

Indifferent or Just Different? The Political and Civic Engagement of Young People in Canada

Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation

Brenda O'Neill

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1. *A Group Apart: Young Party Members in Canada* – Lisa Young and William Cross
2. *Indifferent or Just Different? The Political and Civic Engagement of Young People in Canada* – Brenda O'Neill
3. *The Meaning of Political Participation for Indigenous Youth* – Taiaiake Alfred, Jackie Price and Brock Pitawanakwat
4. *Rendre compte et soutenir l'action bénévole des jeunes* – André Thibault, Patrice Albertus and Julie Fortier
5. *The State and Potential of Civic Learning in Canada* – Kristina R. Llewellyn, Sharon Cook, Joel Westheimer, Luz Alison Molina Girón and Karen Suurtamm
6. *"What Do You Mean I Can't Have a Say?" Young Canadians and Their Government* – André Turcotte

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Contents

Executive Summary iii

Acknowledgements..... v

Introduction 1

Youth as a Group Worthy of Attention 2

Youth Engagement – Patterns and Trends 6

 Voting 6

 Political Organizations..... 8

 Non-Traditional Political Activity..... 11

 Psychological Dimension of Politics – Interest, Knowledge and Attitudes 13

 Civic Engagement – Volunteering and Participating..... 17

 Indifferent or Just Different?..... 20

Youth Not a Homogeneous Group..... 21

Explaining Youth Engagement Patterns 24

Future Research Directions 29

 Cellphones and Computers 29

 Methodological Considerations 30

Policy Considerations..... 31

References 33

Figures

Figure 1. Age as a Determinant of Political and Civic Engagement..... 5

Figure 2. Estimated Turnout by Age Group – 2004 Federal Election..... 7

Figure 3. Political Party and Interest Group Membership by Age, 2000 10

Figure 4. Participation in Non-Traditional Political Activities by Age, 2003 12

Figure 5. Political Knowledge by Age, 2000 14

Figure 6. Attention to the News and News Source by Age, 2003 16

Figure 7. Volunteering and Participation Rates by Age Group, 2004..... 19

Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive review of the literature addressing youth political and civic engagement in Canada to identify the state of existing knowledge in the area and any research gaps that remain. It concludes with a set of policy considerations for increasing youth engagement.

Young Canadians display a pattern of civic and political engagement that differentiates them from other Canadians. They are less likely to vote, are less likely to be members of political parties and interest groups, are less interested in politics and know less about politics than other Canadians.

Young Canadians are not, however, indifferent to politics. On the contrary, they show levels of engagement in non-traditional political activities – signing petitions, boycotting and buycotting – that are similar to those of other Canadians. They are also more likely than other Canadians to participate in political demonstrations, to volunteer and to be members of a group or organization. Rather than being indifferent or apathetic, their engagement is merely different.

Researchers have suggested that the pattern of engagement among youth reveals a shift toward more individualized and private forms of activity, due in part to their increased political sophistication and cognitive mobilization. The relative withdrawal from traditional forms of political engagement might be due to the hierarchical, long-term and relatively unsatisfying nature of such activity.

Numerous explanations for the pattern of engagement among young Canadians have been identified. In spite of increases in education, political knowledge does not appear to have increased among recent generations, resulting in the absence of increased participation. Paying less attention to the news has also been suggested as a possible explanation for a decline in traditional political activity. Others point to the media's role in discouraging engagement; the fault may lie more with the choice of content and the format of news coverage than it does with young people. The importance of civics education, and of education more generally, for political engagement has also been identified and addressed in the literature. Political socialization has reappeared for its role in shaping the development of political beliefs, values and behaviours of young people. Postmaterialism and cognitive mobilization are two broader societal level changes that have received attention as potential explanations for modern patterns of engagement. Whether recent election campaigns have failed to address issues of importance to youth and, as a result, can be blamed for failing to engage them remains a contested explanation. The failure of organizations such as political parties in encouraging youth participation has also been suggested.

Based on a review of the literature on youth engagement, the following research areas are identified as deserving of further attention:

- The intersectionality of youth and other identities in shaping political and civic engagement (Included among these are socio-economic status, gender, Aboriginal status, ethnicity, immigrant status and visible minority status. How these identities vary across urban/rural and regional dimensions in Canada is also not well understood.)
- The linkages across civic engagement, traditional political engagement and non-traditional political engagement (Questions remain about which of these behaviours drives, if at all, the others and whether activity of one type is added to rather than replaces activities of another type.)
- The role of organizations, the political system and the media in encouraging and/or discouraging youth engagement

- The role of civics education and service learning in encouraging and/or discouraging youth engagement
- Political socialization and, in particular, the role of the family, peer groups and associations in shaping political interest, political knowledge and political activity
- The shift to new individualized and private forms of engagement and the related shift in the conceptualization of citizenship among younger generations
- The role of new information and communication technologies – cellphones and the Internet – in the political expression, activism and engagement of youth
- Attention to the manner in which methodological choices and traditional models of political engagement might blind researchers to the changing nature and tools of engagement among youth

Finally, the following policy considerations are offered:

- Policy designed to address youth engagement must avoid the temptation to reflect a “one size fits all” framework. Among young Canadians, women, Aboriginal populations, immigrants, visible minorities, the poor and the less educated face a particular set of difficulties that make it especially difficult to address their participatory disadvantages.
- Evidence suggests that young Canadians may be shifting to individualized results-oriented political action rather than withdrawing from politics altogether. Such a shift leaves open the possibility that policy decisions made by representative political institutions are less likely to reflect their values and desires. As such, policy ought not to overlook the importance of instilling in young Canadians the desire and motivation to participate in electoral politics.
- Young Canadians ought to be encouraged to engage in individualized results-oriented political action. Policies designed to assist volunteer organizations in their recruitment, organization, development and other functions, for example, increase the outlets available for engagement.
- Governments ought to focus the lens inward to consider how institutions and processes may no longer “speak” to the youngest citizens and how they may even discourage their participation. For the cognitively mobilized, the formal processes and hierarchical organizations of representative politics provide little in the way of satisfying and results-oriented practices. Wherever possible, participatory decision-making structures ought to be adopted, fully supported and implemented. This necessarily involves the ceding of a measure of political power but brings with it a host of benefits in the form of an engaged, informed and involved citizenry.
- Civics education stands as an effective, if not the most effective, mechanism for addressing deficiencies in political knowledge and understanding of the public responsibilities associated with citizenship. Accommodating the needs of educators in their attempt to assume this responsibility ought to be a priority.
- Families are a primary agent of political socialization in that they impart political information and knowledge both directly and indirectly, transmit beliefs and values regarding the political system and provide role models of political engagement. Governments ought to include families as important agents in policies designed to assist youth engagement.

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Indifferent or Just Different? The Political and Civic Engagement of Young People in Canada¹

Introduction

Many Western democracies have experienced a common phenomenon in recent years – that of declining voter turnout. The trend has generated interest and concern as much for what it says about past and current electoral behaviour as for its predictions for the future in numerous liberal democracies. One aspect of this phenomenon has generated considerable attention: the turnout rates of youth. This focused attention stems from research evidence suggesting that much of the drop can be explained by declining participation rates among young people. Why rates are dropping to such an extent among one demographic in particular remains the topic of much research; in spite of the research energy that has been devoted to this question, many questions remain.

Election turnout remains an important marker for the health of any democracy because democratic systems are premised on the participation of a significant number of citizens in their processes. And elections are a democratic process requiring very little in the way of individual effort. Importantly, however, elections are only one element of participation; research attention has also been focused on rates of participation in additional processes and across various organizations. When the lens is widened to include these additional considerations, the story of young people's participation is less straightforward yet equally deserving of increased research attention.

This paper aims to review the literature focusing on the political and civic engagement of young Canadians to identify the state of existing knowledge in the area and any research gaps that remain. What helps to explain young Canadians' willingness to engage in politics? How does their political participation differ from their civic engagement more broadly? Are a reconceptualization of political and civic engagement and a remodelling of the forces that structure them needed? Canadian trends are not unique, and therefore research conducted in other Western democracies is included in this review when it helps to shed light on Canadian engagement trends.

The difficulty in conducting research on these questions lies in the fact that explaining the changing nature of participation *over time* requires data that track participation patterns *over time* (normally referred to as longitudinal data), preferably panel data since they allow for a clear investigation into how changing social processes directly affect social behaviour.² Such data are not readily available, however, due to both time and resource constraints. Cross-sectional data compared over time provide a useful alternative, but such investigations are sometimes limited

¹ The author wishes to thank Janine Marshall for research assistance with this paper and the young Canadians who participated in the "Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation" workshop in March 2007. Thanks as well to the anonymous reviewers of the papers, CPRN, the members of the Project Advisory Group and the members of the May 16th roundtable for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier version of the paper. Any errors or omissions remain my own.

² Panel studies are those that "monitor specific organizations or individuals over time" (Jackson and Verberg, 2007: 119).

by changes in questions, wording or the absence of particular variables at particular time periods. As a result, some of the research in this area instead relies on cross-sectional survey data from which inferences on the factors influencing changes in social behaviour are drawn.³ Although this approach certainly allows for inferences to be made about the changing nature of participation and engagement over time, it is a less than satisfactory research strategy.

A review of youth participation ought to begin with a review of the various avenues available for participation. Participation, at the very least, requires some action on the part of individuals. A distinction is normally made between political participation and civic participation. The former refers to the formal arena of politics: political parties, elections, interest groups, social movements and protest behaviour. Civic participation, on the other hand, extends to include participation in community activities, normally those designed to bring about some social good (often in the form of a policy change or program implementation), as well as social organizations. Not all such participation is equal in terms of individual and social benefits. Individual benefits can include the development of specific skills, knowledge, interest and networks, which in turn can generate further participation. Social benefits include the development of social capital (which has been argued to consist of levels of trust and networks that can assist with community decision making) and tolerance (Putnam, 2000).

Participation also can be distinguished from engagement in that engagement normally adds the psychological dimension of participation; in addition to action, political beliefs and attitudes are also of interest. Political interest, political knowledge and political efficacy are among the commonly identified and investigated forms of political engagement.

Given these definitions, the paper's focus on youth engagement casts a fairly wide net: the degree to which youth engage with the political system and the wider civic community both in a behavioural and a psychological manner. The wide net most definitely means that the generalizations will be broad in scope, but a more narrow focus runs the risk of neglecting important, and potentially unique, elements of youth political and civic engagement.

The paper begins by outlining a rationale for studying youth in Canada and proceeds to describe recent trends in youth civic and political engagement in Canada. It then reviews how engagement varies across young Canadians; like all generalizations, modelling "youth engagement" necessarily glosses over some important differences in engagement among groups within the cohort. The paper then moves on to review the various explanations that have been put forward to explain the changing nature of engagement among youth. It closes by identifying future research directions and policy considerations for increasing youth engagement.

Youth as a Group Worthy of Attention

Age has long been considered one of the key determinants of variation in political attitudes and behaviour (Dalton, 2006). The manner in which age can influence political behaviour is two-fold: life cycle and generational effects. The former refers to the fact that the nature of responsibilities and experiences varies over an individual's lifetime. Early in life one is likely to be focused on one's education, in middle age individuals are more likely to be occupied with

³ Cross-sectional studies are those that examine a set of variables for cases at one point in time.

their families, children and homes, and in older age the focus shifts to retirement and health concerns. While the precise nature of the experiences can vary, the key dynamic is the shift in those experiences over time, which translates into shifts in political interest, attitudes, values and behaviour. In short, the stage of life that an individual is in shapes to a certain degree his or her political outlook and political behaviour. Most studies have found that most measures of political and civic engagement generally increase with age, although there is often a slight reversal of the political relationship in the latter stages of life.

