Two-Way Networks: Evaluating the Linkages Between Canadian Senators and Civil Society

Claire Sieffert

June 30, 2017

Abstract

The Senate's institutional structure is at the centre of a broad public debate, yet it is also important to look at how Canadian Senators operate within this institutional structure. Rather than focusing exclusively on institutional structure as the definitive indicator of democracy, we can draw on theories in political sociology to reconceptualize democracy as the back-and-forth interactions between citizens and political institutions. This paper asks who Senators see themselves connected to, how they connect with those communities, and what types of connections they form. Based on semi-structured interviews with ten Canadian Senators, the paper explores the interactions that occur between civil society actors and Senators, while reflecting on how these networks could broaden our understanding of the everyday practice of democracy.

Introduction

In her proposal for a "People's Senate," social activist and writer Helen Forsey argues

that elections are only one pillar of a "true democracy."[1] To enhance democratic governance in

Canada, Forsey suggests that the Senate could act as a forum for broad public involvement.

Underlying this vision is a question: how do Senators engage with the public? Whether

maintaining a website, monitoring email, or even operating a constituency office—as in the case

of retired Senator Bert Brown—individual Senators adopt diverse outreach strategies within a

common institutional structure.[2] Asking how Senators interact with civil society actors can

broaden our understanding of what Canadian democracy looks like in practice.

What the Canadian Senate looks like in theory has often captured public discourse.

Political parties, media commentators, academics, provincial governments, and Senators

themselves have weighed in on what institutional reforms would make the Senate more

democratic.[3] Helen Forsey engages with these normative debates as part of her proposal for a

People's Senate, discussing how Senators listen at the institutional level and proposing other

structural changes to enhance citizen participation.[4] These proposals reflect how institutional

change has become a dominant narrative in the study of the Senate and of democracy more

broadly. Problematizing this focus on institutions, Andrew Perrin makes the case that we cannot

---

[1] Helen Forsey, *A People's Senate for Canada: Not a Pipe Dream!* (Black Point, Nova Scotia, and Winnipeg, Manitoba: Fernwood Books, 2015), 2.

[2] "A Constituency of Millions: 'Elected' Senators Discuss Alternatives to Operating a Province-wide Constituency Office," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* (Summer 2014): 11.

[3] For examples, see Stéphane Dion, "Time for Boldness on Senate Reform, Time for the Trudeau Plan," *Constitutional Forum* 24, no. 2(2015); Chloe Fedio, "NDP Leader Tom Mulcair says he'll seek mandate for Senate abolition," *CBC News*, June 10, 2015 accessed June 29, 2017, http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/ndp-leader-tom-mulcair-says-he-ll-seek-mandate-for-senate-abolition-1.3107870; Peter Zimonjic and Rosemary Barton, "Andrew Scheer says he will not appoint independent senators if elected prime minister," *CBC News*, June 28, 2017, accessed June 29, 2017, http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/andrew-scheer-interview-barton-1.4182567; Michael Kirby and Hugh Segal, "A House Undivided: Making Senate Independence Work," *Public Policy Forum*, September 21, 2016.

[4] Helen Forsey, *A People's Senate for Canada: Not a Pipe Dream!* (Black Point, Nova Scotia, and Winnipeg, Manitoba: Fernwood Books, 2015).

study institutions in isolation; he argues that to study democracy, we must also study how the polity interacts with political institutions.[5] Drawing on this framework, this paper questions how the Senate shapes and is shaped by civil society.

Based on semi-structured interviews with current members of the Canadian Senate, this paper takes a comparative approach to ask who Senators understand themselves to be representing, how they connect with those groups, and what kinds of connections they form. First, the paper discusses how we can bring a political sociology lens to the Senate. The paper then provides an overview of representation and communications in the Senate, before explaining the research design. Finally, the paper analyzes Senators' responses to the three interlinked research questions. Throughout this discussion, the paper examines whether Senators' understanding of who they represent influences the technologies and practices they use to connect with civil society actors, and whether those connections influence their actions as a Senator. By examining these interactions, we can move towards understanding democracy not only as a collection of institutions, but also as the interactions that occur within this framework.

Towards A Political Sociology of the Senate

A political sociology lens can help broaden the debate around the practice of democracy in the Senate and in Canada more broadly. This includes examining democracy not only through major political events, but also the regular practices that constitute political processes. Simmel outlined how his work was guided by the possibility "of finding in each of life's details the totality of its meaning."[6] For Simmel, the details of everyday life presented important windows

---

[5] Andrew J. Perrin, *American Democracy: From Tocqueville to Town Halls to Twitter* (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, USA: Polity Press, 2014), 3.

[6] Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (3rd ed.), edited by David Frisby, translated by Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London and New York: Routledge, 2004). 55.

through which we can better understand society. Following this approach, problematizing everyday practices in the Senate can enable us to reconsider the institution—and even our understanding of democracy—as a whole.

In the study of democracy, political sociologists have drawn attention to the social relationships that shape and are shaped by political institutions. Perrin suggests that "democracy is best understood as the back-and-forth interactions among citizens and institutions of government, structured through rules, ideas, and technology."[7] Perrin's approach complements the evolving landscape of political sociology research in Canada, where Béland, Ramos, and Stanbridge remark that there has been a move away from treating the state and society as monolithic entities.[8] Instead, many political sociologists are now broadening their framework and reconceptualizing the ways that institutions and society act on each other, drawing attention for instance to the actors at work in political processes or to the interactions between institutional outcomes and social movements.[9]

Applying this sociological lens to Senators' interactions can expand public and academic discourse about the Senate. As Senator Serge Joyal highlights in *Protecting Canadian Democracy*, there has been a research deficit around the Canadian Senate.[10] The research that does exist is often dominated by discussions of reform or theoretical questions about the Senate's

---

[7] Perrin, *American Democracy*, 12.

