
Why Youth Do Not Vote?

by Emily-Anne Paul

Since the 1970s scholars estimate that youth turnout is twenty per cent lower than turnout amongst baby boomers born between 1945 and 1950. Kids these days are not forming the habits that their parents did. They are not becoming civically engaged once they become eligible to vote and they are not voting or even moving towards voting as they grow older. This article looks at a project by the British Columbia Legislative Interns to address the problem of voter turnout among youth.

Youth are not voting. This is not meant as an unfair statement or as an absolute but it is true compared to youth historically throughout Western democracies. Not only are youth not voting, scholars have found that in many instances youth are not volunteering or participating in extracurricular activities. Yet youth are graduating from high school and going on to post secondary education, having families and participating in society. They just do not seem to be voting or engaging politically.

In reflecting on existing research, it is evident that very few people from any age group are voting. Over the last twenty years, voter turnout in Canada has been steadily declining. At the federal level turnout in the 1984 election was at 75 percent, whereas it was 61 percent in the 2000 election and 59 percent in 2008. In our most recent British Columbia provincial election, voter turnout was at 53 percent. Keep in mind these are percentages of registered voters, so in actuality the number of people not voting or engaging is higher.

It is not that youth are unaffected by what politicians do. They pay rent, get jobs and pay tuition. Why is it that they are not making the connection between their needs and their responsibility to vote?

Scholars have identified reasons why youth do not become engaged including their stage in life, mobility, single-hood, lower political knowledge, reaching

political adulthood in an atmosphere of political uncompetitiveness, declining levels of civic duty, a preference for non-electoral political participation, and value change associated with a 'decline of deference.' As highlighted by Richard Neimi, "political ideas—like the consumption of cigarettes and hard liquor—do not suddenly begin with one's eighteenth birthday."¹

In addition, youth seem to lack the motivation, opportunity and ability to get engaged. As Elizabeth Smith outlines, American youth are not developing the "habits of acting together"² that de Tocqueville advocated were at the heart of democracy. Instead, they are increasingly less likely to become engaged and participate in politics. Something is breaking the social trust and this combined with low participation and engagement is threatening the foundations of democratic society. The result of this is that people are depending on a government controlled by fewer and fewer people. That is not democratic.

Research on trends relating to elections and engagement illustrate that voting comes from formed habits. Once the connection has been made and the knowledge to make decisions has been acquired, it is possible to continue to vote and maintain that engagement. This is as true for adults as it for youth. Socialization, behaviour and development all contribute to the connection that is made between the environment in which youth live and their responsibility to vote.

As Michael Delli Carpini highlights in an article on youth engagement, youth are less trusting, interested in and knowledgeable about politics, likely to read the

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news, register to vote, do more than vote, participate in civic associations and connect with others to solve problems collectively. Youth are all around less engaged than they were 30 years ago.³

That having been said, there is no evidence that youth do not care. Research conducted on high school students in Ontario suggests that nearly 80 percent of adolescents have expressed a clear opinion about their engagement and behaviour as future voters.⁴ However, Elections Canada estimates that youth voter turnout (those between 18 and 24 years) is around 40 percent. This is down from 70 percent in the 1970s. So the question remains, what has caused this decline?

Some academics have hypothesized that because youth in North America have not faced the same struggles for democracy as those before them did, they are not as engaged. Others argue that engagement is developmental and acquired through education. In other words, voting patterns change when children and youth are educated about the importance of voting; in the early stages of development, they learn the habits that make them civic participants throughout their lives.

British Columbia Legislative Intern Project

The 2009 BC Legislative Interns developed a student education day designed to increase the amount of knowledge and understanding young people have of government and to facilitate the very habits required to increase voter turnout. This would theoretically catch the students before they can vote, during the developmental stage, give them time to think about voting and politics, and then become engaged in their community and make a difference in upcoming elections.