The second explanation, generational effects, argues that political attitudes and behaviour are shaped by events and circumstances at play during one's formative years – that is, as one comes of age. People who were young adults during the 1960s, so the argument goes, are likely to possess attitudes and engage in behaviour shaped by the events and culture of those times. The most influential articulation of this argument, Inglehart's (1997) postmaterialism thesis, argues that, in Western democracies, more recent generations express beliefs and behaviour that are decidedly different from earlier generations because they have not experienced the hardship and failure to meet material needs that comes with times of war and economic downturn such as the Great Depression. As such, recent generations (referred to as "cohorts") have moved beyond material needs to focus on "higher order" issues such as environmentalism and human rights. An example of generational analysis is the cognitive mobilization thesis (reviewed below), which argues that recent generations express different political beliefs and behaviour given their increased level of education. Explanations for changes in attitudes and behaviour focusing on generational influences examine whether individuals in certain birth cohorts today think and act in ways similar to the same cohort in the past. Life cycle and generational effects are often both at play in shaping political and civic engagement; the difficulty lies in trying to disentangle their independent effects. In the end, age has always been a variable of particular interest to those who examine political behaviour.

Why has such attention been directed of late to the political and civic behaviour of the young? The trend originates from evidence suggesting that recent declines in voter turnout stem from dropping turnout rates among the youngest cohorts. This phenomenon, addressed below, has produced a significant degree of research directed at trying to uncover how and why recent generations of Canadians differ from previous ones and to linking these changes to changing patterns of political and civic engagement. According to Norris (2003: 2), the research suggests that young people are "either apathetic (at best) or alienated (at worst)" from the political system. As will be reviewed, wider trends in the civic and political engagement among youth provide some cause for concern in that they suggest this disaffection is not exclusive to electoral politics. And the phenomenon is not limited to Canada. A recent European report noted that limited political and societal participation among youth is considered a problem in most Western European countries (Istituto di Ricerca, 2001).

Modelling the manner in which age potentially shapes political and civic engagement highlights the complex nature of the relationship (see Figure 1). Age is an explanatory factor that is "causally prior" to all others; that is, nothing *causes age to vary* in an explanatory model of engagement. What this means, however, is that age has the potential to have an impact on many of the factors that explain variation in political behaviour and attitudes, and evidence suggests that this is often the case. The model identifies the two routes, life cycle and generation, through

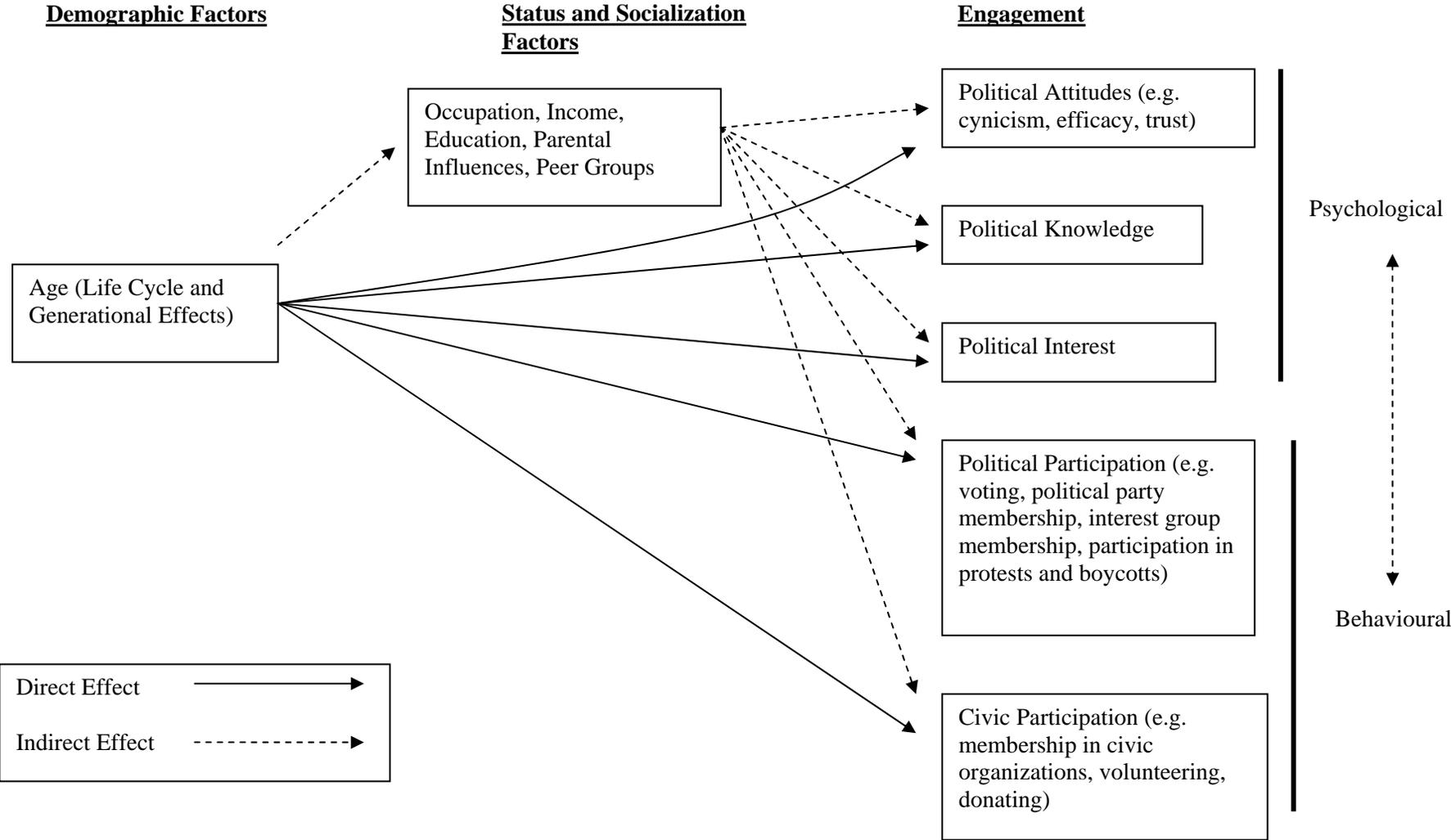
which age shapes engagement. Additionally, it distinguishes between age's direct and indirect influences on attitudes and behaviour. In Figure 1, the direct routes are identified with straight-line arrows and the indirect routes with dashed line arrows.

Age is positively related to the psychological elements of engagement; age, for example, directly determines the levels of political interest, political knowledge and political efficacy that one exhibits. Age is also positively related to the behavioural element of engagement: through either life cycle or generational effects, levels of political and civic participation are shaped by one's age and birth cohort.

Additionally, age has the potential for shaping engagement indirectly in numerous ways. Because age is related to a host of status and socialization factors, it can have an indirect impact on engagement through them. Level of education, for example, is directly related to age through generation, which is in turn strongly related to a number of the behavioural and psychological aspects of engagement. Education provides the skills, knowledge and mindset that are associated with greater engagement generally. The indirect effect of age also works through the relationship between psychological and behavioural engagement. On the far right of Figure 1, a dashed line joins the psychological and behavioural elements of engagement: political interest, for example, is correlated with voter turnout. If political interest increases with age, then age will influence voter turnout indirectly because of its association with political interest.

The goal of the model is not to suggest that the direct and indirect effects are of equal strength or importance. Instead, its role is to model in a simplified format the two main routes through which age might influence engagement and the key components of engagement.

Figure 1: Age as a Determinant of Political and Civic Engagement



Youth Engagement – Patterns and Trends

Providing a general picture of the nature of youth engagement in Canada is difficult in that generalization necessarily masks a number of important subtleties across its various elements. Having said this, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the engagement of young people is, at best, changing in dramatic ways and, at worst, giving cause for concern.

Voting

Without question, the area receiving a significant degree of research attention in the field of political behaviour is voter turnout. In representative democracies, voting occupies a primary role within the repertoire of political acts available to citizens. The key reason for this increased attention is the worrisome decline in voter turnout that has appeared in Canada and elsewhere. Beginning in the later 1980s, turnout in Canada dropped from 75.3% in the 1988 federal election to a low of 60.9% in the 2004 federal election (Elections Canada, 2007).⁴ A slight reversal of the trend in the 2006 election (turnout was 64.7%) has only slightly tempered the concern directed at the decline.

Official voting results in Canada do not normally identify the age of the voter; as a result, the voting turnout rate within age groups has been estimated from opinion surveys. The results suggest that “Canadian youth vote at an alarmingly lower rate than all other age groups” (Stolle and Cruz, 2005: 83). The lowest estimate comes from a survey conducted at the time of the 2000 election that suggests that the turnout rate among those aged 18-24 was a startling 25% (Pammett and Leduc, 2003).⁵ The overall turnout rate for that election was 61.5%, according to Elections Canada (2007), a difference of over 35 percentage points.