[8] Daniel Béland, Howard Ramos, and Karen Stanbridge, eds., "Political Sociology is Dead. Long Live Political Sociology?" *Canadian Review of Sociology* 53, no. 3 (2016): 337-364.

[9] For examples, see Edwin Amenta, "Thinking about the Influence of Social Movements on Institutions," *Canadian Review of Sociology* 53, no. 3(2016): 356-360; E. Winter, "Toward an Actor-Centered Political Sociology of Citizenship," *Canadian Review of Sociology* 53, no. 3(2016): 361-364.

[10] Serge Joyal, ed., *Protecting Canadian Democracy: The Senate You Never Knew* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), xviii.

purpose.[11] Stilborn offers a historical review of these major reform debates, outlining how various bodies examining Senate reform have made proposals about the methods of selecting Senators, the regional distribution of Senate seats, and the powers that Senators exercise.[12] Reform debates have sometimes drawn on sociological thought, such as Hicks' suggestion that social cleavages—and not the constitution—present the primary barrier to reform.[13] Underlying these reform debates is a bias towards studying institutions, rather than studying how the polity interacts with those institutions.

Analyzing the micro-level interactions that occur within the Senate's institutional structure can complement these important debates on institutional reform. As a framework for this research, this paper draws on the three dimensions that Perrin uses to evaluate how publics evolve in a democracy.[14] The first is practices, which Perrin defines as the habits and behaviours of everyday life; the second is technologies, or the patterned tools used to achieve certain goals; and the third is institutions, understood as structuring rules and systems. By asking how Senators connect with civil society actors, this paper seeks to expand our understanding of the ways that habits and tools shape the two-way interactions that unfold within the Senate's institutional structure.

---

[11] For examples, see Joel I. Colón-Ríos and Allan C. Hutchison, "Constitutionalizing the Senate: A Modest Democratic Proposal," *McGill Law Journal* 60, no. 4(2015): 600-622; Adam Dodek, "Addressing the Senate's 'Triple-Deficit:' The Senate as Driver of Its Own Reform," *Constitutional Forum* 24, no. 2(2015): 39-45.

[12] Jack Stilborn, "Forty Years of Not Reforming the Senate - Taking Stock," in *Protecting Canadian Democracy: The Senate You Never Knew*, ed. Serge Joyal, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 31-66.

[13] Bruce M. Hicks, "Placing Future Senate Reform in Context," *Constitutional Forum* 24, no. 2(2015): 25.

[14] Perrin, *American Democracy*, 8.

A Process of Introspection: Evolving Understandings of Representation and

Communications in the Senate

Two contexts are important to frame a discussion of Senators' connections with civil

society. The first context is who Senators represent in theory. In 2014, the Supreme Court of

Canada outlined the Senate's representative functions in *Reference re Senate Reform*. The

Supreme Court highlights how the Senate acts as a forum for regional interests, while also

representing groups that are underrepresented in the House of Commons, including ethnic,

gender, religious, linguistic, and indigenous groups.[15] The Senate Special Committee on

Modernization echoes these twin representative roles in its first report in 2016, where two of the

Committee's guiding principles explicitly mention regional and minority representation.[16]

Speaker Pierre-Claude Nolin also saw these representative roles as part of a Senator's

parliamentary functions; another of the functions he raised was promoting and defending public

causes, where Senators can be seen as representatives for public issues.[17] These prevailing

narratives about representation in the Senate can help inform our understanding of who Senators

connect with.

The second context framing this discussion is the period of institutional change underway

in the Senate. Significant changes have recently occurred in areas such as the nomination process

and the structure of political affiliation,[18] and these changes have extended to Senate

communications. In 2015, a report prepared for the Advisory Working Group on

---

[15] *Reference re Senate Reform* [2014] 1 SCR 704 at para. 15-16, 2014 SCC 32. https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/13614/index.do.

[16] Canada, Parliament, Senate, Special Senate Committee on Senate Modernization, *Senate Modernization: Moving Forward,* 1st session, 42nd Parliament, 2016, Committee Report 1, accessed June 19, 2017, https://sencanada.ca/content/sen/committee/421/MDRN/reports/MDRN_FINAL_FirstReport_webversion_e.pdf.

[17] Ibid., 12.

[18] For example, see Government of Canada, "Backgrounder – Senate Appointments Process," accessed September 24, 2018, https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/news/2016/7/backgrounder-senate-appointments-process.html; Independent Senators Group, "Foundational Principles of The Independent Senators Group (ISG)," accessed September 24, 2018, https://www.isgsenate.ca/foundational-principles.

Communications highlighted the shortfalls of Senate communications.[19] Since that critical

report, the Senate has taken steps to restructure its communications directorate.[20] Senator Leo

Housakos, Chair of the Senate Committee on Internal Economy, Budgets and Administration,

and the Senate Subcommittee on Communications, points out that the Senate is adopting new

ways to increase openness. These measures include Facebook; Instagram; a new digital

magazine, *SenCAPlus*; live-tweeting debates; and streaming news conferences and discussion

panels. Following these changes, Senator Housakos claims that, "The Senate of Canada is now

arguably the most social-media-friendly legislative assembly in the world."[21] This shift informs

research on Senators' individual communications strategies, as the changing institutional

dialogue around communications could also affect how individual offices are pursuing outreach.

