



In Brief

***Youth Voter Turnout in Canada
2. Reasons for the Decline and Efforts
to Increase Participation***

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(In Brief)

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YOUTH VOTER TURNOUT IN CANADA

2. REASONS FOR THE DECLINE AND EFFORTS TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION *

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past 20 years, there has been a marked decline in the participation in federal elections among Canadians born after 1970.¹ This decline is also evident in provincial and municipal elections.

Researchers have been interested in the participation of young Canadians in the democratic process for some time.² In 1991, for instance, the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing examined young Canadians' interest in politics, after finding that younger Canadians had less interest than older Canadians.³

In this paper, we will briefly review some of the reasons for youth disengagement in politics in Canada. We will then summarize some of the measures taken to increase the youth electoral participation rate, with particular emphasis on Elections Canada initiatives.

2 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE DECLINE IN ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION AMONG YOUNG CANADIANS

Various theories have been put forward to explain why a smaller percentage of young Canadians vote than do older Canadians. However, all of these theories cannot be readily verified empirically.⁴

2.1 NO ISSUES OF INTEREST TO YOUNG PEOPLE?

The explanation most often provided is that the issues that are important to young people are not part of the political parties' election platforms. However, this hypothesis is challenged by political scientists who conducted a study for Elections Canada following the federal election in 2004. According to Elizabeth Gidengil and her fellow researchers, for instance, health was cited as a key issue for all survey respondents, regardless of age:

Issues that concern many young people are on the political agenda, and the political parties are taking positions on these issues. The problem seems to be that too often these messages are just not registering with a significant proportion of younger Canadians.⁵

2.2 LACK OF POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE?

The authors of the Gidengil study asserted that there were "striking" gaps in young Canadians' knowledge of politics.⁶ There is also consensus in the academic community that a significant number of young voters go to the polls without the necessary tools to make an informed decision.⁷ According to researchers, young

people know little or nothing about the politicians and have no idea how the political institutions that run the country function. In a study conducted for the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP), Henry Milner established a cause and effect relationship between the level of political knowledge and youth electoral participation.⁸

2.3 LACK OF TRUST IN THE SYSTEM?

According to Brenda O’Neill of the University of Manitoba, beyond limited knowledge about the political system, voters both young and old show a lack of interest in public affairs. She says that many voters doubt that voting every four years can truly influence the decision-making process, and as a result, people stay away from the polls, which can lead to distrust and even cynicism over time.⁹

2.4 MEDIA INFLUENCE?

When the issue of cynicism is raised, the media are often singled out as the culprits. Television is mentioned in particular since it tends to focus on the conflicts in politics.¹⁰

Yet media use reportedly has a positive impact overall on the acquisition of political knowledge, although its efficacy depends on the medium used. Reading newspapers and news websites has a strong positive impact on the electoral participation of young Canadians, while watching television and listening to the radio do not have as marked an effect.

3 INITIATIVES TO INCREASE THE ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG CANADIANS

As indicated, the drop in the electoral participation of young Canadians is worrisome. While various measures have been tried, those taken by Elections Canada in recent years to increase youth electoral participation are of particular interest.

3.1 GENERAL MEASURES

The idea of lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 is raised regularly as a potential means of increasing the electoral participation of young Canadians. The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing recommended in 1991 that Parliament periodically consider the issue.¹¹ (Advocates also emphasize that voting as a civic duty must be instilled in young people before they finish school. We will return to this under heading 3.2.4.) Yet there is no solid evidence that such a measure would increase electoral participation rates in Canada, at least in the long term.¹²

Another proposal is that voting could be made mandatory. Careful consideration must be given before implementing this idea, however, because of the binding nature of the measure and uncertainty about the state’s ability to enforce it. At any rate, according to Henry Milner, mandatory voting would produce a minimal increase in electoral participation.¹³

3.2 ROLE OF ELECTIONS CANADA AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

As an independent agency reporting to Parliament, Elections Canada administers the federal electoral system according to the framework set out in the *Canada Elections Act*. Apart from conducting and overseeing elections, the agency ensures that the electoral process exhibits fairness, transparency and accessibility for all participants.

