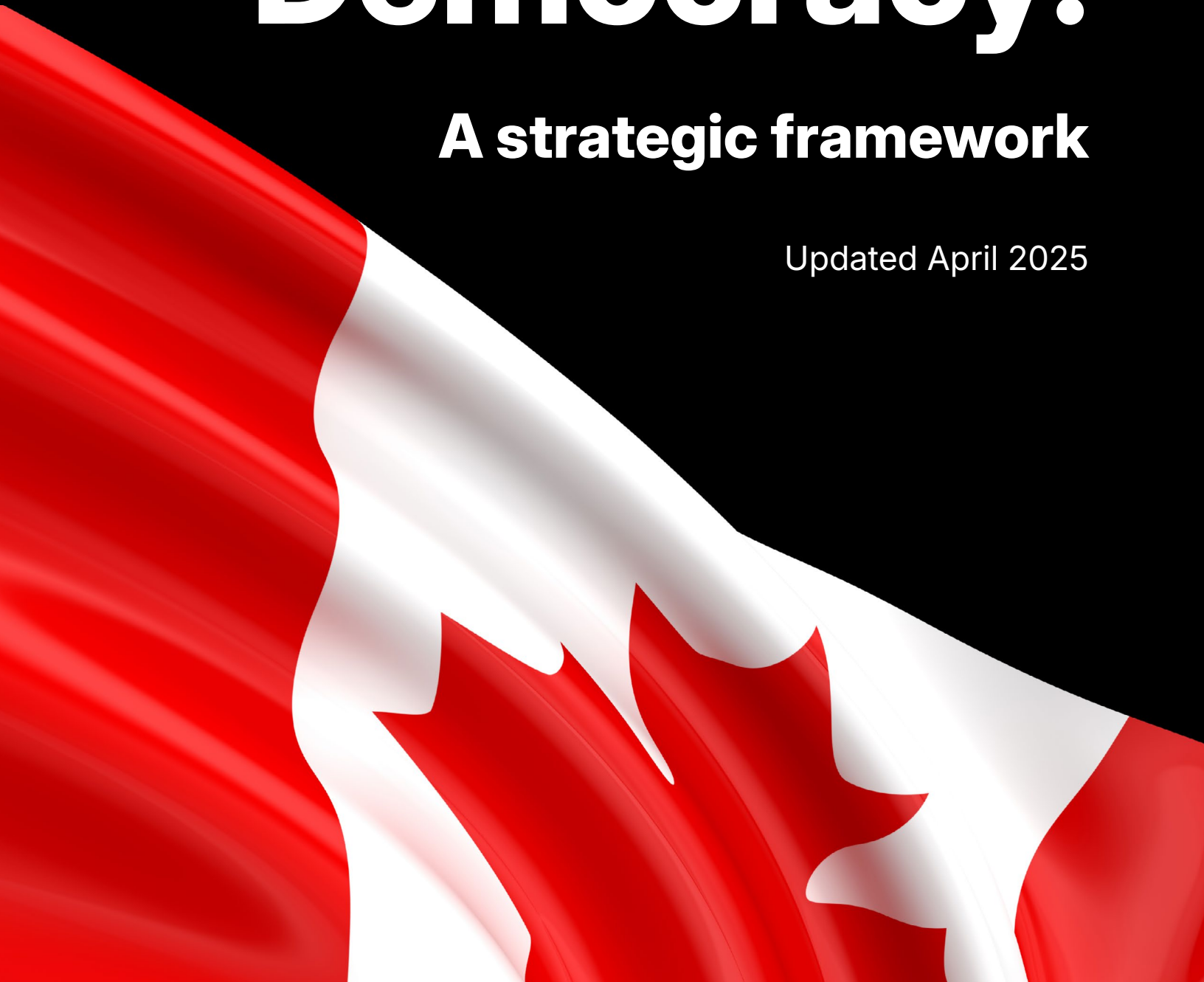


Defending Canada's Democracy:

A strategic framework

Updated April 2025



Summary

The Cascade Institute offers here a strategic framework to revitalize and defend Canada's democracy.