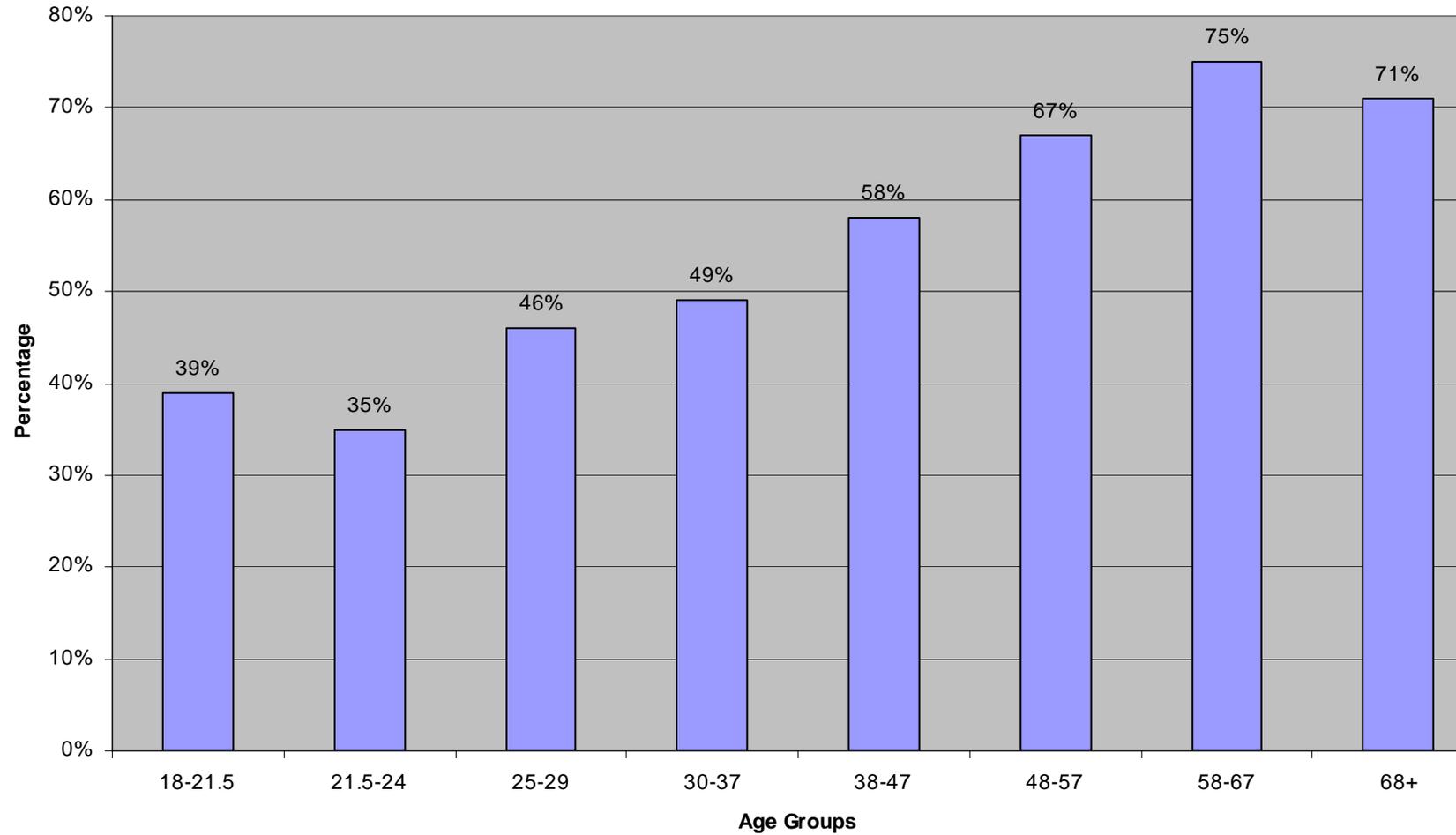
Given the concern associated with the dropping turnout rate, Elections Canada adopted a new methodology during the 2004 election to estimate turnout rate according to age.⁶ The estimates using this new methodology are found in Figure 2. As expected, the results reveal that the turnout rate is positively associated with age; the estimated turnout rate among the youngest voters in that election was approximately 37%. The overall turnout rate for the election, on the other hand, was 60.9%. This figure is less alarming than the estimate obtained during the 2000 election, but given the different methodologies one ought not to compare the estimates directly. The turnout gap between the youngest and oldest voters is still a startling 32 percentage points.

⁴ These figures measure turnout as the percentage of registered voters rather than the voting age population.

⁵ This estimate derives from the application of corrective weights to the survey data to adjust for the oversampling of non-voters and to bring the reported turnout rate in line with actual turnout data.

⁶ For a description of the methodology that was adopted, see Elections Canada (2005).

Figure 2: Estimated turnout by age group - 2004 Federal Election



Source: Elections Canada, 2005

Research into the causes of the decline began in earnest in the late 1990s, and evidence that the decline was due largely to the absence of young Canadians from the polls on election day is hard to ignore (Blais et al., 2002; Howe, 2003; O'Neill, 2001). According to Gidengil et al. (2004: 109), “the single most important determinant of voting is age.” Evidence from other parts of the world confirms its primary role (Norris, 2003).

Part of the story of why young people are less likely to vote is precisely because they are young. Gidengil et al. (2003) report the following: “Detailed study of voter turnout in federal elections since 1968 suggests that the propensity to vote typically increases by 7 or 8 points between ages 20 and 30 and by about 15 points between ages 20 and 50.” Life cycle effects are such that most Canadians will develop an interest in, and with this a willingness to engage with, the political system as they age. Importantly, however, this has always been the case and does not help to explain the drop in turnout among recent generations. Instead, the answer lies in generational changes in patterns of turnout.

Using data from surveys taken in 1990 and 2000, I noted previously that generational differences appeared to be the primary cause of the decline in voter turnout (O'Neill, 2001). Young people today are voting at a lower rate than young people at the same age in previous generations, and it is unlikely that this gap in turnout will shrink as they age. Subsequent research has reinforced this conclusion and additionally suggests that “generational replacement is a crucial factor that explains most of the turnout decline that has occurred since 1990” (Blais et al., 2004: 224). The Canadian Election Study team estimates that, among the group of Canadians born after 1970, the voting turnout rate between the 1993 and 2000 elections dropped by 14 percentage points (Blais et al., 2002: 46). The team argues that this ought to be interpreted as being “tuned out” rather than “turned off,” for as we shall see below, this group is no more cynical about politics than other Canadians (Gidengil et al., 2003).

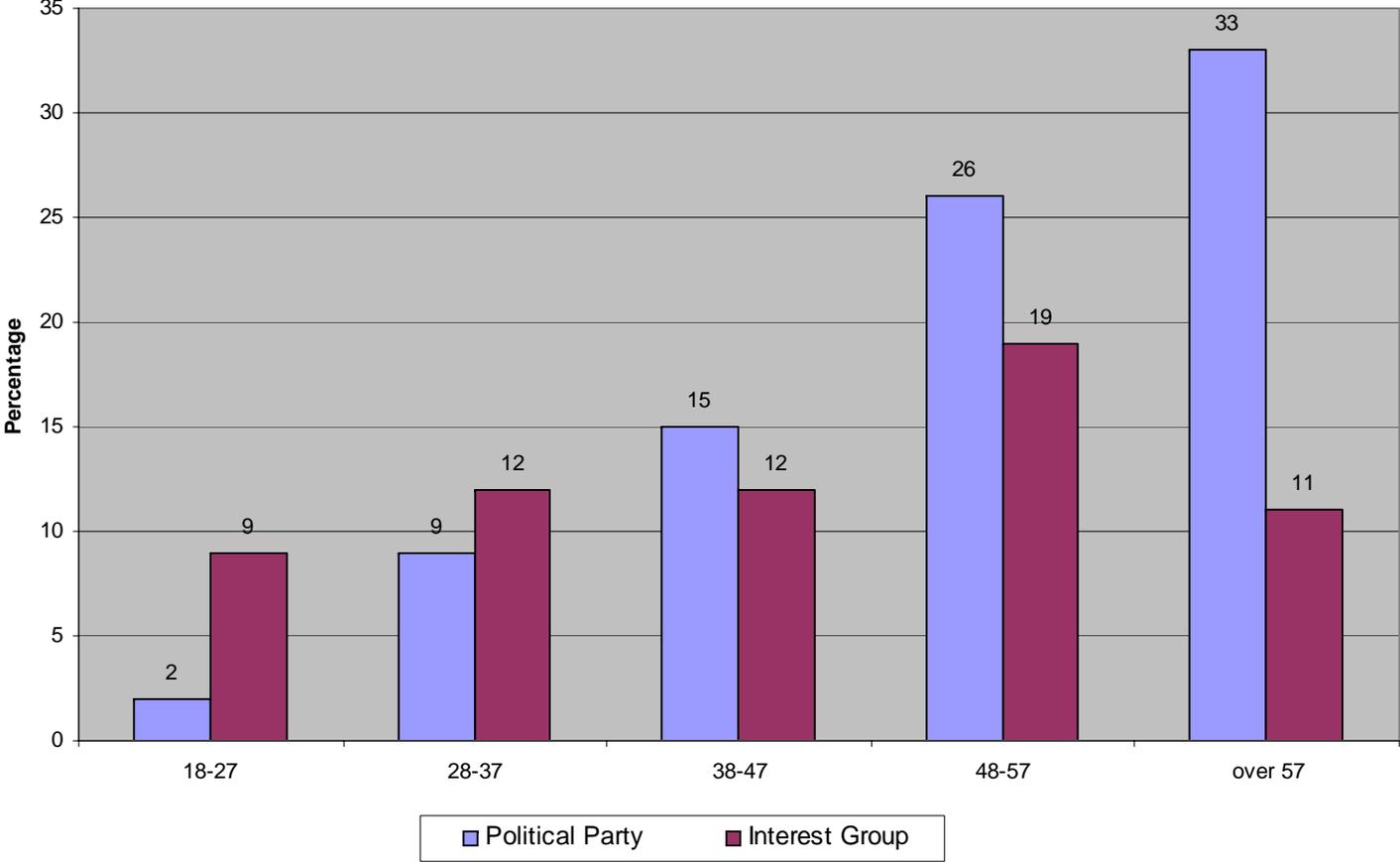
Political Organizations

Research suggests that life cycle trends in voting are also evident in participation patterns with political organizations: participation increases as one moves through life. Figure 3 reveals just how stark the comparison is across age groups within one organization in particular: political parties. Political parties are essential organizations in representative democracies because, among other functions, they structure electoral choices, select and field political candidates during elections and provide an avenue for political engagement.⁷ A survey by the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) conducted with Canadians in 2000 suggests that only 2% of Canadians in the youngest age group had ever been a member of a political party; this figure rises to a high of 33% among those over 57 years of age (O'Neill, 2001). This figure parallels estimates made by Cross and Young following a survey of Canadian political parties in 2002 (Cross and Young, 2004). From their survey data, they estimate that 6% of all party members were less than 30 years of age, a relatively small share when one considers that their relative share in the overall population at the time was 40% (Cross and Young, 2004: 432). Moreover, they find that the average age of party members is 59 years, which they identify as evidence of

⁷ Research on political party membership is fraught with difficulties in that party membership lists, when accessible, are often less than accurate. The alternative source for this information, opinion surveys, brings with it all the difficulties associated with survey research on political behaviour.

the “greying of political parties” (Cross and Young, 2004: 432). As they note, “the apparent inability of parties to recruit young Canadians into their membership raises the spectre of virtually member-less parties in the not too distant future” (Cross and Young, 2004: 440). Evidence from elsewhere reinforces the conclusion that party membership is aging, suggesting that a generational effect may also be at play on this dimension of participation (Richardson, Seyd and Whiteley, 1995). The evidence is mixed, however, on whether party membership numbers are in decline (Norris, 2002).

Figure 3: Political Party and Interest Group Membership by Age, 2000



Source: O’Neill, 2001

Note: The survey question asked respondents if they had ever been a member of a political party or an interest group.