On 17 February 2004, the House of Commons unanimously adopted a motion calling on Elections Canada to take initiatives to encourage youth electoral participation in Canada.¹⁴

In its 2010–2011 Report on Plans and Priorities, Elections Canada indicates that it intends to develop an action plan to make young Canadians more aware of the importance of voting. A new advertising campaign to encourage youth participation in the electoral process will be finalized over the coming year.¹⁵

3.2.1 STUDYING THE PHENOMENON

Elections Canada has long recognized that young voters lack interest in the election process. It conducts research into the obstacles to youth voting and the steps that should be taken to increase participation by young people. For instance, after each election, analyses are conducted to determine the participation rate by age group, and each age group is surveyed. In 2007, Elections Canada provided its assistance to the Canadian Policy Research Networks for in-depth studies on youth electoral participation.¹⁶

3.2.2 FACILITATING REGISTRATION AND ACCESS

Registering young voters is a priority for Elections Canada. Community relations officers strive during each election to maximize youth access by conducting special registration campaigns in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of students and constituencies where postsecondary institutions are located. Canada Post Corporation also plays a role by facilitating registration for postal vote.

In the past, Elections Canada communicated in person or by correspondence with the heads of the main national student associations – the Canadian Federation of Students, the Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec, la Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec and the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations – to discuss the student vote on election day.

In the election of January 2006, Elections Canada made sure that returning officers were especially attentive to young people, since the election period coincided with Christmas exams and holidays. Voter registration and polling stations were set up on campuses to make it easier for young people to vote.

In 2007–2008, to facilitate access for all young Aboriginal voters, Elections Canada worked with the Assembly of First Nations to establish the Aboriginal Youth Forum. According to the activity report, the participants received information about the

election process. In 2010–2011, Elections Canada will continue its research into the obstacles that young Aboriginal voters may face and will develop ways to increase their participation.¹⁷

3.2.3 MAKING THE MOST OF ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY

Elections Canada uses new communications technologies to reach out to young voters as much as possible. In its 2010–2011 Report on Plans and Priorities, Elections Canada indicates that it will continue to develop an electronic registration system to give voters another way to register that might well reach the youngest among them.

Young Canadians make extensive use of new communications technologies in various spheres of their lives. The latest figures from Statistics Canada show that 78.6% of Canadians under the age of 34 used the Internet at home at least once per day in 2007.¹⁸ They spend more time surfing the Web than older generations and make greater use of instant messaging and blogs.

The Internet offers a wealth of information about political parties, their platforms and leaders. In a study of youth electoral participation, André Blais and Peter Loewen noted that “access to the Internet makes the information acquisition required to vote in an election easier and is thus logically associated with higher participation.”¹⁹

Technology should not, however, be regarded as a panacea for increasing youth electoral engagement. In some parts of Canada, it is difficult or impossible to access the Internet. Moreover, young people can be overwhelmed by the amount of information that is available, and the haphazard arrangement of information on the Internet does not lead them to consult more news and political affairs sites.

As for electronic ballots, this method of voting always entails technical difficulties relating to authentication, security and privacy.²⁰

3.2.4 REACHING OUT TO EVEN YOUNGER CANADIANS

Elections Canada sees raising awareness among young people before they reach voting age as an approach with promise. It has instituted parliamentary and electoral simulation exercises to give young people their first exposure to the political process and initiate them into the basic aspects of parliamentary debate.

For the 38th general election, Elections Canada launched the “Student Vote 2004” initiative, which allowed young people under the age of 18 to experience the federal electoral process through a parallel election at their school. This initiative was repeated in 2006 and 2008. In the last election, over 400,000 students at more than 4,000 schools voted for candidates in their schools’ ridings, and served as poll clerks and deputy returning officers. The students predicted a minority Conservative government and the results of the vote were announced on television and posted on the Internet.²¹ Subsequent evaluations by the organizers and an independent university researcher showed high satisfaction levels with the program, among students and teachers alike.

Elections Canada also created the *Young Voters* site,²² aimed at Canadians under the age of 18. The site includes learning tools, hyperlinks and various interactive instructional activities.

Moreover, Elections Canada, with its federal and provincial partners, developed a strategy to create educational material for teachers about elections in Canada.²³ This initiative is consistent with the recommendations of a number of researchers who have called for more civics education in school curricula. Schools are seen as the prime environment for learning about basic civic values and duties.²⁴

There is little data in Canada about the amount of civics instruction in provincial school curricula. Comparisons are difficult because the methodologies used, the students' ages and the number of hours devoted to civics courses differ among jurisdictions. For example, civic education is a separate course in Ontario while in Quebec it is covered in history courses.

The ability of the federal government to intervene in educational matters are limited by the *Constitution Act, 1867*, which gives the provinces nearly exclusive jurisdiction over that sector;²⁵ for example, there is no federal department of education to coordinate a national civics education program.