While there has been little focus on how individual Senators' offices conduct outreach, an

exception is the *Canadian Parliamentary Review*'s interviews with Senator Douglas Back and

Senator Betty Unger in 2014. Unlike most Senators, these Senators were "elected" in Alberta's

provincially-sponsored electoral process. Comparing his position to that of a Member of

Parliament, Senator Black spoke about how "my constituency is an entire province" and

expressed his daily sense of responsibility to remain in touch with those constituents.[22] Senator

Black and Senator Unger both viewed operating a physical space as inadequate to connect with a

---

[19] Blueprint Public Relations Inc., *Senate of Canada Communications Functional Review,* March 10, 2015, accessed June 19, 2017, https://sencanada.ca/content/sen/Committee/412/ciba/rep/rep13mar15-e.pdf.

[20] Jordan Press, "Senate poised to beef up communications with the public," *Ottawa Citizen,* March 24, 2015, http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/senate-must-fix-broken-communications-report.

[21] Leo Housakos, "Opinion: Canada's Senate enters 2017 embracing a new openness," *Montreal Gazette*, January 2, 2017, http://montrealgazette.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-canadas-senate-enters-2017-embracing-a-new-openness.

[22] Doug Black, "A Constituency of Millions: 'Elected' Senators Discuss Alternatives to Operating a Province-wide Constituency Office," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* (Summer 2014): 11.

"constituency" of this size.[23] Senator Black instead connected with Albertans through an active website, strong social media presence, regular online surveys, provincial media, cultural community media, and a robust travel schedule. The Senators' comments present a window into the diverse ways that Senators interpret their representative role and outreach strategies; this paper aims to build on those insights by asking who Senators see themselves representing and what methods they use to connect with those communities.

Research Design

To investigate how Senators understand and maintain their relationships with civil society, I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with current members of the Canadian Senate. These participants represented 10.2% of the 98 currently sitting Senators.[24] As part of the process, Senators were given the option of remaining anonymous. Among these participants, I spoke with Senators from diverse provinces or territories who had sat in the Senate between six months to over five years. This included interviews with non-affiliated, Liberal, Conservative, and Independent Senators who were part of the Independent Senators Group. The Senators came from a range of professional backgrounds before joining the Senate, including a former Deputy Minister, professors, and provincial and territorial legislators. This range enables a comparative approach to analyzing participants' responses.

This study's sample size places limitations on the ability to generalize the results. I contacted a subset of Senators via e-mail to arrange interviews; because these Senators were not randomly selected, these interviews should be viewed as case studies. The unique nature of each

---

[23] Ibid; Betty Unger, "A Constituency of Millions: 'Elected' Senators Discuss Alternatives to Operating a Province-wide Constituency Office," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* (Summer 2014): 12.

[24] At the time of writing this paper in June 2017, there were 98 sitting Senators of a total potential capacity of 105 Senators.

Senator's office presents a further challenge to generalizing the results. As such, this research

can be seen as a thick description of Senators' connections, technologies, and practices that aims

to promote discussion and further research on this topic.

Imagined Communities: Senators' Understandings of Representation

To unpack the relationship between Senators and civil society, this paper first discusses

who participants saw themselves representing in the Senate. In its focus on "civil society," this

paper primarily looks at non-state and non-business actors, although this should not preclude the

possibility that Senators may also see themselves representing certain industrial sectors or state

interests. Senators framed their relationship with these actors in diverse ways, often presenting

themselves as representatives for multiple communities. This section traces the strategies that

Senators use to balance the interests of multiple communities or diverse interests within a

community. Senators may not solely connect with actors whom they see themselves

representing, but asking who Senators feel connected to can enable analysis of whether the ways

Senators position themselves affect the technologies and practices they adopt.

Regional Communities

Across all ten interviews, participants either explicitly saw themselves as representatives

for their region or spoke about focusing on a certain issue relevant to their region. Among the

participants, there were multiple approaches to regional representation. Senator Dennis

Patterson, for example, explained the challenges of representing the large territory of Nunavut.

Rather than attempting to speak for Nunavut as a whole, one of his strategies is "to deal with

issues in Nunavut on a regional basis" because Nunavut's three regions are "quite coherent and

connected."[25] Another Senator took a different approach, explaining that they did not represent a group or the people of their region, which they saw as the Member of Parliament's job.[26] Instead, this Senator saw themselves representing the region itself.

Diverging from this broader approach, some Senators localized their sense of regional representation. Senator Jim Munson explained that his decision to represent the regional division of Ontario (Ottawa-Rideau Canal), the community where he lives, "gives it a state of exactly where you're from."[27] Different Senators found ways of balancing this community-level, provincial-level, and national-level sense of representation. Senator Peter Harder, who represents Ontario (Ottawa), continued to connect with stakeholders from his hometown on the Niagara Peninsula, with representatives from his province, and even with other communities throughout Canada as part of his role as Government Representative in the Senate.[28] While regional representation was a salient theme across the interviews, the majority of participants listed this as one community they represent among others.

Minority Communities

In some interviews, Senators spoke explicitly about the Senate's role in giving a voice to minority groups. Senator Munson stated that, "We are here to represent minorities. The Fathers of Confederation of course had in their minds the minorities meaning English or French depending on where you live. But the whole idea of minorities and the rights of minorities is where I feel that I've been making a little bit of a difference in the work that I do."[29] Senator

---

[25] Senator Dennis Patterson, interview by Claire Sieffert, May 11, 2017.

[26] Interview with Senator, May 8, 2017.

[27] Senator Jim Munson, interview by Claire Sieffert, May 8, 2017.

[28] Senator Peter Harder, interview by Claire Sieffert, April 28, 2017.

[29] Munson, interview.

Harder echoed this, explaining a sense of obligation to ensure that minority, indigenous, provincial, and Charter issues are addressed in legislation or inquiries, which he balanced with his roles as an Ontarian Senator and Government Representative.[30] Conversely, multiple Senators expressed their sense of representing Canadians' interests as a whole. As Albertan Senator Grant Mitchell explained, "I certainly see myself representing Albertans and their interests, but I also feel very strongly that I represent the interests of all Canadians. I have a particular responsibility and interest to represent minority groups."[31] Here, Senator Mitchell balances his regional and minority focus with a broad focus on representing the interests of the Canadian public.

