

Building Youth Civic Engagement through Collaboration

Report of the Roundtable on Youth Voter Engagement

September 4, 2012



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PUBLIC POLICY

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ISBN: [978-1-927009-37-6](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/978-1-927009-37-6)

This report is co-authored by the Public Policy Forum and Elections Canada, under the direction of Julie Cafley and Ryan Conway (Public Policy Forum), and Neil Burron and Miriam Lapp (Elections Canada).

Letter from project co-chairs:

On June 5, 2012, Elections Canada and Canada's Public Policy Forum met in Ottawa with stakeholders from across the country to discuss ways to address issues of youth civic engagement, specifically youth voter turnout. The Roundtable on Youth Voter Engagement brought together over 30 representatives from civil society, the private sector and government, including educators, student leaders, and representatives of youth-serving organizations and the media.

We were pleased to co-convene this session, and to see the serious appetite for action on this issue that exists across different sectors of Canadian society.

Throughout the day, participants agreed that voter turnout is a broad societal issue, and that youth face a number of barriers affecting their engagement in democratic political life. Recognizing the complexity of the issue, participants proposed multiple solutions to address declining youth voter turnout based on a collaborative approach to engaging with youth on an ongoing basis – not only at election time. Participants agreed that civic education must be at the core of youth engagement, and that a multi-faceted approach to engagement would be most effective.

The roundtable came to general agreement that, while access barriers are not the main factor behind the continuing decline in youth voting, there are many ways to make the electoral process and our broader system of governance more accessible to young Canadians. With the diversity of youth in Canada, there was consensus on the need for multiple engagement strategies and more thorough tracking of progress. Perhaps most importantly, participants agreed that we must approach youth as responsible and capable participants in our democracy. It was also recognized that addressing this challenge requires collaborative action across many different institutions and social groups. Responsibility and accountability must be shared.

This roundtable was an important first step in the development of a collaborative, cross-sectoral approach to addressing youth voter engagement. While much remains to be done, participants demonstrated their desire to continue to work together, and to expand the network of partners in this initiative.

We invite you to review this report of the roundtable discussion and proposed actions, and look forward to working with you in addressing this issue of vital importance to the long-term health of our democracy



Marc Mayrand
Chief Electoral Officer of Canada



David Mitchell
President and CEO
Canada's Public Policy Forum



Building Youth Civic Engagement through Collaboration

Report on the Roundtable on Youth Voter Engagement

Morning Session - Key Themes

- Declining turnout is a broad societal issue. Youth turnout, particularly the issue of motivation to vote, is an important element of this problem and the focus of this discussion.
- “Youth” are not a homogenous or cohesive group. They represent a fragmented demographic, constantly evolving in terms of their identity and their relationships with institutions. Efforts to increase youth voter turnout must take the differing needs of these groups into account.
- Declining youth voter turnout should be seen in the context of broader social changes. Issues such as trust in our political system, and how youth view their roles as citizens, are important topics for consideration.

Opening Remarks

The Roundtable on Youth Voter Engagement took place on June 5, 2012 at the Lord Elgin Hotel in Ottawa.

Chief Electoral Officer, Marc Mayrand, and Public Policy Forum President and CEO, David Mitchell, co-chaired the session.

In opening the dialogue, the co-chairs discussed the complex nature of declining youth voter turnout and emphasized the need to forge a common approach among multiple sectors to address the issue. This challenge is not the sole responsibility of election management bodies. All Canadians have a stake in this issue, and a need exists for a pan-Canadian initiative to address declining youth civic engagement.

Voter turnout has steadily declined in Canada over the past two decades at all levels of government. Those who don't vote in the first few elections when they are eligible to exercise their democratic franchise are less likely to become voters later in life. With overall turnout at record low levels, and youth turnout between 34% and 39%, the compounding effects of declining youth turnout will likely have lasting impacts. At this rate, Canada may soon find itself in a situation where less than half of eligible electors bother to cast ballots. This poses serious challenges to the integrity of our democratic system in the long-term.

This decline in turnout is not a simple problem and those convened for this roundtable agreed that there are no quick fixes. However, participants were encouraged to make use of the diversity of representation and opinion assembled for this session to propose constructive ideas that may form part of a larger strategy to address this issue. Throughout the dialogue participants put forward ideas for discussion and consideration by the full group. The summary of these individual ideas and group discussions forms this roundtable report.