By way of a solution, Mary MacKinnon, Sonia Pitre and Judy Watling suggested, following a study conducted for the Canadian Policy Research Networks, that a national civics education strategy be developed, coordinated by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada.²⁶ They proposed that the Council include such an initiative in its Literacy Action Plan, which it launched in 2007 and which calls on the provinces and territories to work together to increase literacy levels in Canada.²⁷

4 CONCLUSION

The low rate of youth electoral participation is a problem that requires serious attention, in order to secure the future of democracy in Canada. Governments need a minimum level of legitimacy in order to make decisions that have a major impact on the lives of Canadians. Elections Canada is well aware of the situation and has taken a series of initiatives to attempt to reverse the trend. However, it is clear that research is needed to understand all aspects of the problem.

NOTES

- * This is the second of two recent Library of Parliament publications on youth electoral participation in Canada. The first was by Andre Barnes, *Youth Voter Turnout in Canada: 1. Trends and Issues*, Publication no. 2010-19-E, 7 April 2010. See also Marion Ménard, *Youth Civic Engagement*, Publication No. 2010-23-E, 8 April 2010.
- 1. Elections Canada, [Youth Electoral Participation – Survey and Analysis of Canadian Trends](#) (October 2003). See also Barnes (2010).

2. The definition of “youth” varies from author to author. In general, it is considered that a youth is someone between the ages of 15 and 24. This is the age range covered by most of the national data from sources such as Statistics Canada. In 2008, more than 4.5 million Canadians were between the ages of 15 and 24, or more than 13.1% of the population (Statistics Canada, Summary Table: [“Population by sex and age group.”](#))
3. Kathy Megyery, ed., *Youth in Canadian Politics: Participation and Involvement*, Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing in Canada, Vol. 8, 1991, p. 33.
4. Brenda O’Neill, “Youth Participation – What We Know, and What We Don’t Know” in *Canadian Democracy: Bringing Youth Back into the Political Process*, Centre for Research and Information on Canada, No. 15, December 2004, pp. 2–5; Elisabeth Gidengil et al., [“Missing the Message: Young Adults and the Election Issues,”](#) *Electoral Insight*, January 2005.
5. Gidengil et al. (2005).
6. Ibid.
7. Mary Pat MacKinnon, Sonia Pitre and Judy Watling, [Lost in Translation: \(Mis\)Understanding Youth Engagement – Synthesis Report – Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation](#), Canadian Policy Research Networks, October 2007, p. 10. See also Kristina R. Llewellyn et al., [The State and Potential of Civic Learning in Canada – Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation](#), Canadian Policy Research Networks, June 2007, p. 20.
8. Henry Milner, [Political Knowledge and Participation Among Young Canadians and Americans](#), IRPP Working Paper Series no. 2007-01, Institute for Research on Public Policy, November 2007, p. 8.
9. Brenda O’Neill, [“Examining Declining Electoral Turnout Among Canada’s Youth,”](#) *Electoral Insight*, July 2003.
10. Pippa Norris, [“Does television erode social capital? A reply to Putnam,”](#) *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 3, September 1996, p. 475.
11. Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, *Final Report*, Vol. 1, 1991, p. 49.
12. Based on comparative studies among various countries, Mark Franklin has concluded that lowering the voting age in 18 countries did not have a significant impact on participation rates. See Mark N. Franklin, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2004, p. 213.
13. Milner (2007), p. 10.
14. See House of Commons, [Journals, 3rd Session, 37th Parliament, 17 February 2004.](#)
15. Office of the Chief Electoral Officer [CEO], [2010–2011 Estimates – Report on Plans and Priorities](#), 2010, p. 11.
16. See Canadian Policy Research Networks, [Research Area: Engaging Young Canadians.](#)
17. CEO (2010), p. 21.
18. See Statistics Canada, Summary Table: [“Internet use by individuals, by selected frequency of use and age \(At least once a day\).”](#)
19. André Blais and Peter Loewen, [Youth Electoral Engagement in Canada](#), Elections Canada, April 2009, p. 10.
20. Lalita Acharya, [Internet Voting](#), Publication no. 03-06E, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, 16 September 2003, p. 5.

21. See Student Vote, [Election Results](#).
22. See the Elections Canada, [Young Voters](#).
23. CEO (2010), p. 21.
24. Llewellyn et al. (2007), p. 1.
25. The federal government shares responsibility with First Nations for providing education to children who normally live on reserves and those who attend provincial or federal schools or schools managed by bands.
26. McKinnon, Pitre and Watling (2007), p. 21.
27. Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, [Literacy](#).