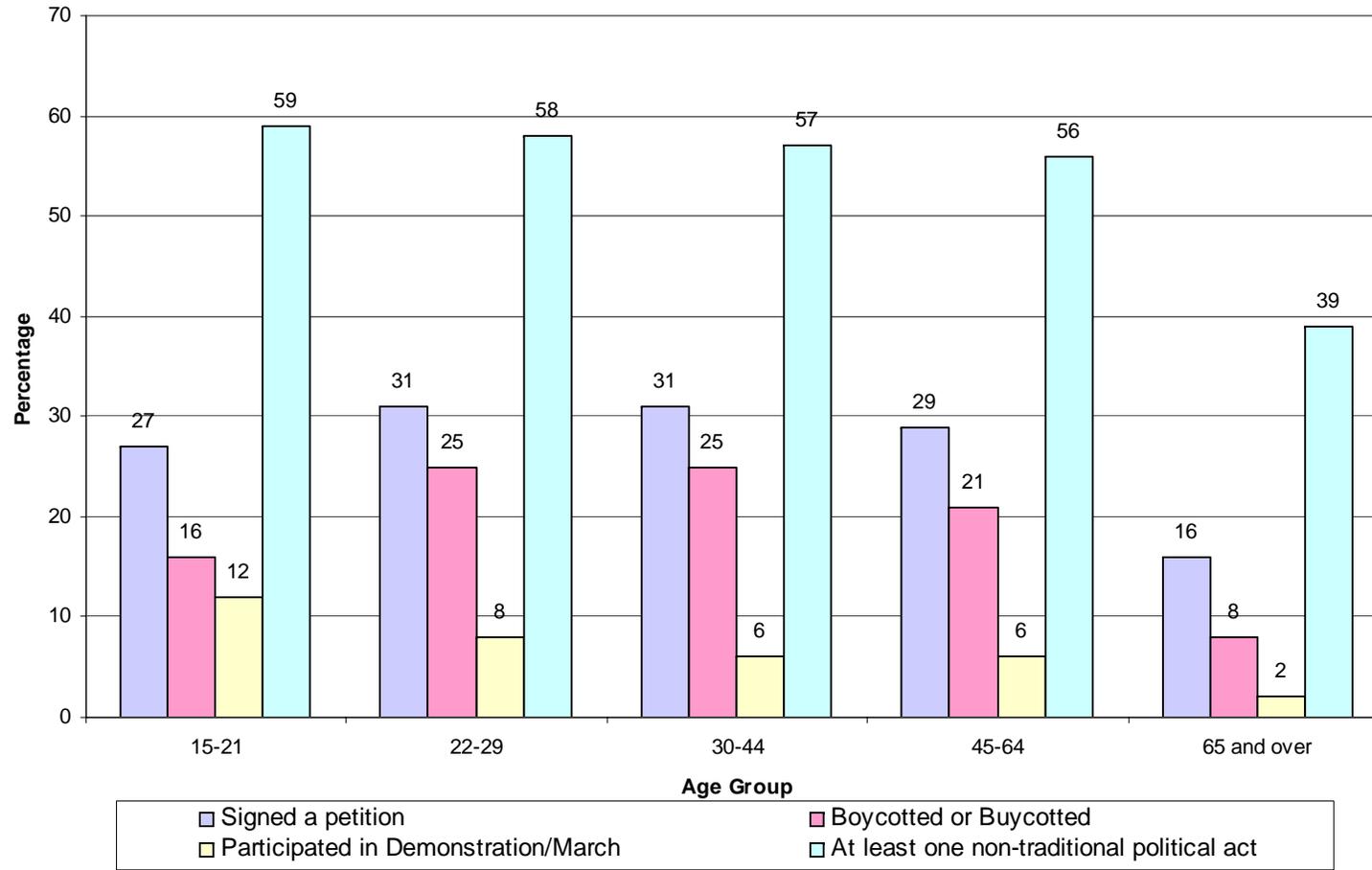
Interest groups, normally defined as groups working to bring about some form of political change on an issue through means other than direct election, constitute another principal political organization within representative democracies. And age differences are also to be found when examining membership in these organizations. Younger Canadians are less likely to be members of interest groups than older Canadians (see Figure 3). The trend, however, is less stark than was the case for membership in political parties. Evidence from the 2000 IRPP survey reveals that 9% of Canadians in the youngest age group reported having been a member of an interest group at some point in time, more than four times the rate at which they reported membership in political parties (O’Neill, 2001). Although the level of participation appears to increase almost steadily with age, the highest level of participation is only 19% among those between the ages of 48 and 57. The data suggest that younger Canadians are more likely to join interest groups than they are political parties, which contrasts directly with the trend among older Canadians.

Non-Traditional Political Activity

Non-traditional political activity includes political protest and demonstrations, signing petitions and engaging in consumer boycotts and buycotts. Age consistently reveals itself to be one of the strongest predictors of unconventional political activity; according to Dalton, “protest is the domain of the young” (2006: 71). Dalton suggests that this pattern reflects a combination of life cycle and generational effects. Youth is often a period of rebellion, and this can translate into an increased willingness to engage in political rebellion. Younger generations, on the other hand, appear to have adopted new styles of protest, of which unconventional political activity is one. As Dalton suggests, “increasing education levels, political sophistication, and participation norms among younger generations” help to explain their increased willingness to adopt “direct-action techniques” (2006: 71). Research by Norris confirms the rise in protest politics across a range of nations (2002: 199).

Evidence from Canada underscores the age dimension of non-traditional political behaviour. Figure 4 reveals how the pattern of participation by age for non-traditional political activity deviates from that which exists in traditional activities. The pattern for the first three activities – signing a petition, participating in a demonstration or march, and boycotting or buycotting products – does not reveal the steady and strong increase associated with age that was found for a number of the traditional activities; instead, the relative difference in the participation rates across age categories are much smaller, and in some instances the pattern is actually reversed. While 27% of those aged between 15 and 21, for example, suggested that they had signed a petition in the past year, this level of activity is only between 2 and 4 percentage points below the next three age groups and is actually 11 points *higher* than that reported by those in the oldest age category. The pattern of increasing participation with age is reversed for one non-traditional action: those in the youngest age group actually reported a level of participation in demonstrations and marches (12%) that outpaces respondents in every other age category. And as a general indicator of the overall level of activity, the final set of statistics in the chart reveals the portion within each age group that participated in at least one non-traditional political activity in the past year. This measure shows that the youngest age group reported a level of participation that is *equal to or higher (at 59%) than that reported in every other age category*. This evidence suggests that generalizations of political apathy among youth adopt a very narrow definition of political engagement.

Figure 4: Participation in Non-Traditional Political Activities by Age, 2003



Source: Milan, 2005

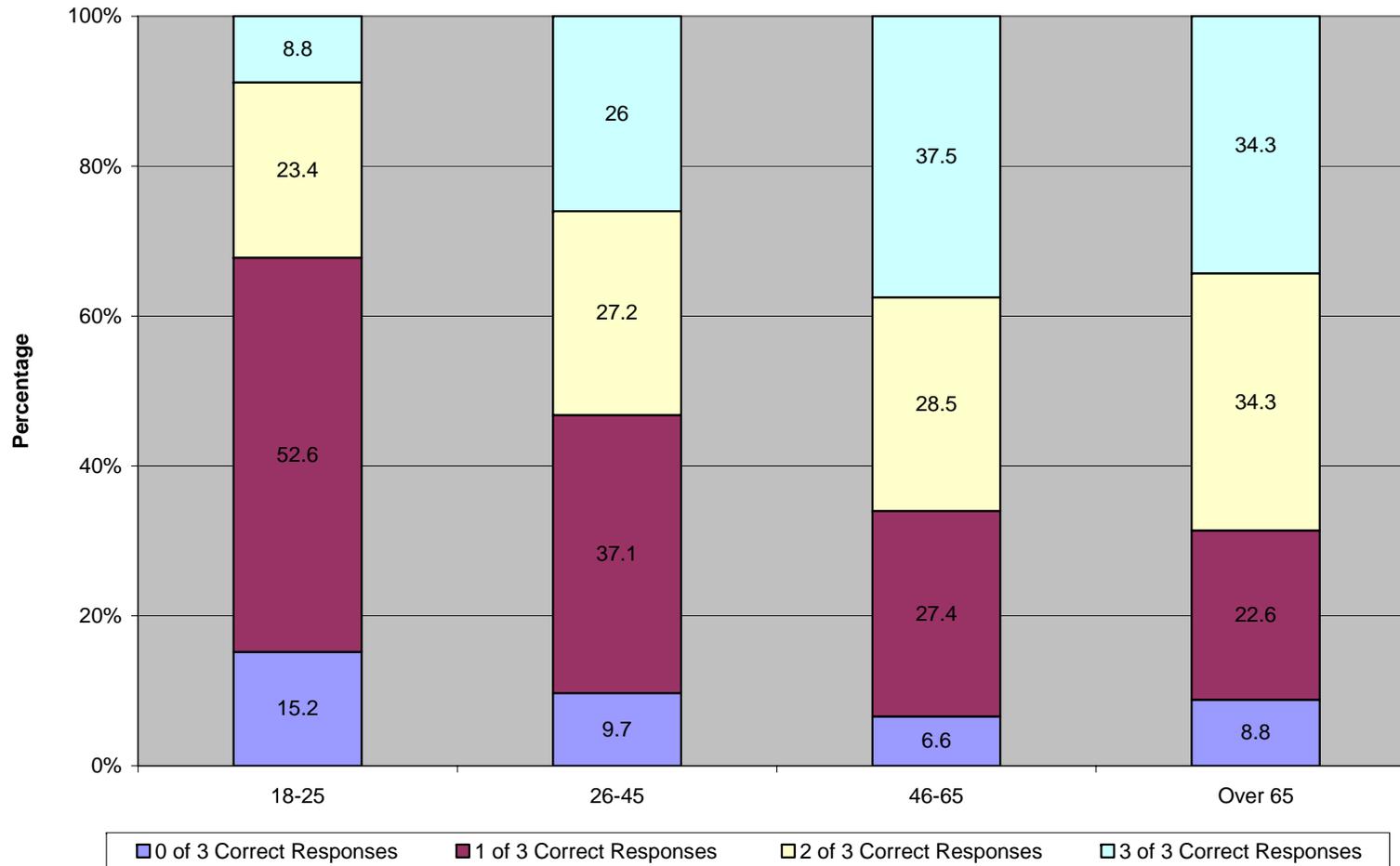
Note: The survey question asked respondents about their political activities during the preceding 12 months.

Psychological Dimension of Politics – Interest, Knowledge and Attitudes

Overall, Canadians demonstrate a level of political interest that is above average when compared against many Western democracies (Gidengil et al., 2004: 20). Compared with other factors, age reveals itself to be the most important predictor of political interest (Gidengil et al., 2004: 20). Evidence from the 2000 Canadian Election Survey shows that, when asked how interested they were in politics, the youngest Canadians (those born after 1970) scored just over 4 on a scale from 0 to 7. By comparison, each subsequent age group showed an increasing level of interest in politics, up to a high of just over 6 among those born prior to 1945. Gidengil et al. provide evidence suggesting that the pattern is a result of life cycle rather than generational effects (Gidengil et al., 2004: 20).

Age also plays a role in shaping levels of political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Gidengil et al. (2004) provide evidence that the youngest Canadians display levels of political knowledge significantly below that of older Canadians, a gap they suggest stems at least partly from life cycle effects. Younger Canadians “have had less exposure to the world of politics and less time to store up political information” (Gidengil et al., 2004: 54). Figure 5 provides evidence of these age knowledge gaps. The 2000 Strengthening Canadian Democracy Survey included three questions tapping political knowledge of political actors. While over a third of those aged 46 and over were able to answer all three questions correctly, just over a quarter of those aged 26-45 and less than one in 10 respondents aged 18-25 could do the same. The age trend does not appear to be an artifact of the type of questions asked. A 2001 survey conducted by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada found that the pattern was repeated for questions tapping knowledge of globalization, an issue that many have argued is of much greater interest among young Canadians generally (cited in Gidengil et al., 2004: 54). Unlike the conclusion reached by Gidengil et al. (2004), however, Howe (2006) provides evidence that political knowledge gaps across age groups are growing in Canada and that these lie behind the decline in electoral turnout among youth.

