

Bridgebuilding Case Study: Toronto Public Library



This case study was developed by [IREX](#) as an example of a "bridgebuilding" activity. IREX defines bridgebuilding as engaging across differences in ways that respect identities, foster mutual relationships, seek a common good, and promote a commitment to civic engagement, thereby contributing to increased social capital and strengthened civic infrastructure, and ultimately, a stronger democracy.

Background/context of the library

Toronto Public Library (TPL) has over 100 branches with about 46 million annual visits, online and in person. The goal of the library is to enable the people of Toronto to succeed in the digital age and the knowledge economy by providing them with convenient access to technology, a wide range of cultural and leisure activities, and lifelong learning opportunities, according to their customers' needs.

What bridging initiatives/programs has the library offered?

In advance of Toronto's 2022 municipal election, TPL ran two complementary initiatives: **Celebrate Democracy** and **Know Your Vote T.O.**

Celebrate Democracy was a system-wide series of programs and services aimed at demonstrating the potential of democracy and how Torontonians can harness their collective power for good, during and beyond elections. The initiative brought a half dozen community agencies together with library staff to discuss the community's needs and priorities, and to design the campaign together. It included programs on voting and participating in campaigns, book lists, blogs, and pop-up voting booths demonstrating how easy it is to vote. Activities and programs were designed for all age groups, and included an opportunity for kids to vote for a fictional mayor.

TPL also produced [Know Your Vote T.O.](#), a municipal election candidate civic learning website. The website helped Torontonians learn about the mayoral and council candidates running in the municipal election and how candidates think some of Toronto's biggest issues should be addressed. TPL designed companion events and activities for Know Your Vote T.O.

The Celebrate Democracy and Know Your Vote T.O. projects were developed and run by the Innovation, Learning and Service Planning (ILSP) department and partner [MASS LBP](#). ILSP designs and delivers programs and services related to digital literacy and community engagement. MASS LBP works with public sector, not-for-profit, and business clients to better involve the public, stakeholders, or members in difficult decisions, planning or policy-making processes.

Some libraries were also voting locations on the day of the election.

Library details

- Library name: Toronto Public Library
- Location: Toronto, Ontario
- Size of library system: 100 locations

Use this case study to learn:

- prepare events and/or services related to elections.
- support your community in increasing its knowledge of and commitment to democratic processes.

Why were bridging initiatives needed in the community?

In Toronto and in communities around the world, there are increasing divides politically, economically, and socially. There is an overwhelming amount of information available to people and, at the same time, not everyone has equal access to it or the ability to critically assess it. A strong and healthy democracy is indispensable so that a community, a city, and individuals can adequately confront these challenges. Celebrate Democracy and Know Your Vote T.O. addressed this need in two ways: by showcasing the value of democracy and by increasing engagement in the electoral process.



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What were the signs of success?

Candidates and voters provided positive feedback to Toronto Public Library. Children loved voting for a fictional mayor with their parents. The pop-up voting stations with questions for kids and youth were active all day long, with parents teaching their children about democracy. First-time voters expressed gratitude for the user-friendly Know Your Vote T.O. website. Candidates shared that they appreciated having a free and unbiased platform to express their views.

What was learned?

The need to find the right balance between advocating for democracy and voting in a way that is nonpartisan and in-line with election laws was a challenge. Know Your Vote T.O. relied on a bipartisan advisory board to ensure that TPL collected information and published content from candidates in an unbiased way.