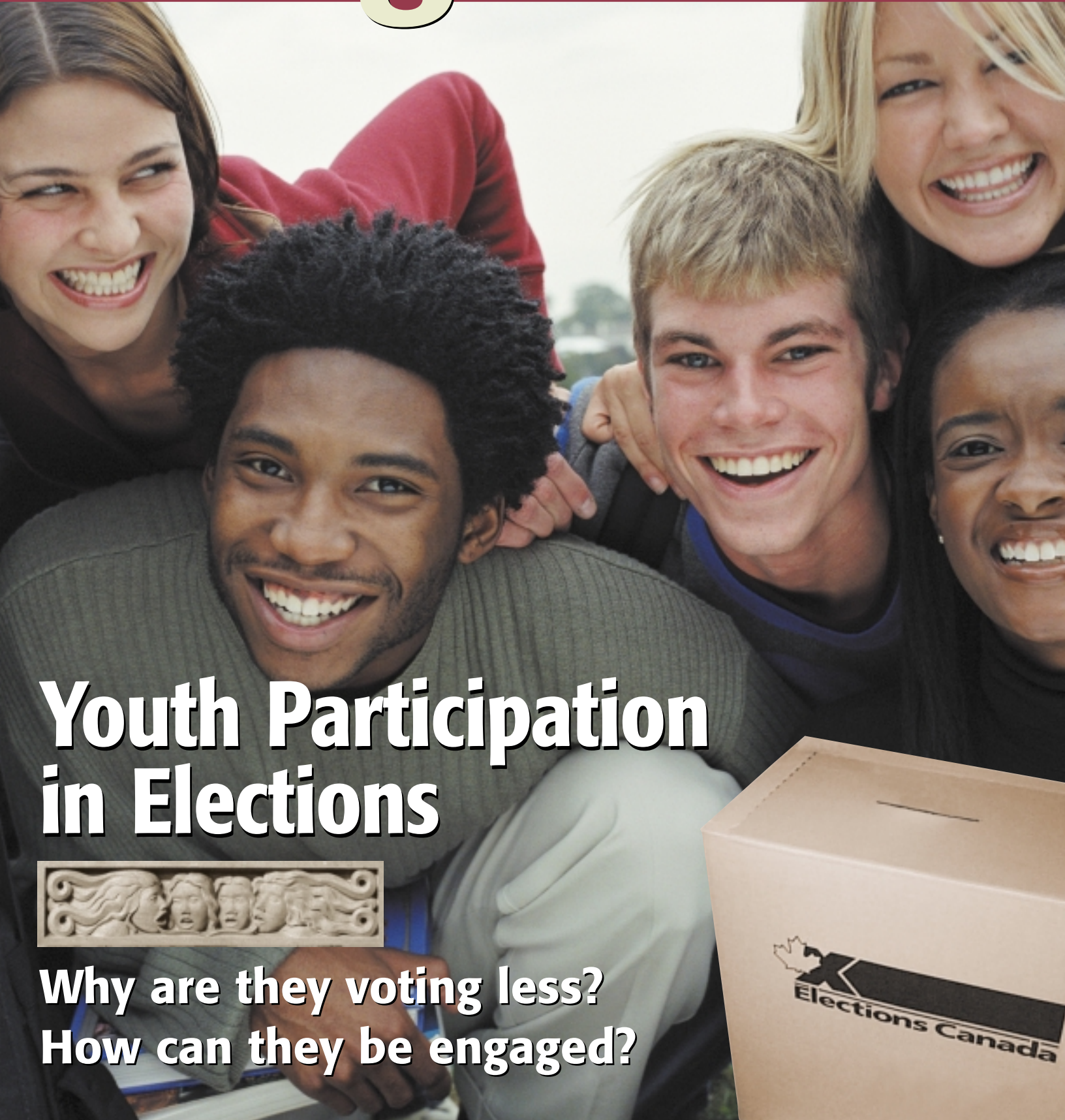
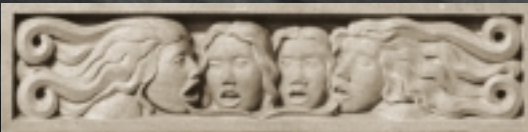


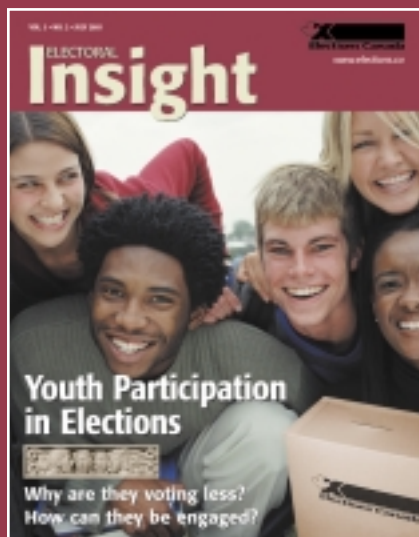
# ELECTORAL **Insight**



## **Youth Participation in Elections**



**Why are they voting less?  
How can they be engaged?**



**Editor**

F. Leslie Seidle

**Publications Manager**

Francine Dalphond

**Managing Editor**

Wayne Brown

For more information, contact  
Elections Canada:  
Telephone: 1 800 463-6868  
[www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca)

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Eleanor Milne, Chris Fairbrother and  
Marcel Joannis  
*The Vote* (1979–1980)  
Indiana limestone, 121.9 x 182.8 cm,  
House of Commons, Ottawa

The base stone of *The Vote*, a sculpture  
on the east wall of the House of Commons  
chamber, shows four heads with flowing  
hair whose mouths shape, in song, the  
first syllables of Canada's national  
anthem, "O-Ca-na-da".

Cover photo: Getty Images

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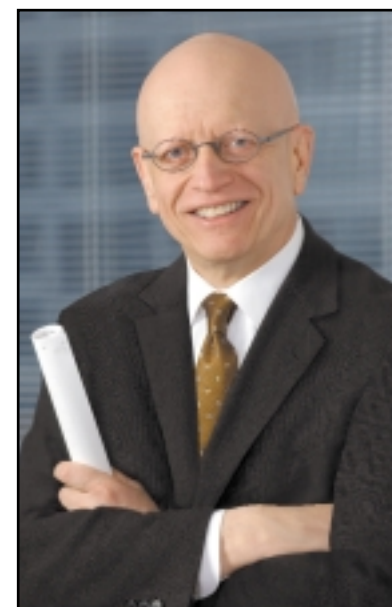
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*Electoral Insight* is published by Elections Canada three times a year. It is intended for those interested in electoral and related matters, including parliamentarians, officials of international and domestic electoral management bodies, election officers and academics. The opinions expressed are those of the authors; they do not necessarily reflect those of the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada.

Submissions of articles and photos that might be of interest to *Electoral Insight* readers are welcome, although publication cannot be guaranteed. If used, submissions will be edited for length and clarity as necessary.

Please address all contributions and letters to Wayne Brown, Managing Editor, *Electoral Insight*, Elections Canada, 257 Slater St., Ottawa, Canada K1A 0M6 ([wayne.brown@elections.ca](mailto:wayne.brown@elections.ca)).

## Chief Electoral Officer's Message



Jean-Pierre Kingsley  
Chief Electoral Officer of Canada

## Youth Participation in Elections

Democracy is based on the right of citizens to participate in making the decisions that affect them and in determining the rules by which they agree to live together. These fundamental rights find full meaning only when citizens engage, as actively as possible, in public life. The act of voting is an essential manifestation of that engagement.

This special issue of *Electoral Insight* is devoted to exploring a major challenge to contemporary Canadian democracy: the decline in voter turnout during the past decade and, in particular, among the youngest group of eligible Canadians. The trend is not entirely new; nor is it confined to Canada. It could, however, worsen if steps are not taken to reverse it.

From an average of 75 percent during the period from the Second World War to 1988, voter turnout in Canadian federal elections declined in 1993 and again in 1997. At the most recent general election in 2000, voter participation dropped further to slightly more than 64 percent of registered electors. Most troubling is the finding of a major research study by professors Jon Pammett (Carleton University) and Lawrence LeDuc (University of Toronto) that only about one quarter (25.4 percent) of eligible 18–24-year-olds voted in the 2000 election.

I am grateful to all the authors of the articles published in this issue for agreeing to share their research and analysis on the subject of declining youth electoral participation. Taken together, their contributions indicate that young Canadians have not been exercising their democratic right to vote to the same degree as older citizens because of lower levels of political knowledge, feelings of apathy, a declining sense that voting is a civic duty, and limited contact with political parties and candidates.

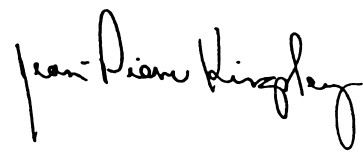
As I said in my address to the Symposium on Electoral Participation in Canada at Carleton University on March 21, 2003, Elections Canada is committed to addressing the issue of declining turnout among young Canadian voters. Certain measures will be implemented by the time of the next federal election, while others will be launched following consultations and, in some cases, pilot projects.

Elections Canada will expand its efforts to promote young Canadians' understanding of the electoral process through information campaigns and joint initiatives with organizations interested in civic education. For example, Elections Canada is partnering with Cable in the Classroom to develop a new voter education program for students. In a contest to be held this autumn in each province and territory, young people between 16 and 18 years of age will be challenged to create 30-second public service announcements (PSAs) on video to tell their peers why the democratic process and voting are important.

We will also ensure that access to the electoral process is as convenient as possible for young voters – and, indeed, for all voters. During the next general election, Elections Canada will conduct special registration drives to target student residences and neighbourhoods, and place more polls in locations to which young people have easy access. We are also planning to send a card to Canadian citizens following their 18th birthdays, with a message from the Chief Electoral Officer congratulating them on attaining the right to vote and reminding them to register.

Recognizing the need for a shared effort to address the drop in youth voting, Elections Canada will host a National Forum on Youth Voting, in Calgary on October 30–31. It will bring together youth, Aboriginal, business, labour, political party and non-governmental organization representatives, as well as academics, researchers and the media. Participants will exchange information about activities to address the decline in youth voting, and offer suggestions for further actions.

I invite parliamentarians and political parties, as well as business and civic leaders, youth representatives and the media to join a national dialogue in search of ways to encourage more young Canadians to vote. Without concerted efforts, there are strong reasons to believe the drift to lower turnout will continue. We must not let that happen. ✕



Jean-Pierre Kingsley

## Youth Participation in Elections



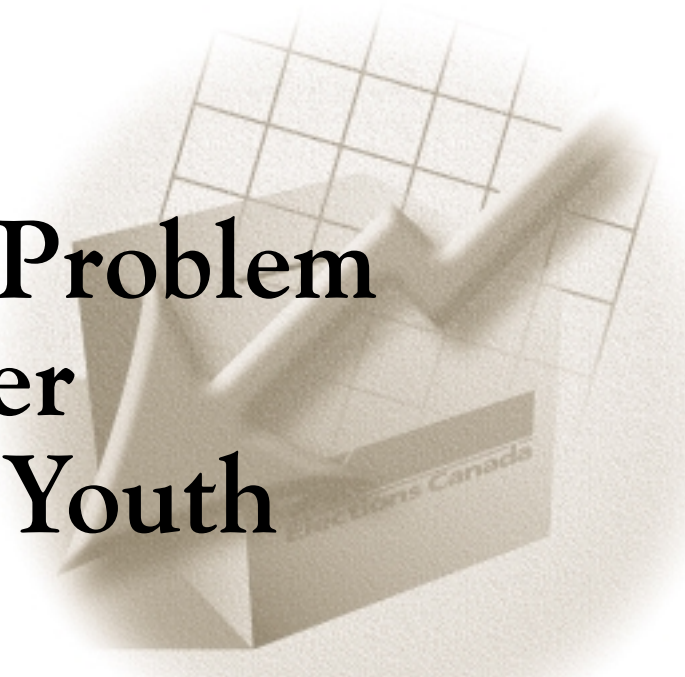
# Confronting the Problem of Declining Voter Turnout Among Youth

*Jon H. Pammett*

*Professor of Political Science, Carleton University*

*Lawrence LeDuc*

*Professor of Political Science, University of Toronto*



The decline of voter turnout in Canada to a historic low in the November 2000 federal election has generated concern among academics, the media and attentive members of the general public. While voter turnout has long been a subject of study by scholars interested in more general issues of political participation, the reasons for the recent precipitous decline are not yet well understood. It is evident, however, that the decline is not connected solely with the most recent federal election, as turnout has declined in each of the last three general elections. Nor does it seem that the turnout decline is necessarily connected to political issues and events specific to Canada. Voter turnout has also been declining in many other industrialized countries. In the most recent French parliamentary election, for example, it dropped to levels as low as those observed in Canada, while in the United Kingdom it has fallen even lower.

### Implications of declining turnout

The issue of voter turnout is taking on greater importance in public discussion in Canada and elsewhere, both because of the magnitude of the recent declines and the way in which they are being interpreted. Observers increasingly link declining participation in elections to some of the more fundamental problems of modern democracy. In this view, declining public participation in a nation's most fundamental democratic exercise may be part of a larger "democratic deficit" and may have serious implications for the health of its democratic political system. Further, if the social and

political forces that are driving turnout down are of a longer-term nature, the problem of low voter participation could continue to plague the political system for years to come. If, for example, there is a consistent pattern of declining turnout across the generations, we might predict that electoral participation would continue to decline well into the future, simply as a result of normal demographic processes of population replacement. Such an interpretation has already been suggested by Blais and his colleagues in their analysis of the low turnout in the 2000 election.<sup>1</sup>

### Survey of voters and non-voters

To investigate more systematically the causes and possible consequences of the prolonged decline in voter turnout in Canada, we designed and carried out a new survey in co-operation with Elections Canada in April 2002.<sup>2</sup> The sample design called for a short screening interview with a large number of Canadians (5,637) and a longer interview continued with



The survey results are available in the Electoral Law & Policy section of the Elections Canada Web site ([www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca)).

960 reported voters in the 2000 federal election and 960 reported non-voters in that election. In this way, interviews were obtained with a much larger sample of non-voters than is possible in election-related surveys of the Canadian public. The survey was designed to explore a variety of explanations for not voting, both in general terms and with reference to the sharp increase in not voting that has occurred in each of the last three federal elections. This article highlights three of the more important findings of the survey – the generational patterns of not voting, the reasons behind it, and perceptions of both younger and older voters of possible solutions to the problem.

Table 1 illustrates the clear pattern of decline in turnout across generations that has been at work in the Canadian electorate over the past decade or more.<sup>3</sup> The levels of non-participation for the three cohorts of newly eligible voters entering the electorate in each of the past three federal elections are striking.<sup>4</sup> Only slightly more than one in five of those who were eligible to vote for the first time in 2000 chose to participate. The figures are only slightly better among those cohorts of voters eligible to vote for the first time in 1997 or 1993. Even those who entered the electorate during the later Trudeau period (1974–1980) voted in 2000 at a lower rate than those in the older age groups. For those who entered the

Photo: Elections Canada



Participants at the Symposium on Electoral Participation in Canada (March 21, 2003, in Ottawa) discussed ways to promote turnout among young voters.

electorate during the Mulroney years (aged 30 to 37 in 2000) the overall percentage casting a ballot in 2000 was only 54 percent.

It is, of course, not unusual to find lower rates of voting participation among the young. Such patterns are well documented in the literature on non-voting behaviour in Canada and in other countries. But lower participation rates among the young have generally been interpreted as a pattern associated with specific behavioural characteristics of the life cycle. As people age, they become more politically aware and engaged. It is, therefore, to be expected that voting rates should increase over time with these normal life cycle changes.

They should also increase with rising levels of education. Our evidence suggests, however, that such changes are occurring more slowly than they have in the past, and that many younger voters, when they do begin to enter the electorate, enter it at a much higher average age.<sup>5</sup> If such patterns persist over time, normal processes of population replacement will combine to keep driving turnout down, with each generation of newly eligible voters participating at lower rates and taking longer to enter the electorate. Since there is, as yet, no evidence that this process of steadily lower participation among younger generations is abating, there could well be even lower turnout in future elections than in 2000. Such a trend has potentially serious implications for

**Table 1**  
Voting and Not Voting in 2000, by Age Cohorts

Voted in 2000 %	Age in 2000 (first eligibility)								Total %
	68+ (-1953)	58-67 (1957-1963)	48-57 (1968-1972)	38-47 (1974-1980)	30-37 (1984-1988)	25-29 (1993)	21-24 (1997)	18-20 (2000)	
Yes	83	80	76	66	54	38	28	22	61
No	17	20	24	34	46	62	73	78	39

N = 2,467 (weighted)

Canadian democracy – for the extent of a democratic mandate that governments might claim, for the kinds of candidates who are elected and even for the types of issues that are discussed.

### Reasons for not voting

Many of the questions in our survey were open-ended, allowing respondents to answer in their own words and to give more than one response to a question. In this way, we were able to explore more fully some of the attitudes and feelings that lie behind the decline in voter turnout in Canada. The ability to compare the answers of both older and younger respondents, and of voters

and non-voters, provides insights into the problem of not voting among the young. We asked those who reported *not* having voted in the 2000 federal election to give their reasons for not voting, and we grouped these in three main categories as shown in Table 2 – *lack of interest*, *negativity* and *personal/administrative*.<sup>6</sup> Table 2 shows a number of interesting variations in the reasons for not voting given by different age groups. In particular, the youngest age group, aged 18–24 in 2000, was less likely to express reasons having to do with negative feelings

towards political candidates, parties and leaders than were older age groups. They were, however, more likely to cite personal or administrative reasons for not voting, particularly that they were “too busy”. They were also somewhat more likely to experience registration problems. The percentages reporting lack of interest were also higher in the two youngest age groups.