Building Youth Civic Engagement through Collaboration

Report on the Roundtable on Youth Voter Engagement

Morning Session: Understanding the Problem

Objective: *Develop a collective understanding of the issue of declining civic engagement among young Canadians*

Voter turnout is declining at many levels, and while each demographic group demonstrates its own trends, the low and steadily deteriorating level of youth voter turnout is of paramount concern. Continued decline in turnout will pose challenges to the legitimacy of our elected legislatures, and further undermine the extent to which citizens feel their voices are reflected in government. Thus, the need for action to address this issue is pressing. But taking action, particularly on youth voter turnout, requires better knowledge of how young Canadians view civic participation, and the broader social context in which they live their lives. Dr. Diane Pacom of the University of Ottawa led the morning dialogue among participants, during which key points relating to the societal context of young Canadians were discussed.

As we seek to understand the factors affecting youth voter turnout, several participants underscored the importance of understanding the definition of “youth”. As the traditional benchmarks associated with adulthood have increasingly been delayed (e.g. marriage, end of education, homeownership, etc.), the concept of youth has become more encompassing. At the same time, youth are highly fragmented and their identities, and how others perceive them, are in a state of flux.

As we further our understanding of the target demographic, we must then ask: what is driving the disengagement of youth from voting? Two issues were presented which could be contributing to this disengagement – the need for what might be called “virtue” in democracy, and a redefinition of citizenship among younger citizens.

The virtue needed in our democracy, some participants suggested, is linked to the trust youth have in our system of governance. For young Canadians today, this trust is simply lacking. In some segments of the youth population, inattention by political leaders to key issues has undermined trust in existing government institutions. As one participant put it, youth are effectively “dropping out” as they lose interest in a political system that has increasingly become irrelevant to them. However, some noted that the trust issue may not be unique to youth, and that combinations of factors may more



Roundtable participants at work

prominently contribute to their lack of desire to vote. Some participants opined that young Canadians often lack access to the entire system; not simply to the polls on election day. They questioned if institutions don't offer youth tools to meaningfully participate in governance, why

should youth reciprocate by playing active roles in institutions? In addition, the foundation of citizenship is different for many young Canadians. In a constantly evolving social landscape, traditional conceptions of citizenship are changing and youth are less inclined to see voting as a civic duty.

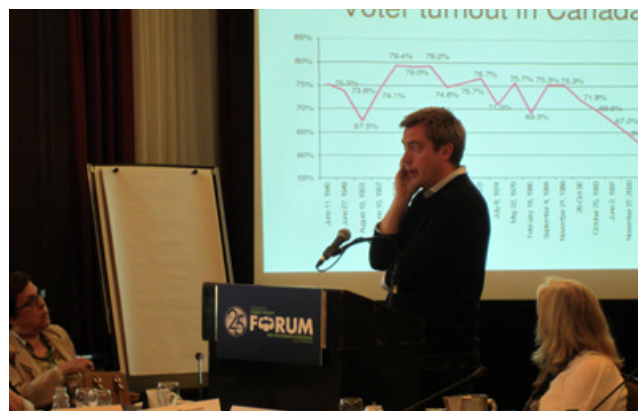
These issues generally fall under the banner of what some have termed “motivational barriers”. These affect the willingness of individuals to vote, as opposed to their actual ability to vote.¹

Building upon the morning discussion, and combined with the results of a pre-event survey of participants, three principal areas for discussion were identified for the afternoon working groups:

1. **Reaching the hard-to-reach:** including improving the accessibility of institutions to youth, focusing on marginalized sectors of the youth population and using new methods of organizing and conducting polls on election day to make them easier and more comfortable for youth.
2. **Increasing political knowledge:** including both formal and informal education, and other efforts to improve overall civic knowledge.
3. **Making politics and participation relevant and the norm:** including focusing on ways to re-engage youth in the system, ideas for addressing the perceived lack of impact of voting, and improving the contact between youth and political leaders.

Working Lunch: Ideas for Action

Over a working lunch, participants had the opportunity to explore public engagement processes, and to discuss new modes of working with citizens to increase their involvement in democratic political life. Peter MacLeod of the public engagement firm MASS LBP led the discussion. Key points raised, which helped spark ideas for consideration during the afternoon discussion, included the need to build the overall level of “democratic fitness” among citizens, and youth in particular. Providing opportunities for learning is essential, as is emphasizing the importance of finding more points of interaction to enable youth to influence government at all levels, and as such, “touch the state.”



