

The Forum Presents:

Youth Engagement in Politics in Canada

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Introduction

Youth's departure from elections has been observed for several decades. In 2011, only 38.8% of youth cast a ballot, accounting for much of the broader decline in turnout.ⁱ In 2015, Harell and Gosselin argue there's reason to believe the federal election garnered more interest and excitement among young people.ⁱⁱ While not unusual to find lower turnout rates among youth, Pammett et al. argue youth are entering the electorate at a slower rate and in smaller numbers than in previous decades.ⁱⁱⁱ This is a serious problem, Howe argues, because voting is a habitual activity: after turning 18, those who vote in the first three elections are likely to continue to do so throughout their lives.^{iv} Scholars are divided as to the precise cause in younger voters' absence at the ballot box. Three schools of thought emerge.

Generational Value Shift

Inglehart argues that values have shifted from a materialist outlook among older generations to one characterized by post-materialism among youth. According to Inglehart, post-materialist values place higher emphasis on more meaningful levels of participation than simply casting a ballot once every four years.^v Consequently, youth exhibit lower levels of civic duty^{vi} and political efficacy (two important precursors to voting). Wattenberg adds that this value change is shaped by the rapidly changing media environment, exposure to politics, and a lack of shared experiences.^{vii}

Institutional Factors

An alternative approach claims that political and institutional changes, such as lowering the voter age (from 21 to 18 in 1970) and fewer "tight" races, have reduced recent cohorts' propensity to vote.^{viii} Blais disagrees, and concludes the generational differences cannot arise purely from differences in the institutional context because their impact is conditional on the presence of other factors (such as civic duty).^{ix}

Turned Off or Tuned Out?

A third approach argues that youth are neither disengaged nor tuned out.^x Scholars assert that traditional attempts to measure youth's engagement focuses too narrowly on voting, and thereby fail to capture the diversity of ways young people engage in politics.^{xi} Research by Samara Canada supports this claim: across eighteen political activities, spanning civic, informal, and formal activities, as well as political discussion, youth (18-29) participate in most activities at the same, or higher, rate as older Canadians.^{xii}

The majority of youth in Canada report talking about politics: 57% have discussed politics face to face or over the phone, while 48% have discussed politics via email or text and circulated, reposted, or commented on political information. Young Canadians are more likely to sign a petition, boycott products, and protest. Even across formal political engagement, youth were much more likely to attend political meetings, volunteer on a campaign, and organize events about politics.

One possible reason youth's broader participation does not translate to the ballots cast is because they are much less likely to be contacted by politicians and parties. Such political contact – at the door, by phone or by mail during elections – is shown to increase the likelihood someone will vote.^{xiii} In 2011, Elections Canada found that young people who were contacted by a politician or political party were more likely to vote.^{xiv} Samara found that only 55% of those under 29 had been contacted by a party or candidate, compared to 75% of Baby Boomers.^{xv}

Next Steps

To increase youth's political engagement, political parties and politicians can improve upon three areas. Firstly, parties and politicians need to be innovative in their online communication since youth are harder to reach via traditional outreach methods.^{xvi} Online platforms should be considered a place to begin a dialogue with youth, rather than a venue to simply broadcast political messages. Second, parties would be well served to consider a more open style of party membership that allows young people to participate in party politics without being exclusionary.^{xvii} Compared to previous generations, youth today exhibit weaker partisan attachments. Finally, "youth" are not a homogenous group, and their interests often intersect with other political and socio-economic concerns. In turn, this intersectionality shapes much of their political outlook. Despite the challenges to youth engagement, research suggests that there can be long-term electoral advantages for parties that effectively engage youth.

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ⁱ Elections Canada, 2012, "Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group and Gender at the 2011 Federal General Election". Turnout for youth aged 18 to 24. Elections Canada's estimates for the 2015 federal election are not yet available.

ⁱⁱ Allison Harell and Tania Gosselin, 2015, "The Youth Vote in the 2015 Election," in *Canadian Election Analysis: Communication, Strategy, and Democracy*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jon H. Pammett, Lawrence LeDuc, Erin Theissen and Antoine Bilodeau, 2001, *Canadian Voting Turnout in Comparative Perspective*. Ottawa: Elections Canada

^{iv} Paul Howe, 2010, *Citizens Adrift*, Vancouver: UBC Press.

^v Ronald Inglehart, 1990, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton.

^{vi} Andre Blais, 2000, *To Vote or Not to Vote: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. Civic duty is defined as the belief that not voting in a democracy is wrong.

^{vii} Martin P. Wattenberg, 2007, "Electoral Turnout: The New Generational Gap." *British Elections and Parties Review*.

^{viii} Scholars in this school of thought include: Franklin (2004), Johnston et al. (2007).

^{ix} Andre Blais, 2006, "What affects voter turnout?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 9: 111-125.

^x Elisabeth Gidengil et al., 2003, "Turned off or Tuned Out?: Youth Participation in Politics", *Electoral Insight*: 9-14.

^{xi} See Norris (2002) and Dalton (2008).

^{xii} Samara Canada, 2015, "Message Not Delivered", Toronto: Samara. Youth's participation was only matched Baby boomer's participation in two activities: political party membership and political donations. Baby boomer's only surpassed youth's participation in terms of charitable donations.

^{xiii} Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, 2008. *Get Out The Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*, 2nd ed. Washington, DC: Brookings Institutional Press.

^{xiv} Elections Canada, 2011, "National Youth Survey," Ottawa: Elections Canada. For more, see Anthony et al., 2014.

^{xv} Samara measured asked about five types of political contact over a year long period in 2014: email, phone call, mail, in person, and social network. See "Message Not Delivered" for more details.

^{xvi} Laura Anthony, Jane Hilderman and Alison Loat, 2014, "What Parties do to Engage and Mobilize Youth: A Literature Review of Five Countries," Ottawa: Elections Canada.

^{xvii} Ibid.