The program developed was not designed on its own to be a catalyst for change, but rather a building block that fits as part of a greater continuum of engagement that must start when people are young. As the students who participated ranged from grades 10-12, they were each in different stages of developing their opinions, and thus the Interns' presentation was meant as a piece of the greater picture of civic awareness.

The Interns invited a group of students from Mount Douglas Secondary School in Victoria, British Columbia to the BC Legislature. The day started with a quiz in order to determine how much attention the students typically pay to politics, what issues they feel are important and what they believe the role of the legislature is. This was followed by a presentation by E. George MacMinn, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, who gave them a history of parliamentary tradition,

the role of the British Columbia Legislature and of the MLAs. The Interns then made a presentation which introduced, in depth, issues and politics throughout the province.

After a tour of the legislative buildings, the students were placed in groups to participate in café-style discussions. Each group had two Interns; a moderator and a rappateur. The purpose of these discussions was to engage the students in focused conversation about issues they have opinions on and basic knowledge of. In order to ensure they had enough information to participate comfortably in the discussion, a backgrounder of key issues was provided during the Intern presentation and topics were chosen based on what were key issues in the province as demonstrated in the most recent provincial election and general news coverage.

The students were given the opportunity to discuss the challenges facing the Downtown East Side of Vancouver (homelessness, drug addiction, housing), and the environment (carbon tax and climate change). The topics of the environment and homelessness featured in the election, but they were also topics which the Interns were exposed to throughout their internship program, thus making it an enriching experience for both the Interns and the students. Furthermore, the Interns were available to provide additional factual information and to help the students engage fully throughout the discussion.

They say knowledge is power, so we, the Interns, thought if we give the students the knowledge; they will know what to do with the power. It is impossible to measure the impact the Interns have had on those students, except to say that the response to the surveys at the end of the day, and additional feedback provided by their sponsor teacher was very positive and reflected understanding of the day's content.

In order to measure the success of the event, the Interns issued surveys at the beginning and the end of the day. Of those surveys at the beginning of the day, two students stated they followed politics a lot, 13 reported a little and 3 reported none. By the end of the day, 12 reported that they would pay more attention, 4 thought they might pay attention and 2 reported their attention would not change. Of those 3 who noted that they did not follow politics at the start of the day, they indicated that they had learned a lot more and had a better understanding of politics.

In British Columbia, we are at a crossroads. It is clear that voters do not want the proposed electoral reform, having thoroughly defeated BCSTV in the

second referendum. But the question remains, what do they want? Are residents so content with the current situation that they believe voting is not worth it? Is the status quo the best option? What is leading to this decline? Who has a role to play?

As Interns, we left each work day with a never ending list of questions about voting and electoral reform. We constantly debated the merits of changing the system, versus changing the people in it. However, we are engaged, we are part of a small group of people who participate in the workings of democratic government. So the question remains, how do we engage others?

Civic engagement and participation comes from knowledge. It comes from developing habits and opinions, from challenging and defending those opinions and from interacting with others. It comes from accessing and assimilating information. In order to contribute to the greater learning process for a group of students at Mount Douglas Secondary School, the

2009 BC Legislative Interns set out to facilitate the very lessons that start the civic ball rolling. Collectively, we agreed that the event was successful. If all we did was teach 18 students about the merits of engagement, that is 18 more than before.

Notes

1. Richard Niemi in Cameron Anderson, and Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant, "Youth Turnout: Adolescents' Attitudes in Ontario", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 41, (2008), pp. 697-718.
2. Elizabeth Smith. "The Effects of Investments in the Social Capital of Youth on Political and Civic Behaviour in Young Adulthood: A longitudinal Analysis." *Political Psychology*, Vol. 20. No. 3, (1999), pp. 553-580.
3. Michael X. Delli Carpini. "Gen.Com: Youth, Civic Engagement, and the New Information Environment." *Political Communication*, Vol. 17, (2000), pp. 341-349.
4. Cameron Anderson and Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant, *op. cit.*