Peter MacLeod leads luncheon discussion

A possible avenue for action is to leverage public events to create new opportunities for engagement; for example, the 150th anniversary of Confederation in 2017. Drawing inspiration

¹ See Appendix C for the pre-session background paper offering research on these issues.

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Afternoon Session - Key Themes

- Hard-to-reach youth include unemployed, Aboriginal, rural youth and newcomers to Canada. They can be engaged through a range of new methods (e.g. social media) and institutions should adapt their use of such tools to meet these specific needs.
- New modes of civic education can help young Canadians find meaningful roles and identify how institutions can impact issues of importance to them.
- Efforts should be made to transform existing institutions to better respond and adapt to the changing realities of citizenship. Progress toward specific goals should be rigorously tracked.

from similar work during Canada's Centennial Celebrations in 1967, the 150th anniversary could build upon a sense of attachment to our country through rejuvenated public engagement efforts.

In the discussion that followed, many participants reiterated the need to reinvigorate civic life by finding ways to make politics more relevant. Several participants noted that political parties and elected officials need to do more to engage with youth.

Afternoon Session: Seeking Solutions

Objective: Agree upon actions that can be undertaken collectively (or individually) to address the issue.

For each of the three issue areas decided upon, a working group was struck to discuss and propose actions that can be taken to lead change and help engage young Canadians.

Working Group 1: reaching the hard-to-reach

Members of this working group noted that the so-called 'hard-to-reach' is not a homogeneous group. It includes many groups within society such as: the unemployed, on and off-reserve Aboriginal youth, rural youth, and newcomers to Canada, to name only a few.

Reaching these groups will require different strategies, and it will be important to track the outcomes within each subset.

For Aboriginal youth, it would be beneficial to blend traditional education with civic education, so that historical knowledge can be employed to support new forms of civic engagement. Voting accessibility could be enhanced for this demographic by having polling stations in areas that are more accessible and familiar for aboriginal youth, such as Friendship Centres.

Across other hard-to-reach groups, numerous proposals were put forward that could form part of a broad-based effort to boost engagement. Ideas include:

- Establishing provisional voting lists for ages 16-17;
- Allowing easier registration and voting using e-tools and pre-registration;
- Targeting social media marketing to hard-to-reach groups, and specialized introductory voting kits for youth in these key subsets;

- Supporting youth voting ambassadors to share knowledge and spark passion on civic issues; and,
- Taking advantage of available technologies to make voting more accessible through tools to which most people already have access (web, mobiles social media etc.).

Such ideas are intended to close the distance between the electoral process and hard-to-reach youth. The goal is for engaged leaders to work with young Canadians, bringing the election to them – hence the objective: *Bring the Election to You(th)*

Working Group 2: increasing political knowledge

The exchange in this group focussed on three questions:

- What is political knowledge?
- Where should we focus our efforts?
- What actions can be taken?

Political knowledge, it was agreed, includes knowledge of institutions, knowledge of the electoral process and how to participate, experiential knowledge based upon past participation (including negative perceptions), and issue-based knowledge.



Andrea Landry presents a summary of the working group session on reaching the hard-to-reach

Members of the working group noted that efforts to increase political and broader civic knowledge should target voters, but also age groups that are still engaged in formal education (K – 12). Given the limited time for discussion, the working group focussed on the age groups still in formal education, and proposed ideas that can largely be integrated into classroom learning.

Based upon the group’s discussion, potential areas for action to increase civic knowledge include:

- Increasing interaction between young people and Members of Parliament and other elected officials;
- Modeling the legislative process in classroom exercises;
- Integrating politics into other school activities (e.g. including democratic decision making processes for school events);
- Enhancing opportunities for contact between youth and leaders across the spectrum of civic life;
- Providing more peer-to-peer mentoring relating to civic participation;
- Developing model democratic institutions in the classroom (e.g. mock House of Commons)
- Drafting a code of civic responsibility by students;
- Allow students to conduct mock campaigns to give them a glimpse into how politics works; and,

- Augmenting classroom-based civic learning with other community activities that have been proven effective.