The problems facing Canada—and weakening our democracy—are so diverse and complex that it's difficult to know where or how to start fixing them. We need a systems lens to understand these problems and implement effective responses. The framework proposed here, therefore, builds on an analysis of the deep causes of our democracy's current frailty. It's designed to help everyone concerned about the state of our democracy—including governments, policymakers, businesses, and actors across Canada's civil society—make sense of the forces at play, how they're linked, and how they can be countered.

This framework is also explicitly *strategic*, because it shows how carefully targeted interventions to strengthen our country's economic and social resilience—both ideas for new interventions and proposals already in circulation—can be integrated to create a synergistic and powerful action plan.

The Cascade Institute welcomes feedback on this framework—and expects it will be strengthened through discussion and debate—as Canadians continue the urgent conversation about how to save our country.

The threat

The international border between Canada and the United States—long a symbol of amity between nations—is now a frontier in the global battle to defend democracy. As in eastern Ukraine, where two radically different political systems are confronting each other, an authoritarian bully is threatening to annex an independent democracy.

In less than three months, the Trump administration has entrenched itself as a hard-right regime with few constraints on its power. It is abridging the rule of law, violating the constitution, terrorizing federal employees, inducing massive economic turmoil, purging top officers in the Pentagon, and advocating American seizure of territory from Gaza to Greenland. President Trump has also declared he'll use "economic force" to subjugate Canada.

In answer, Canadians are raising their voices and waving their flags in defence of our society and institutions. But what exactly are we defending? And how might we best wage this defence?

Needed: A whole-of-society response

The strategic framework offered here recognizes that democracy is far more than the institutions and procedural rules of elections. It is, fundamentally, an ensemble of beliefs, moral commitments, and practices, all of which can be strong and resilient only if embedded in a thriving economy and society.

Yet today, Canada's political institutions are neither adequately representative nor responsive. Our economy has stopped generating widely shared prosperity. Fundamental social infrastructures, like health care and supportive housing, have broken down. Political polarization and social divisions are worsening. Processes of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples have barely begun. And trust in core institutions—including in our governments, traditional media, universities, and legal system—has dropped sharply. These weaknesses could quickly become fatal.

Democracy has many forms, of course, and Canadians have diverse views about what form ours should take. This framework doesn't try to adjudicate among these views. Instead, it's anchored in a single core commitment: if Canadian democracy is to be strong and resilient, our society must be *fair, prosperous, plural, and free*. And while Canadians can debate the precise meaning of each of these criteria, we can agree that we're not meeting them today—especially the criteria of fairness and prosperity.

Ultimately, democracy is not a fixed state but a living social fabric that we must actively weave every day in interactions both large and small. So, revitalizing and defending our democracy requires a whole-of-society response, from our communities, through our diverse regions, across the entire nation.

Long before the Trump administration threatened our country's very existence, Canadian democracy was weakening dangerously. But Mr. Trump's threat can usefully catalyze Canadians to rally around a multi-pronged agenda to strengthen our social, economic, and political fabric. The framework proposed here will help us identify that agenda's key components and integrate them into a compelling action plan.

The framework

Accurate diagnosis must precede effective prescription. We need to correctly understand what ails Canadian democracy before we intervene to try to strengthen it. The Cascade Institute uses two analytical tools to diagnose the forces weakening our democracy and to identify where and how Canadians can address those forces.