During the interviews, multiple participants implicitly framed themselves as representatives for minority groups by naming communities to whom they feel connected. These communities were united for diverse reasons, including shared identity, shared career, or shared interest in a public issue. Various Senators, like Saskatchewan Senator Lillian Dyck and Nova Scotian Senator Dan Christmas, described their connection to communities with a shared identity.[32] Senator Christmas saw himself taking on a dual representative role: "My representation first and foremost is the Mi'kmaq nation of Atlantic Canada. I'm the first and only Mi'kmaq person appointed to the Senate, so my first response would be as a Mi'kmaq person. My second of course would be that I'm a Nova Scotian...."[33] In striking this balance, Senator Christmas captures how identity shapes his sense of who he represents in the Senate, and how that intersects with the province he represents.

---

[30] Harder, interview.

[31] Senator Grant Mitchell, interview by Claire Sieffert, May 16, 2017.

[32] Senator Lillian Eva Dyck, interview by Claire Sieffert, May 10, 2017.

[33] Senator Dan Christmas, interview by Claire Sieffert, May 10, 2017.

Various Senators also spoke about representing communities who are united by profession. After discussing her role representing Manitoban and Canadian interests more broadly, Senator Patricia Bovey explained her connection to the arts community: "I come from the arts background, and I believe I am the first ever art historian, or art gallery or museologist in the Senate, so I feel I have a very strong responsibility to Canada's creators...I have been asked to bring an arts and culture lens to whatever I do."[34] Senator Bovey emphasized that she sees a "balance" between representing different viewpoints, capturing how Senators may pursue a mandate that encapsulates diverse communities' interests.

Finally, various Senators positioned themselves as representatives for communities that coalesced around public issues. Québécoise Senator Rosa Galvez described how she seeks to represent "people who care for the environment," and how she finds "common ground and common goals" between this community and the others she sees herself representing.[35] Seeing these communities' interests as complementary is one strategy to balance regional and minority interests, which other Senators echoed. For example, Senator Mitchell discussed his role representing the interests of Albertans, Canadians, and minority groups, then explained that this broad representative role "...breaks down to representing more specific groups on specific issues."[36] He gave the example of sponsoring Bill C-16 on the rights of transgender people: "I'm of course representing trans people in that regard, although I believe that any promotion of human rights for one group is the promotion of rights for all groups...." Senator Mitchell draws a link between representing a minority group and the Canadian public as a whole; his answer speaks to how he sees linkages between multiple communities' interests.

---

[34] Senator Patricia E. Bovey, interview by Claire Sieffert, May 19, 2017.
[35] Senator Rosa Galvez, interview by Claire Sieffert, May 18, 2017.
[36] Mitchell, interview.

Across the interviews, participants' understanding of representation often reflected the narratives of regional and minority representation. As demonstrated in *Reference re Senate Reform,* these narratives often emerged in discussions of who Senators represent in theory. In practice, participants' responses highlight the need to also consider how Senators can see themselves as representatives for diverse communities, and how they adopt strategies to understand and balance those interests.

Ear to the Ground: Technologies and Practices Used to Communicate Between Senators and Civil Society

Building on the question of who Senators see themselves representing, this section explores how Senators maintain their connections to these communities and to civil society actors more broadly. Outreach technologies and practices can affect the message, audience, and level of interaction, thereby shaping the two-way interactions between Senators and civil society actors. This section discusses the technologies and practices that arose in the interviews, while examining whether the choice of technology and practice reflects a Senator's perceived connection to different communities.

Electronic Technologies: Email, Social Media, and Websites

Across the interviews, email was frequently cited as the most common method that civil society actors used to contact Senators. Senator Galvez estimated that her office receives 200 emails a day; this number fluctuated between 50 or 300 emails depending on legislation before the Senate.[37] This estimate speaks to the scale of emails that Senators receive on a variety of

---

[37] Senator Rosa Galvez, interview by Claire Sieffert, May 18, 2017.

topics. Senator Harder noted that his office had even received "emails from Americans asking me to vote against legislation before the US Senate."[38]

The scope and scale of email correspondence affects this medium's effectiveness as a means of communicating a message from civil society actors to Senators. Multiple Senators emphasized that they did not personally have time to review all their email correspondence. One Senator explained how they addressed this challenge during the debate on medical assistance in dying in 2016: "We were getting literally thousands of emails. My staff were going through and any emails that were written at a personal level from [a person from my province], I would read. It's very important for you to understand what people are thinking." By prioritizing voices coming from the region they saw themselves representing, the Senator used their role as a regional representative to filter their emails.

When discussing the challenges of email correspondence, multiple Senators commented on the growing phenomenon of email campaigns. Senator Harder presented his dilemma around email campaigns: "Now on the one hand you can take from that, well somebody's organizing and obviously they're being animated to do this, but its credibility is distracted when they are all just saying the same thing."[39] This thinking around mass emails was echoed by various Senators, who prioritized personalized emails. Senators' emphasis on personalized emails demonstrates how email can act a form of listening, but also how that listening may be filtered.

While Senators primarily spoke about email as a tool that citizens used to contact their offices, Senator Dyck presented a case where Senators used email to instigate interactions with civil society actors.[40] Senator Dyck outlined how her caucus had previously launched an

---

[38] Harder, interview.
[39] Harder, interview.
[40] Dyck, interview.

initiative where citizens could email in questions for Senators to ask during Question Period.[41]

As captured by this initiative, email is a technology that can allow Senators to reach out to a

broader audience who may not come from their region or to other communities they feel

connected to.