Taylor Gunn presents a summary of the working group session on making politics and participation relevant

Working Group 3: making politics and participation relevant and the norm

Youth who do not vote should not be written off as completely disengaged. Rather, this should be taken as a sign that they do not see voting as relevant, or the best way to make an impact. Indeed, all citizens need to feel the efficacy of participating in the electoral process.

Our system of governance needs to change to better reflect the people it represents. Young Canadians, students in particular, should be actively involved in guiding this reform, and should take part in its actualization. More research and better awareness is required to help launch such a change, and election management bodies should help with this cause.

Potential areas for action include:

- Calling upon youth to design, create and conduct annual surveys of their own engagement, to publicly report successes and problem areas;
- Better integrating youth perspectives into continued research and awareness efforts undertaken by election management bodies; and,
- Considering mechanisms of compulsory voting; however, this should only be undertaken if matched with enhanced civic education.

Moving Forward

Following presentations by the working groups, participants re-convened in a plenary discussion to explore some of the proposed actions. Led by comments and observations by the Rt. Hon Joe Clark, former Prime Minister of Canada, the final discussion of the day focussed on the priority considerations for increasing youth voter turnout.

First, it was suggested that we must look at youth who *do* vote. What motivates them to participate? The importance of careful examination of existing research into these groups was underscored, as was the need to conduct further research into the diverse cohorts of the youth demographic to learn where action can have the most impact, and how results can be adequately measured.



The Rt. Hon. Joe Clark provides his reflections during the afternoon discussion

Second, social media and technology must be seen as key avenues through which to engage youth. A

paramount consideration will be how established institutions can better employ social media and new technologies. These communications platforms are not being used effectively today; this can and must be addressed

Finally, as had been mentioned repeatedly throughout the day's discussion, we need to explore the political system itself. We must understand what legislators actually perceive as the challenge, and how it relates to their work. Some argued that the evolution of political parties in Canada has caused us to lose the cohesiveness and common interest in politics that once existed. We need to know how we can effectively re-engage youth – and political parties – in a new environment.

Closing Remarks: Next Steps in the Development of a Collaborative Approach

Many potential action areas emerged from the day's discussion. Some are very clearly within the scope of election management bodies, such as new polling centre locations and more effective registration processes. However, the overall tone of the roundtable strongly suggested the need for collaboration across all sectors of Canadian society, with shared responsibility and accountability for engaging youth in our system of democratic governance.

The roundtable discussion provided greater clarity on the complex issues linked to declining youth voter turnout. These issues pose significant challenges, and we must remind ourselves that there will be no quick fixes. However, working collaboratively in effective partnerships, there is potential to make a real impact.

A key issue that must be addressed is the need to bring elected representatives into the equation. Throughout the day, participants opined that getting young Canadians engaged will be exceedingly difficult if the perception exists that system in which we want them to participate is not well attuned to their concerns. This was the so-called "elephant in the room." While issues like civic education and outreach are of high importance, upfront engagement to bridge the gap between young Canadians and political leaders, (e.g. parliamentarians and other elected officials) was noted to be an important first step. We must also work to bring political representatives into the discussion so that we can find ways to improve youth engagement. This is in everyone's interest in the short and long-term.

Post-Event Feedback: Ongoing Collaboration and Engagement

Following the roundtable, each participant was sent a short questionnaire to provide feedback on the event and the potential for further collaboration. Participants were asked what form additional collaborations could take, and what role they saw for their own organization in developing a collaborative approach towards addressing declining youth voter turnout.

Overall, participants were quite positive about what was accomplished during the roundtable discussion. Most agreed that some form of further collaboration was desirable. One participant put the matter succinctly: "The most important outcome was starting the conversation, but if we want to succeed, it can't be the end point." Those already working on the issue noted that they would continue to do so, while others indicated that they intended to focus more on youth voter engagement within their existing programs and activities.

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Other participants noted some of the challenges associated with developing a collaborative approach, such as resource constraints and the risk of trying to “reinvent the wheel” by failing to take into consideration what we already know about the problem. Although such challenges are not insurmountable, they do remind us of the need to be realistic about what we can accomplish, and that collaborative action must be grounded in enhancing our understanding of the nature of declining youth voter turnout through ongoing research.