The first tool is a deep analysis of the drivers of ideological polarization, social division, populism, and democratic decline in Canada, the U.S., and other western societies. The Cascade Institute proposes, as a working hypothesis, that four causal mechanisms are producing these pernicious social outcomes; research indicates all four mechanisms are operating powerfully today. They are:

- **Economic Precarity:** Changes in production technologies are widening income and wealth disparities and increasing economic insecurity for broad segments of Canadian society.
- **Ingenuity Gap:** Failures of political and managerial elites to solve critical social problems, like health care and housing, are delegitimizing these elites and undermining people's trust in core institutions of governance.
- **Message Distortion:** Information overload and social media are interacting to heighten the divisiveness of social messaging.
- **Fragmentation of Belief Communities:** The proliferation of alternative "truth bubbles" and their associated ideological camps makes problem-solving increasingly difficult.

The second tool is *WIT analysis*. It assumes that societies are organized around cohesive clusters of **W**orldviews, **I**nstitutions, and **T**echnologies, or "WIT sets." Effective interventions to shift a society's direction or to respond to critical threats must address all three WIT elements simultaneously.

These two analytical tools can be used together to create a 12-cell framework that helps us identify interventions to revitalize and defend our democracy, as shown in Table 1.

Under each column, we can list interventions to mitigate or even reverse the impact of one of the four causal processes. Then along each row, we can specify whether the proposed interventions operate mainly on worldviews, institutions, or technologies. And finally, within each of the table's cells, we can indicate whether the proposed interventions will be implemented at the community, the regional (i.e., provincial and territorial), and/or the national levels.

Table 1: A framework to identify interventions to revitalize and defend Canadian democracy

Identify an intervention that:				
reduces economic precarity	closes the ingenuity gap	mitigates message distortion	reverses fragmentation of belief communities	and operates mainly on:
				worldviews
				institutions
				technologies

We can use this framework to understand exactly where, within Canadian society, proposed interventions to strengthen our society and democracy will exert leverage, and to guide the evaluation and integration of these interventions.

For instance, the proposal to reduce interprovincial trade barriers—an economic remedy that policymakers now widely endorse—falls within Figure 1's *Reduce economic precarity/Institutions* cell and would be implemented mainly at the regional level. Efforts to use overhauled CBC programming to break down isolated and divisive “truth bubbles” within Canadian society would be situated in the *Reverse fragmentation of belief communities/Worldviews* cell, to be implemented at the national level. A Canada-wide technological moonshot project to advance ultradeep geothermal power (as part of a broader energy industrial strategy) would fall in the *Reduce economic precarity/Technologies* cell, to be implemented at the regional and national levels. And redesigning our municipal council proceedings to better channel diverse voices into civil dialogue (and, ultimately, constructive and concerted local action) would fall in the *Close the ingenuity gap/Institutions* cell and would be implemented at the community level.

This report's next section explains in more detail the four mechanisms driving ideological polarization, social division, populism, and democratic decline. This section is followed by another that briefly outlines WIT analysis. The report's final section shows how we can use the proposed framework to both identify interventions and integrate those interventions into an action plan that ensures that our society is fair, prosperous, plural, and free—and that our democracy remains secure.

The drivers of democratic decline

Figure 1 below shows the four linked hypotheses guiding the Cascade Institute's research on polarization dynamics in Western societies. Institute researchers are testing and refining these hypotheses as their research advances.