Beyond email, social media was identified as an increasingly popular mechanism for

Senators to share content with a more diffuse audience. Twitter was frequently mentioned as a

means of outreach. Senator Munson explained his issue-oriented Twitter strategy: "...the last four

or five tweets I've done have had to do with autism. I either retweet or have my own tweets. I

use it as a tool of awareness on the issues that I care about."[42] Through Twitter, Senator Munson

can connect with a broader audience, reflecting his focus on representing the autism community

in Canada.

Some forms of social media allow Senators to both disseminate information and hear

stories, particularly through platforms tailored to a specific community. Senator Patterson

emphasized the importance of using his Nunavut Senator Facebook page to connect with people

in Nunavut, where he described Facebook as "ubiquitous."[43] In one example, his office used

Facebook as a platform to highlight challenges the territory was facing with the Phoenix payroll

system. On Facebook, he told people, "Tell us about your problems. Communicate with my

office. I'll try to be your voice in Ottawa," and then posted anonymous stories they received

about Phoenix. Senator Patterson's analysis was that "I'm using Facebook as I think a very

effective way of reaching constituents, reporting to them." His choice of Facebook reflects the

---

[41] For more on this initiative, see "Let Us Ask Your Questions in Parliament," accessed June 18, 2017, http://liberalsenateforum.ca/publication/let-us-ask-questions-parliament/.
[42] Munson, interview.
[43] Patterson, interview.

territory he represents, using a medium that allows him to overcome geographic barriers to highlight messages he considers relevant to the territory.

Various Senators also spoke about websites as a platform for communicating with civil society actors. One Senator emphasized that their personal website was an effective way to connect with people, especially students, as it showcased their activities and speeches.[44] The use of websites was not confined to personal websites. Senator Harder, for example, spoke about the Senate's new website as part of "a very clear and modern approach to interactions and communications."[45]

On websites, as with other electronic forms of technology, Senators are speaking with people who connect to those platforms. While this research focuses on outreach from a Senator's perspective, electronic technologies highlight the other side of these interactions: who is aware of these opportunities and has access to the resources necessary to seek out Senators via email, Twitter, Facebook, and the internet? This question also applies to other forms of technology, including in-person interactions between Senators and citizens.

Speaking Directly: In-Person Encounters, Committee, Travel, and Phone Calls

Throughout the interviews, a theme emerged around the value of in-person meetings. Senator Christmas explained the trade-offs when choosing between technologies: "My personal preference is always in person and by phone. I'm old-fashioned and I grew up that way. I recognize that because of the efficiency of technology that people reach out to you by social media, email, by text. To me, that's not the ideal way, but I have to give it credit. It is effective

---

[44] Interview with Senator, May 8, 2017.

[45] Harder, interview.

and it is efficient."[46] Multiple Senators similarly expressed their preference for face-to-face meetings over social media, while recognizing that electronic technologies have the potential to expand their audience.

Everyday encounters can be an important means to listen to public opinion; as public figures, Senator Mitchell described Senators as a "magnet" for these conversations.[47] One Senator explained that they see the grocery store as a space where they can hear a cross-section of opinion, and these conversations mean that it often takes them between two and three hours to shop for groceries.[48] These encounters can lead to long-term connections. Senator Munson explained one "happenstance" encounter with a "gentleman on Parliament Hill who had a sign...saying 'Help me, help my son, he has autism.' Just connecting with that one person has led to a massive connection with the autism community across the country."[49] Spontaneous encounters like this can shape a Senator's long-term agenda and network, and even influence who they see themselves representing.

In addition to these more spontaneous encounters, many Senators spoke about arranged meetings with stakeholders. For example, Senator Bovey explained that she has met with stakeholders from a diverse range of issues, particularly those with connections to her province or the arts community. Senator Bovey outlined what this looks like in practice, speaking about her upcoming meetings with a gallery director, studio visits, and other institutions.[50] These meetings can allow Senators to hear directly from diverse actors, although as with many types of in-person encounters, the meeting's physical nature places limits on the size of the audience.

---

[46] Christmas, interview.

[47] Mitchell, interview.

[48] Interview with Senator, May 8, 2017.

[49] Munson, interview.

[50] Bovey, interview.

Travel is one way that Senators address the physical limits of in-person interactions. For Senator Patterson, who emphasized his role as a regional representative, travelling to Nunavut from Friday to Monday almost every sitting week is a key means of maintaining his connections with the territory. As he described, "I have a pretty good opportunity to stay plugged in just by spending most of a typical working day in the capital," in addition to travelling to other regions in Nunavut.[51] Travel can also enable Senators to connect with their province or territory as a whole; Senator Bovey spoke about "trying very consciously to make sure I'm connecting with people who live outside Winnipeg, as well as in Winnipeg."[52]However, travel can also face some restrictions due to institutional rules on expense reimbursement. As Senator Christmas explained, in a case where he does not have a written invitation addressed to him in his capacity as Senator, or if the situation is at all ambiguous, he has "come to the point in my thinking that I'm going to go anyway, I'm going to do this, I'll cover it myself...."[53] Personally covering travel expenses is one of Senator Christmas' strategies to connect with civil society actors within the Senate's institutional structure.

Committees are another way that Senators can travel or speak with diverse groups. One participant spoke about how committees enabled them to speak with groups they otherwise would not have, emphasizing that this was important because "you can only really understand people if you've met them and talked to them and had a good dialogue."[54] In addition to fostering dialogue, Senator Munson framed committees as an opportunity to meet witnesses and

---

[51] Patterson, interview.

[52] Bovey, interview.

[53] Christmas, interview.

[54] Interview with Senator, May 8, 2017.

create "institutional connections."[55] While committees perform many other functions, it is important to also consider how they can shape Senators' networks.