More concretely, participants expressed support for a number of follow-up actions, including the creation of a civic education working group to coordinate individual efforts and establishment of an online forum to exchange information. Other proposals included meeting again to continue the work of the roundtable, and possibly creating working groups dedicated to key themes raised during the course of the roundtable, such as the concept of “democratic fitness.”

Elections Canada and the Public Policy Forum remain committed to future partnership with the participants of the roundtable. Contact among all parties involved has been ongoing since the session, and will continue. As we begin to develop a more collaborative approach that includes all sectors of society, the ideas discussed during the roundtable suggest key priority areas and actions that might be undertaken both collectively and individually. Elections Canada and the Public Policy Forum would like to thank all of those who participated in the roundtable and provided their invaluable feedback as an important first step in this direction.

Appendix A: Roundtable Agenda

Roundtable on Youth Voter Engagement

Agenda

A roundtable to develop a shared understanding of the issue of declining voter engagement among young Canadians, and to agree on individual and collective actions that would address the issue.

June 5, 2012

8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

(Simultaneous translation provided throughout the day)

Lord Elgin Hotel

Ottawa, ON

8:00–8:30	Arrival and networking Coffee, tea, juice and muffins available
8:30–9:00	Opening remarks, roundtable co-chairs Marc Mayrand, Chief Electoral Officer of Canada David Mitchell, President and CEO, Public Policy Forum (PPF) <i>Session to operate under Public Policy Forum Rule: no individual attribution of comments</i>
9:00–9:40	Introductory exercise and <i>tour de table</i> Using an innovative and creative method facilitated by the PPF, participants will introduce themselves and describe their stake in the issue of youth voter engagement.
9:40–10:15	Context presentation and Q&A <i>Youth and Their Relationship with the Democratic Process</i> Dr. Diane Pacom, University of Ottawa
10:15–11:45	Facilitated discussion Focus on objective 1: Develop a shared understanding of the issue of declining civic engagement among young Canadians. Participants will also be identifying and prioritizing the key themes that will form the basis of the afternoon discussion. Facilitated by Marc Mayrand and David Mitchell
11:45–12:00	Pre-lunch break Buffet lunch served (soup, sandwiches, salad, etc.) Participants select afternoon working groups

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12:00–1:00	Lunch presentation Peter MacLeod, Principal, MASS LBP
1:00–1:15	After-lunch briefing Briefing on the process for the afternoon working session Facilitated by Dr. Don Lenihan, Public Policy Forum
1:15–2:45	Working groups Focus on objective 2: Agree upon actions that can be undertaken collectively (or individually) to address the issue. Key questions focus on what needs to be done, who needs to do it and how we can collaborate to achieve these outcomes. Separate facilitators assigned to each working group
2:45–3:00	Health break
3:00–3:30	Group presentations Working groups present and discuss potential action areas they have identified. Rt. Hon. Joe Clark to join the roundtable at this point to listen to the working group proposals
3:30–3:45	Reflections on presentations The Rt. Hon. Joe Clark will contribute reflections and insights on the working group proposals and will kick off the final open discussion.
3:45–4:15	Final open discussion Participants review the potential action areas recommended and prioritize those which have the greatest potential for impact. Facilitated by Marc Mayrand and David Mitchell
4:15–4:30	Conclusion Final remarks from Marc Mayrand and David Mitchell
4:30	Adjournment Time for individual discussions among participants

Appendix B: Participant List

Keith Archer
Chief Electoral Officer
Elections BC

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Chair, Learning for a Sustainable Future
Professor Emeritus, Senior Scholar and
Former Dean, Faculty of Environmental
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Janet Campbell
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National Roundtable on Youth Voter Engagement

**June 5, 2012
Lord Elgin Hotel
Ottawa, ON**

Discussion Paper

Context

As in most advanced democracies, voter turnout has steadily declined in Canada over the past two decades, at both the federal and the provincial levels. This trend is driven primarily by declining youth voter turnout. Research shows that young people today are less likely to vote than previous generations and less likely to become regular voters later on in life.² This has implications for the long-term health of our democratic system, and it raises questions about why young Canadians are disengaged from the electoral process and what we can do about it.

While electoral agencies have sought to make voting more accessible, they are limited in their ability to address underlying issues related to why many young people choose not to vote. Declining youth voter turnout is a societal issue, and an effective response requires coordinated action among those who have the experience and ability to address the motivational issues that prevent youth from casting a ballot in the first place. Although many stakeholders have considerable expertise in fostering democratic participation, engaging youth and providing civic education, few opportunities have emerged thus far for stakeholders to begin working collaboratively in a coordinated manner.