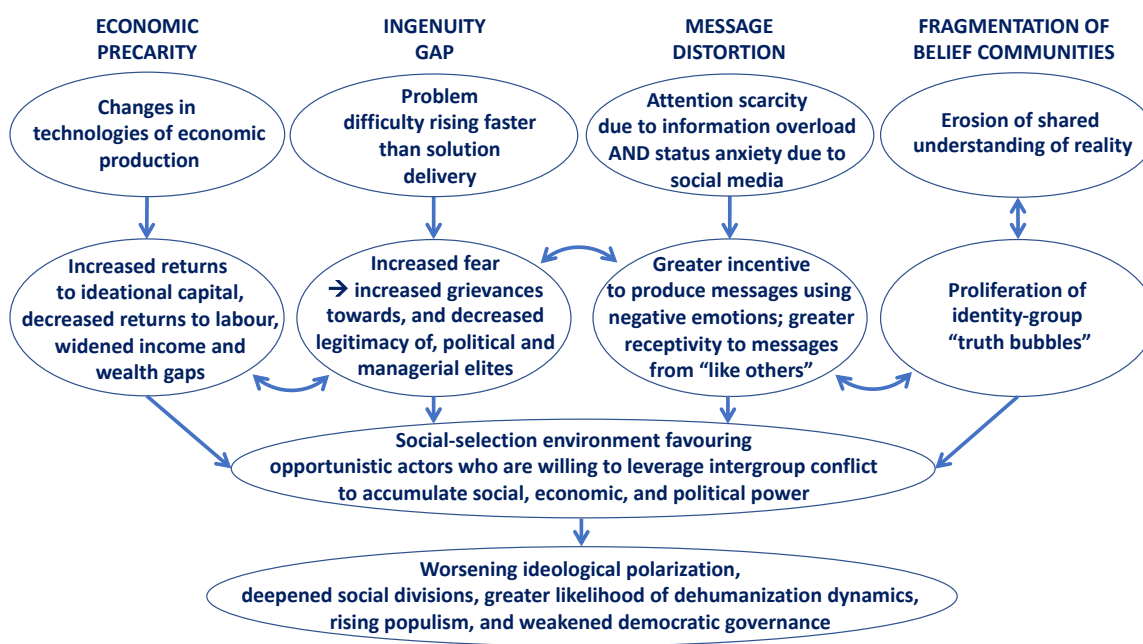


Figure 1: Four causal mechanisms driving ideological polarization, social divisions, and democratic decline.

Each of the diagram's vertical columns describes a causal mechanism or pathway hypothesized to be contributing to worsening ideological polarization, social division, populism, and democratic decline.

The first two columns on Figure 1's left (Economic Precarity and Ingenuity Gap) identify *material* causal processes, in the sense that they highlight things happening in the physical-material world. The two columns on the right (Message Distortion and Fragmentation of Belief Communities) identify more *ideational* causal processes, because they mainly concern things happening in people's heads.

The four pathways are not causally isolated from each other. The figure indicates some of the more obvious causal links among them, although many others certainly operate.

Appreciation of these four pathways' significance as drivers of social division generally declines as attention shifts from material causes on the figure's left to ideational causes on its right. For instance, although scholars have substantially unpacked the first pathway's technological and institutional processes, they have largely neglected the fourth pathway's powerful worldview dynamics.

Economic precarity

The Economic Precarity pathway on Figure 1's left starts at the top with long-term technological changes that have shifted income, wealth, and economic security from labour to capital. These shifts have dramatically increased certain groups' economic insecurity and, in turn, aggravated both geographic divides (especially between urban and rural communities) and social grievances. A variety of other factors—including pandemic-induced inflation, high debt levels, demographic trends, impacts of increasingly extreme weather, and the rising cost of energy—are simultaneously worsening income and wealth differentials. Per-capita economic growth in high-income countries has declined steadily for decades (see Figure 2), a trend that has in turn promoted zero-sum perceptions of economic opportunity.

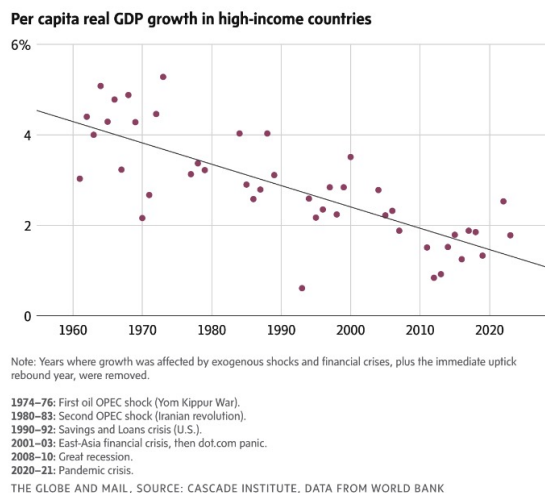


Figure 2: Per capita real economic growth in high-income countries has declined steadily over six decades.

