Defending Canada's Democracy:

A strategic framework

March 2025

Acknowledgements

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Cascade Institute fellows and staff wrote and assembled this document.

Citation

Cascade Institute. 2025. *Defending Canada's democracy: A strategic framework*. Cascade Institute.

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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 varied and entangled that it's difficult to know where or how to start fixing them. This framework therefore uses an analysis of the deep causes of our democracy's current frailty to help Canadians identify powerful ways to build our country's economic and social resilience. It's explicitly *strategic*, in that it shows how these initiatives can be integrated with worthwhile ideas already circulating to create a cohesive and synergistic action plan.

The Cascade Institute will apply this framework to guide and focus the now urgent conversations—within governments, among policymakers and businesses, and across Canada's civil society—about how to save our country.

The threat

For over two centuries, the international border between Canada and the United States—the world's longest—has been a symbol of amity between nations. Now it's 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 just a month, the Trump administration has entrenched itself as a hard-right regime with few if any constraints on its power. It is abridging the rule of law, violating the constitution, terrorizing federal employees, 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?

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 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. The framework presented here 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, defending our democracy against the Trump administration's threats demands an immediate, whole-of-society response, from our communities, through our diverse regions, across the entire nation.

This framework will help Canadians identify the key components of that response and integrate them into a powerfully motivating action plan.

The framework

The Cascade Institute uses two analytical tools to identify where and how Canadians can start addressing the forces weakening Canada's democracy.

The first is *WIT analysis.* This analysis 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.

The second tool is a comprehensive analysis of ideological polarization, social division, populism, and democratic decline in Canada, the US, and other western societies. The Cascade Institute proposes, as a working hypothesis, that four causal mechanisms are driving 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 differentials and increasing economic insecurity.
- Ingenuity Gap: Failures in social problem solving are delegitimizing political and managerial elites.
- Message Distortion: Information overload and social media are interacting to increase the divisiveness of social messaging.
- Epistemic Fragmentation: Propagation of anti-realist beliefs is aiding proliferation of alternative "truth bubbles."

Combining these two analytical tools, as shown in the following table, provides a 12-cell framework for identifying ways that Canadians can revitalize their society and defend their democracy. Because such interventions can take place at community, regional (i.e., provincial and territorial), and/or national levels, the table can be expanded into a 36-cell, three-dimensional "intervention matrix," as shown in Figure 1 farther below.

Table 1: Identifying ways to revitalize and defend Canadian democracy				
	Four causal mechanisms driving polarization and social division			
	Economic Precarity	Ingenuity Gap	Message Distortion	Epistemic Fragmentation
Worldviews				
Institutions				
Technologies				

We can use this intervention matrix to understand exactly where, within Canadian society, proposed interventions to strengthen our society and democracy will exert their leverage and to guide selection and evaluation of interventions.

For instance, reducing interprovincial trade barriers—an economic remedy now widely endorsed—falls in Figure 1's Economic Precarity/Institutions/Regional cell. Efforts to use
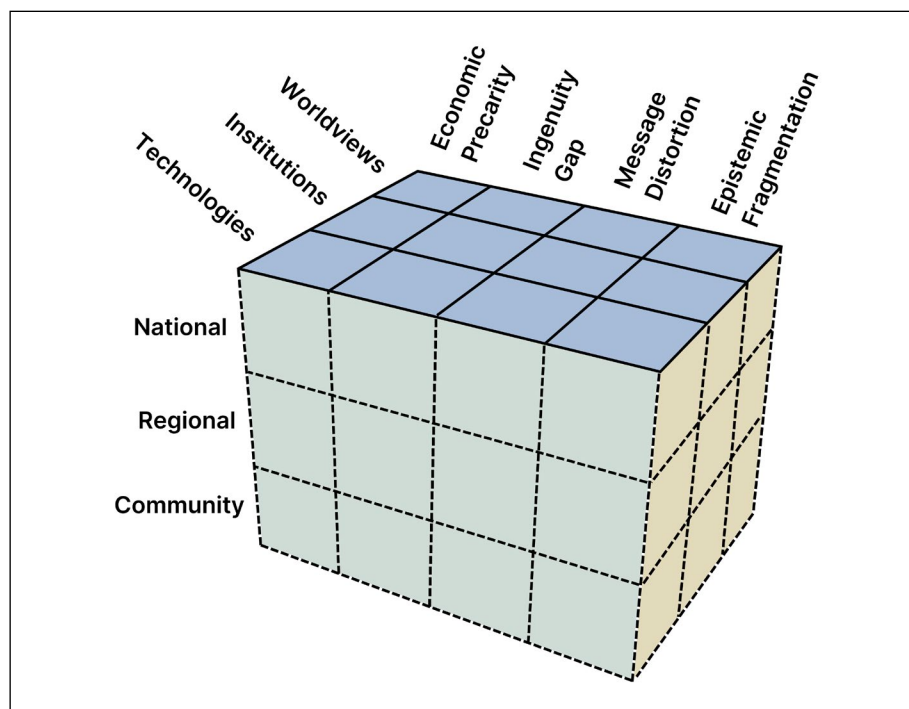