As a first step, Elections Canada and Canada's Public Policy Forum will convene the National Roundtable on Youth Voter Engagement on June 5, 2012, in Ottawa. Elections Canada and the Public Policy Forum are seeking the input and assistance of the assembled organizations and individuals to help craft the foundation for collective, multi-sectoral action to address this issue. A concerted effort is needed to help reverse declining youth voter turnout in Canada, and the participants in this roundtable have been convened to begin this process.

The roundtable will have two principal objectives:

1. To develop a shared understanding of the issue of declining civic engagement among young Canadians.
2. To agree on the actions that can be taken by the assembled stakeholders, either collectively or individually, to address the issue.

The event will provide participants with the opportunity to move beyond discussing the root causes of declining youth voter turnout to identify which factors can be addressed, by whom and how.

² *Youth Electoral Engagement in Canada*, André Blais and Peter Loewen, Elections Canada Working Paper Series, 2011.

Background

Declining Youth Voter Turnout and Barriers to Participation

In the May 2, 2011, federal election, 61.1 percent of registered Canadian electors turned out to cast a ballot. While this is up slightly from 58.8 percent in 2008, it is a far cry from the 75 percent that Canada averaged in the decades following the Second World War. Turnout for young Canadians in the 2011 election was considerably below the average – just 38.8 percent of Canadians aged 18 to 24 and 45.1 percent of 25-to-34-year-olds voted.

That young people vote less often than their elders is not new; the tendency for voter turnout to increase with age is a long-standing finding of research on voter participation.³ What has changed is that young people are voting at much lower rates today than they were 30 or 40 years ago. Voter turnout among first-time eligible electors has been declining steadily since the 1970s. A second trend is the decreasing tendency for today's youth to take up the habit of voting as they grow older. Whereas in the past young voters tended to "catch up" to the rest of the population by about their third election, today that process takes longer – and, for a growing number of people, it never happens. As Paul Howe points out in his recent book, *Citizens Adrift*, there is a growing tendency for today's young electors to become habitual non-voters.⁴

To gain a better understanding of the reasons why youth may or may not participate in the electoral process, Elections Canada commissioned the National Youth Survey following the 2011 general election. The study – the most comprehensive to date on the electoral participation of 18-to-34-year-olds – detailed the **motivational** and **access** barriers young Canadians experience in exercising their right to vote.⁵

Key access barriers that were identified by the study included those related to:

- **Process knowledge:** Barriers associated with lack of knowledge of the actual electoral process, such as how, where or when to vote. Youth who know more about the electoral process are more likely to vote.
- **Personal circumstances:** Barriers associated with one's personal situation, such as being sick, lacking transportation or having moved.
- **Administrative issues:** Actual or perceived barriers to the administration of the voting process, such as accessibility of a polling site or perceptions of a polling station.

Addressing many of these barriers falls within the realm of electoral agencies – for example, providing more accessible information on the voting process or addressing accessibility issues at a polling station. However, research suggests that fixing these problems alone will not produce the desired increase in youth voter turnout.

³ See, for example, Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* Yale University Press, 1980.

⁴ Paul Howe, *Citizens Adrift: The Democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians*. UBC Press, 2010.

⁵ The *National Youth Survey Report* is available on the Elections Canada [website](#). The survey included a national random sample of 1,372 youth and young adults aged 18 to 34 years and an additional non-random sample of 1,293 youth from the following subgroups: Aboriginal youth, ethnocultural youth, youth in rural areas, youth with disabilities and unemployed youth not in school.

While access barriers are important, motivational factors outweigh access barriers as the primary determinants of non-voting. The National Youth Survey identified the following motivational factors:

- **Attitudes:** Barriers consisting of negative attitudes toward politics, such as a feeling that all political parties are the same or that none speak to issues important to youth. Individuals who face these barriers may be knowledgeable but do not want to vote. In contrast, youth who believed that voting is a civic duty were much more likely to vote.
- **Interest:** Barriers based on lack of interest in or apathy toward politics. Youth with higher levels of political interest are more likely to cast a ballot.
- **Political influencers:** Barriers arising from a lack of personal influencers encouraging political participation, most notably parents and politicians. Youth who vote are more likely to have had political discussions growing up at home and are more likely to have been contacted by a politician during an election.
- **Political knowledge:** Barriers defined by lack of knowledge of politics, issues, parties and/or candidates. Individuals who face these barriers may be interested in voting but feel that they lack the political knowledge to be able to make a choice. Those with higher levels of political knowledge are significantly more likely to vote. Youth who have taken a civic education course are also more likely to vote.