Ingenuity gap

Scholars, policymakers, and commentators appreciate less the significance of the Ingenuity Gap pathway (second column from the left in Figure 1). This causal chain starts with our societies' declining ability to address critical problems, as the number and difficulty of these problems outraces our collective capacity to supply effective and just solutions. A widening ingenuity gap between the ideas required to solve a society's problems and the solutions a society is able to supply (see Figure 3) progressively erodes the moral authority (i.e., legitimacy) of political and technocratic elites and governance institutions.¹ Why, people ask, should we continue to reward these highly credentialed elites with wealth and power when they aren't protecting us from economic, health, technological, demographic, climate, and other threats?

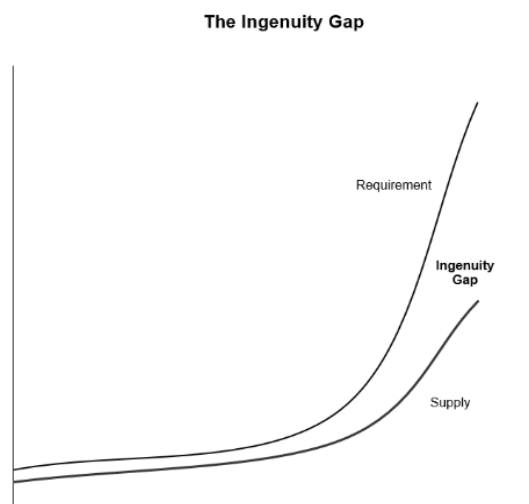


Figure 3: Over time, societies' ingenuity requirement has increasingly outstripped their ingenuity supply, where ingenuity is defined as problem-solving algorithms.

¹Homer-Dixon, Thomas, *The Ingenuity Gap: Can we solve the problems of the future?* Knopf, 2000.

Message distortion

In the third, Message Distortion, pathway, information overload (arising from recent decades' astounding increase in information availability) has biased both message production and message reception in ways that sharpen group-identity (we/they) boundaries. First, with respect to *message production*, information overload increases people's incentives to shorten their messages and infuse them with psychologically "sticky" negative emotions (fear, anger, and disgust) to gain scarce attention in a saturated information environment. Simultaneously, digital-media oligopolies have deliberately designed their social-media technologies to heighten status anxiety; this anxiety encourages people to use their short, emotionally charged messages to disparage out-groups and boost their in-group status. Second, with respect to *message reception*, attention scarcity encourages people to preferentially attend to messages from "like others" (i.e., people like themselves), because those messages are more easily understood. (Two charts in this document's appendix provide more detail on these mechanisms.)

Fragmentation of belief communities

The fourth pathway, called Fragmentation of Belief Communities, starts in Figure 1's top right corner with today's widespread erosion of a shared understanding of reality, the proliferation of truth claims about our reality, and the weakening of grounds for effectively adjudicating among these claims. These processes result in part from the propagation and strengthening of diverse anti-realist or realism-skeptical worldviews (including those postulating multiple universes) that suggest we substantially create reality, or choose among realities, through our minds. Technologies of virtual reality, massively multiplayer online games, the Metaverse, and large language model AI are now powerfully amplifying the appeal and reach of realism-skeptical beliefs.

The erosion of a shared understanding of reality makes solving collective problems like climate change or pandemics harder, by undermining the status of science, weakening agreement on what counts as "truth," and catalyzing fundamental disputes about sources of evidence. And, in doing so, it encourages identity groups to generate their own *truth bubbles*—isolated epistemic domains of knowledge, fact, and expertise—that harden the boundaries among increasingly discrete and isolated belief communities.