Figure 1: The intervention matrix for revitalizing Canadian democracy.

revamped CBC programming to break down isolated and divisive "truth bubbles" within Canadian society would be situated in the Worldviews/Epistemic Fragmentation/National cell. A Canada-wide technological moonshot project to advance ultradeep geothermal power (as part of a broader energy industrial strategy) would fall in the Technologies/Economic Precarity/National cell. And redesigning our municipal council proceedings to better channel diverse inputs into civil dialogue (and, ultimately, constructive and concerted local action) would fall in the Institutions/Ingenuity Gap/Community cell.

This report's next two sections explain in more detail both WIT analysis and the four mechanisms driving ideological polarization, social division, populism, and democratic decline. Its final section then shows how we can use the framework to 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.

WIT analysis

Societies are generally organized around cohesive clusters of worldviews, institutions, and technologies, or WIT sets.[1]

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.

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, a prominent part of our Western worldview is a commitment to personal freedom and independence. This commitment supports—and is supported by—our institutions of (partially) free economic markets, including private corporations. The commitment to freedom also reinforces—and is reinforced by—the technology of private cars, a technology that allows for extraordinary personal mobility by historical standards. And finally, the accumulation of political and economic power within the corporations that make cars allows them to adjust markets (by obtaining subsidies, for instance) in ways that benefit them.

The tight links among these three WIT components mean, among other things, that policymakers find it hard to change people's use of private cars or, more fundamentally, change the way markets operate without addressing people's beliefs and emotions about their personal freedom and/or addressing excessive concentrations of corporate power.

More generally, if societies want to achieve rapid, effective social change, they must intervene simultaneously in all three WIT domains.
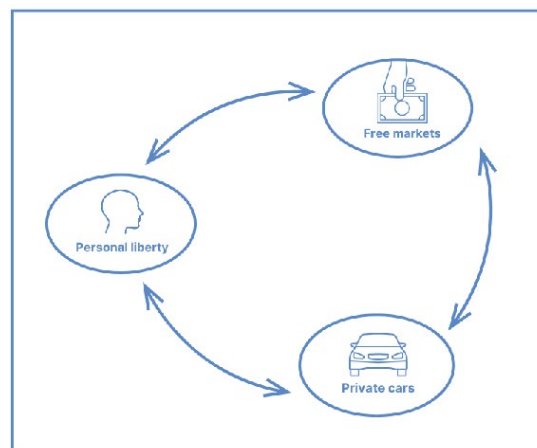

Figure 2: The liberty, free market, and private cars WIT set.

[1]Beddoe, 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.