Photo: Wayne Brown



According to the authors' research, only about one quarter of eligible 18–24-year-olds are believed to have voted at the most recent Canadian general election in 2000.

**Table 2**  
Main Reasons for Not Voting in 2000 (open-ended; multiple responses; % of respondents)

	Age in 2000					
	55+	45-54	35-44	25-34	18-24	Total
<b>Lack of interest</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>37</b>
Not interested; didn't care; apathy	23	18	20	27	28	25
Vote meaningless; won't count; election forgone	8	10	10	11	7	9
Forgot; unaware	2	0	1	2	4	2
Too complicated; confusing	0	2	3	1	0	1
<b>Negativity</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>34</b>
No appealing candidates/parties/issues	12	23	21	14	14	16
Lack of faith/confidence in candidates/parties/leaders	15	21	17	14	6	13
Lack of information about candidates/parties/issues	1	3	5	3	6	4
Regional discontent	2	3	3	1	1	1
<b>Personal/Administrative</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>37</b>
Too busy with work/school/family	4	3	12	14	23	14
Away from riding/province/country	22	9	8	11	8	10
Registration problems	3	7	3	5	7	6
Illness, health issues	12	8	2	2	*	3
Didn't know where or when; polling station problems; transportation	5	3	3	2	4	3
Moving-related problems	0	3	1	1	1	1
<b>Other</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>
Religious reasons	4	2	2	1	1	2
Other; unclassifiable; unclear; none	1	1	3	2	4	2
N =	101	109	171	331	347	1,059

\*less than 1 percent

**Table 3**  
**Perceived Reasons Why Young People Are Less Likely to Vote**  
**(open-ended; multiple responses; % of respondents)**

	Under 25 years old	25 and older
<b>Not integrated</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>71</b>
Distanced from politics by age; not feeling represented, connected	40	37
Lack of information, understanding, knowledge	34	27
Lack of encouragement	2	4
Too busy, too mobile	3	3
<b>Disengagement</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>59</b>
Uninterested, apathetic	31	30
Negativism, cynicism, disillusionment	9	14
Distrustful of system, politicians	7	9
Irresponsibility, rebelliousness, laziness	4	6
Other	2	4
Do not know	0	*
	N = 386	1,420

\*less than 1 percent

The oldest age group was most affected by health issues and by absence from the electoral district at election time, although it should be remembered that there were far fewer non-voters overall in the older age groups. The middle-aged groups, those between the mid-30s and the mid-50s, were more likely to cite reasons involving negative feelings toward politicians or political parties than were those in either the oldest or the youngest groups.

As part of the survey, we asked our respondents to speculate on the reasons behind the higher rates of not voting among youth. Their reasons (Table 3) fell into two broad categories – those related to a lack of integration of young people into the political system, and those suggesting that the problem lies with feelings of apathy or political distrust. It is apparent that the bulk of Canadians believe that young people are not voting because they feel distanced from the operations of the political system, or because they lack

information about it. The first category, distancing from politics, contained responses of the following nature:

- Youth do not believe that government represents them or cares about their views, their needs and their issues.

*It is apparent that the bulk of Canadians believe that young people are not voting because they feel distanced from the operations of the political system, or because they lack information about it.*

- The age difference distances youth from the political process and the politicians.
- Political parties do not reach out to them or are out of touch with youth.
- Youth feel that politics does not affect them, perhaps because they have not yet developed the responsibilities that are the subject of political discourse.

- No one listens to young people; they have no voice.

There is a strong feeling, then, that young people lack connection to the current political system. This explanation is joined by the suggestion that young people simply do not have enough political information. This lack of knowledge relates to all aspects of politics – the candidates, parties and issues. It extends to a lack of knowledge of how politics might affect their lives. Attitudes of this sort are cited as explanations by 34 percent of young people themselves. Overall, then, almost three quarters of the respondents in the study, and 80 percent of the under-25 age group, gave answers that we have classified in the “not integrated” category.

Explanations for not voting among youth also involved reasons that we classified as “disengagement”. Such reasons were cited by 59 percent of respondents over 25, and 52 percent of young people themselves. The bulk of these answers simply categorized youth as uninterested or apathetic when it comes to voting in elections. This image of uncaring youth is sometimes accompanied by a more purposeful description of youth as being actively

negative toward politics or elections. Older respondents were somewhat more likely to say that young people were less likely to vote because they were cynical or disillusioned about politics, sick of the “false promises, dishonesty, hypocrisy, corruption and negativity” that are sometimes seen as characterizing political life, and not willing to participate in a “meaningless”

activity. Young people were also seen by some respondents as lacking trust in candidates, parties or the government, or simply disliking what is happening (or not happening) in politics.

### Raising young people’s interest in politics

We followed up the question about the reasons for lower voting levels among youth by asking respondents to suggest what they felt should be done to get young people to be more interested in politics. The answers to this question, again grouped by age, are shown in Table 4. A majority of those responding mentioned “improved education or information” as a potential solution. Answers in this category, however, were reasonably diverse, dealing not only with the need for more education in the schools but also in the home and in the media. Some also indicated that increased information or education needed to be made more relevant to the interests and personal situations of young people, to better engage them.

The notion of increased relevance to young people came up again in the next category of answers, which referred to systemic changes that might be made to encourage more involvement of youth. Table 4 indicates that 27 percent of respondents under 25 years of age felt that those setting the political agenda should make more effort to accommodate issues of relevance to young people, such as those relating to the jobs, education and future of youth. This number is almost twice as high as in the 25 and older group.

Other changes suggested in this category were related to improvements that might encourage more youth to enter politics – as leaders, politicians and candidates, for example. Few

**Table 4**  
**What Should Be Done to Get Young People Interested in Politics?**  
**(open-ended; multiple responses; % of respondents)**

	Under 25 years old	25 and older
<b>Improved education; information</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>53</b>
More education in the schools	23	24
More dialogue/exposure/education (general)	9	13
More emphasis on personal relevance, benefits, jobs	8	10
More advertisements, media exposure	8	4
More education in the home	0	2
<b>Political system change; involvement</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>39</b>
More relevant issues to youth	27	15
Recruitment, involvement of youth	7	11
Younger candidates, politicians, leaders	5	7
Better politicians, leaders, parties	2	4
Electoral reform; democratic reform	2	2
<b>Changes in conduct of politics</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>30</b>
Government relate better to, understand youth	11	14
More honesty, responsibility, accountability in politics	6	11
Make politics less complicated, more interesting, fun	8	5
Other	2	2
Nothing, do not know	3	3
	N = 332	1,184

respondents mentioned the electoral system as a target of possible change. Indeed, in response to a separate series of closed-end questions on this topic, more than three quarters of the respondents in both the older and younger age groups expressed general satisfaction with the operation of the current electoral system.<sup>7</sup> But, in response to a different question, nearly two thirds of the respondents were at least “somewhat supportive” of reforms that might introduce greater proportionality into the electoral system.<sup>8</sup> The majority of respondents, however, were clearly opposed to compulsory voting. While those in the oldest age group were about evenly divided on this question, respondents in the youngest age cohorts were the most opposed to the idea of making voting mandatory.

The matter of the “relevance” of politics to youth comes up again in the third category shown in Table 4 – changes in the actions or conduct of those running the political system. These respondents felt that young people might become more interested in politics if government made an effort to contact and relate to youth, giving them more say in government activities. Other people who referred to changes in the conduct of politics were more likely to cite the need for more honesty, responsibility and accountability in the actions of politicians. In response to a separate series of questions, many respondents also agreed that technological developments, such as the possibility of Internet voting, might help bring more young people into the active electorate.<sup>9</sup>

The survey findings point us toward an understanding of the scope of the problem, but only in a limited way toward its possible solution. It is evident that the decline in voter turnout in recent elections is mainly attributable to the young, and that it is part of a demographic trend that shows every sign of continuing well into the future. It has serious implications for the kinds of issues that are likely to be addressed in the political arena, the types of candidates who seek election, the positions of the parties, and even possibly for the health of democracy

itself. It is a problem that deserves our attention, but one that will not be easily solved. The direction of a solution is clear – making voting easier and more meaningful for first-time voters; making politics more relevant to the young; providing them with the tools they need to understand its relevance to their own lives, engaging them more directly in the political process. But without fundamental changes in the way in which politics is conducted in Canada, these are goals that could well remain out of reach for some time. ✕

## NOTES

1. André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte, *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory: Making Sense of the 2000 Canadian Election* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), pp. 45–63.
2. The full report of the survey, “Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters,” is available at [www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca) under Electoral Law & Policy. Field work for the survey was conducted by Decima Research. Technical details may be obtained by contacting Decima Research or Elections Canada.
3. To calculate this table, we employed a corrective weight to rebalance the total proportions of voters and non-voters in the sample. The weighting was arrived at by weighting each of the non-voters in the sample at 1 and voters at .34, thereby simulating a sample of 2,467 with a voting rate of 61.3 percent.
4. The cohorts displayed in Table 1 are structured according to the particular election at which a respondent first became eligible to vote. To have been eligible to vote in the 1988 federal election, for example, a respondent would have to have been at least 30 years old in 2000.
5. An analysis of data from the Canadian National Election Studies, collected over the past 30 years, which was also conducted by the authors for Elections Canada, shows clearly that each generation of newly eligible voters participates at lower rates and begins to enter the active electorate at a higher average age. Jon H. Pammett, Lawrence LeDuc, Erin Thiessen and Antoine Bilodeau, “Canadian Voting Turnout in Comparative Perspective,” unpublished report prepared for Elections Canada, 2001, pp. 71–74, 78–79.
6. In tables 2, 3 and 4, which use multiple responses, category totals should be regarded as approximate, since respondents were allowed to give more than one response in the same category.
7. The question asked was: “In general, how satisfied are you with the present Canadian electoral system?” Twenty-eight percent of all respondents indicated that they were “very satisfied”, while fifty percent responded that they were “somewhat satisfied”.
8. The question asked was: “How supportive would you be of introducing a proportional representation system for federal elections in Canada?” Twenty-two percent of respondents indicated that they would be “very supportive” and another forty-four percent, “somewhat supportive”. Differences between the age groups on this item were negligible.

9. A majority of the survey respondents said that it was “very likely” or “somewhat likely” that they personally would take advantage of an Internet voting option. The proportion responding positively to this item was higher among younger, better-educated, higher-income and urban respondents, and among those who did not vote in 2000.

## Youth Participation in Elections



# Turned Off or Tuned Out? Youth Participation in Politics

Elisabeth Gidengil

Professor, Department of Political Science,  
McGill University

André Blais

Professor, Department of Political Science,  
Université de Montréal

Neil Nevitte

Professor, Department of Political Science,  
University of Toronto

Richard Nadeau

Professor, Department of Political Science,  
Université de Montréal

Young Canadians are turning their backs on electoral politics in unprecedented numbers. The optimistic assumption is that they are turning to other forms of political engagement instead. This assumption is encouraged by the fact that today’s young Canadians are much more likely than their parents’ or grandparents’ generation to have had a university education. The assumption gains credence from media images of young people protesting against globalization or the war against Iraq. What we are seeing, the argument goes, is a new generation of highly educated young Canadians who are frustrated with traditional electoral politics and who are turning to more autonomous forms of political action. However, as this article demonstrates, there is evidence this represents an unduly sanguine reading of the situation.

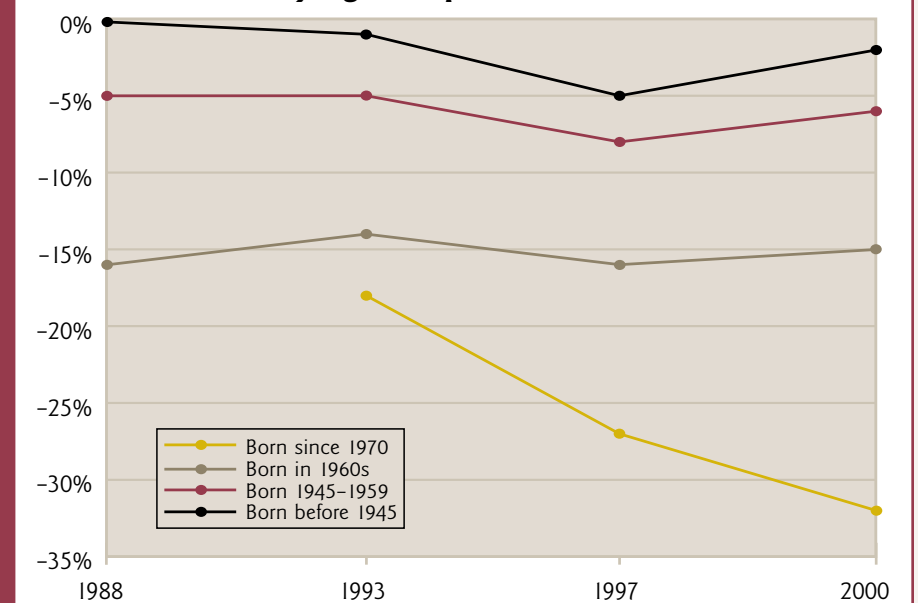
### The deepening divide

There is nothing new about lower turnout rates among young people. Detailed study of voter turnout in federal elections since 1968 suggests that the propensity to vote typically increases by 7 or 8 points between ages 20 and 30 and by about 15 points between ages 20 and 50.<sup>1</sup> Young people are less likely to vote precisely because

they are young. Most young people are not going to be particularly concerned about taxes, mortgage rates and access to services, and the political debate that swirls around these issues may seem remote and abstract.

What is new is the widening generational divide. There is something about this generation of young Canadians that

**Figure 1**  
Trends in Turnout by Age Group



Note: The turnout among the oldest age group in 1988 is used as the benchmark. Only people born in 1970 or earlier were eligible to vote in 1988, and so the tracking for the youngest generation begins in 1993. Source: 1988, 1993, 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies

makes them less likely to vote than their parents or their grandparents were when they were in their twenties. Turnout was 10 points higher among those born in the 1960s when they were young and 20 points higher among baby boomers when they were the same age. When trends are tracked for the different generations, the pattern is truly striking (see Figure 1). Turnout has held more or less steady for the three older generations; it is only among the young that voting has decreased. What this means is that much of the decline in turnout since 1988 can be attributed to generational replacement. If the four generations had made up the same proportion of the electorate in 2000 as they did in 1988, turnout in the 2000 federal election would have been as much as 10 points higher.

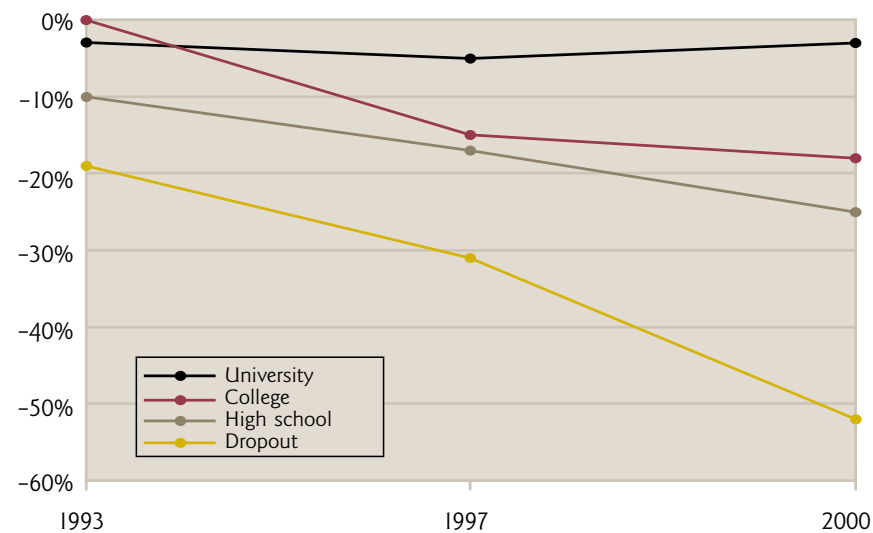
### The education myth

The declining turnout in this generation is puzzling because it has come at a time when unprecedented numbers



of young Canadians continue their education beyond high school. If they are so much more likely to go on to university, why are they so much less likely to vote than their parents or their grandparents? A ready answer has been found in the very fact that they *are* highly educated. The assumption has been made that these young Canadians are turning away from electoral politics in search of more active forms of political engagement. Because they are highly educated, they aspire to something more meaningful than casting a ballot once in a while.

**Figure 2**  
Trends in Turnout Among Young Canadians



Note: The turnout in 1993 among those with some college education is used as the benchmark.  
Source: 1993, 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies

However, it is a serious misconception to suppose that it is the highly educated young who are failing to turn up at the polls. On the contrary, the more education young people have, the more likely they are to vote. Education remains one of the best predictors of turnout because it provides the cognitive skills needed to cope with the complexities of politics and because it seems to foster norms of civic engagement. Education makes a massive difference to whether young Canadians vote or not. The 2000 Canadian Election Study reveals that turnout in the youngest generation was almost 50 points higher among university graduates than it was among those who left school without a high school diploma.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the decline is confined to those with less than a university education. Since the 1993 general election, turnout has fallen over 30 points among those with less than a high school education and 15 points or more among those who have completed high school and/or some college (see Figure 2). Meanwhile, turnout has held steady among young university graduates.

