



Background Paper

Youth Civic Engagement

Publication No. 2010-23-E
8 April 2010

Marion Ménard

Social Affairs Division
Parliamentary Information and Research Service

**Youth Civic Engagement
(Background Paper)**

HTML and PDF versions of this publication are available on Intraparl (the parliamentary intranet) and on the Parliament of Canada website.

In the electronic versions, a number of the endnote entries contain hyperlinks to referenced resources.

Ce document est également publié en français.

Library of Parliament **Background Papers** present and analyze various aspects of current issues in an objective, impartial manner. They are prepared by the Parliamentary Information and Research Service, which carries out research for and provides information and analysis to parliamentarians and Senate and House of Commons committees and parliamentary associations.

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION.....	1
2	WHAT IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?	1
3	HOW DOES CIVIC ENGAGEMENT DEVELOP?.....	2
3.1	Family.....	2
3.2	School.....	2
3.3	Media.....	3
4	WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?.....	3
5	WHY DO YOUTH DISENGAGE FROM CIVIC LIFE?.....	4
6	CONCLUSION.....	5

YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT*

1 INTRODUCTION

The role of young people as a social and political force is largely a recent feature in Western societies. In the 1960s, opposition to the Vietnam War, the struggle against racial inequality in the United States and the events of May 1968 in France were high points in youth political assertiveness.

Today, however, young people seem to exhibit disengagement from the civic sphere and a general loss of interest in public affairs. This phenomenon has been reported in numerous countries, including the United Kingdom,¹ the United States² and Canada.³

However, we should not be too hasty to declare this disengagement absolute or irreversible. A number of factors are working against this trend, the education process chief among them. While the international context may have changed since the 1960s – the Cold War, for example, is no longer a source of tension – various other major issues, such as environmental protection, have come to the fore. Nor should anyone underestimate the fact that the Internet and social media have changed the way in which young people communicate among themselves and, very likely, the ways in which they can and want to engage in civic life.⁴

This document provides a brief overview of this issue. First, it presents a definition of civic engagement and examines how it develops in each person. It then outlines some of the benefits of youth civic engagement and, lastly, certain factors that may explain youth disengagement.

2 WHAT IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

Generally speaking, civic engagement results when citizens acquire behaviours and attitudes that express their will to get involved in their society or community in a manner consistent with democratic principles. This can include involvement in community and volunteer organizations.

Civic engagement is broader than political engagement in that it can include service to the community through involvement in health, in education and in charitable organizations. Political engagement is a more targeted aspect of civic engagement and is expressed through voting, demonstrations, signing petitions and work with political organizations.

Child development researcher Aida Balsano defines youth civic engagement as “the set of youth behaviours and activities that benefit both youth and community organizations or institutions that serve civil society.”⁵ This definition is noteworthy for its emphasis on the benefits of civic engagement for both the individual and the community.

3 HOW DOES CIVIC ENGAGEMENT DEVELOP?

The habit of community engagement generally forms between the ages of 15 and 20. It is the result of socialization, the process whereby individuals, throughout their lives, internalize the socio-cultural elements of their environment and in so doing adapt to the political and social context in which they live. Family and school have always been two of the most important socialization factors, but the significant role played by the media in today's world must not be overlooked.

3.1 FAMILY

Obviously, the family is a very strong locus of socialization.⁶ Parents and other family members exercise the primary role in shaping children's personalities. The discussions that young children have within the family are their first meaningful experiences with debating ideas and with self-assertion and self-affirmation.

This intuitive observation was corroborated by Constance Flanagan and her colleagues in 1995 in an investigation into the roles of school and the family in the emergence of civic engagement in a number of countries. The study looked at 5,579 young people between the ages of 12 and 18 in three countries recognized as democratically stable (Australia, Sweden and the United States) and in four transitionally democratic countries previously located in the East Block (Russia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Hungary). The study's main finding was that youths were more likely to engage civically when their families instilled social values and a sense of social responsibility in them.

3.2 SCHOOL

School is another important socialization environment. It is a "social microcosm," where young people first learn about democracy through dealings with their peers.⁷ At school, students discover that they are their neighbours' equals and that their actions can affect their neighbours. They must negotiate and discuss matters in a civilized way without resorting to violence. School is a place for personal assertiveness separate from the family unit, and it also affords youths their first experience with the electoral process when they help to choose their student council.