Most participants pointed to public speaking as an important means of disseminating a message and listening to public opinion. Senator Christmas presented public speaking as "a personal way of delivering a message" where he can receive "immediate feedback" and "get a sense very quickly of what people are thinking or not thinking."[56] Public speaking can foster this dialogue between Senators and civil society actors, and it can even cultivate new connections. Senator Dyck identified public speaking as her main form of outreach; in her 12 years as a Senator, she has given nearly 100 major speeches between 30 to 60 minutes in length.[57] She explained that these talks help expand her network: "It's a good way to meet new people, because you always meet people after your talk. You exchange business cards, and quite often, people in the audience will invite me to speak to their university or their group or what have you."[58] Speeches can therefore generate more opportunities to publicly engage, especially on topics that reflect Senator Dyck's focus on representing minority groups such as aboriginal women. By connecting with "new people," Senator Dyck can both disseminate a message and become a linkage between actors interested in that issue.

Another means of speaking directly and personally with diverse groups is the telephone. Senator Patterson actively encouraged phone calls from Nunavut; his office operates a 1-800 number that is publicized on his website and newsletter.[59] This reflects the unique nature of the territory he represents, where connectivity can be a challenge, as well as his emphasis on

---

[55] Munson, interview.

[56] Christmas, interview.

[57] Senator Lillian Eva Dyck, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2017.

[58] Dyck, interview.

[59] Patterson, interview.

regional representation. Taking a different approach to the telephone, Senator Mitchell described

his practice of calling people who have written to disagree with his position. He explained two

motivations: "one, it's way more fun to have a debate with somebody, and two, it's amazing how

much they appreciate that somebody who disagrees with them will actually phone. Sometimes

they can change my mind, and often I change their mind."[60] This practice enables Senator

Mitchell to connect with people outside his network, and these in-depth conversations are

enabled by phone technology and his practice of reaching to people outside his community of

thought.

Phone calls can be an opportunity for Senators to keep their ear to the ground and

understand public opinion. Senator Dyck described how phone calls helped draw her attention to

the public demands to remove Senator Beyak from the Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples

in 2017. On any particular issue, Senator Dyck's office would normally receive one or two calls.

During the Senator Beyak case, her office received twenty or thirty phone calls, in addition to

personal emails. Senator Dyck explained that these calls and emails "really made her notice" the

issue.[61] Whether via phone or conversations in public spaces, multiple Senators reflected on the

importance of in-person encounters for listening, which can enable them to understand what

position to take when balancing diverse communities' interests.

Print: Newsletters and Letters

During the interviews, the majority of Senators did not frequently reference print

materials as a means to connect with civil society. One exception was Senator Patterson, who

explained that his office publishes a quarterly newsletter in English and Inuktitut that goes to

---

[60] Mitchell, interview.

[61] Dyck, interview.

every mailbox in Nunavut.[62] Senator Patterson's use of outreach technologies was often distinct; this may be linked to his perceived role as a regional representative in a geographically large and often isolated territory where connectivity can be a challenge. Multiple participants also mentioned letters, although like emails, they were considered to be more effective when they were personal. Overall, Senators' minimal focus on print sources may reflect factors such as these technologies' cost and narrower audience, as well as the broader institutional and social pivot towards electronic forms of technology.

Media: Broadcasts, Comments, and the News

Various Senators also highlighted how news media enabled them to communicate a message. Senator Harder, for example, raised the importance of speaking with the media, both in his province of Ontario and when he travelled throughout the country as part of his "national obligation."[63] While the Senate is sitting, Senators can connect with communities through broadcast forms of media. Senator Patterson explained this process when he is in Ottawa: "I walked two blocks to the [CBC's] Queen Street studio, I did the interview at 2 o'clock Ottawa time, and it was across the territories on the evening news at the dinner hour. That program is translated into Inuktitut as well."[64] Broadcast media is one of the strategies the Senator Patterson used to stay connected to his territory despite geographic barriers, although it can be a unidirectional interaction.

Media can however create opportunities for Senators to not only spread a message, but also to listen to public opinion. Senator Patterson gave the example of reading comments on

---

[62] Patterson, interview.
[63] Harder, interview.
[64] Patterson, interview.

speeches and interviews he gave with publications like the *Nunatsiaq News*. On some of his content, "there can be sometimes dozens of commentary, anonymous and some of it very critical, very argumentative, and challenging."[65] Senator Patterson explained that "it's a peculiar way to get feedback, but I think it's a valuable way to get feedback for me." For Senator Rosa Galvez, comments on news websites were a means of understanding public opinion around the world. One of her practices is reading a news article and "immediately" reading the comments. Using her ability to read five languages, Senator Galvez explained how she compares international news sources and "at the end, my opinion is rich."[66] Both Senator Galvez and Senator Patterson demonstrated that media is not necessarily a unidirectional means for Senators to speak to communities.

Besides diffusing and receiving information, the media can serve other functions for Senators. Senator Munson, who had a long career as a journalist, reframed media coverage as an opportunity to have a meaningful impact in the communities he is connected with: "You can create your own news page doing your own thing, whether through social media, tweeting...There's a news story going on all the time, and it doesn't have to be the front page of *The Globe and Mail*. It can be on the pages of the lives of people who matter to me, and I think it matters to them."[67] Media can therefore serve multiple purposes, tied into who a Senator is trying to communicate with or advocate for.

---

[65] Ibid.

[66] Galvez, interview.

[67] Munson, interview.

Language: Written, Spoken, and Visual

Language was an important dimension of outreach for some participants. Senator Galvez, who speaks four languages and also writes in Portuguese, explained that she will post on Facebook in the language of the item she wants to share. She framed this as a way of signposting to her audience that they can communicate with her in diverse languages. In her words, "If I was just unilingual, I think my connection would be partially cut."[68] For Senator Galvez, language is an important tool that allows her to communicate with diverse communities. Senator Patterson also touched on the role of language, explaining the important role of his staff who speak Inuktitut.[69] As a Senator who framed himself primarily as a regional representative, this helps open his office to a wider number of people from his perceived community.