### Knowing little and caring less

A second misconception is that young Canadians are being “turned off” by traditional electoral politics. They are certainly dissatisfied with politics and politicians. Three in five believe that the government does not care what people like them think and two in five believe that political parties hardly ever keep their election promises. However, they are no more dissatisfied than older Canadians. In fact, they are, if anything, a little less disillusioned with politics than their parents and their grandparents are. In any case, political discontent is not a particularly good predictor when it comes to staying

away from the polls. Many people who are disaffected with politics choose to vent that frustration by voting against the incumbent.<sup>3</sup>

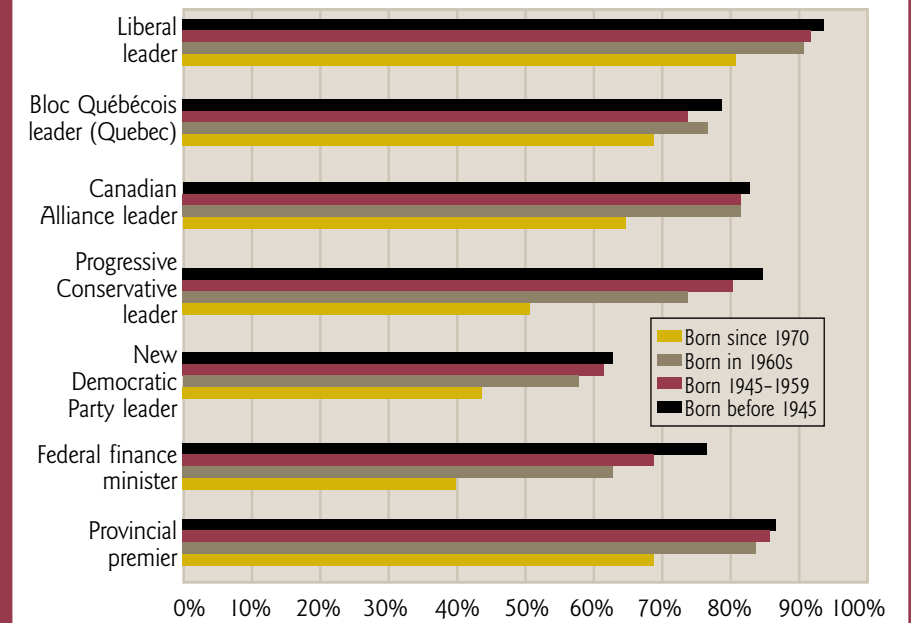
Young Canadians are not so much “turned off” as “tuned out”. They tend to be much less interested in politics than older Canadians and to know much less about what is going on politically. Interest in politics and political knowledge are two of the best predictors of who will vote and who will not. If young Canadians had been as interested in politics and as informed as older Canadians, their turnout in the 2000 federal election would have been 14 points higher.

When they were interviewed right after the 2000 federal election, almost one young Canadian in five was unable to name Jean Chrétien as leader of the Liberal party, and one in two failed to come up with Joe Clark’s name when asked to identify the Progressive Conservative leader (see Figure 3). The skeptical might charge that this knowledge test is biased against the young: given how long both men have



The leaders of five federal political parties took part in televised debates (English and French) during the 2000 general election: (from the left) Jean Chrétien (Liberal), Gilles Duceppe (Bloc Québécois), Joe Clark (Progressive Conservative), Alexa McDonough (N.D.P.) and Stockwell Day (Canadian Alliance).

**Figure 3**  
Knowledge of Party Leaders and Other Political Figures



Source: 2000 Canadian Election Study

been active in federal politics, older Canadians have simply had more time to become acquainted with them. However, younger respondents were also much less likely to know the names of the newer party leaders: one in three could not name Stockwell Day as Canadian Alliance leader, and more

than half failed to identify Alexa McDonough as leader of the New Democratic Party. Knowing the names of the federal party leaders is not mere political trivia. After all, the leader of the winning party will be Canada’s prime minister. At the same time, only two in five could come up with the name of the federal finance minister,

and only two in three managed to name their provincial premier. Young Canadians knew even less about the parties’ positions than older Canadians. Only one in four could identify the Alliance as being on the right and even fewer could locate the N.D.P. as being on the left. The one factual question on which young Canadians did as well as the older age groups was naming the capital of the United States.

According to the optimistic scenario, however, this low level of knowledge could be just what we would expect if young Canadians are turning their backs on traditional electoral politics. If many of them are finding electoral politics to be irrelevant to their real concerns, perhaps it is hardly surprising that they seem to know so little about it. If this line of argument were correct, we would expect to find much higher levels of knowledge when young Canadians are asked about the issues that *are* supposed to concern them.



Young people were among the demonstrators at the April 2001 Summit of the Americas, in the city of Québec.

This is not so. The sight of young Canadians protesting at economic summits suggests that globalization is exactly the sort of issue that is of special interest to them. In truth, however, their lack of awareness seems to extend to this topic as well. According to a survey conducted in March 2001 for the Centre for Research and Information on Canada, only 57 percent of Canadians born since 1970 had heard anything about globalization, only 53 percent had heard anything about the demonstrations against the World Trade Organization the previous year in Seattle, and a mere 40 percent had heard anything about the upcoming Summit of the Americas in the city of Québec.<sup>4</sup> On all three questions, awareness was lowest among the young.

### Who are the activists?

The third misconception is that young Canadians who are giving up on electoral politics are involving themselves in other ways. In fact, according to the 2000 Canadian Election Study, young Canadians were the least likely to have been active in a voluntary association or community group during the previous five years, and when they had been

active, it was typically in a sports association (40 percent). If young Canadians were turning to more meaningful forms of engagement, this should show up in membership of environmental groups. The environment is an issue that matters to young people, and it has hardly been a priority on the country's political agenda. Active involvement in an environmental group might seem to offer a more effective way of working for change. However, young Canadians are no more likely (9 percent) than Canadians in general to have been active in an environmental group. This calls into question the optimistic assumption that declining participation in traditional electoral politics is being offset by greater involvement in grassroots-level activities.

Involvement in protest activities tells a similar story. The activists are actually most likely to be found among the middle-aged, a pattern that holds across national boundaries.<sup>5</sup> The young are the least likely among Canadians to have been active; more than one in five have engaged in no form of protest whatsoever – even signing a petition or joining in a boycott. To be sure, there is a core of young people who are

seeking to effect change by engaging in protest activities. Indeed, this generation ranks second only to their baby-boomer parents when it comes to involvement in three or more different protest activities. But far from turning their backs on more conventional means of making their voices heard, these young activists are *more* likely than other members of their generation to belong to a political party or to an interest group, and to vote.

It is not really surprising that many of the same young people who fail to vote also fail to get involved in grassroots organizing or protest activities. Involvement presumes a degree of awareness of what is going on in the world. If people do not pay a modicum of attention to the news, issues such as globalization or the environment may simply be “off the radar screen”.

### The on-line myth

This brings us to the final misconception, namely that the Internet is helping to counteract young Canadians' tendency to tune out of politics. It is certainly true that young Canadians

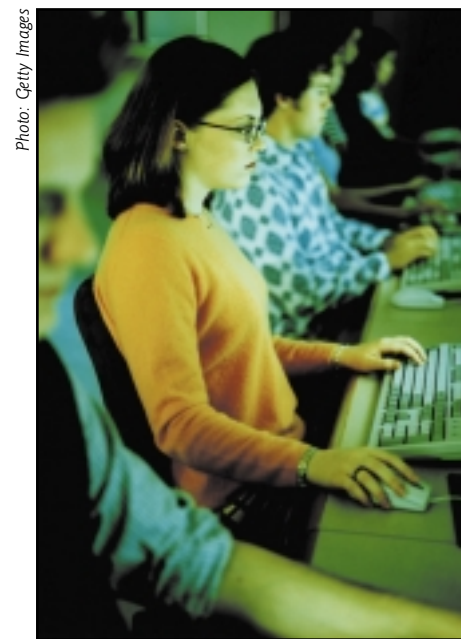


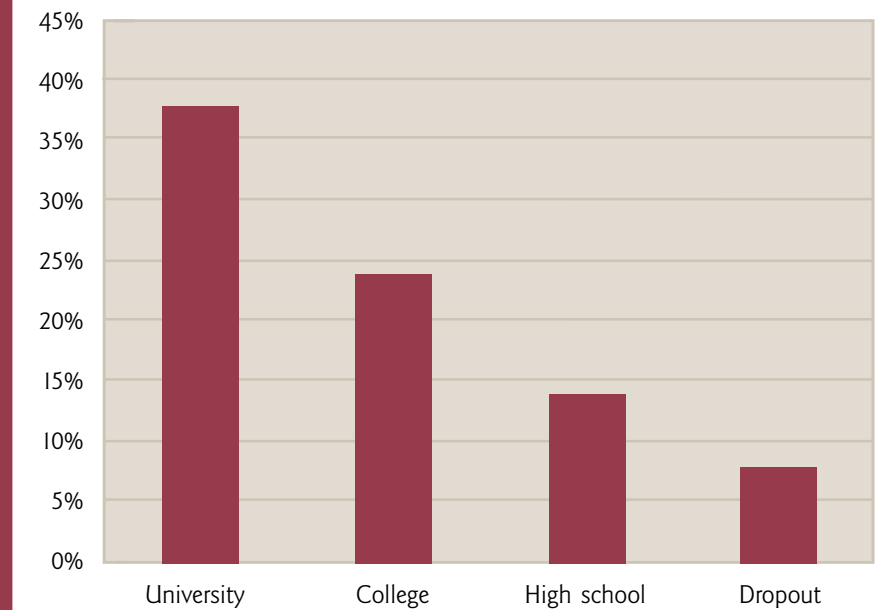
Photo: Getty Images

are the most likely to go on-line in search of information about politics. However, the numbers are not very impressive. At the time of the 2000 federal election, less than a quarter of young Canadians reported that they had ever used the Internet to track down political information. Moreover, there was a clear education gradient: the more education they had, the more likely they were to have used the Internet for this purpose (see Figure 4). Almost two in five university graduates had gone on-line to find some information or other about politics, compared with fewer than one in ten of young Canadians without a high school diploma. More to the point, those young people who had used the Internet to obtain political information were also the most likely to be following politics in the traditional media. These Internet users scored fully two points higher on average than the non-users (on a scale from zero to ten) when it came to the amount of attention they paid to television news and/or news in the newspaper.

### How can young Canadians be encouraged to vote?

The key to encouraging young Canadians to participate in politics is to get them to “tune in”. Political engagement presupposes political interest. If young Canadians are not interested in politics, they are not going to spend much time or energy keeping up with public affairs, and still less participating actively in the country's democratic life. We need to recognize, though, that interest runs both ways. One very tangible form of interest is to have a campaign worker or even a candidate turn up at the door: people who reported being contacted by *any* of the parties during the 2000 campaign were more likely to vote. This was true

**Figure 4**  
Use of the Internet by Young Canadians to Obtain Political Information (% having ever used)



Source: 2000 Canadian Election Study

of young Canadians, too, but they were the least likely to report being contacted. This suggests that a

politics and the more likely they are to vote, to join groups working for change and to be active in their communities. Canada's dropout rates may not be out of line with other OECD countries, but Canadian dropouts tend to have very low levels of literacy compared to

*The key to encouraging young Canadians to participate in politics is to get them to “tune in”.*

these countries because they typically quit high school at an earlier age.<sup>7</sup> Education not only equips citizens with the cognitive skills that active engagement requires, it also seems to instill norms of civic obligation. Sense of duty is one of the most powerful incentives for turning out to vote.<sup>8</sup> However, this sense seems to be diminishing: fewer than one young Canadian in five expressed a strong sense of duty to vote in 2000, compared with one in three of those born before 1945.

For the longer term, the single most important step would be to find ways to keep more young people in school. The more education young people have, the more interested they are in



Just what has impaired the development of a sense of duty to vote on the part of this generation of young Canadians is unclear, but it may well have something to do with the fact that they were reaching adulthood at a time when disaffection with politics was growing. This disaffection had a number of sources: the rise of a neo-conservative outlook that advocated a smaller role for the state, a perception that governments were

relatively powerless in the face of global economic forces, and a series of constitutional crises and failed accords. All of these factors could have combined to produce a disengaged generation that often tunes out politics altogether. But these circumstances are changing. Political disaffection peaked in the mid-1990s and seems to be waning. Meanwhile, security concerns at home and abroad have highlighted

the role of the state. One result may be a renewed sense that politics does indeed matter. ✖

## Youth Participation in Elections



# Examining Declining Electoral Turnout Among Canada's Youth

Brenda O'Neill

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Studies, University of Manitoba

## NOTES

1. André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte, "The Evolving Nature of Non-Voting: Evidence from Canada," *European Journal of Political Research* (forthcoming). For more detailed information on issues covered in this article, see André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte, *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory: Making Sense of the 2000 Canadian Election* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), Chapter 3, and Elisabeth Gidengil, André Blais, Neil Nevitte and Richard Nadeau, *Democratic Citizenship in Canada* (University of British Columbia Press, forthcoming).
2. The 2000 Canadian Election Study involved a rolling cross-section campaign survey with a representative sample of 3,651 Canadians, a post-election survey with 2,862 of the campaign survey respondents, and a mail-back questionnaire filled out by 1,535 of the post-election respondents. The campaign survey response rate was 62 percent. The field work was conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University and by Jolicoeur et Associés. It was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, with additional funding from Elections Canada and the Institute for Research on Public Policy.
3. Elisabeth Gidengil, André Blais, Neil Nevitte and Richard Nadeau, "The Correlates and Consequences of Anti-Partyism in the 1997 Canadian Election," *Party Politics* Vol. 7 (2001), pp. 491–513.
4. For details, see the Canadian Opinion Research Archive at Queen's University under CROP Political Survey (March 2001), CROP, Inc., Montréal, Quebec (CRIC0103). Neither the original collector of the data, CORA, nor the relevant funding agency bear any responsibility for the use of the data made here. The results of the survey are analyzed in "Trade, Globalization and Canadian Values," *The CRIC Papers* Vol. 1 (April 2001), available at [http://www.cric.ca/pdf/cahiers/cricpapers\\_april2001.pdf](http://www.cric.ca/pdf/cahiers/cricpapers_april2001.pdf).
5. Pippa Norris, *The Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
6. Eric Plutzer, "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood," *American Political Science Review* Vol. 96 (2002), pp. 41–56.
7. Canada, Human Resources Development Canada, Applied Research Branch, *Dropping Out of High School: Definitions and Costs R-01-1E* (Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada, 2000).
8. André Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

Without question, young people are not participating in politics to the same degree as previous generations.<sup>1</sup> This trend has important implications for politics today, as well as in the future, and for society at large, as well as for the youngest generation in particular. A key question generated by the trend is what accounts for it, which is the focus of this article; another is what should be done to reverse it.

Analysis of a survey conducted by the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) in 2000<sup>2</sup> revealed a gap of 25 percentage points in reported turnout for the 1997 election between those aged 18–27 and those over 57 years of age (see Table 1). Additionally, research suggests that the dramatic decline in voter turnout in Canada can largely be attributed to Canada's youth. According to Blais and his colleagues, tracking non-voters across the three latest Canadian general elections (1993, 1997 and 2000) reveals that not voting increased only among those born after 1970, and by a significant 14 points.<sup>3</sup>

Differences in political attitudes and participation across age groups are normally accounted for by two distinct phenomena: life-cycle and generational effects. The first identifies the reality that politics achieves greater importance in the middle and later stages of one's life, because of self-interest (political decisions take on greater importance when the risk associated with the outcome increases), or because of an increased sense of responsibility to the community. Generational effects account for changes across generations due to shared common and distinctive experiences in young and early adulthood. Formative experiences, the presence or absence of war, for example, can



Photo: Paul Toogood Photography

A study by the Institute for Research on Public Policy in 2000 found that only slightly more than 40 percent of Canadian 18–27-year-olds have an interest in politics.

lead to unique attitudes and behaviours among individuals for whom these are newly developing.

The IRPP survey revealed that life-cycle effects are evident in Canadians' attitudes and participation rates (see Table 1). When 1997 voting turnout was compared to turnout measured in a 1990 survey, a similar pattern emerged, with younger Canadians being less likely to vote than older Canadians in both time periods.<sup>4</sup> But comparing the 1990 results to the 2000 survey results reveals that generational changes are strong and that increased voting among today's youth over time will not allow the turnout rate to "catch up" to rates previously recorded in Canada.<sup>5</sup> Much of the

**Table 1**  
Generational Differences in Reported Turnout, 1990–2000

Birth cohort	Voting	
	% 1990	% 2000
1973–1982	–	66
1963–1972	74	69
1953–1962	85	85
1943–1952	93	92
Before 1943	93	91
Total	88	81

Note: Entries are percentage of respondents. The youngest birth cohort in both surveys includes only those respondents of voting age at the time of the election. Data for 1990 are from the Lortie survey [Blais and Gidengil, 2000 (see note 5)] and for 2000 from the IRPP survey [Howe and Northrup, 2000 (see note 2)].

level of cynicism. Canada's youth have tuned out, they insist, because they have little confidence in those entrusted with society's interests. Very visible protests, apparently dominated by young activists, would seem to support such a

reported drop in voting over the 10-year period is accounted for by the lower turnout among those who became newly enfranchised between the two surveys (from 74 percent in 1990 to 66 percent in 2000) and to the drop in turnout among the 1963–1972 cohort (from 74 percent in 1990 to 69 percent in 2000). Generational effects, then, are outpacing life-cycle effects.

### Explaining low youth voter turnout

Evidence of dropping turnout levels among youth in Canada mirrors the trend in other advanced democracies.<sup>6</sup> Some have been quick to suggest that this is symptomatic of an increased

conclusion. But while levels of political cynicism have increased, a more accurate picture emerges through more careful analysis.