In multicultural countries like Canada, school gives newcomers their first contact with the host society's standards.⁸ As societies become increasingly ethno-culturally diverse, the place of school as a centre for socialization and for learning the dominant society's standards is critical.⁹

Experience and research show that organizations pursuing educational objectives that do not have the compulsory character of school are places where initial forms of community engagement can also be expressed. These include the scouting movement and 4-H clubs, where young people can see for themselves the possibilities for and necessity of working as a team.¹⁰

3.3 MEDIA

The role of the media as a socialization agent conducive to the development of civic engagement should not be overlooked. Today, self-image and the image of others are no longer developed solely through interpersonal relations: they are also shaped by the media.

It can be assumed that the exponential spread of the Internet and the ever-growing popularity of social media are having an impact on youth civic engagement.¹¹ Through the Internet, it is now possible to access, almost instantaneously, information from foreign countries that previously took days, weeks or months to arrive. Issues of public interest no longer know borders, and people can now debate them almost instantly with anyone anywhere on the planet.

4 WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

Civic engagement has positive effects for individuals, including young people, and for the community.

At the individual level, American researchers James Youniss and Miranda Yates surveyed 44 studies that explored the impact of youth participation in community life.¹² Most of those studies found that civically engaged young Americans 12 to 24 years of age were more likely than unengaged youths to meet personal and social challenges and to control their own lives. They enjoyed higher self-esteem and a more acute sense of their abilities. Other researchers have defined those five abilities as follows:

- a general improvement in social and school/university skills
- greater self-confidence
- reinforced ties with family and peers
- reinforced moral values and integrity
- compassion for others¹³

At the community level, participation by young people – an important segment of society – enhances the legitimacy of the decision-making process conducted by leaders. This is particularly true in education, where young people are the first ones affected by decisions made by leaders.¹⁴

The United Nations, for example, emphasizes that youth must be consulted at all stages – in the development and implementation of public policy as well as in its evaluation.¹⁵ The right of young people to lobby must be acknowledged and accepted, even though they do not have the same financial or human resources as better organized groups. This, moreover, is a factor that, by means of a virtuous circle, could promote greater civic engagement on their part.

5 WHY DO YOUTH DISENGAGE FROM CIVIC LIFE?

Robert D. Putnam of Harvard University studied civic disengagement and the decline of “social capital”¹⁶ closely in the 1990s. The publication in 2000 of his book on political disengagement among Americans, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, triggered widespread reaction.

To summarize, Putnam believes that declining memberships in local organizations have resulted in a loss of opportunities to discuss matters of common interest and community affairs. In a presentation to the Canadian Centre for Management Development, he suggested a number of other factors that may explain civic disengagement:

- Demographic factors: Two-income families and upheavals in the family structure (e.g., divorce, rising numbers choosing to remain single). However, women in the labour market may be more inclined toward community participation and civic engagement.
- Age group factors: Older people are more likely to be civically engaged than youth.
- Technological progress, in areas such as television, which Putnam believes is likely the main factor isolating Americans from one another.
- The expansion of governments and the strength of bureaucracies.¹⁷ Putnam cites the urban renewal programs of the 1960s: physical capital was renewed at the expense of social capital.

These factors may of course partly explain civic disengagement among young people, but other assumptions must also be made. For example, living in communities where insecurity and violence predominate and poverty is a daily reality may explain why some young people no longer want to get more involved in society. Lack of safety leads to feelings of mistrust of adults and of those who are supposed to protect young people.¹⁸

Civic disengagement is probably the most apparent in the area of democratic participation. Some researchers have emphasized that multicultural societies find it hard to promote civic engagement among youth from socio-cultural backgrounds that differ from that of the core cultural group. Sometimes the consequence of diversity among youth is a different vision of participation in democratic life.¹⁹

Other American researchers contend that adults may have a negative perception of youth and their ability to take a genuine part in the democratic process. This perception breeds mutual mistrust, which makes cooperation between the two groups difficult.²⁰ Building bridges with older generations and working in cooperation with them is a continuous and often difficult matter of starting over again.

A British researcher, Murray Print, identifies deficiencies in civic education that may help to explain the ignorance of young people of all ages of their political institutions.²¹ We know that today’s youth are less informed and politicized than

young people in previous generations. They know less about the political system and its workings and players, and people whose political knowledge is lacking are generally less inclined to vote. Print has suggested adding civic education programs to the British curriculum to remedy the situation.²² In his view, it is more a matter of political indifference than disillusionment or cynicism that keeps young people away from the polling stations. While the older generations consider voting a responsibility or an obligation rooted in the most elementary privilege of citizenship, apparently many young people do not.

