

research snapshot

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City Dwellers Redefine What it Means to Be a Citizen



What is this research about?

When we think about what it means to be a 'citizen', we tend to imagine the rights, privileges, and responsibilities that are given to us by a government. This kind of citizenship is 'constitutional.' Canadian citizenship gives us the right to vote, own property, and be free from arbitrary arrest. However, we can also define citizenship by the actions of ordinary people who push the boundaries of current laws. This is called 'performative citizenship'. An empowered population of performative citizens can expand democratic rights through activism, protest, and negotiations with private and public bodies.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers at York University looked at the difference between constitutional and performative citizenship in two case studies. The first case focused on a successful campaign by the Water Watch coalition to stop the privatization of water management in the city of Toronto. The second case focused on Tent City, a makeshift community near the waterfront in Toronto. Tent City was made up of over one hundred homeless people who were eventually evicted from the land.

What you need to know:

This research may help policymakers and community groups to better understand the needs of city dwellers in Canada. It highlights the benefits of continued activism and rights reform by citizens. Policymakers who are tackling issues like poverty and homelessness can use this research to co-ordinate their efforts more closely with housing activists, the homeless, and the public at large.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that the first case study offered a good example of performative citizenship. Since rights to water are not made clear by the law, the Water Watch coalition raised awareness and, in doing so, kept the Toronto City Council from privatizing water management. The argument that citizens have a right to public services (such as water) posed a challenge to the proposed changes. This expanded democratic rights for Toronto residents. It prevented water management from being handed over to private companies.

The researchers found that the second case study also offered a good example of performative citizenship. Due to government cutbacks, homelessness has become a serious issue in Toronto. Residents of Toronto's Tent City expanded democratic rights by embracing the idea of 'housing as a basic human right'. In other words, they took the issue of housing into their own hands. Living in Tent City gave the residents a feeling of independence that they could not get while living in shelters. Despite the fact that they were eventually evicted, the residents 'became political' about the issue. They turned the public's attention to housing and urban rights through their struggle. Many were able to get affordable housing as a result.

How can you use this research?

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