Canada's youth are not more cynical than other Canadians about democracy and politics, and indeed are, in some cases, more satisfied with the workings of the Canadian political system than members of previous generations. As shown in Table 2, when asked whether elected officials “soon lose touch with the people”, the youngest Canadians did not reveal themselves to be the most cynical among Canadians. Moreover, when asked how satisfied they are with elections, the youngest age group reveals

the highest level of satisfaction of all age groups, 81 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Differences across age groups are apparent, however, in political interest and knowledge (see Table 2). Only 41 percent of 18–27-year-olds indicated an interest in politics; this increases with age to 68 percent among those 57 and over. While the ability to correctly identify the Prime Minister differs only slightly among age groups, more than 40 points separate the youngest and oldest groups in their ability to identify the Minister of Finance: 22 percent and 65 percent respectively. Lower levels of both political interest and knowledge have been associated with decreased voter turnout and help to explain increased levels of electoral abstention among Canadian youth. However, it is not clear why this lack of knowledge and limited interest are more pronounced today than in previous generations. This is due in part to the limited attention devoted to the question in Canadian research.<sup>8</sup>

Young Canadians are also more likely to believe that voting is simply not important, with only 75 percent of the youngest respondents in the IRPP survey suggesting that voting was essential or very important (Table 2). Clearly, such attitudes directly shape

**Table 2**  
Political Interest, Knowledge, Importance of Voting and Cynicism, by Age Group, 2000

Age group	% 18–27	% 28–37	% 38–47	% 48–57	% over 57
Follow politics very or fairly closely	41	59	58	64	68
Correctly identify the Prime Minister	84	89	93	93	89
Correctly identify the Minister of Finance	22	46	46	61	65
Voting essential or very important	75	85	89	86	91
Those elected to government soon lose touch with the people	71	75	81	70	67
Very or fairly satisfied with elections	81	79	68	66	72

Note: Entries are percentage of respondents responding in the identified category. The second to last row reports those respondents who strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement. Data are from the IRPP survey [Howe and Northrup, 2000 (see note 2)].

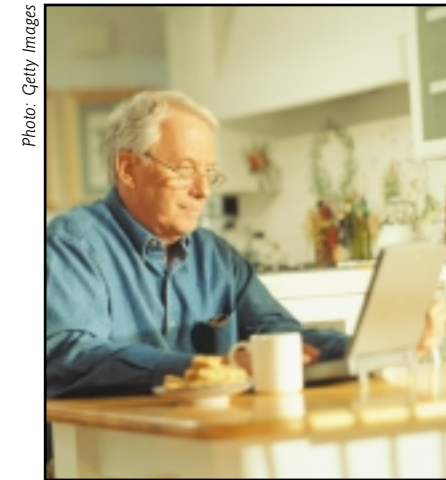


Photo: Getty Images  
*Older Canadians are much more likely than younger ones to follow politics closely.*

the likelihood of participating in politics, but again the question remains as to why previous generations were less likely to dismiss the importance of elections at the same stage of life.

Political participation involves more, however, than simply voting. Involvement in political parties has exhibited a similar decline among young Canadians, a trend that is also likely to continue over time. Only two percent of those aged 18 to 27 in the 2000 IRPP survey indicated that they had ever been members of any political party, a drop from eight percent in 1990 among similarly-aged respondents.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the ratio of interest group to political party involvement among young Canadians is much higher than for other Canadians. Among those aged 18 to 27 in the IRPP survey, for every respondent who indicated having been a member of a political party, 4.5 indicated membership in an interest group. In comparison, the interest group to party membership ratio among respondents over 57 years of age was only 0.3 to 1. Thus, while voter turnout might be down among young Canadians, there is reason to believe that traditional partisan politics has also been affected.

**Table 3**  
Variation in Reported Turnout Among Canadians 22 to 37 Years of Age, 2000

	% voted in 1997 election
<b>Education</b>	
High school or less	60 (118)
Post-secondary	71 (322)
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	65 (241)
Male	71 (203)
<b>Household income</b>	
Less than \$30,000	64 (91)
\$30,000–\$49,000	74 (100)
\$50,000–\$79,000	79 (95)
Over \$80,000	67 (90)
<b>Political interest</b>	
Follow politics very or fairly closely	81 (225)
Not very closely or not at all	55 (214)
<b>Political knowledge</b>	
Identified the Prime Minister	72 (385)
Could not identify the Prime Minister	47 (58)
<b>Political cynicism: Those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people</b>	
Agree	69 (307)
Disagree	72 (106)
<b>Importance of voting</b>	
Essential	88 (153)
Very important	64 (207)
Somewhat or not at all	44 (78)
<b>Interest group member</b>	
Yes	82 (49)
No	66 (395)
<b>Most effective way to work for change</b>	
Join a political party	71 (79)
Join an interest group	70 (285)

Note: Entries are percentage of respondents; the number of respondents is indicated in parentheses. Data are from the IRPP survey [Howe and Northrup, 2000 (see note 2)].

### Variations in voter turnout among youth

Examination of reported turnout across demographic and other groups (see Table 3)<sup>10</sup> reveals that not all young Canadians are avoiding the polls. Low turnout is greatest among those with no post-secondary education, those

with low and high family incomes and, to some extent, women.<sup>11</sup> Variation in reported turnout by levels of political knowledge and interest is, however, much greater. While 81 percent of young respondents with some political interest reported voting in 1997, the rate drops to 55 percent among those reporting little or no interest. Similarly,

less than half of respondents who could not identify the Prime Minister reported voting in 1997. In comparison, over 70 percent of those who could identify him went to the polls. Equally revealing is the fact that 88 percent of those who believed that voting was essential reported having voted in 1997; among those who attached little importance to the vote, the reported turnout level drops to 44 percent.

Cynicism, on the other hand, does little to explain low turnout among Canadian youth. As shown in Table 2, there is little difference in the turnout rate between respondents who agree that those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people (69 percent) and those who disagree with the statement (72 percent). Similarly, reduced turnout levels are not the result of young people turning away from electoral and partisan politics towards interest group and social group politics. In fact, the turnout rate is higher among

... reduced turnout levels are not the result of young people turning away from electoral and partisan politics towards interest group and social group politics.

those who indicate they have been members of an interest group. Indeed, those who believe that interest groups are the most effective way to work for change are as likely to vote as those who believe political parties are the most effective mechanisms of change.

### Concluding reflections

How, then, to make sense of these changed patterns of participation among Canada's youth? Young people are less likely to vote because they are less interested in politics, know less



Photo: Paul Toogood Photography

about politics and believe less strongly that voting is essential. This explanation does not, however, take us very far, for it begs the question of why this is the case. It might help to consider that political participation depends directly on ability, opportunity and motivation.<sup>12</sup> We have seen that young people who lack the tools provided by education

are voting at lower levels due, perhaps, to the fact that the political system seems remote and complex. But it is not clear why today's young Canadians would find the system any more complex than young Canadians 10 years ago.

Alternatively, limited opportunities for political participation, as reflected in the electoral system's tendency to distort voters' choices in the translation to seat shares, might help to explain increased participation within non-traditional political organizations such as interest groups and social movements. But this helps little to explain drops in electoral participation among young people over time, since there are no fewer opportunities for participation

today than in the past. If young people's time is more limited in today's world, however, then perhaps increasing the ease with which they might vote could result in higher participation rates.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, value might come from focusing on motivation – or lack thereof – as an explanation for lower levels of participation among youth. The lack of motivation for voting – that is, no reason or stimulus justifying the expenditure of time and energy, however limited – might help to explain the decreasing turnout rates. André Blais has argued that an important motivation for voting is a sense of duty.<sup>14</sup> A sense of duty may be thought of as one side of a reciprocal relationship: citizens agree to vote in return for the benefits provided by governments. However, more than 10 years of Canadian governments highlighting the need for fiscal restraint and balanced budgets might have left many young Canadians with less than a clear sense of what exactly governments do for them to deserve their duty in return. The answer to the paradox of falling turnout rates among the young may thus lie outside of factors historically evaluated as explanations for turnout.

Instead, the answer may lie in the very success of governments in reducing their perceived responsibility towards citizens.

In the end, however, what is clear is that many, if not most, young Canadians avoid the polls because of political apathy rather than cynicism. They choose not to vote because

they see politics and elections as unimportant, rather than because of a strong belief that politicians and politics are not addressing issues of importance to them. This conclusion is reinforced by evidence that the many young Canadians who consider interest groups to be the most effective instruments of political change vote at rates similar to those who consider political parties to

be most effective. The challenge is thus twofold: to develop an interest in politics and elections among the current generation of young voters and, second, to commit to fostering just such an interest among the next generation of voters, to arrest any further decline in voter turnout levels. ✕

### NOTES

1. Examples include André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte, *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory: Making Sense of the 2000 Canadian Election* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002); Henry Milner, "Civic Drop-outs? What Young Citizens Know and Don't Know About Politics," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, Massachusetts, August 26 – September 1, 2002; and my own, "Generational Patterns in the Political Opinions and Behaviour of Canadians," *Policy Matters* Vol. 2, No. 5 (October 2001).
2. York University's Institute for Social Research interviewed 1,278 Canadians for this survey. Full details can be found in Appendix 1 of Paul Howe and David Northrup, "Strengthening Canadian Democracy: The Views of Canadians," *Policy Matters* Vol. 1, No. 5 (July 2000).
3. Blais et al., *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory*, p. 46.
4. O'Neill, "Generational Patterns," pp. 34–35.
5. This survey was conducted by the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (the Lortie Commission). See André Blais and Elisabeth Gidengil, *Making Representative Democracy Work: The Views of Canadians* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991).
6. See Russell J. Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Western Democracies*, 2nd ed. (Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1996).
7. One should note, however, that a significant share of respondents in the youngest age group, 43 percent, answered "don't know" to this question. By comparison, only 21 percent among those aged 48–57 answered similarly.
8. One exception is Paul Howe, "Name That Premier: The Political Knowledge of Canadians Past and Present," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Toronto, May 29–31, 2002.
9. Table 13 in O'Neill, "Generational Patterns," p. 35.
10. Table 3 provides reported turnout levels for 1997 for respondents between 22 and 37 years of age across various categories in the IRPP survey (N = 448). The reported turnout rates among those between 22 and 27 years of age and those between 28 and 37 years were 66 percent and 69 percent respectively.
11. This examination provides first-order differences in turnout. A more rigorous analysis would control for the impact of various factors on these relationships and could result in different conclusions. Women, for instance, report lower levels of political interest than men and controlling for this difference could lead to disappearance of the gender gap in reported turnout.
12. See Patrick Fournier, "The Uninformed Canadian Voter" in Joanna Everitt and Brenda O'Neill, *Citizen Politics: Research and Theory in Canadian Political Behaviour* (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford, 2003), pp. 92–109.
13. The Chief Electoral Officer has announced that measures designed to make polling stations and information about advance voting and mail-in ballots more accessible are being adopted specifically to increase participation among Canada's youngest voters. See Elections Canada news release dated March 21, 2003, at [www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca).
14. André Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).



# Electoral Participation and the Knowledge Deficit

Paul Howe

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of New Brunswick

Since the federal election of November 2000, considerable attention has been directed to the declining participation of younger voters in Canadian elections. One recent estimate for the 2000 campaign, which corrects for the tendency of surveys to produce inflated estimates of voting, puts turnout among those aged 18 to 24 at about 25 percent, in an election that saw overall participation drop to 64 percent,<sup>1</sup> the lowest level since the Second World War. In trying to identify the reasons for voter withdrawal and strategies to win them back, the question of flagging youth participation must figure prominently.

Researchers looking at the phenomenon in greater depth have discovered that it is not as novel as the recent flurry of attention would suggest. Looking at surveys conducted during federal elections from 1968 to 2000, they have identified a long-standing tendency for Canadians to vote less in early adulthood than in later stages of life. Between the ages of 20 and 50, there is roughly a 15-point increase in voter turnout. This – the life-cycle effect in electoral



Photo: Paul Toogood Photography

participation – is not, however, especially critical to current concerns, since it is not implicated in the overall decline in voter turnout.<sup>2</sup> More important in that regard are significant generational differences that have emerged in the past 20 years or so, between those born in the 1960s and 1970s and older Canadians. Turnout among those born in the 1970s, for example, who mostly joined the electorate in the 1990s, is about 20 points lower than turnout was among pre-baby boomers (those born before 1945) when they were young adults. As these younger birth cohorts have come to account for a greater proportion of the electorate, their failure to turn up on election day has started to pinch, accounting for much of the aggregate decline in voter turnout over the past several elections.<sup>3</sup>

## Political knowledge

A pressing task for further research is to sift through the various factors associated with age differences in voter turnout to determine which underlie these important cohort effects and which are responsible for the less critical life-cycle pattern. One cohort-related factor that stands out is a significant gap in levels of political knowledge between older and younger cohorts. In surveys conducted at the time of the 1984, 1993, 1997 and 2000 general elections, as well as a separate study conducted in 1990, Canadians were asked a wide variety of factual questions that tapped into their knowledge of Canadian politics – questions such as the names of political leaders and the campaign promises of different parties. Each survey included a different bundle of questions, so in order to draw comparisons, it is necessary to standardize in some fashion. A simple method is to assign respondents on each survey a ranking between 0 and 100

(a percentile score, to be precise), based on how their knowledge level compared to other respondents in the same survey. Table 1 uses these standardized scores to capture patterns of political knowledge over time, reporting the gap in knowledge between various birth cohorts and an older comparison group (those born between 1926 and 1938). Two points stand out: first, there are large differences in political knowledge between the younger cohorts and the comparison group, with the gaps tending to grow larger with each successive cohort; and second, those gaps have been closing only marginally over

time, even as the younger cohorts have aged (what improvement there is seems to come when cohorts are relatively young, after which the knowledge gap more or less stabilizes). The pattern is more suggestive of cohort effects – sizable and persistent gaps between those born at different points – than a life-cycle pattern of growing knowledge with advancing age.

This is only one way, however, in which political knowledge is implicated in the cohort effects that have depressed voter turnout in the past several elections. A second lies in the *heightened impact*

of political knowledge on electoral participation among those who have more recently joined the electorate. Breaking down the data for various birth cohorts,<sup>4</sup> Table 2 reports the gap in voting turnout across a series of elections between those with high levels of political knowledge and those with low levels. The turnout gaps, it would appear, are substantially larger among younger cohorts than older ones. For example, looking at the 1976 to 1982 cohort in the 2000 election, turnout was 46.9 points lower among the least knowledgeable respondents than the most knowledgeable (based on reported turnout of 41.3 percent in the former group and 88.2 percent in the latter). In short, there are two dynamics working together to drive turnout down among younger cohorts: *lower levels of knowledge*, the effects of which are magnified by the *escalating impact of knowledge* on participation. The net result is that political knowledge is a critical factor – perhaps the critical factor – underlying cohort differences in voter turnout.

To this conclusion, the objection might be raised that the problem surely runs deeper, that the knowledge deficit is but a symptom of a more pervasive malaise, namely the wholesale disengagement of young Canadians from politics. In this alternative view, the problem is first and foremost motivational: young Canadians do not vote (and do not know much about politics) simply because they are not interested in politics. However, a similar analysis to the above, looking at levels of *political interest* across birth cohorts over time, undermines this contention. When it comes to political interest, cohort effects are relatively weak. Instead, political interest exhibits a stronger life-cycle pattern: low levels of interest

**Table 1**  
A Growing Knowledge Deficit, 1984 to 2000

	1984	1990	1993	1997	2000
1939–1954	-4.6	-4.6	-4.5	-4.7	-2.6
1955–1966	-15.4	-11.7	-8.9	-11.2	-10.7
1967–1971		-23.7	-16.2	-14.4	-16.1
1972–1975			-26.2	-19.1	-23.3
1976–1979				-24.0	-26.7
1980–1982					-33.3

Entries represent the difference between the mean knowledge level for each cohort and a comparison cohort (1926–1938), where political knowledge is measured on a 0 to 100 scale. Sources: 1984, 1993, 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies and The Survey of Attitudes About Electoral Reform (1990). Further information on these studies is provided in the Acknowledgements.

**Table 2**  
The Growing Impact of Knowledge on Electoral Participation, 1984 to 2000

Cohort	1984	1990	1993	1997	2000
pre-1926	10.6	9.1	11.9	15.6	4.2
1926–1938	12.5	7.7	9.1	12.3	20.4
1939–1954	8.3	8.4	10.5	12.6	17.6
1955–1966	27.7	19.6	21.4	21.6	24.2
1967–1975		10.5*	31.1	33.8	31.9
1976–1982				35.8*	46.9
Total	18.2	13.8	21.4	23.3	32.3

\*N < 20 for high knowledge category. Entries represent the gap in voting turnout between those with low political knowledge and those with high knowledge, each representing roughly one third of total respondents. Some cells are empty because there were no respondents in those cohorts for those years. Sources: 1984, 1993, 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies and The Survey of Attitudes About Electoral Reform (1990).

in early adulthood that pick up substantially as cohorts age. When the various pieces of information are pulled together and plugged into a model of electoral participation over time, the conclusions are reinforced: political interest has its greatest impact on the life-cycle pattern in electoral participation, whereas political knowledge principally explains cohort differences.<sup>5</sup>

Some reflection on the causal linkages between knowledge and interest also undermines the notion that motivation must be the prime mover in matters of political disengagement. If it seems reasonable to suggest that interest provides the incentive to learn about politics, it seems equally reasonable to suppose that knowledge renders politics more intelligible and hence more interesting. Likely the two are linked in a virtuous circle, interest generating knowledge and knowledge piquing interest, with some momentum on either side potentially serving to start the circle spinning. Common sense would suggest that an injection of knowledge could be especially effective at an early age – adolescence,

*Common sense would suggest that an injection of knowledge could be especially effective at an early age – adolescence, say – when interests are still relatively fluid and malleable.*

say – when interests are still relatively fluid and malleable. Practical considerations also suggest that emphasizing political knowledge is the sounder strategy: it seems a less daunting task to teach teenagers something about politics than to cajole them into caring about a subject they find categorically boring.