Figure 5: Political Knowledge by Age, 2000



Source: 2000 Strengthening Canadian Democracy Survey (IRPP)

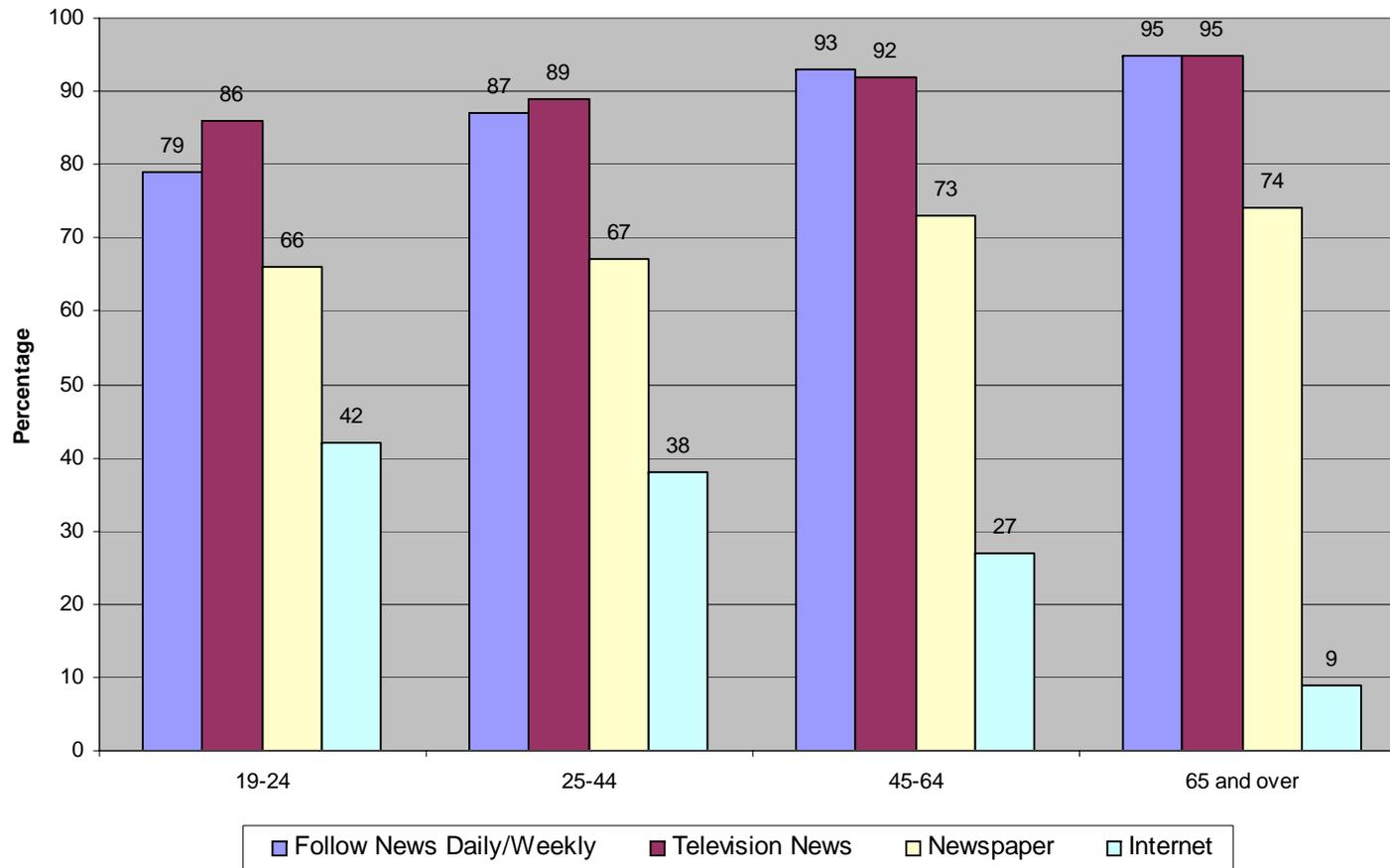
Note: Questions asked respondents to identify the Prime Minister, the Federal Minister of Finance and the Official Opposition.

Levels of political knowledge are no doubt related to the effort expended in trying to stay abreast of political events. As shown in Figure 6, young people in Canada appear to pay less attention to news on a daily or weekly basis than older Canadians: where 79% of those aged 19-24 follow the news at least weekly, the equivalent figure is higher among all other age groups by as much as 16 points.⁸ Television and the newspaper appear to be relatively consistent as the first and second choices for a source of news information among all age groups. Although the Internet is used as a news source by a lower percentage within each age group than television and newspapers, it is much more likely to be used by young Canadians. Forty-two percent of those in the youngest age category (19-24) identified it as a news source; this share drops steadily across older age categories to a low of 9% among those aged 65 and over.

Trust is considered to be an important component of social capital and, as such, can be important for civic and political engagement (Putnam, 2000). On measures of general trust, there is mixed evidence of a difference in attitudes across age groups. Approximately half of Canadians under the age of 30 in the 2003 General Social Survey reported that “people can be trusted,” a level of trust comparable to Canadians in every other age group (Stolle and Cruz, 2005: 89), but differences have been recorded in other surveys. In a 2000 IRPP survey, for instance, 42% of young Canadians strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement “Generally most people cannot be trusted,” a full 8 points higher than Canadians between the ages of 38 and 47 (O’Neill, 2001: 18). Regardless, this difference is much smaller than that recorded across age groups for political interest and knowledge.

⁸ One might argue that attention to political news might be a better measure of political engagement, but attention to the news in general likely is a better indicator of civic engagement.

Figure 6: Attention to the News and News Source by Age, 2003



Source: Keown, 2007

Note: Differences are significant at $p < 0.05$.

Political cynicism is an attitude that is also strongly associated with political engagement, and surveys are fairly clear in revealing that young Canadians are often less cynical than other Canadians. Although much conventional wisdom would suggest otherwise, declining participation rates in traditional political activities are not the result of increased cynicism among young Canadians. In a 2000 IRPP survey, 81% of Canadians between the ages of 38 and 47 strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement “Those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people,” 10 points more than those in the youngest age category (O’Neill, 2001: 18). The lack of an elevated level of cynicism among the youngest Canadians is important because it underscores that lower levels of voter turnout cannot be accounted for by increased levels of political cynicism (Gidengil et al., 2003; O’Neill, 2003). In a related vein, research by Pammett and Leduc (2003) observes that young Canadian are *less negative* about various aspects of elections than are older Canadians, reinforcing results obtained elsewhere (O’Neill, 2001). Whereas 6% of Canadians aged 18 to 24 suggested that they lacked faith and confidence in candidates, parties and leaders, for example, the share among older Canadians ranged from 15% to 21% (Pammett and Leduc, 2003: 17).

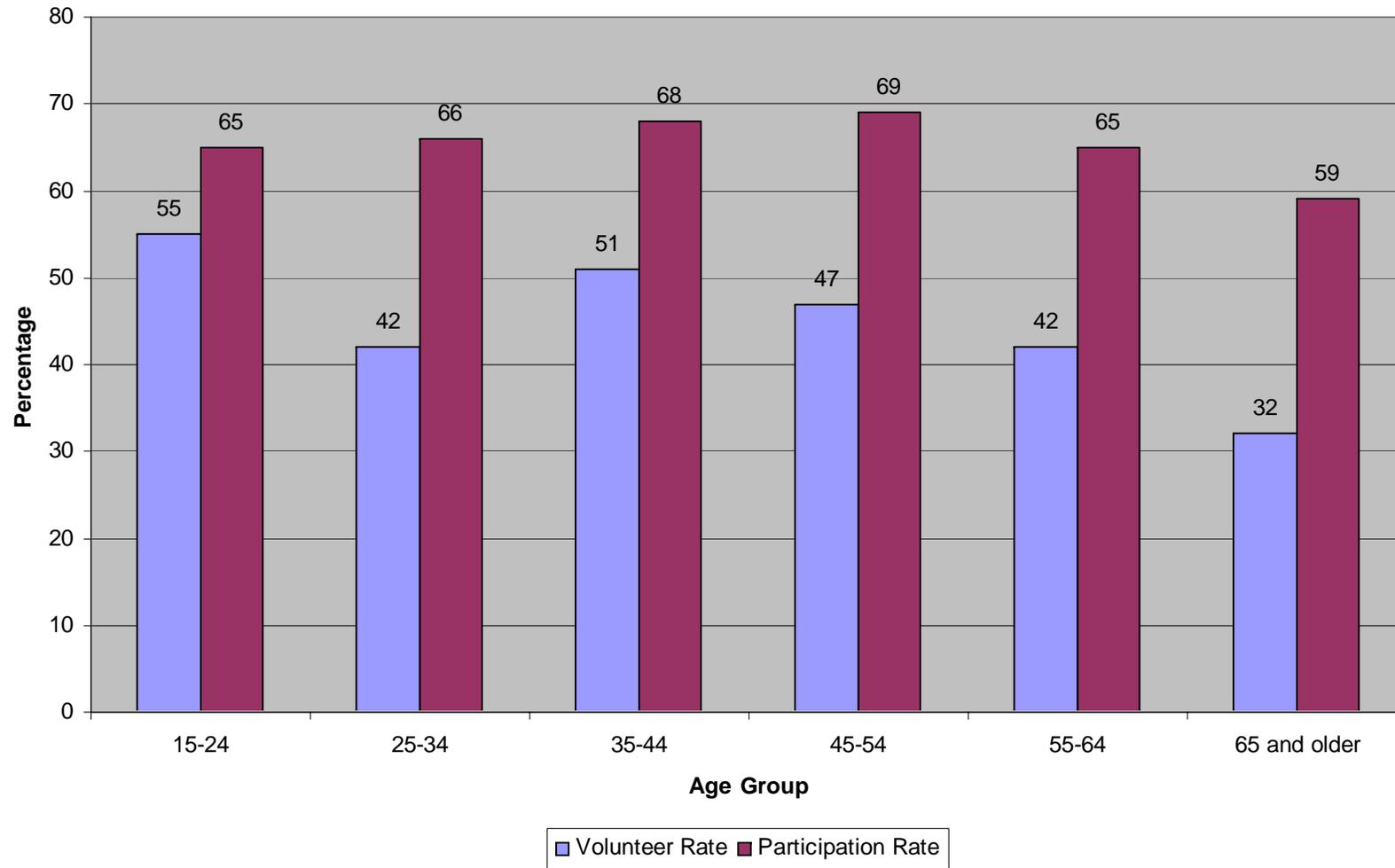
Younger Canadians do, however, show levels of political efficacy that are lower than those of many older Canadians. Political efficacy refers to the belief that one has the capacity to understand and influence political decision making (internal efficacy) and that government is responsive to citizens (external efficacy) (Abramson, 1983). Both provide the motivation for engaging in traditional politics. Evidence from the 2004 Canadian Election Study suggests that 62.4% of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 25 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what is going on” (Archer and Wesley, 2006). By comparison, only 52% of Canadians between 34 and 45 years answered in a similar fashion, but 62.4% of those over the age of 66 did the same. Thus, if young Canadians are less likely to engage in traditional political activities, it may stem from their weakened levels of internal and external political efficacy.

Civic Engagement – Volunteering and Participating

Young Canadians report higher rates of volunteering activity than all other Canadians (see Figure 7). According to a 2004 survey conducted by Statistics Canada, 45% of Canadians reported having volunteered at some point in the previous year; the corresponding share among those aged 15-24 was 55% (Statistics Canada, 2006a: 34). Even within this age group, a distinction is apparent: 65% of those aged 15-19 reported volunteering, as compared with 43% of those aged 20-24, although the older group reported more average hours than the youngest group. These youngest volunteers revealed additional patterns that differed from other volunteers: they volunteered for a different set of groups (mostly education and research, and social services organizations), undertook different tasks in their volunteering activities (predominantly coaching, refereeing/officiating and fundraising) and were motivated to volunteer for reasons that differed from the norm (they cited improving job opportunities, exploring their own strengths and because their friends volunteered as key motivators) (Statistics Canada, 2006a: 10). Part of this higher volunteering rate is explained, however, by the fact that *mandatory community service* is relatively common among the younger age groups, affecting as high as 69% of volunteers aged 15-19 (Statistics Canada, 2006a: 42). Accordingly, Stolle and Cruz note that volunteering within this group often does not “stick,” and instead their volunteering rates decline once they have completed their schooling (2005: 89).