Problematizing the common conception of language as written or spoken, Senator Bovey spoke about the language of visual art. As an international, non-verbal language, Senator Bovey presented visual art as an opportunity to engage younger people, refugees, and immigrants in understanding civil society and the role of a Senator on Parliament Hill. To move towards communicating with a broader audience through this visual language, she has sponsored a bill that calls for a visual artist laureate on Parliament Hill. As Senator Bovey highlights, "Our word-based means of communication is great, but there are other ways too."[70] Coming from a Senator who spoke about her "responsibility to Canada's creators," this promotes a language that connects with a broader audience.

---

[68] Galvez, interview.

[69] Patterson, interview.

[70] Bovey, interview.

Acting on Connection: Roles and Relationships Between Senators and Civil Society

During the interviews, Senators touched on the diverse types of connections they have with civil society actors. For Senators, different types of connections can also instigate different everyday practices. This section outlines themes that emerged in these relationships and considers how technologies and practices affect the ways that Senators enact these roles.

Senators can offer symbolic representation to certain communities based on a sense of shared identity; members of these communities reach out to them as their perceived representative. Senator Galvez, who explained that she is originally from Peru, described the reaction to her appointment as a Senator: "I think Latin Americans didn't have this until now. They're very proud and they reach out to me."[71] While at first Senator Galvez was most often asked to attend social events, such as visiting a chamber of commerce, she explained that members of the Latin American community are now saying: "We have bigger issues, can you please communicate these to higher levels of government." This evolution highlights the dynamic relationships between Senators and civil society actors, as well as the role that Senators can take on as intermediaries between communities and political institutions.

Activism was frequently associated with a Senator's connection to an issue and the community around it—even when that issue was not necessarily related to legislation currently before the Senate. Senator Munson's connection to the autism community and other issues shaped his role in Parliament: "I was told when I first came 'The most important thing you'll do as a lawmaker is legislation and amend and so on, so forth.' I get that. But the other part of it is advocacy, and if you can take this place and make the country a little more sensitive to others,

---

[71] Galvez, interview.

those kind of connections are sort of our own infrastructure."[72] Senator Munson's emphasis on

advocacy is reflected in the forms of outreach he uses. Whether speaking at events across Canada

related to autism, participating in walks to raise awareness of autism, or using Twitter to

highlight news related to autism, Senator Munson's advocacy is both enabled by and guides the

practices and technologies his office uses.

Activism also extends to advocating for individual constituents. Multiple Senators

explained that their office engages in constituency work, even though this role is often associated

with Members of Parliament (MP). As one Senator explained, "I'm consistently available. I have

a constituency caseload that is not as high as an MP would have, but people have confidence in

how I can help them maneuver through whatever issue or problem that they have."[73] This

Senator spoke about how individual constituency cases could also be opportunities to advocate

for policy change that would affect Canadians more broadly. This Senator saw themselves

representing both their region and the interests of the Canadian public, which may shed light on

the links they strike between constituency work and broad policy change.

Involvement with a community can shape a Senator's agenda, but Senators can also

shape a community itself. Senator Munson captured this role when he spoke about the potential

connections he saw between two organizations who were both working on video and animation

with people on the autism spectrum. For Senator Munson, fostering linkages is part of his work:

"I think my role as a Senator is that little connecting part of best practices...I love doing that too,

beyond the political part of it all."[74] As part of diverse or diffuse communities, Senators can play

a bridging role between different players in their network.

---

[72] Munson, interview.
[73] Interview with Senator, May 8, 2017.
[74] Munson, interview.

In these two-way interactions, Senators can also draw motivation from their connections with civil society actors. Senator Dyck spoke about the importance of feeling connected to others interested in the same issues: "...I think Facebook really helped me feel as though I'm not alone. A lot of the things that I talk about in the Senate, I may be the only person that's talking about it...."[75] As Senator Dyck explained, she often felt like a "lone voice" in her focus on "the need for an inquiry into Missing and Murdered Aboriginal women and girls."[76] Facebook enabled a sense of interconnectedness with others working on this issue, capturing how new technologies have facilitated new relationships between Senators and civil society actors.

The diverse types of relationships between Senators and civil society actors emphasize that Senators' perceived role is highly individual and differs from Senator to Senator. These relationships are not static and are influenced by multiple factors, ranging from new issues to new technologies. As electronic technologies become increasingly common, there have been shifts in the types of practices and connections between Senators and civil society actors. It is important to also ask how there continues to be a parallel evolution in who is heard and who is not, and how that influences Senators' work and ultimately policy in Canada.

Conclusion

When we focus only on institutional structure, it is possible to overlook how everyday practices and technologies shape democracy through the back-and-forth interactions between civil society actors and political institutions. This research attempts to open a dialogue about these interactions in the Canadian Senate by analyzing Senators' perceived connections, the technologies used to make those connections, and the types of connections they make. This

---

[75] Dyck, interview.

[76] Senator Lillian Eva Dyck, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2017.

research suggests that within the Senate's institutional structure, the practices and technologies used are dynamic and often individual, as are the types of relationships that form out of these interactions. Perhaps related to the small sample size or to the nature of the Senate, neither political affiliation nor length of sitting time emerged as a defining determinant behind a Senator's primary technologies or practices. Instead, it was often more revealing to ask who a Senator perceived that they represented on a case-by-case basis, and to look at the shape, nature, and connectivity of that audience.