The drivers of democratic decline

Figure 3 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.
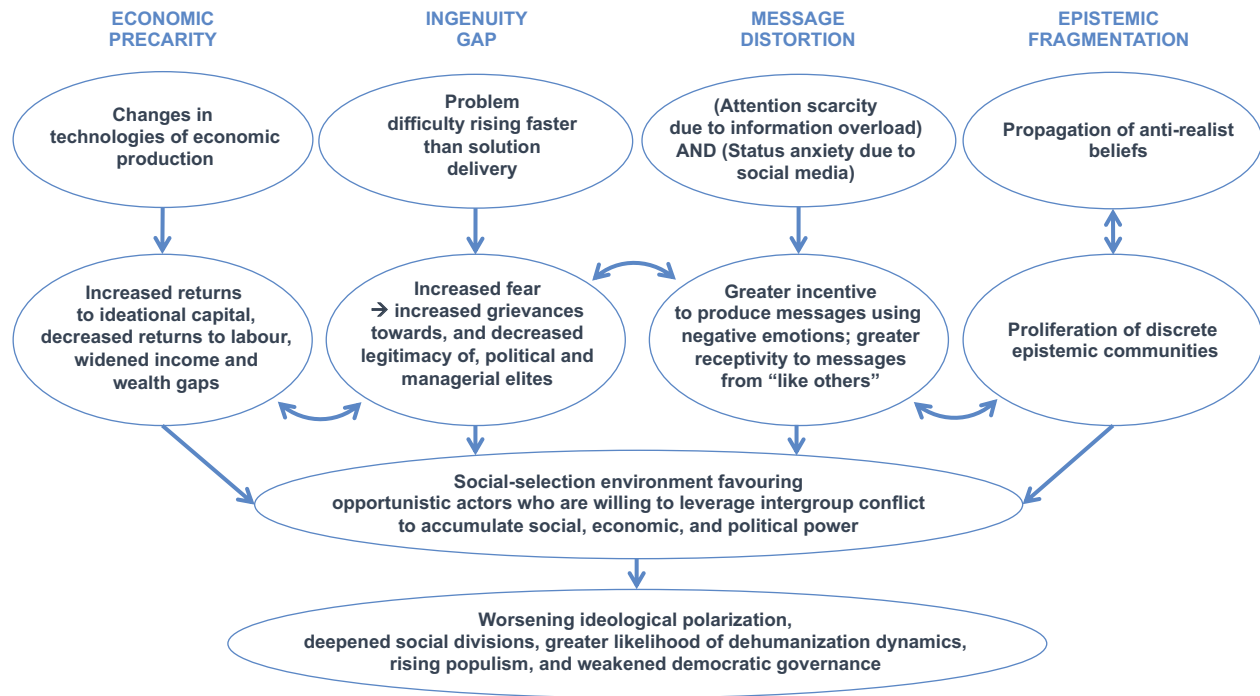

Figure 3: Four causal mechanisms driving ideological polarization, social divisions, and democratic decline.

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 3's left (Economic Precarity and Ingenuity Gap) identify *material* causal processes, in the sense that they highlight things happening in our societies' physical-material world. The two columns on the right (Message Distortion and Epistemic Fragmentation) 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.