Complex systems are highly nonlinear, which means they often contain leverage points, where small interventions can cause large, beneficial change.

The Cascade Institute proposes that the four processes shown in Figure 1 are reinforcing each other, creating a social-selection environment that favours opportunistic actors willing to use intergroup conflict to accumulate social and political power. These actors' increasing social and political success then worsens ideological polarization, social division, dehumanization dynamics, populism, and democratic decline.

The global challenge of deepening social division is vastly more complex than generally understood. But that complexity doesn't make social division inevitably less tractable. Complex

systems are highly nonlinear, which means they often contain leverage points, where small interventions can cause large, beneficial change. The goal of identifying and exploiting leverage points guides the Cascade Institute's application of this strategic framework to defend Canadian democracy.

WIT analysis

Societies are generally organized around cohesive clusters of worldviews, institutions, and technologies,² or WIT sets.

In simplest terms, *worldviews* are mental networks of concepts, beliefs, and values—usually emotionally charged—that allow people to interpret things around them and plan their actions. Worldviews also give people's lives meaning and therefore some sense of security, which can make them highly resistant to change. *Institutions* are, broadly, a community's rules, ranging from formal laws governing its economic markets and legislatures to unwritten social norms about what behaviour is appropriate or ethical at specific times and places. Finally, *technologies* are problem-solving tools that people invent by using energy and information to exploit properties of their physical and social environments.

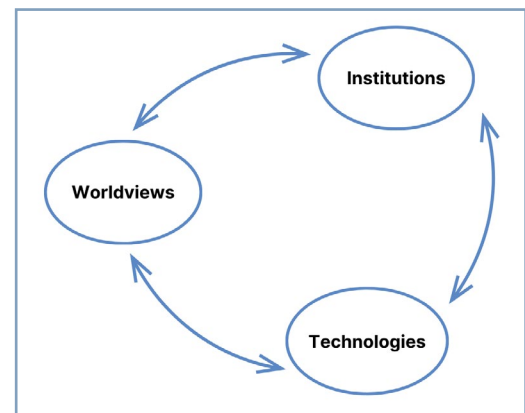


Figure 4: Societies are generally organized around cohesive clusters of worldviews, institutions, and technologies.

Within each WIT set, these three components are tightly interdependent: they influence each other, depend on each other, and usually hang together in a cohesive way. For example, the Canadian health-care system is grounded in shared worldview principles that health care is a public good, that access to good health care is a right due all members of our society, and that the whole of society should provide resources to support this care. These worldview commitments then support—and are supported by—our institutions of public funding for health professionals, hospitals, and other health facilities. And the hospitals themselves are ensembles of physical and social technologies—from MRI machines and Gatch beds to emergency alert systems—that are acquired through the institution of public funding and that discharge (we hope) our worldview commitment to the right to good health care.

The tight links among these three WIT components mean that efforts to reform Canadian health care must consider not just the system's institutions and technologies—the usual focus of policy proposals—but also the beliefs and values that underpin the system. More generally, if societies want to achieve rapid, effective social change, they must generally intervene simultaneously in all three WIT domains.

²Beddoe, Rachael, et al. "Overcoming systemic roadblocks to sustainability: The evolutionary redesign of worldviews, institutions, and technologies." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106.8 (2009): 2483-2489.

Assembling an action plan

Defending Canadian democracy demands a whole-of-society response. So the Cascade Institute's strategic framework is addressed to the broad range of frontline actors in Canadian society who recognize that our democracy hangs in the balance: non-governmental, philanthropic, and community-based organizations, whose mandates intersect with the forces identified in the previous sections; small and large business owners and industry representatives; elected leaders and public servants at all levels of government and of whatever political stripe; educational institutions; and concerned citizens who engage with—or are represented by—any of the above.

This framework should help these diverse Canadians design elements of a multifaceted democracy-protection strategy, rank those interventions by their timeliness and likely effectiveness, and then assemble them into a cohesive and synergistic action plan—one that people across our society can collaborate to implement.