Canadian youth also report a relatively high level of participation in groups and organizations, which, according to Putnam (2000), is integral to the development of high levels of social capital. While the overall average participation rate among Canadians was 66%, 65% of Canadians between 15 and 24 years of age reported belonging to at least one group or organization (Statistics Canada, 2006a: 53). The frequency of their participation outpaces other Canadians; whereas 25% of all those surveyed reported participation on a weekly basis or more, 35% of those in the youngest age category reported participating at this rate.

Figure 7: Volunteering and Participation Rate by Age Group, 2004



Source: Statistics Canada, 2006a

Indifferent or Just Different?

A review of trends in the political engagement of young Canadians suggests that their engagement is unlike that of older Canadians in several respects. But ought these trends to be considered evidence of apathy or indifference or just a different way of engaging in politics? Youth engagement in the formal arenas of political – namely representative – politics suggests apathy and/or indifference among young Canadians. This conclusion is reinforced when one examines levels of political knowledge and interest. Young Canadians do not participate in elections or with political parties and interest groups to the same extent as older Canadians, and they reveal much lower levels of knowledge and interest in politics. Evidence for voting suggests that generational rather than life cycle effects are behind these trends. Whether life cycle or generational effects lie behind current differences in membership in political parties and interest groups is uncertain; data that could help to answer this question are difficult to come by.

Much conventional wisdom to the contrary, young Canadians do not reveal lower levels of engagement in formal politics than other Canadians because of increased political cynicism or unhappiness with the political system. The evidence quite simply does not bear this out. Less political knowledge among young Canadians, while potentially an indicator of political apathy, does on the other hand help to explain drops in electoral participation. In qualitative research with young Canadians, the point is often made that the sense of having incomplete or, worse, very little knowledge of politics and political issues is behind the decision not to vote (CPRN, 2007).

When the focus shifts to include non-traditional forms of engagement, such as protest behaviour, and volunteering and participation patterns, however, the evidence suggests a very different conclusion is in order. Young Canadians engage in these activities at levels that rival and in some cases exceed those of older Canadians. As such, the conclusion that youth engage in a different manner than other Canadians seems more appropriate than one of indifference or apathy.

Several researchers have identified the changing nature of participation among young citizens. For Putnam, growing individualism, social isolation and a decline in social capital are identified as key explanations for changes in engagement, generally, and among young people, specifically (Putnam, 2000). Similarly, Delli Carpini suggests that “civic engagement has become *defined* as the one-on-one experience of working in a soup kitchen, cleaning trash from a local river, or tutoring a child once a week. What is missing is an awareness of the connection between the individual, isolated ‘problems’ these actions are intended to address and the larger world of public policy” (Delli Carpini, 2000: 346, italics in original). This point was reflected in a CPRN workshop held in March 2007 with a group of diverse young Canadians; for them, volunteering brings immediate results in a way that is not apparent in traditional politics (CPRN, 2007).

Research in the United Kingdom reinforces this line of argument; citizens have not contracted out of politics but rather are pursuing new individualistic forms of actions. The increased use of consumer boycotts, for example, leads researchers to argue that “consumer citizenship” is a new concept that ought to be explored as a form of engagement (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004). Pattie et al. (2004) argue that the nature of youth engagement in Britain is not characterized by apathy or inactivity but rather by a shift in types of activity, in particular to participation in

protest politics and membership in informal groups. Using a much more qualitative approach to their research, Marsh, O'Toole and Jones (2007) develop a strong argument for ensuring that the absence of political participation as it is normally defined not be equated with political apathy.

Norris (1999) also argues that the nature of participation has changed among younger generations. This generation is not “dropping out” of politics but shifting to new and different forms of participation. For Norris, increasing political sophistication and cognitive mobilization have meant that alternative forms of participation and engagement have become the preference of younger generations, in part because the traditional forms provide little in the way of direct impact on political outcomes. Voting, for example, can be a particularly unsatisfying form of participation in that the structure of the process provides little in the way of opportunity for *engagement*; instead, one marks one’s ballot, and this may or may not have an effect on the political outcome depending on the nature of the system in place.⁹ Similarly, recent generations have become more focused in their use of both boycotts and buycotts as a form of mass political action, in part because of the individual nature of the act and its perceived immediate effects (Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle, 2004). The argument is that the line between the social and political has become blurred (Norris, 2003), as has the line between the public and the private (Marsh, O'Toole and Jones, 2007). Putnam (2000: 259) argues that “unlike boomers, who were once engaged, X-ers have never made the connection to politics, so they emphasize the personal and private over the public and collective.”

Youth Not a Homogeneous Group

It would be a mistake to think of youth in Canada as a homogeneous group; although they share similar challenges, experiences and norms as a result of their age, there are many additional factors that are likely to result in variation in their willingness and capacity to engage in the political and civic worlds. Age is but one element of youth identity; the interplay between the various roles and identities that shape engagement is complex, interesting and worthy of additional research attention. Among these elements are education, income, gender, Aboriginal status, ethnicity and immigrant status, and each has received too little focused attention among researchers who examine engagement.

Human capital is a key factor, and education is one of the key elements that fosters and develops human capital (O'Neill, 2007). Education is essential to the development of engaged citizens. Education encourages the development of a civic outlook, provides the skills and knowledge that allows one to navigate the often complex political processes and issues and provides the social networks that anchor citizens in the political system (Gidengil et al., 2004; Stolle and Cruz, 2005). In short, education provides the cognitive capacity, confidence and civic outlook that enable engagement.

The relative importance of education in shaping voter turnout, for example, is one of the keys to understanding drops in the voter turnout rate in Canada. Using the 2000 Canadian Election Study (Gidengil et al., 2003) found that, among Canadians born after 1970, the turnout decline is found only among those without a university education and predominantly among those who

⁹ In Canada’s “first past the post” system, for example, many votes in a district are essentially wasted in that only the candidate with a plurality of votes is sent to the legislature.

dropped out of high school. This explains in part why turnout has been falling in spite of increasing education levels; although university educated youth are consistently heading to the polls, those with less than this level of education are not. Cross and Young have also identified the importance of university attendance for membership in political parties (Cross and Young, 2004).

Income is also a key factor in the ability to engage. Gidengil et al. (2004: 7-8) note the following:

The daily struggle to put food on the table, to pay the bills, and to find money for the rent may sap any desire to follow politics closely. This is especially likely if the daily struggle feeds a perception that the system is not very responsible to the needs and wants of the poor. And even if the will is there, there may not be the money to pay for a babysitter or to travel to party meetings or even to the polls. As for subscribing to the daily newspaper or accessing political information on the Internet, these are luxuries that the poor can ill afford.

For young Canadians, the opportunity, motivation and resources that enable engagement are directly dependent on economic capacity. Combined, education and income help to explain much of the variation in engagement among young Canadians.

Neither should gender be overlooked for the role that it plays in shaping engagement among Canadian youth. Although relatively little research has been conducted on gender patterns of engagement among this group, that which exists makes clear that young men and women are not alike on this score. Research on the political engagement of women and men suggests that women are less engaged in numerous political processes and organizations, and are less politically interested and knowledgeable than men (Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001; Inglehart and Norris, 2003). Research also suggests that women and men not only engage at different rates, but they differ in the form that their participation takes and in its context. In general, “women favour smaller-scale and less conflict-oriented forms of engagement . . . , with fewer formal institutions and hierarchies” (Hooghe and Stolle, 2004: 6). On the other hand, gender gaps in voter turnout and in non-traditional political activity have disappeared (Hooghe and Stolle, 2004: 6).

Some researchers report that part of the explanation behind these differences lies in differences in the skills, time and resources available to and possessed by women and men; others identify the male-dominated nature of many political institutions as inhibitive of women’s involvement; and still others point to socialization processes as key to understanding the continuation of gaps in these areas (for a summary of this literature, see Hooghe and Stolle, 2004). Among the few researchers looking specifically at the political engagement of young women in Canada, Thomas (2006) suggests that the closing of resource gaps is unlikely to eliminate engagement gaps. Moreover, she identifies differences in early childhood political socialization as key to understanding gender differences in engagement.

Innovative research into the intentions of young women and men regarding future political action suggests that gaps only appear upon reaching early adulthood; additionally, young girls are far more likely to suggest that they will engage in socially beneficial activities such as peaceful

protests and collecting money and signatures. Young men, on the other hand, are more likely to identify intentions of running for office, blocking traffic and occupying buildings. As Hooghe and Stolle point out, “the activities preferred by girls ... tend to be neglected in participation research, or they are sometimes dismissed as not being strictly political” (Hooghe and Stolle, 2004: 19). This point is reinforced in Vromen’s research, where she records a higher average level of involvement among young Australian women than men, a point she suggests might be related to the broader definition of engagement that she uses in her work (Vromen, 2003).

Many of the trends in participation and engagement outlined above are unlikely to apply to one particular group: Aboriginal youth. For a host of reasons, Aboriginal youth are less likely to engage politically and civically in the same manner or at the same level as other Canadians. This situation reflects partly the history of colonialism, which has created unwillingness on the part of many Aboriginal people to engage in the political system, and partly the weaker socio-economic and educational resources that Aboriginal youth possess as compared with other young Canadians (see Elections Canada, 2003a). As noted by Guérin (2003: 11), “promoting greater involvement by Aboriginal people must be situated within a complex historical, cultural and political context.” As a result, traditional models of political and civic engagement only take us part of the way in understanding their distinct nature. Bedford (2003: 16), for instance, argues that trends such as low turnout rates in federal elections combined with high turnout rates for band elections sit uncomfortably with the “orthodox understanding of electoral participation.” And in spite of an increase in attention directed to Aboriginal engagement, much of this has been directed specifically at electoral participation to the relative neglect of other forms of engagement; even within this relatively small scope, little progress has been made (Ladner and McCrossan, in press). An exception is qualitative research conducted by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC) on the civic engagement of Aboriginal people (CRIC, 2005).

Ethnicity and immigrant status are also key factors to consider when striving to understand how and why engagement varies among youth. Significant underrepresentation in political institutions and persistent racial biases most likely play a role in shaping the engagement decisions of members of visible minorities; those born outside the country are also likely to reveal unique engagement patterns given their adjustments to the new environment and political system (Gidengil et al., 2004; Jedwab, 2006; Stolle and Cruz, 2005). How these identities matter specifically for youth is not well understood.

