off guard by our feistiness. I think they needed to be a little bit better about checking their own egos. And that's okay. I think they did all right."

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Semester in Dialogue program always provides a unique learning environment for students. This year, the *Semester in Democracy: The Next Frontier* proved prescient in ways instructors could not have imagined. Students carried with them the personal and professional challenges borne by so many during the pandemic. As a result, SID adapted to student needs. The online learning format was re-designed to allow for a space to discuss and study the real-time democratic actions and challenges taking place around the world, such as the Black Lives Matter and Hong Kong democracy protests.

Our research illustrates SID equipped students with fundamental skills in writing, facilitating, communications and research. Students applied and developed their writing abilities when they both wrote more personal blog posts, and more formal candidate policy briefs. They nurtured their facilitation and communication abilities when they hosted thought leaders and designed a dialogue for the class. They expanded their quantitative and qualitative research skills as part of their youth engagement project.

The following are recommendations based on the success of the SID for future youth-focused civic education projects:

- Bring together a diverse set of participants and give them both structured and unstructured time to connect with each other. Students cited in-class conversations and learning from one another as important tools for understanding the challenges facing democracy.
- Allow students to collaborate on the design of the program. Allowing students to help design the program will help students adapt to unexpected developments and better participate in an online environment.
- Ensure decolonial and anti-racism principles are understood and embedded into the program. Open the course with training on anti-racism and decolonizing for both students and instructors to set a better foundation for conversations throughout the program.
- Provide space for informal conversations with a diverse range of elected officials and other democratic actors. Thought leaders who engaged in real conversations with students were overwhelmingly identified as making a lasting impression on students.
- Bring in youth leaders for participants to see the power their peers have exercised and learn how they might participate in democracy. Ensure multi-generational representation in thought and workshop leaders.
- Equip participants with foundational knowledge through engaging workshops that allow them to apply those learnings in a meaningful and practical way. Applied experiential learning and practice in using the tools that influence decisions are key for de-mystifying how to influence democracy.
- Allow participants to be responsible for leading multiple important parts of the course. Hosting a thought leader and leading dialogues as well as applied project work is key for developing students' self-confidence.

Evaluation results show SID provided a space for students to develop meaningful relationships with each other. The trust cultivated in that online space empowered students to push the boundaries of class discussions into the complex and uncomfortable territory of current events.



The unplanned influence of global events combined with the thoughtfully structured course resulted in an empowering program for students to see the power in themselves and a space to exercise that power.

Students were also able to expand their knowledge of Canada's democratic system beyond what can be read in textbooks through dynamic workshops and dialogues with elected officials, public servants and democratic organizations. Discussions with guests humanized politicians and removed the internalized barriers to students' participation in democratic engagement and public work.