The Economic Precarity pathway on Figure 3'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 4), a trend that has in turn promoted zero-sum perceptions of economic opportunity.
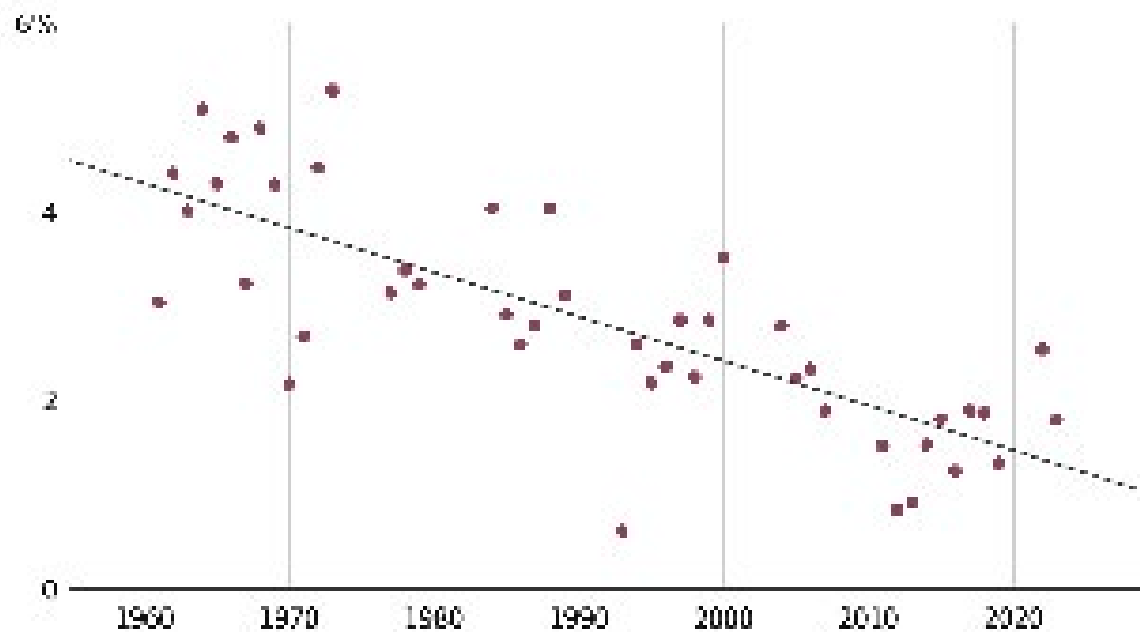
Figure 4: Per capita real economic growth in high-income countries has declined steadily over six decades.

Scholars, policymakers, and commentators appreciate less the significance of the Ingenuity Gap pathway (second column from the left in Figure 3). 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 5) progressively erodes the moral authority (i.e., legitimacy) of political and technocratic elites and governance institutions.[2] 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?
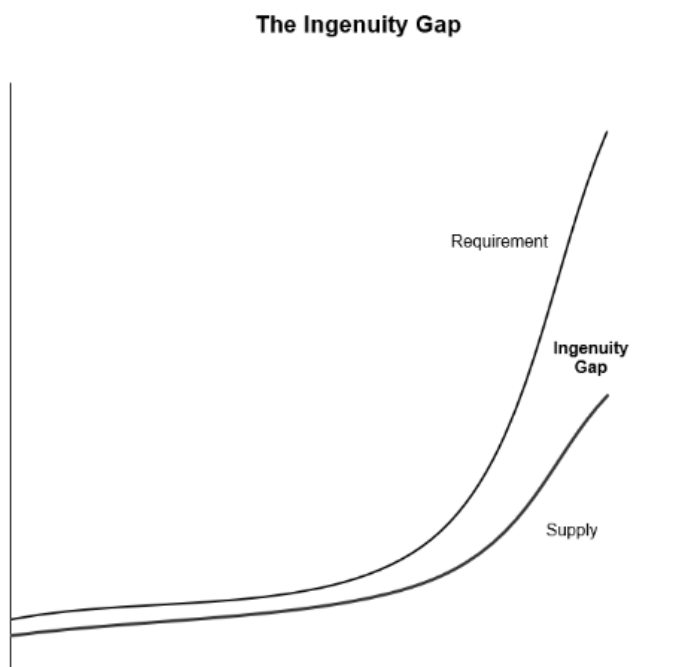

The Ingenuity Gap

Figure 5: Over time, societies' ingenuity requirement has increasingly outstripped their ingenuity supply, where "ingenuity" is defined as problem-solving algorithms.

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.)

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

The fourth, Epistemic Fragmentation pathway starts in Figure 3's top right corner with the impact on our societies of weakening of the shared belief in a single, mind-independent reality (i.e., the belief that a singular world exists "out there" irrespective of what we think about it) and conversely, the propagation and strengthening of diverse anti-realist worldviews (including those postulating multiple universes) that suggest we substantially create reality, or choose among realities, through our minds.

The Cascade Institute proposes that these four processes are reinforcing each other, creating a social-selection environment that favours opportunistic actors willing to use intergroup conflict to accumulate social and political power.