No single intervention can simultaneously have impacts across all four causal mechanisms and all WIT domains. But every proposed intervention should interact with and reinforce at least some others located elsewhere in the framework.

Finally, any intervention powerful enough to reverse or even slow our democracy's decline will affect multiple stakeholders across our society, so will likely prove contentious. Discussion of interventions will inevitably surface sharp disagreements about economic and social policy and the principles of representation and equity.

For this reason, the interventions shown in Table 2 are examples only. The Cascade Institute seeks to stimulate a systematic conversation about what *exactly* Canadians can do in this perilous moment. Readers who disagree with any or all of Table 2's suggestions are encouraged to propose others that they believe might better ensure our society is fair, prosperous, plural, and free—and that our democracy remains secure.

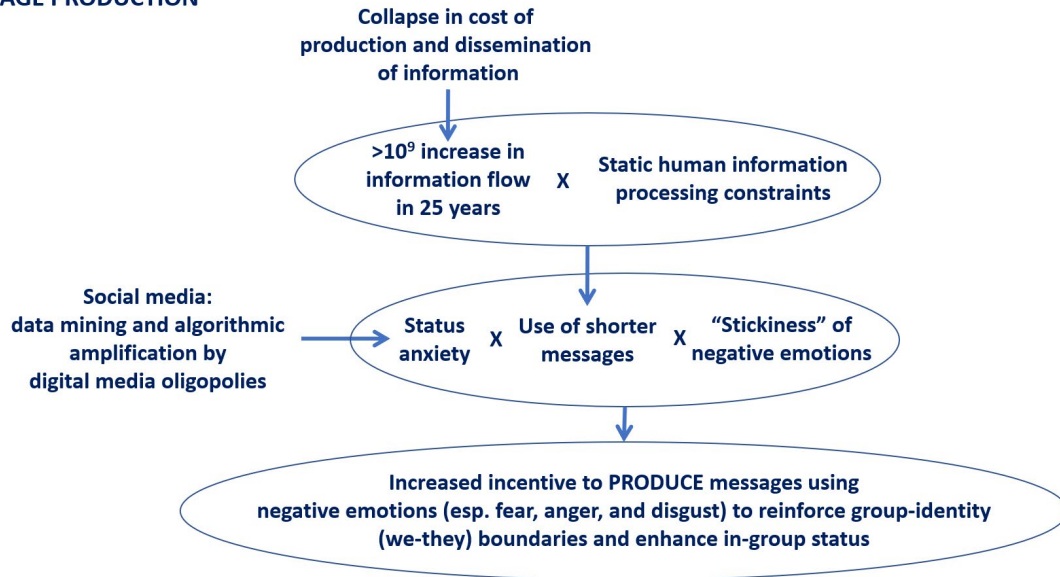
Table 2: Examples of interventions to revitalize Canadian democracy

