

Youth Do Get the Bug for Democracy

By

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Canada's political parties tend to ignore young voters "because so few vote." Political scientists have found that only 30% actually vote. Some say they have trouble getting registered and others don't think voting brings about positive change and that politicians have nothing of interest to say to them.

But the parties need to wake up and realize we all have a lot to gain by engaging young Canadian voters. These people are fully committed to democracy and they have a lot to say.

We say this as a result of our experience with a national dialogue for young people organized by Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN). The question for participants was quite simply, "What kind of Canada do you want and what will you do to bring it about?" After three days' experience in deliberative dialogue informed by wise advice from young people themselves, close to 150 randomly selected youth (18-25) got the political bug. Their evaluation of the experience was overwhelmingly positive: over 90% were positive about the dialogue and over 80% said they are now more likely to become involved with public issues.

They came from all provinces and the North. Some had not finished high school, others were running their own businesses or working on a Ph.D. Many work part-time. In French and in English, they talked through the major policy challenges important to them – the environment, work, learning, and health.

At the end of three days of deliberation, 80% wrote a letter to themselves making commitments for how they would try to build a better Canada. About 75% of those commitments involved becoming more politically engaged. For example, they plan to vote, become actively involved in their community, join organizations, become more informed, write letters to their MP or MLA or inform friends and family.

They were given balanced and accessible information, space and respect to have an informed discussion about public policy issues, and though many came wondering what

politics has to do with them, they left understanding the myriad connections between policy decisions and their everyday lives. The three days they spent together in discussion about issues important to them, gave them greater confidence. They left convinced that they have important things to say and that by exercising their rights and responsibilities as citizens to be involved, their voices will be heard.

One participant wrote us to say that she had a rich experience talking to people of all ages about the experience. She returned to her home town, spoke with some teachers, and “next week I get to talk to youth about the importance of staying in high school . . . even if you have no intention of going on to post-secondary, why it’s important to vote and enact change. . . . And I will run for Parliament (in a few years).”

Other participants decided at the meeting to go back to school to finish their education. One said “I need to know more to be able to understand what is happening in this country and to look after the future of my son.”

This shows what a taste of engagement can contribute to civic education. “I felt that everyone was very mature and expressive in dialogue and that although we were pressed for time, we did reach many useful and important conclusions.”

So what kind of Canada do young people want, you might ask? Here are just a few highlights:

Young Canadians called for common standards across the country because they see a need for a more united country, and urgency to work together. They were very disturbed by disparities in services to the public, and spoke passionately about the pain of losing credits for a year of high school or college just because they choose to move to a new institution in another part of the country.

They have a holistic and long term view of the environment and health. They expect their governments to demonstrate leadership by taking bold steps to advance sustainability and prevention and they expect individuals including themselves to take more responsibility.

They want multiple paths for learning new skills, responding to different learning styles and aptitudes and educational qualifications for work that allow them to be mobile.

And they want democratic institutions that are less adversarial, while being more responsive to the voices and needs of young people. In return, they are committed to active citizenship on their own part.

So the next step is up to you, political parties and electoral candidates. You need to engage with young adults by creating spaces for conversation about “stuff that matters” – learning, work, health, environment. Find out what is not working for them before you run for office. Don’t preach at them. Demonstrate that you can listen and that you want to represent them in places where you can be heard. Give them confidence that you are ready to listen and respond, and that their views will make a difference.

Our dialogue participants have gone home to make waves. We will all be the beneficiaries as they become engaged citizens. They have given us a sense of hope for the future of Canada.

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