## Civics education

The reasoning above leads to the question of civics education. Are we doing enough in our schools to educate young people about politics? And if we started doing more, would it have positive effects on political knowledge and electoral participation? The literature in this area is somewhat

ambiguous. There are suggestions that the long-term impact of civics education is less than overwhelming, especially if it comes too early in the educational cycle.<sup>6</sup> But broad conclusions can obscure finer differences. More needs to be known about the potential impact of full-throttled civics education in a country that has never emphasized the subject and appears to be trailing other nations in its political knowledge capacities.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately, we have a ready-made case study at hand: the new civics

curriculum introduced in Ontario high schools. Since 2000, all Grade 10 students must take a course simply entitled “Civics” as part of the Canadian and World Studies program.<sup>8</sup> What makes this initiative especially valuable, in more ways than one, is its compulsory nature. This means, first, that all students, including those who might otherwise avoid the civics program, will be given a basic grounding in the subject. It also offers an advantage to researchers interested in assessing the effects of the new



Photo: Getty Images

curriculum. Where civics courses are optional, the methodological problem of self-selection arises: students with pre-existing knowledge of and interest in politics are more likely to take the courses than others, making it difficult to know what effect the courses actually have. With self-selection removed from the equation, more definitive assessment of civics education – its impact on levels of knowledge, political engagement and participation – should be possible. And soon too, as at least some of the first graduates should be eligible to vote in the next federal or provincial election. Investigating these matters and disseminating the results so that other provinces might learn from the Ontario experience would be one concrete step to help address the problem of declining electoral participation among young Canadians.

## Newspapers, television and Internet

In reflecting on the potential role of civics education in enhancing levels of knowledge and participation, it is important to bear in mind its multiple channels of influence. As others have noted, there is more to civics education than simply stuffing students full of

facts and sending them on their way; equally important are the skills and predilections acquired in school that underwrite a process of continual learning after graduation. The objective should be, as Henry Milner puts it, to instill habits of “civic literacy” so that citizens naturally and effortlessly keep themselves abreast of politics.<sup>9</sup>

One important habit of civic literacy often highlighted is newspaper reading. Newspapers are an important source of political information, but younger generations are less inclined to pick them up. There are, however, other strategies that deserve at least equal emphasis. In particular, television appears to be an especially important medium for acquiring political knowledge, among younger Canadians. Table 3, based on the 2000 Canadian Election Study, reports levels of political knowledge in different age groups as a function of people’s attention to the federal election campaign on television; political knowledge, as above, is measured

on a 0 to 100 scale. For those under age 30, the impact of television viewing is quite dramatic: a 33-point difference in political knowledge separates those in the low attention category from those in the high attention group. The effect of television viewing is also considerable in the adjacent category, the 30- to 39-year-olds, but diminishes considerably in the older age groups. Reading newspapers also has a considerable impact on political knowledge in all groups, but for the younger respondents – those 18 to 39 – following politics on television makes a bigger difference, particularly when the variables are subjected to controls in multivariate analysis.<sup>10</sup>

One part of a general strategy to raise levels of political knowledge among young Canadians, then, should be to shift the viewing patterns of young people so that they pay greater attention to politics on television. The best place to start is probably in school. In the spirit of building habits of civic literacy,

watching broadcasts of politically oriented programming might be woven into the civics curriculum. Just as students are sometimes required to read the newspaper each day for their civics class, so they might be told (and probably to greater effect) to watch a national newscast each night. Or the

events of the day might be shown in class and serve as the basis for debate and discussion. To those wedded to the printed word, this may seem like a strategy of capitulation, but it may prove to be the most effective way of sustaining a basic level of political knowledge among generations raised primarily on electronic media.

Another strategy is to encourage use of the Internet as a source of political information. Though not a great deal is currently known about its impact on levels of political knowledge,<sup>11</sup> consulting reliable news Web sites on a consistent basis could become as effective as reading newspapers regularly. Again, instilling the appropriate habits early, as part of an enhanced civics curriculum, would likely prove an effective way of piggy-backing on a trend – extensive Internet use – that is already well entrenched among younger generations.

These suggestions for ways to raise voter turnout address one dimension of the issue – the lower levels of knowledge exhibited by younger Canadians. But the second component, the heightened impact of knowledge on voting among younger generations, is equally critical. This part of the problem may be a tougher nut to crack.

It seems perfectly reasonable that political knowledge would have some influence on electoral participation. If people are drawn to cast a vote to exercise influence over public policy and those who formulate it, it only stands to reason that people unfamiliar with the issues and political players will be less inclined to vote. Indeed, what is probably most striking about the pattern of voting and not voting across cohorts is not that knowledge makes such a big difference to

**Table 3**  
**Attention to Politics on Television and Political Knowledge**

Age	Attention to politics on television	Political knowledge (0 to 100 scale)
18–29	Low	21
	Moderate	35
	High	54
30–39	Low	38
	Moderate	45
	High	64
40–49	Low	43
	Moderate	51
	High	61
50 plus	Low	51
	Moderate	58
	High	65

Attention to politics measured by attention to federal election campaign on television over last few days (a 0 to 10 scale, with 0 to 3 coded as “low”, 4 to 6 coded as “moderate”, and 7 to 10 coded as “high”).  
Source: 2000 Canadian Election Study



Lack of knowledge about the issues and the contestants in politics is much less likely to discourage older Canadians from voting than young persons.

duty among younger age groups.<sup>13</sup> This is entirely consistent with broader trends highlighted in various studies. Younger generations are less inclined to take cues and directions from those around them; they are more self-directing, more autonomous in their decision making, less likely to defer to outside authority.<sup>14</sup> When it comes to

voting or not voting, younger people are more likely to be guided by their own lights than directed by social pressures.

It is in this context that political knowledge comes to the fore. Self-directed citizens are only likely to vote if they feel it will represent a personally

*The fact that knowledge strongly influences electoral participation in younger cohorts means that efforts to raise levels of political knowledge could have a very sizable impact on turnout levels.*

meaningful act. For those who know little about politics, this is unlikely to be the case – ticking one box or another with little information to guide them would be an empty, even counter-productive, gesture. Learning something at election time is always an option, but not a very feasible one for someone starting from scratch; the learning curve would be very steep indeed. It is in this way that knowledge, in the absence of a strong sense of civic duty, comes to assume such influence over the voting decision.

participation among younger cohorts; it is that knowledge makes such a *small difference* among older generations. The gap in turnout between more and less knowledgeable individuals in the older age categories has often been around 10 percentage points in recent elections (see Table 2), which means that roughly 80 to 85 percent of politically ill-informed, older citizens choose to vote despite this evident debility.

### Civic duty

We can only surmise that something else – something other than the desire to register one's views on the issues of the day and the leaders who will manage them – sustains electoral participation among older generations. That something else, others have suggested, is a strong sense of civic duty.<sup>12</sup> It is the responsibility of every citizen, immersed in the issues or not, to cast a ballot on election day. For voters who think this way, going to the polls is more a reflexive instinct than a conscious decision.

Those who highlight the importance of civic duty to voting have at the same time identified a diminished sense of

### Conclusion

The analysis in this article is admittedly speculative, but it seems a plausible account of the rising importance of knowledge to political participation. It also carries an important implication: the decline in electoral participation among younger Canadians is partly rooted in a pervasive culture shift that has altered the basis for social and political action. Self-directed behaviour is the norm nowadays, and this will not easily be undone. A change in the motivational underpinnings of voting and not voting is probably something that simply has to be accepted.

But if this part of the equation cannot be altered, it can at least be turned to our advantage. The fact that knowledge strongly influences electoral participation in younger cohorts means that efforts to raise levels of political knowledge could have a very sizable impact on turnout levels. Sorting through the various factors that have contributed to declining participation among young voters can help pinpoint where policy leverage exists; it

can also help identify forces that might be harnessed to put that leverage to maximum effect.

### Acknowledgements

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conducted for the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing. Principal investigators for the studies are as follows: 1984 Canadian Election Study, R. D. Lambert, S. D. Brown, J. E. Curtis, B. J. Kay and J. M. Wilson; the Survey of Attitudes About Electoral Reform

(1990), André Blais and Elisabeth Gidengil; the 1993 Canadian Election Study, Richard Johnston, André Blais, Henry Brady, Elisabeth Gidengil and Neil Nevitte; the 1997 Canadian Election Study, André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte; and the 2000 Canadian

Election Study, André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte. The original investigators, the study sponsors and the ISR bear no responsibility for the analyses and interpretations presented here. ✕

### NOTES

- Jon H. Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc, "Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters" [on-line research report], Elections Canada (March 2003), p. 20, available at [www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca) under Electoral Law & Policy. The 64 percent figure for overall turnout is the corrected figure produced by Elections Canada after the 2000 election, once the National Register of Electors had been purged of duplicates (the original figure was just over 61 percent).
- The logic here is that the life-cycle effect could only diminish overall turnout if young people somehow came to account for a larger portion of the electorate. But, of course, the age distribution of the electorate is more or less constant over time.
- André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Neil Nevitte and Richard Nadeau, "The Evolving Nature of Non-Voting: Evidence from Canada," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, August 30 – September 2, 2001.
- The cohorts from Table 1 are collapsed into larger bands of birth years in Table 2 to increase sample sizes and produce more reliable estimates.
- This analysis has been conducted using election study data from 1984, 1988, 1993, 1997 and 2000. These results, along with the cohort analysis of political interest, will be detailed in a forthcoming paper by the author.
- On this point, see Henry Milner, *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2002), pp. 118–121.
- Results from an international survey of geopolitical knowledge among 18- to 24-year-olds place Canada third from the bottom of a group of nine countries, ahead only of Mexico and the United States. See "Geography Quiz Stumps College-Age Canadians," *The Globe and Mail*, November 21, 2002, p. A14.
- Details are provided in Ontario, Ministry of Education, "The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 and 10: Canadian and World Studies", pp. 46–53, available at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curricul/secondary/canadian/canasc.pdf>
- Milner, *Civic Literacy*, especially chapters 7, 8 and 9.
- These results are presented in greater detail in Paul Howe, "Name That Premier: The Political Knowledge of Canadians Past and Present," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Toronto, May 29–31, 2002, pp. 17–19.
- Internet use is included in the multivariate analysis included in Paul Howe, "Name That Premier," in Table 4, p. 31. It has a positive impact, though its effect on political knowledge is smaller than that of either newspaper reading or TV viewing. The Internet measure in the survey used for that analysis, however, is relatively imprecise, simply asking people if they ever use the Internet to become informed about politics. More precise measurement – *which* Web sites are consulted and *how often* – might produce stronger results.
- André Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), pp. 92–114.

13. Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote*, p. 97.

14. See Neil Nevitte, *The Decline of Deference: Canadian Value Change in Cross-National Perspective* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996) and Russell Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (London: Chatham House Publishers, 2002), especially chapters 1 to 6.



# Increasing Youth Voter Registration

## Best Practices in Targeting Young Electors

Keith Archer

Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Calgary



One of the most consistent findings of two generations of research on political behaviour in a broad range of settings is that some citizens are more likely than others to be engaged and involved in politics. If variations in political activity were entirely random, this particular variation could be discounted as perhaps an interesting but insignificant feature of democratic political life. In fact, variation in political activity is anything but random. Some groups of voters are less likely to be involved in politics, and less likely to be involved across a broad spectrum of political systems and settings, than other groups. Among the groups with the lowest levels of participation are those with the lowest economic means, the young, members of the Aboriginal community, and newly eligible electors.

That levels of participation vary systematically, and are much lower among certain groups, raises important questions in a democracy. The assumption in democratic political systems is that political participation serves important functions both for the political system and for the individual. For the system, the participation of citizens results in selection among competing candidates and competing political ideas. In short, it affects the types of policies and issues that are pursued and advanced by government. The groups who participate less will have less impact on the policies pursued or the ideas advanced by government. Consequently, the outputs of government will be less likely

to reflect the collective preferences and priorities of such groups of voters.

For the individual, political participation is an expression of belonging to a political community, of having one's say in how one ought to be governed. Political activity can lead to a greater sense of support for the political community and for the elites in positions of power. It gives citizens an increased sense of the legitimacy of the electoral process and of their own roles as members of the political community.

Further to the consistent finding that some electors are less likely to participate in politics is the finding that those same segments of the electorate are less likely to be registered to vote. This has led many election authorities to seek ways of encouraging registration among groups of citizens with historically lower levels of participation. Election authorities typically seek to increase the registration of such electors through targeted registration campaigns, which can vary considerably in the creative means by which authorities attempt to reach these hard-to-reach groups. Even the most aggressive targeted campaigns, however, have limited success in enrolling all members of the electorate.

A related consideration is the desire of the hard-to-reach electorate to register to vote. If members of a group are not

inclined to register, even the most ambitious registration effort will produce lower levels of registration among that group than for the electorate as a whole. Consequently, it is common for targeted registration drives to include elements of political education to reduce such disinclination, and to provide positive reasons for the electorate to choose to register. Such campaigns often use symbols and images that are viewed positively by the targeted group, make appeals to the importance of the democratic process, or highlight the power that comes from expressing a political preference (for example, with slogans such as "Make Your Voice Count", or "Make Your Voice Heard", which have been used by a number of election authorities).

### Best practices in targeted youth registration

Efforts to increase the registration of young electors are among the most common targeted enrolment strategies used by election authorities. The young often are considered one of the most important segments of the electorate upon which to focus. There are several reasons for this.

- Youth typically have one of the lowest rates of voter registration.
- Youth are often among the most highly mobile segments of the population, moving frequently to enrol in post-secondary education or simply as part of a lifestyle of securing accommodation that changes due to a desire to travel, change jobs, etc.
- They often have not developed a sense of themselves as full members of a political community or a strong stake in their community of residence (as opposed, for example, to homeowners or parents of children in the school system).

- They often have not developed consistent patterns of political participation.
- They represent to a very considerable extent the future citizens of a democracy, and thus their active engagement is tied to the very success of the political system.

For these and other reasons, increasing the political participation and voter registration of young electors is desirable. It is in this context that the Canadian Chief Electoral Officer recently announced initiatives to increase voter registration among Canadian youth.<sup>1</sup> A variety of instruments are available for a targeted youth registration initiative, some of which have been adopted in Canada and some of which are worthy of consideration by Canada's election authority. The following section describes a number of such targeting strategies.

### Provisional registration

An obvious method of increasing the registration of electors who are coming of voting age is to extend the effective period in which they can enrol, in particular by adding a year in which they can be placed on a provisional list of electors. This method is used in both Australia and New Zealand, as well as in some U.S. states, and enables young people to complete voter registration forms at age 17. The election authority automatically moves those on the provisional list to the list of electors upon their achieving the age of majority (or legal voting age).

A number of advantages to the provisional register are worth considering. First, it provides the election authority with a considerably longer period of time in which to contact, and be contacted by, those who are coming of voting age. It has been estimated that approximately two percent of the electorate attains voting age every year. It is reasonable to assume that, for any given electoral event, a very large proportion of those who are becoming eligible to vote within three months (for example) of the election would not be included in the register of electors. Therefore, approximately 0.5 percent of the electorate (i.e. those turning 18 in those three months) would need to register during the revision period or on polling day. Providing a provisional register of electors would give these same new electors a full year to be entered in the register, likely decreasing



Photo: Roger Bérubé  
Canada's Chief Electoral Officer, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, announced measures to address declining voter turnout among youth, at a symposium on electoral participation in Canada held at Carleton University in Ottawa on March 21, 2003.

registration activity during the revision period. Also, spreading out the work over a longer period would reduce the spike in the activity of the election authority during the revision period, thereby easing personnel management. Data provided by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) indicate that approximately 16 percent of 17-year-olds are included on the

provisional list and, in the state of Victoria, fully 27 percent of 17-year-olds are on the provisional list.<sup>2</sup> It is significant that the Victoria Electoral Commission sends birthday cards and enrolment forms to individuals on their 17th birthdays, an issue to which we return below.<sup>3</sup>

### School-based registration drives

It has become increasingly popular for targeted youth enrolment activities to include a campaign for university and college campuses. One novel method used in Australia, and related to the existence of a provisional list of electors for 17-year-olds, is to enter into agreements with high schools for registration activities. The election authority pays a small per capita amount of funding to the school, based on the number of students at the school who are on the list of electors. The advantage of this arrangement, coupled with the existence of a provisional list of electors, is that the registration effort can take place in high schools, in addition to universities and colleges. The high school setting is more

*A number of election authorities have developed political education material specifically targeted to increase registration among the youth electorate.*

advantageous, because high school enrolments are much higher than post-secondary enrolments and, therefore, the targeted campaign has a more comprehensive reach. In addition, within high schools, it is possible to introduce a political education campaign into a civics curriculum that is offered to all students, which simply is not

possible in post-secondary settings. Without the existence of a provisional list of electors for 17-year-olds, a registration drive in high schools is likely to be much less effective, since a large proportion of students would not be of voting age.

A number of election authorities have developed political education material specifically targeted to increase registration among the youth electorate.

In its review of practices of the AEC, the Australian National Audit Office recommended the AEC collaborate with educational authorities to develop curricular materials aimed at increasing the proportion of young electors enrolled.<sup>4</sup> Elections Canada recently concluded a partnership arrangement with the Cable in the Classroom initiative to encourage youth to prepare public service announcements to promote participation by their peers.