Interventions to:				
reduce economic precarity	close the ingenuity gap	mitigate message distortion	reverse fragmentation of belief communities	and operating mainly on:
Surfacing subsidies: Conduct a “true costs” study of equalization, subsidy, and royalty programs so the public recognizes hidden support for incumbent interests; make study cross-partisan and participatory, with results as a starting point for a reform discussion. (National/Regional)	Rethinking credentials: Start a national conversation about the role of rent-seeking credentialism in eroding public trust in experts and managerial elites; engage professional associations in credential reform (esp. reducing barriers) to rebuild public trust in genuine/legitimate expertise. (National/Regional)	Disinformation inoculation: Revamp education curricula to teach critical engagement with online news, troll farms, disinformation, and AI. (Regional)	Activate the Pledge: Have Canadian celebrities endorse the Pledge for Canada ; create a follow-on resource where people register proposals and visions for Canada’s future. (National) CBC renewal: Adjust programming to address isolated and divisive “truth bubbles” within Canadian society; re-prioritize and adequately resource CBC’s news mandate (National)	worldviews
Habitat for Canadians: Implement an emergency public-private program of on-the-job trades training for the unemployed and underemployed to build subsidized housing; bolstered with university, college, and high school co-op positions. (Regional/National) Protecting our mental health: Expand mental-health support under healthcare, esp. for youth. (Regional)	Innovation immigration: Fast-track residency status for top scientists, policy experts, artists, and academics seeking to leave the US. (National) Dual-use military: Revitalize Canadian Armed Forces to meet a 2%-of-GDP target with military capacities relevant to Canadians: e.g., increased Arctic security, emergency response, and homeland defence. (National)	Algorithm transparency: Mandate open access to recommender algorithms and work with international bodies to establish a global protocol for the same. (National)	Intranational exchanges: Build/expand inter-provincial, Indigenous-settler, faith-secular exchange programs. (Community/Regional/National) Serve the nation: Establish a one-year national service program for young (post-secondary) Canadians, stipulating residence outside one’s province, with varied (but including military-reserve and climate-corps) service options. (National)	institutions
Geothermal moonshot: Create public-private partnership for an integrated set of experimental drilling sites in diverse geologies to drop the cost of deep geothermal power, as part of a broader energy diversification strategy to give Canada expertise and technology it can sell worldwide. (Regional/National)	Hands-on democracy: Prototype and test new approaches and new technologies for citizens’ assemblies and participatory budgeting, to increase democratic participation and legitimacy at the municipal level (Community)	AI defence: Fund AI research on the design of real-time, publicly accessible disinformation detection systems. (National) Better conversations: Develop AI- based chatbots that teach people how to engage in less-polarized conversations around controversial topics. (National/Community)	Get off screens: Ban smart phones in public schools. (Regional/Community) Escaping IT oligopolies: Study how to improve and expand “ fediverse ” social-media technologies, with effective, distributed content moderation. (National/Regional)	technologies

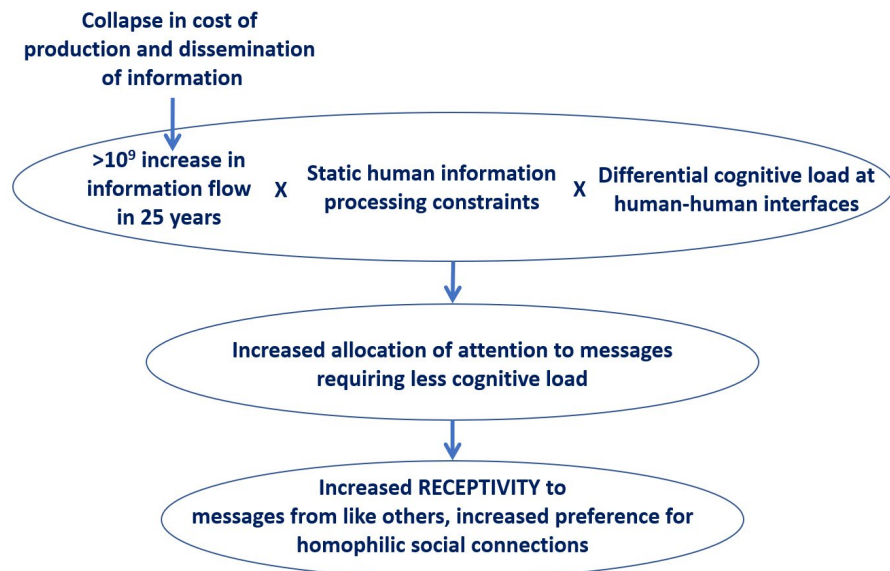
Appendix:

Two causal pathways leading to message distortion

1. MESSAGE PRODUCTION



2. MESSAGE RECEPTIVITY



Authors

Cascade Institute fellows and staff wrote and assembled this document.

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