This research can offer insights for both further research on the Senate and for civil society actors who seek to engage with Senators. Considering the individual nature of Senators' offices, civil society actors may attempt to identify Senators who are involved with the issue or community in question and evaluate what technologies that Senator is most active on. They may also consider the potential impact of personalized correspondence and in-person encounters. However, each Senator's individual practices, technologies, and understanding of their representative role means it is challenging to generalize this research's findings. Senators interpret their role within the Senate's institutional structure and understanding the often-unique ways they put that role into practice can help shed light on the multitude of ways that society and institutions can act on each other.

As we study the practice of democracy in the Senate, it is particularly crucial to ask who is being heard—and who is not. Future research can continue questioning what the back-and-forth interactions between Senators and civil society actors reveal about Canadian political institutions and the direction of policy. Considering that interactions between Senators and civil society actors have at least two sides, this research can expand to ask these questions from the perspective of civil society actors. Another dimension to explore is the perspective of Senate

staff, who play a critical role in these everyday interactions. These lines of questioning move towards a political sociology of the Senate and of Canadian democracy, looking at how democracy may be determined not only by institutions or elections, but what people make of those institutions.

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Amenta, Edwin. "Thinking about the Influence of Social Movements on Institutions." *Canadian Review of Sociology* 53, no. 3(2016): 356-360.

Béland, Daniel, Ramos, Howard and Karen Stanbridge (eds.). "Political Sociology is Dead. Long Live Political Sociology?" *Canadian Review of Sociology* 53, no. 3 (2016): 337-364.

Blueprint Public Relations Inc. *Senate of Canada Communications Functional Review.* March 10, 2015. Accessed June 19, 2017.

https://sencanada.ca/content/sen/Committee/412/ciba/rep/rep13mar15-e.pdf.

Black, Doug. "A Constituency of Millions: 'Elected' Senators Discuss Alternatives to Operating a Province-wide Constituency Office." *Canadian Parliamentary Review* (Summer 2014): 11-13.

Colón-Ríos, Joel I. and Allan C. Hutchison. "Constitutionalizing the Senate: A Modest Democratic Proposal." *McGill Law Journal* 60, no. 4(2015): 600-622.

Dion, Stéphane. "Time for Boldness on Senate Reform, Time for the Trudeau Plan." *Constitutional Forum* 24, no. 2(2015): 61-64.

Dodek, Adam. "Addressing the Senate's 'Triple-Deficit:' The Senate as Driver of Its Own Reform." *Constitutional Forum* 24, no. 2(2015): 39-45.

Fedio, Chloe. "NDP Leader Tom Mulcair says he'll seek mandate for Senate abolition," *CBC News.* June 10, 2015. Accessed June 29, 2017. http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/ndp-leader-tom-mulcair-says-he-ll-seek-mandate-for-senate-abolition-1.3107870.

Forsey, Helen. *A People's Senate for Canada: Not a Pipe Dream!* Black Point, Nova Scotia, and Winnipeg, Manitoba: Fernwood Books, 2015.

Government of Canada. "Backgrounder – Senate Appointments Process." Accessed September

    24, 2018. https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/news/2016/7/backgrounder-

    senate-appointments-process.html.

Hicks, Bruce M. "Placing Future Senate Reform in Context." *Constitutional Forum* 24, no.

    2(2015): 17-31.

Housakos, Leo. "Opinion: Canada's Senate enters 2017 embracing a new openness." *Montreal*

    Gazette. January 2, 2017. Accessed June 18, 2017.

    http://montrealgazette.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-canadas-senate-enters-2017-

    embracing-a-new-openness.

Independent Senators Group. "Foundational Principles of The Independent Senators Group

    (ISG)." Accessed September 24, 2018. https://www.isgsenate.ca/foundational-principles.

Joyal, Serge, ed. *Protecting Canadian Democracy: The Senate You Never Knew.* Montreal and

    Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.

Kirby, Michael and Hugh Segal. "A House Undivided: Making Senate Independence Work."

    Public Policy Forum. September 21, 2016.

Perrin, Andrew J. *American Democracy: From Tocqueville to Town Halls to Twitter*.

    Cambridge, UK, and Malden, USA: Polity Press, 2014.

Press, Jordan. "Senate poised to beef up communications with the public." *Ottawa Citizen.*

    March 24, 2015. Accessed June 18, 2017. http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/senate-

    must-fix-broken-communications-report.

Simmel, Georg. *The Philosophy of Money* (3rd ed.), Edited by David Frisby. Translated by Tom

    Bottomore and David Frisby. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

Canada. Parliament. Senate. Special Senate Committee on Senate Modernization. *Senate Modernization: Moving Forward.* 1st session, 42nd Parliament, 2016. Committee Report 1. Accessed June 19, 2017. https://sencanada.ca/content/sen/committee/421/MDRN/reports/MDRN_FINAL_FirstReport_webversion_e.pdf.

Stilborn, Jack. "Forty Years of Not Reforming the Senate - Taking Stock." In *Protecting Canadian Democracy: The Senate You Never Knew*, edited by Serge Joyal, 31-66. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.

Reference re Senate Reform [2014] 1 SCR 704 at para. 15-16, 2014 SCC 32. https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/13614/index.do.

Unger, Betty. "A Constituency of Millions: 'Elected' Senators Discuss Alternatives to Operating a Province-wide Constituency Office." *Canadian Parliamentary Review* (Summer 2014): 11-13.

Winter, E. "Toward an Actor-Centered Political Sociology of Citizenship." *Canadian Review of Sociology* 53, no. 3(2016): 361-364.

Zimonjic, Peter and Rosemary Barton. "Andrew Scheer says he will not appoint independent senators if elected prime minister." *CBC News*. June 28, 2017. Accessed June 29, 2017. http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/andrew-scheer-interview-barton-1.4182567.