Significantly, some youth groups – such as Aboriginal youth and unemployed youth who are not in school – face even greater barriers to voting than the general youth population. Youth in these groups are also much more likely to be habitual non-voters.

The Need for Coordinated, Collaborative Action

The findings of the National Youth Survey provide a common ground to begin tackling the problem of declining youth voter turnout by prioritizing key areas that need to be addressed and developing common strategies and approaches. While electoral agencies have a key role to play in addressing access barriers, coordinated, collaborative action among a range of stakeholders is required to deal with the much more complex issue of motivation. This type of approach provides opportunities to pool resources, exchange information, learn from each other and ensure complementarity and synergy. Greater results can be achieved if collective action is taken by leaders across all sectors.

This means working together to create the conditions that foster engagement among youth while reducing the barriers that restrict their participation. Among other things, we need to find ways to provide all youth with civic education tools and opportunities, bridge the gap between young people and politicians, make politics relevant to youth and reach out to those least likely to participate. To be effective, such work needs to take place on an ongoing basis between elections – and not only at election time.

The need for collaborative action raises the question: who must be included? Stakeholders who work with and represent youth are clearly essential, as are those with expertise in engagement, education and civic participation more broadly. A cross-sectoral approach that involves stakeholders from civil society, the private sector and government is crucial, including educators, youth-serving organizations, student federations, private sector organizations, post-secondary institutions, members of the media and government agencies. Groups representing diverse segments of the

youth population – such as those representing Aboriginal youth and ethnocultural youth – must also be included.

The National Roundtable on Youth Voter Engagement will provide a forum for representatives from these organizations to discuss priorities and identify action areas to begin reversing declining youth voter turnout within a larger collaborative framework.

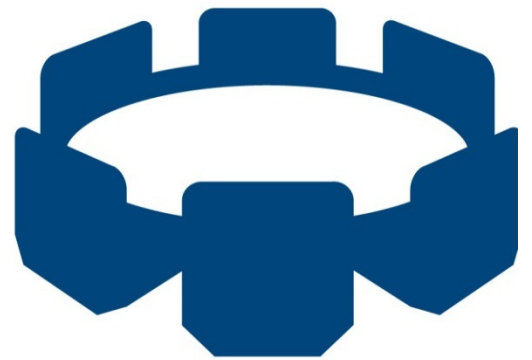
Ensuring Success

In thinking about what we might accomplish as a group, it is important to consider those areas where there is the greatest potential for (and interest in) collaboration and action.

Roundtable participants will be tasked with two objectives. First, **developing a shared understanding of the issue** will centre on identifying which motivational factors can be most effectively addressed through collective, cross-sector action. Second, **agreeing on actions that can be taken** will focus on prioritizing actions, outlining needs and identifying potential leaders. While the input of participants during the roundtable will determine which themes should be central to the discussion, existing research suggests certain thematic areas worthy of consideration. These themes include:

1. Reaching the hard-to-reach – how do we reach those youth who are the least likely to vote and who may largely be outside established networks?
2. Increasing political knowledge – what are the essential tools and resources youth need to understand politics? How can we make these available both inside and outside the classroom?
3. Bridging the gap between youth and politicians – how do we build connections between youth and politicians?
4. Supporting participation at multiple levels – how can we encourage local civic participation as a bridge to voting?
5. Getting parents involved – how do we better leverage parents as primary political influencers? What kinds of tools can help facilitate this?
6. Making politics and participation relevant and the norm – how do we overcome the disconnect many youth feel with politics? While civic duty is clearly important, what other attitudes and values can be fostered to make politics and participation relevant and normal for youth?
7. Others?

Addendum: For further research into motivational and access barriers, please consult The National Youth Survey, conducted by Elections Canada following the May 2011 federal election. This study found that while access barriers are important, motivational factors have a greater impact on the decision not to vote. The National Youth Survey report is available [here](#).



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