Youth mistrust of politics and politicians also should not be overlooked as an explanation for low voter turnout among young people. Young people do not think that politicians' decisions affect them directly,²³ they do not believe that casting a vote every few years can have a genuine influence on the decision-making process, and they are skeptical about a system that concentrates power in the hands of the executive to the detriment of the legislative branch. Election platforms do not appeal to them either; they do not view them as addressing issues important to them. These beliefs are not substantially different from those held by some of their older fellow citizens.

6 CONCLUSION

In a democracy, the presence of citizens who care about their society's affairs – political, social, charitable, and so on – is a positive social factor. Civic engagement is in a sense the very expression of a society's stability and of its looking to the future, that is to say its survival.

This is why it is important for a society's younger citizens to develop a sense of civic engagement, which is not innate, but rather acquired. It is also why it is important to give young people the reasons and means to acquire the basic civic skills that will prepare them to become engaged citizens.

NOTES

- * See also the following two Library of Parliament publications on youth electoral participation: Andre Barnes, *Youth Voter Turnout in Canada: 1. Trends and Issues*, Publication no. 2010-19-E, 7 April 2010; and Marion Ménard, *Youth Voter Turnout in Canada : 2. Reasons for the Decline and Efforts to Increase Participation*, Publication no. 2010-21-E, 20 April 2010.
- 1. Ben Kisby and James Sloam, "Revitalising Politics: The Role of Citizenship Education," *Representation*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2009.
- 2. Judith Torney-Purta, "The School's Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-Eight Countries," *Applied Developmental Science*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2002, p. 204.
- 3. Centre for Research and Information on Canada, *Canadian Democracy: Bringing Youth Back Into the Political Process*, CRIC Papers #15, December 2004.

4. Josh Pasek, Eian More and Daniel Romer, "Realizing the Social Internet? Online Social Networking Meets Offline," *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2009.
5. Aida Balsano, "Youth Civic Engagement in the United States: Understanding and Addressing the Impact of Social Impediments on Positive Youth and Community Development," *Applied Developmental Science*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2005, p. 188.
6. Constance Flanagan, Jennifer Bowes and Britta Jonsson, "Ties that Bind: Correlates of Adolescents' Civic Commitments in Seven Countries," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 1998.
7. Ibid., p. 462. See also Torney-Purta (2002).
8. Ellen Claes, Marc Hooghe and Dietlind Stolle, "The Political Socialization of Adolescents in Canada: Differential Effects of Civic Education on Visible Minorities," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 2009.
9. It is interesting to note that Flanagan, Bowes and Jonsson (1998) observed that schools in countries experiencing democratic transition did not seem to rank the acquisition of civic skills very highly. Under former regimes, those schools were used to minimize differences among individuals and to homogenize the population within the spirit of the dominant ideology.
10. Flanagan, Bowes and Jonsson (1998), p. 461.
11. Pasek, More and Romer (2009).
12. James Youniss and Miranda Yates, "A Developmental Perspective on Community Service in Adolescence," *Social Development*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1996.
13. Richard Lerner, Celia Fisher and Richard Weinberg, "Toward a Science for and of the People: Promoting Civil Society through the Application of Developmental Science," *Child Development*, February 2000, Vol. 71, p. 16.
14. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Chapter 10, "Youth Participation in Decision-Making," in *World Youth Report 2003 – The global situation of young people*, 2004, p. 274.
15. Ibid.
16. See Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon and Schuster, 2000. Putnam defines social capital as the aspects of our community life that make us more productive: a high level of participation, trust and reciprocity.
17. Robert D. Putnam, *The Decline of Civil Society: How Come? So What?* Canadian Centre for Management Development, 1996.
18. F. Dubet and D. Martuccelli, *Dans quelle société vivons-nous?* Seuil, Paris, 1998, p. 289.
19. Claes, Hooghe and Stolle (2009).
20. Daniel Hart and Robert Atkins, "Civic Competence in Urban Youth," *Applied Developmental Science*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2002.
21. Murray Print, "Citizenship Education and Youth Participation in Democracy," *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 3, September 2007.
22. Ibid.
23. Gina Bishop and Rebecca Low, "Exploring Young Canadians' Attitudes Towards Government, Politics and Community," Centre for Research and Information on Canada, 2004.