Even without the move to develop a provisional list of electors, and to direct enrolment activities in the high schools, many election authorities have initiated registration activities on university and college campuses. Since most universi-

ties include political clubs and also feature a “clubs week” each year (normally during the early fall), one strategy would be to engage these clubs in efforts to publicize voter registration efforts. While this has the advantage of operating within a previously scheduled event, the drawback is that the registration effort of any particular club could be inspired as much by the desire for partisan advantage as by a sense of civic-mindedness in providing equal opportunities for all eligible young electors to register. An alternative,

and probably preferable strategy, is to hold such events separate from the political clubs, either on an annual basis, or in the revision period preceding an electoral event. While this strategy has obvious staffing implications for the election authority, some election authorities have found it sufficiently effective to justify the additional expenditure.

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### Birthday cards

There are a variety of ways in which an election authority may become aware that an elector has achieved voting age – for example, through data files shared with a motor transport authority, a tax authority or some other civic authority. In some instances, this information is used to generate a mail-out to electors coming of voting age, which may also include political education material, and possibly a voter registration application. This approach personalizes communication with the elector, provides him or her with information important to a citizen, and also facilitates the completion of the registration process. As a first contact with the newly eligible elector, it also is a very cost-effective strategy, and could be used either with a provisional list of electors (card sent upon reaching 17 years of age), or a regular list (card sent at 18 years). In his March 2003 announcement, the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada indicated that he will send a greeting card or certificate to electors following their 18th birthdays, congratulating them on attaining the right to vote and encouraging them to register.

The Victoria Electoral Commission sends a birthday card to electors on their 17th birthdays, congratulating them on being eligible for the provisional electoral roll, from which they

will automatically be placed on the electoral roll upon reaching 18. On June 30, 2002, 16 percent of 17-year-olds in Australia were on the provisional roll, compared to 27 percent of 17-year-olds in Victoria. Similarly, 56 percent of Australian 18-year-olds were enrolled, compared to 68 percent of those in Victoria. Therefore, this initiative appears to account for an increased enrolment of approximately 10 percent of those eligible.<sup>5</sup>

### On-line voter registration

The availability of personal computers with very substantial storage capacity, coupled with increasingly reliable network connections with high bandwidth data transmission, and high accessibility to computers in homes, at schools and in many public places (such as Internet cafés, government offices and the like), means that opportunities for an electronically-based voter registration system, or key elements of such a system, are now available in a way that was not the case even a decade ago. Canada is among the most “wired” countries in the world in terms of computer usage, which makes it among the most desirable places to introduce on-line access to voter registration. In view of the fact that young citizens tend to use the Internet more, on-line voter registration systems are likely to be particularly effective in increasing registration among youth.

Various countries provide a range of options for on-line voter registration. At one end of the continuum, Elections New Zealand provides the most direct and interactive on-line voter registration system, at [www.elections.org.nz](http://www.elections.org.nz). The elector may receive information about the registration process, check and change his or her registration

information, register for the first time, or re-register after leaving the register for a period.

In Australia, while registration forms for all states are available on the AEC Web site,<sup>6</sup> the elector must first print and complete the form and then send it to the state or district enrolment office through the postal service or by fax, or deliver the form in person. In addition to the extra step of printing and posting the form, Australian

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enrolment forms require that an elector who is eligible to be enrolled witness the completed form. This latter requirement makes on-line registration much more difficult, particularly since the witness guarantee is provided through the witness’ signature. In addition, unlike the New Zealand case, the AEC does not provide electors with the option of checking their registrations on-line. While the electoral roll is considered a public document, it is not available on-line, but rather through the AEC’s State Head Office or Divisional Offices. Furthermore, requests to determine whether an elector is enrolled must be made by the elector him- or herself, and must be made in writing, including a signature on the request form. Thus, the high value placed on the security of the electoral roll and the use of strict procedures to guard against potential electoral fraud have, in Australia, limited the full use of on-line registration.

The recently created Electoral Commission of the United Kingdom, as one of its first initiatives, has also put in place on-line voter registration forms for British electors.<sup>7</sup> As in the Australian case, the forms must be printed and completed, with signature but without a witness, and sent to the district enrolment office. There is no provision for the elector to check his or her registration information on-line, and there is a relatively lengthy period (seven weeks) for the processing of

registration information. One of the main reasons for the absence of completely interactive on-line registration is the highly decentralized character of the electoral register.

Should the proposal by the Electoral Commission for a national electronic register be realized, the on-line registration system that is limited to making forms available, rather than providing full interactive registration, likely will also be revisited. The recent announcement of the targeted youth registration initiative by Elections Canada suggests a phase-in process. The first phase, similar to the Australian and British cases, will be to provide downloadable forms from the Elections Canada Web site. In addition, Elections Canada has indicated a commitment to seek the means to implement full on-line registration. It can be expected that the latter initiative will have the greatest effect in increasing youth registration.

### Special events

A particularly novel approach to contacting young electors is to host events that appeal to that age group, and to



weave registration activities into an event that youth are attending for other purposes. This strategy is used in New Zealand. The election authority sponsors music concerts and festivals, at which the host and entertainers encourage attendees to complete voter registration forms that are provided by the election authority at booths or tables. Although information on the cost-per-enrolment for this initiative is not available, a personal communication with an official in New Zealand described it as “highly effective”. A variation on this approach would be for the election authority to provide partial sponsorship for the hosting of youth-oriented entertainment events, in exchange for having the contribution acknowledged and the opportunity for the organizers, host and entertainers to highlight registration activity.

## Conclusion

Young people in a wide range of countries have long displayed lower levels of participation in conventional, system-supporting political activities such as voting. There are a number



On April 6, 2003, several thousand young people attended a Rush the Vote block party in Ottawa, which featured many solo artists, bands and speakers who encouraged them to get involved in political and social causes.

of explanations for this pattern – greater residential mobility, less established patterns of voting and weaker attachments to the community, among others. It is likely this pattern will persist. That is not to suggest, however, that one should be complacent. Adjusting administrative arrangements to lead to fewer discrepancies in voter registration, and in political participation, is advantageous to the individual elector and to the political system. While

eliminating variation in levels of participation across groups in society may not be an achievable outcome, implementing best practices to mitigate those variations is a sensible strategy for the election authority. ❌

## NOTES

1. See “Chief Electoral Officer of Canada Announces Measures to Address Decline in Voter Turnout Among Youth” [on-line media release], Elections Canada (March 21, 2003) at [www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca).
2. Unpublished data provided by Australian Electoral Commission, “Youth Enrolment Statistics: Enrolment by Age as a Percentage of Population, 30 June 2002”.
3. Unpublished data provided by Australian Electoral Commission, “Youth Enrolment” (no date).
4. “Australian Electoral Commission: Integrity of the Electoral Roll,” [on-line report], Australian National Audit Office, Canberra (2002) at [www.anao.gov.au](http://www.anao.gov.au).
5. Unpublished data provided by Australian Electoral Commission, “Youth Enrolment Statistics, 2002.”
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7. See [www.electoralcommission.gov.uk/your-vote/rollingreg.cfm](http://www.electoralcommission.gov.uk/your-vote/rollingreg.cfm).

## Youth Participation in Elections



# Marketing Voter Participation to the MuchMusic Generation

Phillip Haid

Account Director, Manifest Communications

On a recent flight to Winnipeg, I was sitting next to a 22-year-old from a small town in Ontario, where he works for an agricultural equipment manufacturer. It was his first time on a commercial airplane and he was a bit nervous about flying. We struck up a conversation and once we got past pleasantries about the weather, flying, and mosquitoes in Winnipeg, we settled on more engaging topics, such as the war in Iraq, SARS and Canadian politics.

I asked my seatmate what he thought of Canadian politicians and whether he voted in the past federal or provincial elections. He informed me that he had not (adding that none of his friends ever thought about voting), and offered the following advice: “We need to go back to the times of ancient Greece, because the Greeks understood what it meant to be democratic. They understood the need to talk to citizens and make politics relevant to the average guy.”

His insight highlighted a key to the lack of voter participation among young people: *relevance*. Young Canadians do not find the act of voting very enticing. And while it is true that a large majority of youth is not very politically and civilly literate, this should not be used as an excuse to avoid the challenge of making politics more engaging to young people. Quite the opposite is true. It is up to governments, non-profit organizations and corporations to help reinvigorate young people’s interest in the political system so that voting becomes an expression of their democratic beliefs and actions. Voting, as a recognized form of participatory democracy, must be re-learned. It must become a habit for all young Canadians.

The goal of this article is to provide some ideas on how to re-establish political relevance and lead young Canadians back to the ballot box. The article will explore three main questions: *Why aren’t young people voting? What can be done to reverse the trend? How should it be accomplished?*

## Tuned out and turned off: Why young Canadians are not voting

The vast majority of young Canadians (those between the ages of 18 and 24) do not vote. In the last federal election, only 25.4 percent of eligible young voters showed up, the lowest turnout in Canadian history.<sup>1</sup> The most commonly expressed explanation from journalists, pundits and young people themselves is cynicism – distrust of politicians and a belief that voting will not make a difference. While it is true that cynicism plays a role in declining youth voter turnout, it is not the driving force. In fact, research shows that youth are no more cynical about government or politics than older people.<sup>2</sup>



### *Lack of political and civic knowledge*

One of the key drivers of low youth voter turnout is lack of political and civic knowledge. Several studies have pointed to young people's low levels of awareness about government, politics, history and current events.<sup>3</sup> A survey in 2000 conducted by the Institute for Research on Public Policy found that over 50 percent of young adults do not follow politics closely.<sup>4</sup>

What has led to this lack of civic knowledge among young people? Schools have not focused enough attention

*Political parties and elected officials have not made major efforts to engage young people in meaningful and ongoing dialogue.*

and importance on civics education in the curriculum. Government departments and agencies have not had the necessary financial support to mount wide-ranging multimedia campaigns between elections to promote the importance of voter/civic engagement. Political parties and elected officials have not made major efforts to engage young people in meaningful and ongoing dialogue. Parents are not discussing politics and civic engagement as much as is perhaps necessary. And, finally, youth are not seeking to know more about the political system. The result is that young adults are to a great extent "tuned out" of politics and government, making the relevance of voting a difficult proposition to sell.

### *Lack of trust and confidence*

Other reasons for low voter turnout reflect the "turned off" arguments often cited in the media. It is claimed that young people are not interested in politics and government because they distrust politicians and the political

system, and do not believe that their votes will make a difference. For example, in national focus groups conducted for Communication Canada in 2001, the common lament from young Canadians was the lack of political leadership to inspire and help youth to believe there is something and someone worth voting for. Recent government scandals surrounding improper contracting and misuse of money have only helped fuel this perception. The lack of interest is also generated by a perception that government does not understand young people's needs and interests.

This was confirmed by Communication Canada's *Listening to Canadians: Focus on Young Adults* report (2002), which indicated that 70 percent

of young adults do not believe that the federal government understands what is desirable to them.

### *Globalization*

Globalization has also widened the gap between young people and political institutions, negatively affecting voter turnout. In a multimedia universe where information is so prevalent, many young adults are becoming "over-informed and under-engaged". The multiplicity of issues, concerns and causes creates a form of paralysis, causing young people to feel there is too much to deal with and not enough time to do anything of real value.<sup>5</sup>

Globalization has also created a world where commercial brands and marketed lifestyles tend to dominate the minds of young adults. Corporations spend more money to shape attitudes and behaviours than governments; as a result, young people have grown up in a marketing-driven, consumer culture,

where the relevance of government is marginalized. Molson, Labatt, Roots, Tim Horton's and Canadian Tire are all helping to define what it means to be Canadian. If this situation continues to hold, why should young adults bother to vote, when consumer decisions define the values landscape? While this may be overstated, governments need to become more effective at marketing and communications aimed at young people. Recent findings show that 62 percent of young adults do not believe that the federal government does a good job communicating to them.<sup>6</sup>

### *Transitional stage of life*

Young adults are also naturally less inclined to vote during the transitional stage of life between the ages of 18 and 24. They are busy finding a job, enrolling in university or college, moving out of their parents' houses, travelling, getting married, buying their first homes and having children. They are in a highly mobile, turbulent phase, dealing with the tension of expressing their individuality, while also wanting to fit in and conform. Politics and voting fall low on the priority list of "to-dos".

### *Generational effect*

"Tuned out" and "turned off" young Canadians may not simply be going through a life cycle phase that will improve as they get older, pay taxes and become more rooted in the community. Troubling evidence, highlighted by leading academics (Jon Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc, Brenda O'Neill, André Blais and others), seems to show a "generational" effect. Young adults today are not showing signs of becoming more likely to vote as they age and are, in fact, voting less than their grandparents did when they were the

same age. If this holds true, the lack of interest in voting today will affect Canadian democracy for generations to come.

### *Reversing the trend*

The solution to reversing the "generational effect" lies with engaging my Air Canada seatmate and others like him. Selling voter participation to young people requires a different frame of reference. It is about hearts, not minds. It is about a new way of approaching the problem. Small, incremental steps will not suffice. Large-scale behaviour change is needed. Rational arguments that highlight the importance of exercising one's democratic rights will not carry the same weight as values-based arguments and initiatives that speak directly to young

*Voter participation requires the creation of a new social norm, so that young people see value in voting and wear their participation in the political process as a badge of their identity.*

people's sense of self and identity. Participatory democracy must become a way of life. Voting must be seen as part of that lifestyle.

Behaviour change occurs not because people suddenly understand more about an issue, but because they want to see themselves differently in relation to it. When Canadians began recycling in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was not because they suddenly understood more about the effects of waste. People began to recycle because a social dynamic was created, in which the Blue Box became the visual badge of being a

right-minded citizen. People felt good about contributing positively to the environment and nobody wanted to be the only one in the neighbourhood who was not recycling.

Voter participation requires the creation of a new social norm, so that young people see value in voting and wear their participation in the political process as a badge of their identity.

Creating this new civic norm is a challenge, given that young Canadians are not a homogenous group and efforts aimed at increasing voter participation tend to occur only at election time. Election-driven efforts are likely to motivate only those who are already interested, and may breed cynicism among those who are not. The election

period is too short a time to persuade young Canadians that voting is a worthwhile thing to do. This is why the time between elections counts most. That is when political parties,

government departments and agencies, non-profits and corporations should be harnessing their resources and talents together to create a new norm for civic participation.

Because of the disconnection between how young people perceive voting and other civic activities, the creation of this norm must be linked to the underlying value of voting. Voting is not seen as part of the same spectrum of activities as volunteering, protesting, giving money to charities or signing petitions. Young people do not value the act of voting as an opportunity or a tool to express and assert their voices.

For whom one votes, or whether one's preferred candidate is elected, is secondary to the act of expression, much in the same way that the act of protest is as or more important than the outcome.

Voting also lacks a personal connection because most young Canadians are not aware of and have never met the people who represent them at the municipal, provincial and federal levels. Elected officials are a mystery to young people. There is little understanding of what they do, why they do it and how government works. Part of the reason for this is that, by and large, elected officials do not reach out to young people and if they do, it is usually at election time – a very transparent gesture from the standpoint of the young electorate.

If, as a society, we are interested in encouraging greater voter turnout among young Canadians, efforts have to be made by all sectors and in a way that is relevant to youth. Young people must be encouraged, exposed to and persuaded toward a different approach – one in which they are aware of all the tools of civic engagement at their disposal, and believe that utilizing these tools can make a difference.

### *Ideas for engaging young voters: A social marketing perspective*

Increasing youth voter turnout requires a conscious and deliberate approach to creating social change. From a social marketing perspective, a voter outreach program would involve the following four elements: *knowledge generation and understanding, social climate-setting activities, education and outreach, and policy initiatives.*

### Knowledge generation and understanding

Reaching young Canadians requires a deep understanding of their attitudes and behaviours. Since they are not a homogenous group, segmentation is key. What motivates a young Aboriginal person in rural Saskatchewan is different from what motivates a middle-class youth from Toronto. Understanding the difference is necessary if voter outreach efforts are to be successful in different parts of the country.

Risk taking is also necessary to better understand what might work with young people. While there have been many studies on participation rates and the reasons for low voter turnout, very little has been done to test innovative techniques to improve voter participation. Easing access to participation through on-line registration and electronic voting may improve participation rates. Placing polling booths in areas and at events where young people are likely to be – universities, shopping malls, YMCAs, community centres and concerts – may help improve voter participation. And efforts by political parties to communicate with young voters through text messaging, e-mail campaigns and face-to-face meetings

should also be attempted. None of these initiatives may ultimately be successful, but there is no way of knowing unless governments and political parties are willing to take some risks.

### Social climate-setting

Rock the Vote in the United States is a good example of creating the right social climate around youth voter participation. Through the use of music and pop culture, the campaign has been able to generate a climate where voting is perceived as something that “cool” people do. *Participation* is another example of a social climate-setting campaign that did an excellent job of raising Canadians’ awareness of the need to be more active.

We need nothing short of a *Participation* campaign for youth voter turnout. Creating the right climate, in which Canadian youth value the act of voting, requires the creation of a new societal norm. How this is accomplished is critical. Motherhood statements about the importance of voting are not acceptable. Rather, breakthrough advertising and programming are necessary to create an energy and momentum with which various segments of the youth population can identify. The

message needs to be sent throughout the year and during non-election years. It also should come from an entity at arm’s length from government. Young people have to believe in the authors of the message, and currently non-profit organizations have more acceptability than



The Web site of the Rock the Vote organization (in the United States) is located at [www.rockthevote.org/index2.html](http://www.rockthevote.org/index2.html).

government or corporations for this type of social message. No national non-profit organization exists solely to promote voter participation among Canadian youth, and one should be created.

