

SPRINGTIDE COLLECTIVE,
NOVA SCOTIA

MAKE DEMOCRACY BETTER

WHO

Springtide Collective, convener of the Make Democracy Better project

GOAL

Bridge the gap between Nova Scotians and their democratic institutions by creating an action plan for a better democracy

HOW

Using Ethelo's digital engagement platform to identify citizen priorities

OUTCOME

A discussion paper and publicly-validated action plan for lobbying Nova Scotia's provincial government

There is a growing movement for electoral reform in the province of Nova Scotia and the non-profit Springtide Collective is at the lead. Springtide used Ethelo to engage several hundred Nova Scotians in evaluating different options for democratic reform. Ideas proposed ranged from instituting term limits for provincially elected officials, to lowering the voting age, and changing the voting system. After floating close to twenty ideas, the results of Ethelo then became the basis of the organization's research priorities and deep exploration of specific policy options, based on the proposals participants expressed most interest in exploring further.

BACKGROUND

“WE WANT TO HELP BUILD A NOVA SCOTIA WHERE THE CITIZENRY IS ACTIVE – WHERE OUR DEMOCRACY ISN'T JUST SOMETHING WE HAVE, BUT SOMETHING WE DO.”

- MARK COFFIN, FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF SPRINGTIDE COLLECTIVE

Started by the Springtide Collective in late 2014, Make Democracy Better is a project with three objectives: 1) to start a conversation about improving democracy in Nova Scotia, 2) to identify people and groups who want to Make Democracy Better, and 3) to build an action plan for a better democracy, using the priorities identified by participants and inspired by the best information and research available.

In 2015 Springtide completed a round of community engagement and online engagements with Nova Scotians to learn which areas participants were most eager to explore deeper to make democracy better. Ethelo was then used as a way to identify research and community engagement priorities at Springtide.

decision. That gave participants the possibility to shape which proposals were to be selected for deeper deliberative discussion across the province.

Through Ethelo's platform, Springtide Collective enabled Nova Scotians to weigh in on five areas where provincial democracy could be improved. In each of these areas, citizens were presented with 17 specific initiatives and asked which ones deserved further consideration. The five areas were:

- elections
- political parties
- the legislature
- public engagement
- citizen education and empowerment

THE NEED

After visiting communities from Shelburne to Sydney to host community dialogues, Springtide invited Nova Scotians to contribute through Ethelo, with the aim of making a collective

BRINGING ETHELO INTO THE SCENE

Ethelo was used to collect citizen’s ratings (on a 9-point scale) on 17 potential initiatives for electoral reform. These initiatives included: ‘alternatives for first past the post system’, ‘giving permanent residents the right to vote’, or ‘participatory budgeting’. These 17 initiatives were divided into five general categories, both for navigational ease and for further evaluation; each participant was able to “weigh” the importance of each category.

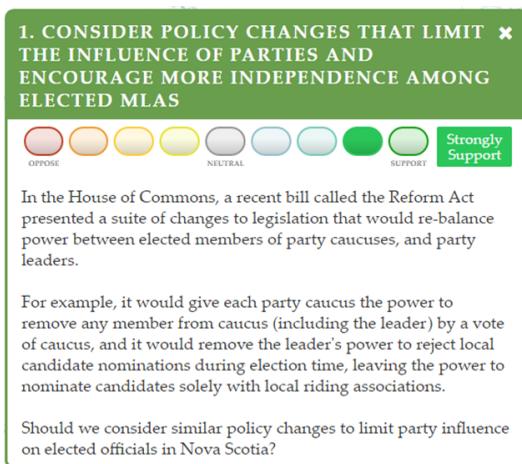


Figure 1: One of 17 potential initiatives for Making Democracy Better



Figure 2: Weighting the importance of the 5 general categories which contained the 17 potential initiatives

A TRANSPARENT SHORTLISTING EXPERIENCE

As each participant evaluated the options and weighed the categories, Ethelo used this information to generate a shortlist of between 3 and 7 initiatives which comprised that participants “Top Choice”.