Research into variations in engagement among ethnic groups reveal that generalizations are difficult to make; moreover, many researchers in the area stress the importance of evaluating ethnic groups on an individual basis, ethnic minority groups in particular, a practice that renders quantitative research using large-scale surveys particularly difficult (Abu-Laban, 2002). Length of time in Canada and place of birth have both been found to shape voting patterns among immigrants, although calls for further analysis to better understand the interplay between immigration and minority status have been made (Jedwab, 2006: 7). Not surprisingly, calls have also been made to better understand how these identities shape youth voting decisions (Jedwab, 2006). White et al. find, for example, that gaps in voter turnout between 20-year-old and 50-year-old immigrants in Canadian elections exceed gaps between similar age groups among native-born Canadians by as much as 20 points (White et al., 2006). They note that an immigrant’s age measures in part accumulated political experience in Canada and that this has a particular effect on voter turnout (White et al., 2006). Thus, traditional models of electoral

behaviour are often less than successful at fully capturing the unique factors that shape behaviour within certain groups. And the more limited research examining the broader engagement patterns of ethnic and immigrant youth necessitates adding this area of research to the list of those deserving of greater attention.

This limited review of the heterogeneity that exists among Canadian youth in the factors shaping their political engagement underscores the need for more focused research attention in these areas to add to our understanding of changing patterns of engagement among them, as well as the need for caution in rendering generalizations about engagement patterns among young Canadians.

Explaining Youth Engagement Patterns

Explanations for the trends revealed in the engagement of young Canadians have necessarily concentrated on generational over life cycle factors and have focused on individual or micro level factors and more macro or societal level factors. Many of these explanations deal narrowly with explanations for declining turnout rates among youth, while others address broader changes in youth engagement.

Galston (2001) is clear in identifying the link between political participation and political knowledge: the more you know about politics, the more likely you are to participate. Howe's research (2003) shows that those born in and after the 1960s are particularly ill-informed politically and that, over time, they are unlikely to close the knowledge gap with earlier generations. This lack of knowledge is part of the reason, he argues, for the decline in voter turnout among younger generations. A similar argument has been made by Milner (2002). Howe adds that, among more recent generations, political knowledge plays a larger role in shaping the voting decision, thereby adding to its overall impact. If young Canadians know less about politics than their parents did at the same age, then this takes us some distance in understanding lower levels of political engagement.

That younger generations are less politically knowledgeable is difficult to reconcile with rising education rates over time, a difficulty Richard Brody (1978) refers to as the "the puzzle of political participation." The phenomenon of increased cognitive mobilization among recent generations is clear (Dalton, 1984). Increases in education levels have meant that younger citizens have greater levels of skills and knowledge that directly increase their likelihood of participating in politics. The problem is that their engagement has increased in some forms (e.g. interest in politics) but not in others (e.g. voting turnout). Delli Carpini suggests that increases in cognitive mobilization have not been matched by increasing levels of engagement, in part because young adults do not believe that their participation is likely to be either effective or satisfying. This lack of motivation stems, he argues, from "the systematic devaluing of the public sector over the past 30 years" (Delli Carpini, 2000: 344). As evidence of this devaluing, the proportion of Canadians agreeing that one can trust the government in Ottawa to do what is right dropped from 58% in 1965 to 33% in 1993. Similarly, while 36% of Canadians in 1965 agreed that "people in government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes," this figure had risen to 79% by 1993 (Roese, 2002: 152). Investigating the dropping voter turnout rate, Blais et al. (2004) suggest that the decline is associated with much lower levels of attention to politics

among younger Canadians and to the fact that they are less likely to consider voting a moral duty than previous generations. The same researchers have suggested that young Canadians have “tuned out” rather than “turned off” politics (Gidengil et al., 2003).

The role of the media in shaping interest in and knowledge of politics ought also to be included in this review of factors influencing youth engagement. Media consumption has been linked to levels of social capital (Putnam, 2000), civic literacy (Milner, 2002) and political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001). Some investigators have argued that negative and cynical coverage of politics by media is to blame for growing political disengagement, increased political cynicism and decreasing political knowledge; others have countered this argument by highlighting the key role of the media in stimulating political mobilization (see Norris, 2002). According to the latter, “people who watch more TV news, read more newspapers, surf the net, and pay attention to campaigns have consistently been found to be more knowledgeable, trusting of government, and participatory” (Norris, 2002: 29). As discussed above, young people pay less attention to the news than other age groups, a point that has been identified as a potential explanation for their engagement patterns. Others, however, have suggested that the fault may lie more with news sources themselves than with young people.¹⁰ Buckingham (2000) for example, found that young people were critical of the format, content and relevance of the news and expressed a desire to be more informed, a point similar to that made in the CPRN youth workshop that took place in March 2007. Saunders (2007) correctly identifies that the generational shift in media use, from traditional to online media, needs to be better understood for its role in shaping the civic skills, orientations and activities of young citizens. The blurring of the line between journalism and popular culture, epitomized by the use of “comedy television” as a source of political information, is another aspect of this shift that is not well understood (Saunders, 2007). Another is the use of the Internet “not just as a tool for political information but also as a *space* for political interaction and organization,” a point returned to below (Saunders, 2007: 24, italics in original). As she suggests, “If we are to fully understand how to re-engage youth in formal political channels, we need first to understand how media – old and new – contribute to the formation of political understanding and political identity” (Saunders, 2007: 25).

Explanations looking to political knowledge, political interest and a sense of duty among young Canadians as the cause of declining voter participation rates focus on individual level motivations for understanding changes in behaviour over time. As such, civics education has been suggested by many researchers and organizations for the potential it embodies for stemming the tide. In the United Kingdom, for example, the publication of the Crick report (entitled *Educating for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools* [Crick, 1998]) led to the introduction of citizenship classes as a mandatory part of the national curriculum beginning in 2002. Tied to these measures was a significant investment in volunteering initiatives, designed to counter the tide of declining engagement. “Service learning” has been adopted in the United States – programs that combine community service with instruction and reflection to develop civic responsibility among high school and university students. Civics education has been adopted in Canadian schools as well; in 2000, for example, Ontario introduced a mandatory half-credit course in civics at the Grade 10 level. Determining the effects of such curriculum changes is ongoing. Mock elections such as those organized by

¹⁰ For a review of this literature, see Saunders, 2007.

Student Vote (www.studentvote.ca) provide an additional educational and experiential tool for introducing civic responsibility to Canadian schoolchildren.

Others have pointed to the importance of ensuring that young Canadians remain in school for as long as possible given the role that education generally plays in encouraging engagement (Gidengil et al., 2004; O'Neill, 2007). The problem is not a small one: in 2006, one in 10 Canadians between the ages of 20 and 24 had dropped out of high school and was not pursuing further education (de Broucker, 2005b). Engagement among young people with limited formal education is exceedingly low and partly helps explain declining rates of participation overall (Blais et al., 2004).

One line of research has identified the possibility that the changing nature of life cycle patterns may lie behind changes in youth engagement. Along these lines, the fact that young people tend to remain in the family home later in life than in past generations and that the decision to marry and have children is occurring later in life may have implications for life cycle patterns in engagement. Evidence from the 2001 General Social Survey suggests that “there has been a substantial increase in children still living at home long past the age when their parents expected them to leave” (Beaupré, Turcotte and Milan, 2006: 9). Between 1981 and 2001, the proportion of children aged 25-29 still living at home doubled from 12% to 24%. The increase among those aged 30-34 was of a similar size, from 5% to 11% (Beaupré, Turcotte and Milan, 2006: 9). This pattern of “delayed maturity” has been linked to a delaying of civic involvement until later in life (CRIC, 2003).

Research in the area of political socialization, that is, the degree to which family, education and peer groups are involved in the development of political attitudes and behaviour, has experienced resurgence in recent years. Early socialization is tremendously important to the development of “civic habits” (Delli Carpini, 2000). Research in political socialization traditionally has focused on the transmission of values and norms from one generation to the next, often explicitly associating this transmission as integral to the success of democratization (Hyman, 1959; Jennings and Niemi, 1981). Research suggests that whether a young person’s parents went to university is more important than family income to whether or not they themselves attend (de Broucker, 2005a). Recent research in the area focuses almost exclusively on the role of education in the transmission of political orientations, to the neglect of the role of the family, peer groups and associations (Stolle and Hooghe, 2004).

Yet evidence suggests that the nature of time spent with one’s family has changed. In 2005, family members with paid employment spent less time with their families than was the case in 1986: 3.4 hours on average compared with 4.2 (Turcotte, 2007). The main reason behind this change is an increase in the hours in a typical workday: more time at work translates into less time at home. This can have implications for political engagement in that we know that time spent discussing politics or even listening to one’s family discuss politics has implications for the transmission of values and for behaviour. Time spent at mealtime is generally when most discussions take place, but between 1986 and 2005, the average worker increased the time spent eating alone. The result is less time spent eating, and engaging, with family (Turcotte, 2007).

Others have suggested that changes in behaviour and psychological engagement are due to a larger cultural shift. Inglehart (1997) has argued that the shift in behaviour stems from a shift in

focus away from materialist toward postmaterialist values. This shift is caused by the increases in physical and economic security enjoyed by generations since the Second World War. Support for environmental and antiglobalization movements, he argues, is more likely to be found among recent generations for whom the deprivation associated with the Great Depression and war is learned from textbooks rather than as lived experiences. Cross and Young (2004), for example, attribute the greying of Canadian political parties to this cultural shift.

Nevitte (1996) has argued that cognitive mobilization, postmaterialism and a concomitant decline of deference toward authority have led to a shift toward political activity that is more citizen-directed and for which the payoff is more immediate and visible. Political protest, for example, has been argued to be a growing form of engagement among youth for this very reason. One could argue that experiments with citizens' assemblies for decision making on electoral reform both tap into this desire for greater participation and encourage unhappiness with more state-led top-down forms of decision making.

Gidengil et al. (2004) point out that political protest tends to be adopted as a means of engagement among those young Canadians who are already engaged in traditional ways such as voting and joining political parties. Non-traditional political activity is adopted in addition to, rather than instead of, traditional political activity. These researchers conclude that higher education lies behind these trends in engagement; as they note, "the less education people have, the less likely they are to be aware of what is going on, and people who are less aware are less likely to become involved in protest activities" (Gidengil et al., 2004: 139). Research has yet to adequately determine, however, whether youth are turning away from traditional activity toward more self-led, individual non-traditional forms of political activity or whether they are simply adding to the list of activities in which they engage.

Where micro level explanations look for changes at the individual level to explain generational change in engagement, those at the macro level focus on institutional and procedural changes to explain change. Along these lines, the failure of elections and politics to address issues of particular importance to young Canadians has been raised as a possible explanation for declining engagement. However, the evidence here is mixed. Gidengil et al. (2005) argue that opinion data from the 2004 election reveal that Canadians of all ages report strikingly similar personal priorities: namely, health care, corruption in government and taxes. Turcotte (2005), on the other hand, using survey data from the same election, finds a different set of concerns for young people. He suggests that young Canadians were more likely to identify education and economic issues as important issues during the election. Given that these concerns were not afforded significant attention by political parties during the campaign, lower participation levels can be explained. But part of the story behind these seemingly contradictory results lies in differences in survey question wording and in response type. The Canadian Election Study team adopted a closed-end question that asked about the most important issue to you personally in the campaign (Gidengil et al., 2005: 6), whereas Turcotte asked an open-ended question on the most important issue in the election campaign (Turcotte, 2005: 14).¹¹

Others have suggested that reduced engagement among young Canadians is due to less energy and attention being devoted by political and other organizations to recruiting members and

¹¹ The exact wording of the question is not provided in the article.

getting out the vote (Gidengil et al., 2004). Certainly, political parties have become more centrally run and organized, and their communication strategies are more media-directed than focused on door-to-door campaigns and canvassing, both of which make it less necessary and thus less likely that they will contact members of the public directly to entice them to engage (Carty, Cross and Young, 2000; Cross, 2004; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). How other organizations – political, governmental and civic – either encourage or discourage youth engagement is not well understood.