Modern skepticism about realism can be traced back nearly a century in physics, specifically, to the ideas of the Copenhagen School, whose ontology now dominates the discipline. But they've also emerged from several other quarters, including from philosophy (via postmodernism), social sciences (constructivism), and contemporary pop culture (as evinced in movies like *The Matrix, Inception,* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*; and perhaps most influentially, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe). Technologies of virtual reality, massively multiplayer online games, the Metaverse, and large language model AI are now powerfully amplifying the appeal and reach of anti-realist beliefs.

Scholarly skepticism about realism is often well-grounded and reasonable. Many things we conventionally regard as concrete and real in our social world—countries, for instance—are essentially subjective: they exist only because people believe they exist. Yet the widespread erosion of a shared understanding of reality makes solving collective problems like climate change or pandemics harder, because it undermines the epistemic status of science, weakens agreement on what counts as "truth," and catalyzes fundamental disputes about sources of evidence. It also deepens social divisions by encouraging identity groups to create their own *truth bubbles*—isolated epistemic domains of knowledge, fact, and expertise—a process Cascade Institute researchers call *epistemic fragmentation*.

The Cascade Institute proposes that the four processes shown in Figure 3 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.

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 WIT domains or all four mechanisms, at all three social levels. But every proposed intervention should interact with and reinforce at least some others located elsewhere in the matrix.

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

For this reason, the interventions shown in Table 2 are examples only. The Cascade Institute intends 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.
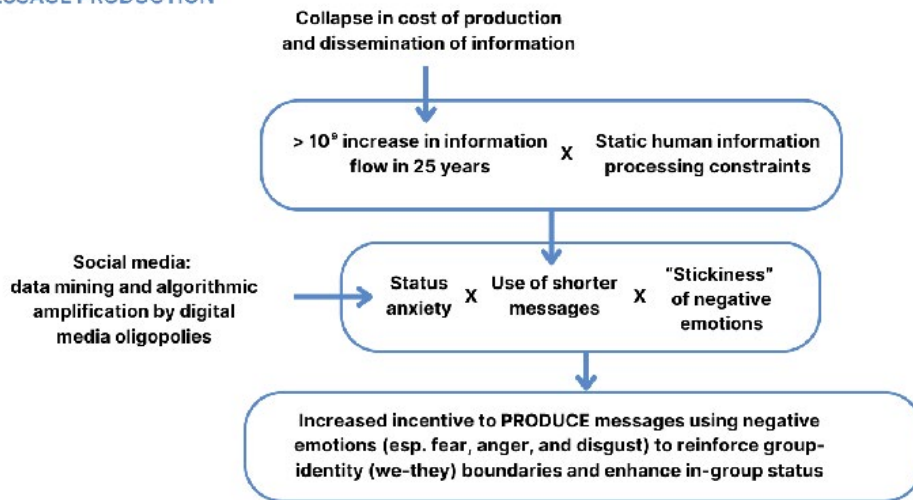
Table 2: Examples of interventions to revitalize Canadian democracy

	Four causal mechanisms driving polarization and social division			
	Economic precarity	**Ingenuity gap**	**Message distortion**	**Epistemic fragmentation**
Worldviews	**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)
Institutions	**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. (National/ Regional) **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)
Technologies	**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. (National/ Regional)	**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)

Appendix:

Two causal pathways leading to message distortion

1. MESSAGE PRODUCTION

Collapse in cost of production and dissemination of information

> 10^9 increase in information flow in 25 years **X** Static human information processing constraints

Social media: data mining and algorithmic amplification by digital media oligopolies

Status anxiety **X** Use of shorter messages **X** "Stickiness" of negative emotions

Increased incentive to **PRODUCE** messages using negative emotions (esp. fear, anger, and disgust) to reinforce group-identity (we-they) boundaries and enhance in-group status

2. MESSAGE RECEPTIVITY

Collapse in cost of production and dissemination of Information

> 10^9 increase in information flow in 25 years **X** Static human information processing constraints **X** Differential cognitive load at human-human interfaces

Increased allocation of attention to messages requiring less cognitive load

Increased **RECEPTIVITY** to messages from like others, increased preference for homophilic social connections