Figure 3: A Participant’s Top Choice shortlist, as determined by their evaluation of the options and categories.

The platform also helped to collect and cross validate additional citizen suggestions. As each participant proceeded through the process, they were able to add suggestions for other initiatives under each category. They could also comment on each other’s suggestions, and like them. A total of 69 citizen suggestions were collected, alongside 22 related replies. Some of the suggestions were concrete actions, and those

were included among the other options under the appropriate category.

In addition, the results page had an overall feedback panel where citizens could add remarks regarding the digital engagement process itself, or voice additional concerns in regard to Nova Scotia's government.



The image shows a screenshot of a digital interface titled "YOUR SUGGESTIONS" with a close button (X) in the top right corner. The panel contains three suggestions, each in a light green box with a blue header and black text. Below each suggestion is the name of the person who suggested it, the date and time, and links for "Like" and "Comment".

YOUR SUGGESTIONS X

No Whipped Votes. Everyone should be able to vote freely for or against legislation that affects their communities. Whipped votes, requiring MLAs to vote along party lines, removes an option for representing a community to the best of ones ability.

Suggested by Schuyler H Smith June 9 at 9:34am Like Comment

No more appointments. All positions within should be filled using standardized and fair hiring practices.

Suggested by Charlene June 9 at 4:50pm Like Comment

Have the full legislature elect Cabinet Ministers. All portfolios should be held by the MLAs with the greatest amount of expertise in them. All members of the Legislature should have the opportunity to provide input to the Cabinet selection process.

Suggested by Charlene June 9 at 4:54pm Like

Figure 4: Participant suggestions under the category of Make the Legislature Better.

RESULTS

Unlike the traditional approach of collecting votes into a black ballot box, Ethelo's results panel allowed citizens to see how everyone else (anonymously) rated different initiatives. The platform was configured to continuously update results according to the participant preferences and shortlist between 3 and 7 of the most highly-supported initiatives. This shortlist allowed Springtide to focus limited resources on the most strongly supported initiatives.

The input of 268 participants enabled Ethelo to identify a scenario comprised of 4 highly-supported initiatives; namely:

- A shift towards openness and transparency in the Nova Scotia Government
- Alternatives to the First Past The Post voting system
- Prioritizing and Revitalizing Civic Education in Schools
- Ways to empower and improve legislative committees

This final shortlist had a 96% of participant approval and an Ethelo 'strength of support' score of 88/100 (a metric measures the depth and breadth of collective support for a given scenario).

"A new politics isn't going to come from government," said Springtide president Mark Coffin, "so it's up to Nova Scotians to do it."

Once the digital engagement period closed, these results were analyzed and became a transparent, publicly-validated input for Springtide's public policy research efforts. The organization will slowly work through the identified priorities and develop sound public policy research in each area.

In the Spring of 2016, Springtide published a detailed discussion paper modelling five different voting systems, and how elections would work under each system in Nova Scotia. A series of community education and engagement sessions was held to share the findings from this paper, and solicit citizen feedback on what a better voting system for Nova Scotia would need to look like in order to 'pass the sniff test'



Figure 5: Participant suggestions under the category of Make the Legislature Better

NEXT STEPS

The next step, according to Coffin, is to take the findings from the community engagement sessions to inform the design of another Ethelo Decision - this time where participants will decide what voting system we use.

"Ethelo provides a mechanism to capture an incredible number of possibilities in a handful of simple questions. This means participants in the decision are able to see what the impact of certain decisions is, and enables us to quickly eliminate many unpopular alternatives, and focus on the changes that will satisfy the most people."

Mark Coffin, President, Springtide Collective

website: <http://www.springtidecollective.ca/make-democracy-better>

news articles: <http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1296287-new-politics-up-to-you-nova-scotia>

Go to www.ethelo.com