There are limits to social climate-setting, however. It cannot, on its own, sustain attitudinal and behavioural shifts without local, community-based programs to bring the ideas and values to life. *Participation* ultimately failed because it did not have the proper programs on the ground.

### Education and outreach

The greatest untapped resource for engaging young people in the political process is young people. Thousands of youth organizations exist throughout the country to influence change at the local, provincial and national levels. Each of these organizations has a constituency of young Canadians that it reaches and with whom it interacts on a frequent basis. Yet very few efforts have been made by government departments and agencies to engage these groups and use them as vehicles to disseminate information and resources that promote voter engagement. Youth round tables should be created to explore better ways to improve voter

turnout. Voter education materials tailored to youth organizations should be developed for their use when hosting conferences and running programs.

Elected officials and their political parties need to become more proactive in their outreach toward young people as well. They need to recognize that engaging youth on issues of mutual concern (violence, substance abuse, skill development, etc.) can be very useful in the development of programs and policies that affect their lives. Canadian corporations also have an important role to play, given their strong “brand relationships” with young people. Labatt, VIA Rail, Roots and Bell are only some of the Canadian corporations whose young adult focus and community initiatives should be leveraged to promote voter participation and generate greater momentum.

Classrooms are the other obvious place to engage young people in voter participation. To do so, however, requires new civic materials that promote interactive, engaging, experiential learning. Guest speakers, field trips, simulation games, films, debates and hands-on projects that expose young people to issues and politics in a

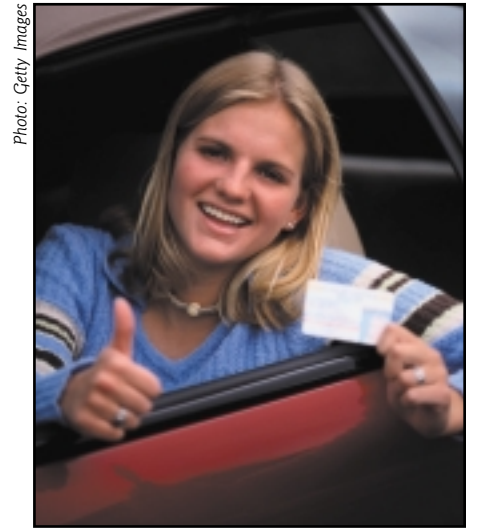
wide-ranging form will help to generate awareness of the world and community, and help to connect civic engagement with voting in municipal, provincial and federal elections.

### Policy initiatives

Increasing youth voter participation also requires changes in policy to bring about the desired social change. There has been discussion over the past 20 years of reducing the voting age to 16 as an incentive to encourage more young Canadians to engage in the political process. Many have argued that if young people are responsible enough to drive a car at 16, they should be allowed to vote. Exploring this issue, as well as others related to voter registration and on-line voting, are worthwhile endeavours that will generate dialogue and debate among young people.

### Conclusion

To increase youth voter turnout, all four elements of the social change dynamic outlined above need to happen in an integrated and integrating manner. However, it is essential to create the proper social climate to ensure that other activities are properly supported



If young people are old enough to obtain a driver's licence, are they also old enough to vote?

and momentum is created. To ensure that the proper range and level of activity are taking place, leadership must be seized by an organization that is willing to develop a coordinated plan to incorporate the ideas and resources of players from the public, private and non-profit sectors. Achieving greater civic and political engagement among young people requires a social marketing orientation, if we truly want to reverse the generational effect and forge a more participatory democracy in which voting is a habit among the grandchildren of the MuchMusic generation. ✕

Photo: Nicholas Sales



Placing polling booths in areas and at events where young people are likely to be – universities, shopping malls, YMCAs, community centres and concerts – may help improve voter participation.

### NOTES

1. Jean-Pierre Kingsley, keynote address to *Symposium on Electoral Participation in Canada*, Carleton University, Ottawa, March 21, 2003. The full text is available at [www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca) under Media: Special Events.
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# How Old Is Old Enough to Vote?

## Youth Participation in Society

Raymond Hudon

Professor, Department of Political Science, Université Laval

Bernard Fournier

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Memorial University of Newfoundland

According to a reductionist definition, a democratic society is a society that has its citizens participate in major collective decisions by granting the right to vote. Based on this perspective, young electors, who are supposed to be less likely to show up at the polling station, have regularly been the subject of a whole range of questions. We are interested here in a specific aspect of the general problem: allowing 16-year-olds to vote.

For over a decade, the subject has surfaced and resurfaced, without, however, leading to any change in the rules. In 1990, the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Lortie Commission) studied the question and commissioned specific research.<sup>1</sup> At the final stage of writing their report, the members of the Commission decided against proposing that the voting age be lowered. In the years that followed, the question was raised again, occasionally sustaining somewhat limited debate.<sup>2</sup> Just recently, Quebec's Estates General on the Reform of Democratic Institutions considered the idea of lowering the voting age, but dismissed it: 58 percent of the participants opposed it. However, during its most recent policy conference, in March 2003, the Parti Québécois included in its program a referendum on the advisability of giving the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds.

This is not, of course, a burning issue; but it is not out of the realm of possibility either. Given the circumstances, it is worth putting this subject in perspective by recalling some of the milestones that have marked the debates and the changes made to the age at which we are entitled to

exercise our civil rights by voting. After noting that the decisions are not made on the basis of absolute and purely rational criteria, we bring into the discussion those most immediately concerned, young people between 16 and 18. We do so using the results of two surveys, conducted in 1990 and 1998.<sup>3</sup> Although they cannot be used to determine definitive positions, the observations made shed some light and provide at least some food for thought.

### Age, a socio-historical construct

Age is a socio-historical construct, the variants of which are a function of the times and social contexts. The changes in the voting age illustrate this well.

In Canada, electoral rights have evolved considerably since the establishment of the first modern electoral system.<sup>4</sup> The progress seems less obvious in the case of the threshold for the age of majority: set at 21 at the time of Confederation, it has been changed only once at the federal level, in 1970.<sup>5</sup> The disappearance of the poll tax, the abolition of discrimination based on sex or racial origin and the lowering of the age of majority all reflect a desire to expand the recognition of citizen authority.

Have the changes been rational? Were they, for example, brought about by some positive change in civil or criminal law producing a review of the right to vote? To take one case, a study of the French parliamentary debates<sup>6</sup> shows both that the same arguments recur and that they can easily be

used by either side, to support or oppose lowering the voting age. In the end, the historical analysis reveals that the observed changes result primarily from *political will*, usually within Parliament, and with no real public debate.

This same ambivalence is found today in newspaper articles, on Internet sites on democracy, and in Parliament.<sup>7</sup> For some, the enthusiasm and zeal of the “young” would justify lowering the voting age to the benefit of society as a whole; others, on the contrary, associate

the zeal of youth with excessive high spirits and an inexperience that calls for the greatest caution. The young are simply “not ready” to vote! The reversibility of the arguments tends to show the strictly *political* – although not *partisan*<sup>8</sup> – nature of the decisions about lowering the voting age. Politics may not be typically irrational, but it implies choices sometimes made more or less independently of public opinion.

There are, in fact, objective reasons for lowering the voting age today. Here is what those most concerned think.

### “Am I ready to vote?”

Although the question did not take quite this form, this was, for all practical purposes, what the students of two Quebec cities surveyed in 1990 and 1998 (see Methodological Note) had to ask themselves. Their answers follow, cross-referenced to certain factors that illuminate them from a variety of angles. We will comment on them briefly, before concluding with some general thoughts on the political participation of young people.

Table 1 shows that, in both 1990 and 1998, a majority of the students surveyed were against giving the vote to 16-year-olds. Reflecting the received wisdom that young women are less interested in politics, the female students were more categorically against the idea than their male counterparts, with the gap even growing from 1990 to 1998. In fact, the idea gained a favourable majority among the boys (going from 47.0 percent to 51.9 percent), while the opposition among the girls gained a few points (from 57.3 percent to 59.3 percent). It can also be seen that opposition to the idea increases with age (Table 2),

**Table 1: Opinions on the Right to Vote at 16 Years of Age (percentages)<sup>1</sup>**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey	1998 survey
Agree	44.0	45.5
Disagree	53.6	54.5
N	832	847

<sup>1</sup> The total for the 1990 survey does not equal 100%, because 2.4% of the subjects did not answer this question. In all the other tables, however, the distributions are based on the number of answers actually recorded. Only the results of those respondents who said they agreed with the question or statement are reported there.

**Table 2: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Level of Education (percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	Secondary IV	Secondary V	Secondary IV	Secondary V
Agree	49.7	40.9	47.3	43.4
N	384	428	427	410

**Table 3: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Degree of Interest in Politics (percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	A lot/ Somewhat	Little/ Not at all	A lot/ Somewhat	Little/ Not at all
Agree	46.5	43.9	51.3	41.5
N	355	456	343	491

**Table 4: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Perceived Importance of Voting (percentages)<sup>1</sup>**

Right to vote at 16	You have to vote to make politics conform to your ideas	
	Agree completely/ Somewhat	Disagree completely/ Somewhat
Agree	45.5	41.5
N	726	82

<sup>1</sup> This question was asked only in 1990.

although the gap seems to narrow over time: while 2.4 percent fewer Secondary IV students supported the idea in 1998, 2.5 percent more Secondary V students did. Of

relatively limited political significance, it is reasonable to think that these initial results become more meaningful when the opinions are cross-referenced with other factors.

**Table 5: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Partisan Affinity (percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	Close to a party	Not close to a party	Close to a party	Not close to a party
Agree	56.3	41.1	52.5	42.5
N	213	599	238	598

**Table 6: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Conception of a Good Citizen (percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	Good citizens...		Good citizens...	
	mind their own business	demonstrate for their ideas	mind their own business	demonstrate for their ideas
Agree	38.3	47.4	35.4	47.7
N	214	597	161	673

**Table 7: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by the Relation Between Rights and Duties of a Good Citizen (percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	Good citizens...		Good citizens...	
	assert their rights	fulfill their duties	assert their rights	fulfill their duties
Agree	46.8	41.8	47.4	39.0
N	547	263	620	210

**Table 8: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Attitude to the Law (percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	A good citizen...		A good citizen...	
	respects the law	need not respect an unjust law	respects the law	need not respect an unjust law
Agree	43.0	53.4	38.9	52.0
N	646	163	422	415

It is logical to think that a greater interest in politics or a sense that one is more affected by government decisions would make one more receptive to the proposal to give 16-year-olds the vote. And indeed, although a majority still opposed the suggestion, those who were very or somewhat interested in politics were less opposed than those who were slightly or not at all interested (Table 3). Between 1990 and 1998, however, the difference increased; those most interested agreed with the idea by a slight majority, while those least interested were yet a bit more opposed. The partisans and opponents of the vote for 16-year-olds could also be classified depending on whether they felt affected (very often or often) or not (not very often or never) by government decisions.

Another aspect of the resistance to the vote for 16-year-olds is that there is a majority opposed, even among those who feel that voting is important to “make politics conform to your ideas” (Table 4). In reality, the most decisive factor in determining support for or opposition to lowering the voting age is the degree of attachment to a political party, although this effect became less pronounced between 1990 and 1998 (Table 5). The latter observation is no doubt related to other data reported in Table 11: confidence in various “institutions,” particularly the Church and political parties, diminished somewhat between 1990 and 1998; in contrast, it is interesting to note that confidence in elected officials increased by 2.7 percent.

Openness to the idea of 16-year-olds voting also varies with one’s idea of what makes a “good citizen.” Depending on whether you think ideal citizens are people who “mind their own business without making a fuss,” or people who “are prepared to get involved and

demonstrate to defend their ideas,” you have a different attitude to lowering the voting age (Table 6). The same trends are evident when the opinions are linked to the contrast between citizens as people who feel it is more important to assert their rights, or people who feel it is more important to fulfill their duties (Table 7). Finally, the partisans of order, who want a good citizen to “respect the law under any circumstances,” are proportionally more

resistant to giving 16-year-olds the vote; this particular position is particularly conspicuous since there is majority support for the idea among those who feel that a good citizen need not obey the law when it seems unjust (Table 8).

In the same vein, it would seem only logical that a significant proportion of those in favour of the general status quo (“Our society does not need major changes”) would oppose giving the

vote to 16-year-olds (Table 9). It is more surprising that a majority, although a smaller majority, of the much larger group declaring itself in favour of change still oppose the idea.

In closing, there are two paradoxical results that we cannot leave unremarked. In 1990, participation in at least one association reduced the opposition to lowering the voting age (Table 10). What is surprising is that, in 1998, opposition was highest among those who do participate. Another surprise: proportionately more, and in some cases a majority, of those people with less confidence in a series of “institutions” (school, church, bureaucracy, politicians and media) accept the idea of 16-year-olds voting. One notable exception is the case of political parties in the 1990 survey (Table 11).

## Conclusion

To sum up, the results presented will undoubtedly feed the opposition to giving 16-year-olds the vote. Thus, it is worth noting that even a majority of those 16 to 18 do not want the vote for those under 18. It should also be noted that there is a connection between political involvement, certain conceptions of citizenship, and openness to such an idea.

**Table 9: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Attitude to Change (percentages)<sup>1</sup>**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	Our society does not need major changes		Our society does not need major changes	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree completely/ Somewhat	Disagree somewhat/ Completely
Agree	34.3	46.3	40.2	46.8
N	108	697	169	666

<sup>1</sup> The choice of responses is different in 1990 (agree and disagree) and 1998 (agree completely/ somewhat and disagree somewhat/completely).

**Table 10: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Participation in an Association (percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	Not involved in any	Involved in at least one	Not involved in any	Involved in at least one
Agree	40.5	47.8	47.7	44.4
N	304	508	258	579

**Table 11: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Amount of Confidence in... (percentages)<sup>1</sup>**

Survey	Right to vote at 16	School		Church		Bureaucracy		Media		Politicians		Parties	
		Some	Not much	Some	Not much	Some	Not much	Some	Not much	Some	Not much	Some	Not much
1990	Agree	41.6	61.6	41.8	49.7	42.4	50.6	44.9	45.2	41.7	47.2	45.9	44.6
	N	671	138	488	320	536	269	483	325	345	458	283	522
1998	Agree	41.2	60.1	37.8	50.7	41.6	48.8	44.9	45.8	44.4	46.0	41.0	53.6
	N	638	193	341	491	387	443	356	476	243	589	144	690

<sup>1</sup> The options available to the respondents were some confidence or not much confidence.

On that basis, it would seem appropriate to concentrate on giving young people better preparation for exercising their civil rights, rather than on whether to give them the right to vote at 16 or 18. This concern is all the more pressing given that, for some time now, there seems to have been a disenchantment

... it would seem appropriate to concentrate on giving young people better preparation for exercising their civil rights, rather than on whether to give them the right to vote at 16 or 18.

with politics. That being said, the issue should not be reduced simply to the observed drop in voter turnout in the past 12 to 15 years. This rather misleading reading would result in large part from a narrow conception of citizen involvement, which is no longer simply a question of voting.

Photo: Wayne Broun



Every year, Chief Electoral Officer Jean-Pierre Kingsley meets with students attending the Forum for Young Canadians, in Ottawa, to talk to them about the electoral process.

However, while citizen involvement is not restricted to elections, these remain crucial to the democratic conduct of civic affairs. Democracy is, of course, a hands-on affair, but there is obviously no harm in supporting it with philosophical principles and “theoretical” knowledge, with an eye to producing better citizens for tomorrow. ✖

### Methodological Note

In May and June 1990, 832 students were surveyed in seven schools in the cities of Québec and Lévis. The sample was composed almost equally of boys and girls (52 percent and 48 percent), almost all between 16 and 18 (96 percent). A little less than a third (31 percent) of the respondents had been educated exclusively or primarily in private schools.

In 1998, at the same point in the school year as in 1990, the same schools took part in the survey – with the exception of one private school, which was replaced by another private school. The survey was given to 847 students and, again, slightly more were boys than girls (53 percent and 47 percent), most between the ages of 16 and 18 (97 percent). Compared to the sample for 1990, the new sample had slightly fewer students from private schools (28 percent).

The composition of the sample is not random; the schools were chosen to reflect the social and cultural diversity of the region being studied. The survey was given during class time (generally a civics or history/geography class) and sometimes with the teacher present, which produced a very high response rate.

The surveys were funded by various sources, including in particular the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Lortie Commission) for the 1990 survey, and the Fonds Gérard-Dion of the Université Laval for the 1998 survey.

### NOTES

1. See Kathy Megyery, ed., *Youth in Canadian Politics: Participation and Involvement*, Research Studies of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, Vol. 8 (Supply and Services Canada, Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991).
2. For example, see Raymond Hudon, “Le droit de vote à 16 ans. Une décision purement politique,” *Le Soleil* (May 31, 1996) or “Evaluating the Pros and Cons. Are 16-Year-Olds Ready to Vote?” *Elections Today* Vol. 6, No. 3 (Fall 1996).
3. See the methodological note.
4. See J. Patrick Boyer, *Political Rights: The Legal Framework of Elections in Canada* (Toronto: Butterworths, 1981), pp. 129–137.
5. The right to vote at 18 was given in 1963 in Quebec and in 1971 in Ontario. The *Military Voters Act, 1917*, which set out the conditions for Canadian military personnel to vote during a conflict, gave all soldiers on active service the right to vote ([http://www.archives.ca/05/0518/05180204/051802040102\\_e.html](http://www.archives.ca/05/0518/05180204/051802040102_e.html)). However, in 1993, Bill C-114 withdrew this right from soldiers under the age of 18.
6. Before the adoption of the current age of majority of 18 in 1974, no less than a dozen constitutions or acts changed the age of majority between 1791 and 1875, some lowering it and some raising it.
7. Peter Adams, Liberal Member of Parliament for Peterborough, Ontario, recently presented a private member’s bill proposing that the voting age be lowered to 16 (Roy MacGregor, “At 16, teens are considered mature enough to drive, marry and work – so why not vote?” *The Globe and Mail*, March 4, 2003).
8. Although as Patrick Boyer (*Political Rights*, p. 132) notes, such intentions can manifest themselves. Thus, giving the right to vote to new categories of electors in 1917, in the middle of a war, was essentially an effort to get the Conservative government of the day re-elected. On the other hand, withdrawing the right to vote from soldiers under the age of 18 was primarily an effort to standardize the electoral rights of all citizens.