Related to these arguments are those that stress the recent move to the permanent voters' list in Canada as partly to blame for declining electoral engagement. The previous system, enumeration, is argued to have increased turnout for two reasons: first, personal and direct contact with voters has been shown to have a positive effect on turnout, and second, enumeration results in a more accurate registered voters' list. According to Black, enumeration "served to enhance inclusion, particularly since it drew into the political process the kinds of individuals, such as the young, the poor and those with little formal education, who otherwise would be less likely to take the initiative to participate" (Black, 2005: 162). Difficulties in disentangling the shift's effects on declining turnout from other effects and declining turnout outside of Canada make it difficult to argue convincingly that the permanent voter's list is the chief cause of the decline.

The review of the literature identifies multiple causes for the changes that have been recognized in youth political and civic engagement over time. Education has been identified for the key role it plays in the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes; lower levels of political knowledge and a weaker understanding of the requirements of citizenship and civic duty have implicitly been associated with changes in curriculum. The family's role in the transmission of knowledge and values has similarly been identified as a possible key to understanding the changing nature of youth engagement. Time spent with family and the activities that families engage in as a group are both potential causes for changes in engagement. Others suggest that election campaigns that fail to address issues of concern to youth, political parties that fail to devote significant energy to recruiting new members and getting out the vote, and the move from enumeration to a permanent voters' list cannot be overlooked as potential factors for explaining declining electoral turnout among youth. Recommendations stemming from research focusing on these changes have concentrated on assisting schools, families and political parties to encourage the development of civic attitudes among youth and on encouraging election platforms and get-out-the-vote campaigns targeted specifically at youth.

Research that has looked beyond electoral behaviour has identified a larger set of social changes that help to shed light on behavioural changes among the most recent generations. Changes in larger societal forces, including cognitive mobilization, postmaterialism, increased individualism and social isolation, help to explain higher levels of engagement among young Canadians in non-traditional forms of engagement and, to a lesser extent, in volunteering and participation patterns. Programs aimed to counter declining electoral participation are likely to be advocated among these researchers, but the conclusion that young people are adopting *different forms of participation* mutes any worry over the democratic deficit. Instead, programs aimed at encouraging more participatory forms of political decision making and at facilitating volunteering are more commonly proscribed by these researchers.

Future Research Directions

Throughout this review, several research areas have been identified as deserving of further attention. These include:

- The intersectionality of youth and other identities in shaping political and civic engagement (Included among these are socio-economic status, gender, Aboriginal status, ethnicity, immigrant status and visible minority status. How these identities vary across urban/rural and regional dimensions in Canada is also not well understood.)
- The linkages across civic engagement, traditional political engagement and non-traditional political engagement (Questions remain on which of these behaviours drives, if at all, the others and whether activity of one type is added to rather than replaces activities of another type.)
- The role of organizations, the political system and the media in encouraging and/or discouraging youth engagement
- The role of civics education and service learning in encouraging and/or discouraging youth engagement
- Political socialization and, in particular, the role of the family, peer groups and associations in shaping political interest, political knowledge, political understanding and political activity
- The shift to new individualized, private forms of engagement and concomitant shifts in understanding and defining citizenship among younger generations

Several new research directions also can be suggested as a result of a literature review that identified, first, the relatively limited understanding of the manner in which technology is reshaping political engagement and, second, the relative weakness of traditional methodologies used in the field in identifying and understanding changing engagement patterns.

Cellphones and Computers

The manner in which new technologies are changing the *repertoires* employed for political expression is not well understood. Cellphones, now ubiquitous in many countries, have provided a new avenue for political action, for example, in the form of instant text messaging, or SMS (Short Message Service). Text messaging has been credited with mobilizing opponents of Philippine President Joseph Estrada in 2001 and with boosting youth turnout in Spain's 2004 presidential elections (Hudson and Brown, 2006). Similarly, the Internet and access to the World Wide Web have brought about a seeming revolution in access to information and in communication. This revolution has had its greatest impact on the young. Yet its relevance for engagement, particularly among youth, remains tremendously under-researched (Delli Carpini, 2000; Saunders, 2007). We have information on the access and use of the Internet, and on the digital divide, but less on its *potential for* and indeed its *impact on* changing engagement among the young.

The increased use of cellphones in Canada is dramatic: from 22% of households reporting having a cellphone for personal use in 1997 to 59% in 2004. In December 2005, 4.8% of Canadian households reported relying *only* on cellphones as opposed to land lines. And

Canadians under the age of 34 are both more likely to own or have access to a cellphone (74%) than older Canadians and to spend more time on them (almost twice as much) than Canadians over age 55 (Industry Canada, 2006). Cellphones have been identified as a new form of political activism. Chinese activists, for example, flooded city government officials with text messages in a successful campaign to halt the development of a chemical factory in the city of Xiamen (York, 2007). Growth in the use of the Internet in Canada between 2000 and 2007 was a tremendous 73.2% (Internet World Stats, 2007). According to Statistics Canada, 61% of households in 2005 were connected to the Internet, and “Canadians between the ages of 18 and 44 (85%) were over one and half times more likely to use the Internet than those 45 years of age and older (50%)” (Statistics Canada, 2006b).

Among younger Canadians, the Internet is beginning to rival television and newspapers as a source of political information (see Figure 6). New Internet-based sites such as MySpace¹² and Facebook provide forums for communicating, organizing and socializing that are unlike traditional social networks that require face-to-face contact. Internet relationships were identified as a “sub-peer” group by a participant in a recent workshop on youth engagement (CPRN, 2007). Delli Carpini suggests that what is new about the Web is that, among other things, it increases the speed with which information can be collected and transmitted, provides greater opportunity and mixes of interactivity, shifts the nature of community from geographic to interest-based and challenges traditional definitions of information gatekeepers and authoritative voices (Delli Carpini, 2000: 346-347). Saunders has argued that researchers ought to ask how the use of new media shapes not only political information and knowledge but also, importantly, the development of political understanding and identity (Saunders, 2007: 25-26). The potential negative impacts of this new technology are real (e.g. virtual bullying and misinformation) but ought not to blind us to the possibility that it provides avenues for engagement that we would not immediately recognize in the traditional sense as engagement.

Canadian research directed at political and civic engagement has not adequately incorporated these changes into its analyses. At the very least, we ought to be pushing ourselves to better understand the limitations in our traditional models and expand our conceptualization of political and civic engagement toward inclusiveness of these new technological forums and processes. The study of political behaviour has not yet begun to adequately study the use of these technologies in engagement; how this technology is specifically adopted by youth is especially deserving of greater attention.

Methodological Considerations

Norris (2003) makes clear that political behaviour research focuses almost exclusively on the traditional repertoires of political activism, designed to influence the agents, agencies and outcomes of representative democracy (such as voting and campaign work). She notes that “today this represents an excessively narrow conceptualization of activism that excludes some of

¹² MySpace is a Web-based service that bills itself as an “online community that lets you meet your friends' friends.” Similarly, Facebook is a Web-based service that describes itself as a “social utility that connects you with the people around you.” See www.myspace.com and www.facebook.com.

the most common targets of civic engagement” (Norris, 2003: 3). Others have made similar arguments. Vromen (2003), for instance, has argued that political science has to reconceptualize political participation to include activity aimed at shaping society rather than simply aimed at influencing those institutions associated directly with representative democracy. Marsh, O’Toole and Jones (2007) go a step further and argue that the “free-rider” problem in electoral politics (that is, young people assuming less than their fair share of the responsibilities of citizenship) is less problematic than the role of government in constraining democracy, particularly for young people.

This research highlights the degree to which our methodologies, concepts and models shape our understanding of the problem, the causes behind it and the prescriptions for remedying it. As researchers, we need to be certain that the assumptions we bring to bear on our methodological choices do not function as blinders to the changing nature of participation in younger generations. If political action is indeed changing, then at the very least, the surveys that we employ to measure engagement ought to capture the changing nature of that engagement. This goes beyond adding or modifying questions in the traditional battery of engagement survey questions; it suggests instead a rethinking of political engagement and activism as community processes designed primarily to influence political actors. And as the technologies adopted to facilitate engagement change, so too must the models and explanations that attempt to explain behaviour and attitudes. Adopting qualitative methodologies to develop richer understandings of the relationship between age and engagement, and to shed light on the changes in meaning associated with political activity, can take us some distance toward meeting this goal as it allows us to better assess how well our methodologies tap these shifts (Vromen, 2003; Marsh, O’Toole and Jones, 2007).

Policy Considerations

As noted above, policy designed to counter declining levels of youth engagement will reflect both the political activity in question and the factors that are considered to lie behind the decline in activity. In spite of the range of policy alternatives available, various suggestions can nevertheless be offered in light of the issues and considerations raised in this review.

First, policy designed to address youth engagement must avoid the temptation to reflect a “one size fits all” framework. Youth across Canada share similarities, but in many instances these are likely to be outweighed by their differences. Among young Canadians, women, Aboriginal populations, immigrants, visible minorities, the poor and the less educated face a particular set of difficulties and struggles within representative democracies that make it more difficult to model and address their participatory disadvantages.

Second, the evidence suggests that young Canadians may be shifting to individualized results-oriented political action rather than withdrawing from politics altogether. While such a shift perhaps lessens the need for concern, the limited participation of young Canadians in the formal processes and institutions of electoral politics is not without consequence. At the very least, it leaves open the possibility that policy decisions made by representative political institutions are less likely to reflect their values and desires. As such, policy ought not to overlook the

importance of instilling in young Canadians the desire and motivation to participate in electoral politics.

Third, if young Canadians are engaging in individualized results-oriented political action, then such action ought to be encouraged and, moreover, nurtured by government. Policies designed to assist volunteer organizations in their recruitment, organization, development and other functions, for example, bring with them the possibility of increasing the outlets available for this important form of engagement. Tying government-sponsored post-secondary bursaries and scholarships to volunteering activities is another.

Fourth, governments ought to focus the lens inward to consider how institutions and processes may no longer “speak” to the youngest citizens and how they may even discourage their participation. For the cognitively mobilized, the formal processes and hierarchical organizations of representative politics provide little in the way of satisfying and results-oriented practices. Wherever possible, participatory decision-making structures ought to be adopted, fully supported and implemented. This necessarily involves the ceding of a measure of political power but brings with it a host of benefits in the form of an engaged, informed and involved citizenry.

Fifth, civics education stands as an effective, if not the most effective, mechanism for addressing deficiencies in political knowledge and understanding of the public responsibilities associated with citizenship. Encouraging private acts of engagement is an important role for governments in modern democracies; ensuring that citizens accept and assume the responsibilities associated with citizenship is essential. Similarly, instilling in the young an understanding that politics “involves the collective imposition of decisions, demands a complex communication process and generally produces messy compromises” might reduce citizen discontent with formal political processes and actors (Stoker, 2006: 68). Accommodating the needs of educators in their attempt to assume this responsibility ought to be a priority.

Finally, families stand as the primary agent of political socialization. Families provide political information and knowledge both directly and indirectly, transmit beliefs and values regarding the political system and provide role models of political engagement. Governments ought to include families as important agents in policies designed to assist youth engagement.

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