# Lowering the Voting Age

## European Debates and Experiences

Kees Aarts

University of Twente, The Netherlands

Charlotte van Hees

Dutch Centre for Political Participation, The Netherlands

Democracy grows on contradictions, and one of these is about the question of who exactly belongs to the *demos*. On the one hand, general suffrage is seen as a defining characteristic of democracy; on the other hand, suffrage never extends to all those who are ruled. Drawing the lines is also known as the problem of inclusiveness.

Who should be excluded from taking part in elections? This is one of the toughest questions of democratic theory. The Austrian economist Schumpeter argued long ago that, precisely because there is no simple answer, “must we not leave it to every *populus* to define himself?”<sup>1</sup> This radical viewpoint is, however, not generally accepted. It is more common to try and pin down more or less universal criteria for inclusion. Such criteria are at first necessarily abstract: for example, a voter should be able to “reason” about politics, and to have political preferences.

Translated into political practice, it appears that a large variety of criteria are applied to make exclusion work. One of these is a minimum voting age. The argument is that, lacking better indicators, a minimum age is a proxy for civic maturity and, therefore, a qualification for full citizenship. Of course, this is a circular argument: full citizenship, in turn, determines the minimum age. But in political practice, the circularity is taken for granted.<sup>2</sup>

### Is there consensus on the minimum voting age?

The problem of inclusiveness is solved, in practice, by criteria that usually differ among countries. According to recent

literature, there appear to be only two such criteria about which there is currently a global consensus. One of these is a minimum voting age of 18 years.<sup>3</sup>

But is there really a consensus? If so, it is of a relatively recent date. The voting age has decreased steadily since the expansion of suffrage in the older democracies in the first decades of the 20th century. The Dutch case may serve as an example. At the time of the introduction of the modern Dutch electoral system, in 1917, the minimum voting age was 25. In 1946, it was lowered to 23 years. In 1965, 21-year-olds were granted the vote, and in 1972, 18-year-olds followed. It appears that similar developments occurred in many Western democracies.

Moreover, the apparent consensus is fragile. It holds at the moment, with few exceptions,<sup>4</sup> for elections of national assemblies and presidents. But it has been the subject of renewed debate in recent years in a variety of countries, and in some places the cracks are already visible, starting with the rules for local elections.

Although the issue is not making headlines yet, calls to lower the voting age to 16 are on the public agenda in several European countries. In Germany, 6 of the 16 states<sup>5</sup> have, in the past seven years, actually lowered the active voting age for local elections to 16. In other countries, voting at 16 has, so far, merely been debated.

There is a clear political dimension to lowering the voting age. All six German states mentioned above were governed

at the time of the change by coalitions of Social Democrats (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland) and Greens (Die Grünen).<sup>6</sup> In most European countries, the issue has found some support from progressive left-wing and liberal parties. The Social Democrat leaders in France (Lionel Jospin of the Parti Socialist [PS]) and the Netherlands (Ad Melkert of the Partij van de Arbeid [PvdA]) endorsed the idea of lowering the voting age at some point in their 2002 election campaigns, although the issue did not make it into the formal party programs. In Britain and Flanders (Belgium) the issue has been put on the political agenda by the cabinet minister specifically responsible for youth affairs.

In Flanders the liberal VLD (Vlaamse Liberale Partij), the green Agalev (Anders Gaan Leven), and the progressive splinter Spirit (Sociaal-Progressief-Internationaal-Regionalistisch-Integraal-democratisch-Toekomstgericht) support the change.<sup>7</sup> The VLD, which is the second-largest

*In Britain, the Electoral Commission is now reviewing the minimum voting age and will report to Parliament at the beginning of 2004.*

party in Flanders, has linked the issue to its wish to abolish compulsory voting. There is no political majority for abolishing compulsory voting at present. Also, lowering the voting age for regional or federal elections requires a constitutional amendment, and therefore political support from the Walloon provinces. All this is still far away, but following the German example, changes at the local level might be within reach.



Westminster, home of the Parliament of the United Kingdom, in London.

In Britain, the Electoral Commission is now reviewing the minimum voting age and will report to Parliament at the beginning of 2004. The Electoral Commission is investigating the claim that lowering the voting age would help to re-engage young people in the political process, as well as the arguments for keeping it as it stands. In the meantime a large number of social and

political organizations, including several parties, have initiated a campaign called “Votes at 16”, aimed at influencing public opinion and encouraging MPs to actively support the measure.<sup>8</sup> Among the parties in favour are the Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties (Scottish National Party and Party of Wales), and the Liberal Democrats. The latter’s party leader, Charles Kennedy, publicly advocated the measure in February 2002.<sup>9</sup> Individual Labour and Conservative politicians have also expressed support. At the local level, the Commission on Local Governance recently concluded in a major report

on the future of local democracy<sup>10</sup> that the voting age should be reduced to 16.

### Why voting at 16? And why not?

The motives of supporters and opponents of lowering the voting age are very similar in the various countries. Their arguments can roughly be divided into three categories: legal, political and educational.

#### Legal arguments

Legally, young people come of age when they turn 18. Disregarding minor legal differences among the European countries, this means that 18-year-olds can be held fully responsible for their actions, can stand trial in an adult court, can marry without parental consent and can start their own businesses. This is an argument against voting at 16. The counterargument is that many other legal rights and duties are granted at 16, such as joining the military, buying alcohol, leaving school and paying taxes. Supporters of voting at 16 have highlighted these inconsistencies affecting young people’s rights

and responsibilities at different ages. In some of the German states, e.g. Lower Saxony, it was the decisive argument for lowering the voting age at the local level.

The right to participate is implicitly granted in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which all Western European countries support. Article 12 states that the right to express views freely in all matters affecting the child is given to every child who is capable of forming his or her views, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with his or her age and maturity. Although not literally a “right to participate” in matters affecting the child, it is often interpreted as such. Consequently, it can be argued that this treaty provides legal grounds for lowering the voting age.

### Political arguments

Politicians and young people, it is often claimed, live in different worlds and speak different languages. Many politicians regard young people as objects of policy. Youth policies typically focus on the (relatively few) young people who show deviant behaviour. Not surprisingly, young people feel excluded from the democratic process.<sup>11</sup>

It is argued that giving 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote will provide political parties with an incentive to make politics more interesting, and to speak and write in language that young people understand. Skeptics hold that politicians create the wish for voting rights, rather than respond to it. Politicians are attracted by the advantages of a new potential electorate. It is true that the supporters of voting at 16 are mainly found among left-wing,

green, and liberal parties, which in Europe have a relatively young electorate.

### Educational arguments

The two most frequently mentioned arguments against lowering the voting age are that it will have a negative effect on voter turnout, and that young people tend to vote for extremist parties. Both arguments build on the assumption that voting requires a civic maturity that is absent in the typical 16-year-old.

This reasoning has, however, also been reversed. The turnout rate among young people has always been relatively low, but lately it has been suggested that turnout no longer rises as younger generations age.<sup>12</sup> Young people are not attracted by election-related political activities, and increasing numbers remain uninterested when they grow older. Schizzerotto and Gasperoni describe this as a threat to democracy:

Limited political participation – voting, membership in political parties, in youth associations and organizations, and representation in decision-making bodies – is understood as a major youth problem in most Western European countries ... The declining political engagement and traditional societal participation among youth is perceived as a threat to the future of the representative democracy ....<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, it is argued, youth must get involved in electoral politics at a younger age – and granting them the right to vote might help.

Meanwhile, it is interesting that many young people, when asked in surveys for their opinion on lowering the voting age, oppose it.<sup>14</sup> They believe that they lack the political knowledge to vote. However, their support increases when they are asked if they think lowering the voting age to 16 would be a good idea if their political knowledge were improved. In Britain, since September 2002, civic education has been part of the national curriculum for secondary schools. The “Votes at 16” campaign used the launch of this subject to support its case.

What about voting for extreme, anti-system parties? Research in three German states that have recently lowered the voting age from 18 to 16 shows that these new voters do vote in different patterns than older voters; however a uniform trend is absent.<sup>15</sup> Electoral statistics from the 1999 local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia show that the Greens and the liberal FDP (Freie demokratische Partei) are more popular among young people, at the expense of the SPD and CDU (Christlich demokratische Union Deutschlands). But in the 1996

Lower Saxony local elections, surveys in the cities of Hannover and Braunschweig show that the CDU and Greens received more votes among the young. Finally, in the 1999 Saxony-Anhalt local elections, the differences in party preferences were hardly noticeable. It is important to note that in none of these states is there a strong tendency among the young to vote for parties of the extreme left or right.

### What can we learn from research?

Traditionally, voting is regarded as a more or less purposeful vehicle for expressing political preferences, which is more easily used by those people who have the relevant resources (notably education) at their disposal.

Although its importance for the individual decision to vote or not is unquestioned, this resource-oriented explanation alone accounts for only a small fraction of the decision to vote or not (typically less than 10 percent). In the search for better explanations, one variable also appeared to be uniformly relevant. This is the age of the voter. Research suggests that people become more inclined to vote when they grow older, but that the relation-

*In most countries, lowering the voting age involves a change to the constitution, which cannot be accomplished quickly.*

ship reverses for the elderly. In addition to this life-cycle effect of age, a generational explanation of turnout has also often been suggested: younger generations vote less than older generations, even when they grow older.

Recent publications have highlighted other age-related factors in the explanation of turnout. Plutzer (2002) presents and tests a “developmental theory of turnout”, which emphasizes the habitual nature of voting and the crucial role of childhood socialization into voting.<sup>16</sup> Whether first-time voters do actually cast a vote is, to a considerable extent, dependent on their parents’ social and political resources; only later in life are these resources replaced by acquired habits.

This developmental approach to voting might fit well with the educational arguments for lowering the voting age that we referred to above. At age 16, most young persons still attend school. Civic education classes, which are commonly required before age 18, may support the socialization into voting habits – together with a competitive electoral contest.<sup>17</sup>

The research in three German states on the turnout level of 16–18-year-olds lends some support to this hypothesis. In North Rhine-Westphalia, the turnout among 16–21-year-olds<sup>18</sup> was slightly below the average for the whole electorate, but clearly higher – by about 5 to 8 percent – than among those aged 21–30. Similar results hold for Lower Saxony, where 16–18-year-olds vote at a level comparable to 35–45-year-olds. Finally, a similar conclusion

can be drawn for the 1999 local elections in Saxony-Anhalt.

If the developmental theory of turnout holds, these genera-

tions of 16–18-year-olds in Germany are more likely to acquire the habit of voting than their predecessors, who learned to vote only at age 18. This may be a good sign for the future of electoral democracy.

### The future

Will other European countries follow the German example? Probably not in the short term. In most countries, lowering the voting age involves a change to the constitution, which cannot be accomplished quickly. Experiments at the local level are more easily developed, and this seems to be the feasible route in Flanders (Belgium) and Britain. Moreover, changing the rules of the political process is itself

a political act. Thus, after the 1999 state election replaced the SPD-Greens coalition by a CDU-FDP majority, the Hesse state government renounced its 1998 decision to lower the voting age to 16. But whatever direction the reforms take, it is unlikely, just as it was in the 1970s, that they will be halted by national borders. ✕



## NOTES

1. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1943, 1976 ed.), p. 245.
2. Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1989), p. 127.
3. The other is the exclusion from voting rights of mentally deficient persons, see André Blais, Louis Massicotte, Antoine Yoshinaka, "Deciding Who Has the Right to Vote: A Comparative Analysis of Election Laws," *Electoral Studies* Vol. 20 (2001), pp. 41–62.
4. The best-known exception is Brazil, with non-compulsory voting for 16–18-year-olds (for 18–70-year-olds, voting is compulsory). Several Asian countries have a minimum voting age higher than 18 – see Blais, Massicotte and Yoshinaka, "Deciding Who Has the Right to Vote".
5. These six German states are: Hesse, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania.
6. Manfred Schwarzmeier, "Kommunalwahl ab 16 Jahren: Mehr als nur ein Partizipationsplacebo?," *BJR-Jugendnachrichten* Januar/Februar (2002).
7. Joël de Ceulaer, "Een verjongingskuur voor de stem," *Knack* Vol. 32 (November 27, 2002), pp. 20–25.
8. See [www.votesat16.org.uk](http://www.votesat16.org.uk).
9. Kennedy's speech at Westminster Day, on February 5, 2002, reported by BBC News on BBCi, can be found at [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/1801693.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1801693.stm).
10. Discussed in the briefing paper of the National Youth Agency, *Spotlight* Issue 11 (January 2003); Commission on Local Governance, *Free to Differ: The Future for Local Democracy* (Local Government Information Unit, 2002).
11. Marije Cornelissen, 'De' jongere bestaat niet. *Negatieve gevolgen van de beeldvorming over jongeren* (Utrecht: Landelijk Bureau ter bestrijding van Rassendiscriminatie, 2000), p. 54; e.g. Children's Rights Alliance for England, *The REAL Democratic Deficit: Why 16 and 17 Year-Olds Should Be Allowed to Vote* (London: CRAE, 2000), p. 20.
12. For an overview of arguments and evidence, see Mark N. Franklin, *The Dynamics of Voter Turnout in Established Democracies since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
13. A. Schizzerotto and G. Gasperoni (supervisors), *Study on the State of Young People and Youth Policy in Europe* (Milan: IARD, 2001), pp. 1–17.
14. Charlotte Van Hees and Heleen Snijders, *Drank, Brommer en dus ook stemmen!: Een onderzoek naar de haalbaarheid en wenselijkheid van het stemrecht voor zestienjarige* (Amsterdam: Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek, 2002); for Britain, see also *Spotlight*, the National Youth Agency briefing paper, available at [www.nya.org.uk/download-PDF/spotlight-5.pdf](http://www.nya.org.uk/download-PDF/spotlight-5.pdf).
15. The sources are: Statistisches Landesamt, Nordrhein-Westfalen; Statistisches Landesamt, Sachsen-Anhalt; Universität Hannover, Arbeitsgruppe Interdisziplinäre Sozialstrukturforschung.
16. Eric Plutzer, "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources and Growth in Young Adulthood," *American Political Science Review* Vol. 96 (2002), pp. 41–56.
17. Franklin shows that the context of their first election can leave a "footprint" in the turnout levels of a generation of new voters for many years. Mark N. Franklin, "Electoral Competitiveness and Turnout: How Voters React to the Changing Character of Elections," paper presented at Joint Sessions of Workshops of the European Consortium for Political Research, Edinburgh, March 28 – April 3, 2003.
18. The categorization of age results from administrative rules.

## Youth Participation in Elections



# Rush the Vote

Wayne Brown

Managing Editor, Electoral Insight, Elections Canada

Rush the Vote, an Ontario youth organization, is using music and entertainers to encourage young people "to get involved in the democratic process and to become better informed about society's issues."

The national Rush the Vote campaign was launched at an April 6, 2003, block party in downtown Ottawa. It was timed to coincide with the annual Juno awards. This helped attract 17 solo artists and bands, who gave free performances on a stage constructed in the middle of what is normally a busy street in the nation's capital. "If you want a large attendance, bring the music," said Paul Green, Rush the Vote's executive director. "It is the tool by which kids really understand their world. Right or wrong, that is a fact. They take their cue from the leaders of the entertainment world, not from social and political leaders. In music, they see a reflection of themselves." The rally was also supported by the national MuchMusic television channel, the National Capital Commission and three local radio stations.

Several speakers encouraged young people to get involved in political and social causes and use their right to vote. Meanwhile, many of those who attended marked ballots in a mock referendum on a question about whether the voting age should be lowered from 18 to 16. By an almost two to one vote count (304 to 171), they supported making such a change.

"Rush the Vote focuses not only on trying to get youth to the polls, but to simplify information; making it easier to understand," says Mr. Green. "Many youth can't see the difference between the various parties and candidates and what they stand for. The parties have not made it clear to them."

Mr. Green also calls for the creation of a new national body with a strategy to mount a full-time effort solely devoted to informing young Canadians about the importance of voting and encouraging them to do so.



At the April 6, 2003, Rush the Vote rally in Ottawa, young people voted in a mock referendum on whether the voting age should be reduced to 16.

Founded in 1997, Rush the Vote was inspired by the Rock the Vote campaigns in the United States and also evolved from the Universal Black Student Association (founded because of an estimated 50 percent school dropout rate among Black youth in Ontario), and from B.L.O.C.K. Headz (Building Links on Community Korners). While survey research indicates that only about 25 percent of Canada's 18 to 24-year-olds voted at the 2000 federal election, Mr. Green believes the proportion of Black youth who cast ballots was likely much lower. "Many feel they are dealing with other day-to-day problems, including schools, jobs, careers, the judicial system. Voting is on the back burner. We are trying to show them how everything is related."

Rush the Vote plans to hold another event during the next Ontario provincial election, in a further attempt to boost youth voting. Its first major rally was held during the 1999 Ontario election, and a Dunk the Vote event, involving basketball personalities, was held in 2000 at the University of Toronto to encourage higher turnout in municipal elections. ❧

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