

Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation CPRN Youth Workshop Summary Report

On March 7, 2007 CPRN hosted an all day workshop bringing together a diverse group of young people to explore what participation and citizenship means to them and to hear their ideas about what should be done to encourage and support more young adults to participate in civic and political activities. The participants represented a wide range of backgrounds. Some are still students, either in high school, college or university, and others are working. Some are actively involved in civic or political activities, while others are not. The purpose of the workshop was to inform a series of research papers (*Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation*) commissioned to explore key issues related to youth engagement.

Using a variety of participatory methods to engage young people, the professionally facilitated workshop probed some foundational questions including: *What does participation mean to you? What does it mean to be a citizen? What opportunities and barriers encourage and discourage your participation?*

The young people interacted with five of the Canadian academics who are writing the research papers for CPRN. Those papers will be released later this year along with a synthesis paper that presents cross cutting themes and recommends policy and community actions to support young people in becoming and remaining active citizens.

This summary report includes: a complete list of participants, authors and observers (Appendix 1); demographic information on the young people (Appendix 2); summary results of the pre-questionnaire on civic and political participation (Appendix 3); participants' evaluation rankings and comments (Appendix 4); and the agenda for the workshop (Appendix 5).

Project Background

The spark for this workshop and the research series came from CPRN's 2005 National Youth Dialogue and Summit held in Ottawa which gathered 144 randomly recruited young Canadians (between 18 – 25) for 3.5 days to talk about the kind of Canada they want and their role in realizing their dream. The Dialogue identified gaps in our understanding of youth participation and more importantly led to the realization that our participation models and practices need to be reinvigorated to support young people to become and remain civically and politically active citizens.

As part of our commitment to act on the findings of the Youth Dialogue and Summit we decided to undertake this research series to better understand why and how young people engage or don't engage in civic and political life; what young Canadians think of their

government, including what changes they would like to see in our democratic system, and what being a citizen means to them.

More specifically, the project consists of:

- A) six research papers, exploring the following topics: youth and political parties; citizenship and learning; why and how young people participate or don't participate; Aboriginal youth engagement; and youth participation in Quebec. The papers are all being written by Canadian academic researchers who are especially interested in these issues;
- B) the March 7 workshop with 14 youth and the authors;
- C) a May 16 roundtable with young people, policy makers and researchers to discuss the draft papers, and
- D) a synthesis paper, to be written by CPRN.

We have a Project Advisory Group helping us with this project. Its members reflect a diverse range of perspectives and interests, including representatives of youth-led organizations, researchers and some of our funders.

The project is based on CPRN's policy research model which emphasizes the importance of incorporating different kinds of evidence, including first-hand experience and values-based perspectives. We believe that combining the knowledge of experts with the experience of regular citizens results in better policy. This approach is particularly compelling in research related to citizenship, because unless people themselves actively participate in defining what 'good' citizenship should mean and what conditions and supports are needed to achieve this end, we risk producing theoretical work that never moves beyond the academy and policy wonks. What are the chances of the theory of citizenship ever becoming practice if the practitioners are left out of the conversation?

Key Findings of the Workshop

- Developing **personal identity** really comes first – having a strong sense of identity helps give confidence for participation (you need to know who you are before you can engage). At the same time, they recognized that their identity is shaped, in part, by their connections with others.
- They are **feeling the burden of mistakes** by previous generations. The message they hear repeatedly – *it's up to youth to save the world, reverse climate change, find a way to make health care sustainable for the baby boomers* – creates anxiety among youth. To paraphrase one participant – “we're told to fix things but the tools we get are a few nails and no hammer.”
- **Participation should bring results.** Volunteering for a cause or providing direct help at the community level gives immediate results and satisfaction. In contrast, becoming involved in formal politics or voting rarely offers immediate results. They talked about their own need to be more patient, and understand that political actions often take time and are aimed at longer term changes.

- **Politics are a turn off.** Workshop participants don't believe politicians necessarily act in the long term interests of the people. They are turned off by the politicians fighting to score media points and avoiding the tough discussions and decisions instead of addressing these issues with the people who elected them. While many of them think voting is important, others are not so sure. They are not encouraged when the main issue aimed at youth during election campaigns is about them not showing up to vote. Governments are perceived as catering to the baby boomers because they carry more demographic weight than youth.
- **Engagement between elections is missing the mark.** It doesn't always feel like a privilege to vote. If youth don't see their views reflected in the party platforms, voting can be a burden.
- **Political parties are not on youth's radar screen** in part because they lack knowledge about the role of parties in democracy. Parties are seen as boring, partisan and not at the forefront of taking action on society's challenges. Youth don't see themselves in party membership, ideas or policy processes. In looking at the slate of party representatives, they note that their cohort and views are not well represented.
- They feel a **personal responsibility to be informed** about issues in order to be active. As one participant said, "Politics is about everything...you cannot escape it so you might as well understand it." However, they also expressed the view that they are not getting the support needed from the education system or from organizations to achieve this. Several articulated their feeling of not having a voice or a choice in decisions that affect them and they don't have the ability to change things. They want more information about opportunities to become involved in things that matter to them.
- **Families and peers are important influences** on a young person's interest in being involved. Families play a critical role in exposing youth to current affairs and in helping them to develop critical thinking skills. Peers are equally, if not more important than family in encouraging participation. Interestingly, they view their internet contacts as a sub-peer group. Teachers were also cited by some participants as role-models who inspired them to get engaged. Some said they were motivated by negative role models – families, teachers or community leaders who discouraged them from becoming involved.
- **Media can be a barrier and an incentive to participation.** While participants saw the media as a source of information about politics and policy issues, they were very critical of the media's superficial and negative political coverage of important public issues (e.g. not looking at the issues addressed in protests and rallies but reporting on the problems caused by a few protesters).

What do youth think needs to change?

1. How youth learn about and are prepared for active citizenship

- Civics education should be more than a half-credit course. It needs to start earlier than grade 10 and be integrated throughout the curriculum, linking their learning to real issues that are important to youth and their communities.
- « *Il faut ouvrir nos horizons!* ». Schools should be a safe place to openly discuss challenging issues, learn about different points of view, and develop skills for critical analysis and problem solving. Some participants did not feel their schools provided this.
- Education should focus on our responsibilities as citizens and members of communities, as well as rights. More interaction between schools and the community can reinforce the skills needed for participation. And learning by doing works better than passive lecturing. As one participant noted, “You cannot educate an interest – you can only nurture it.”
- Teachers and schools need to be supported in helping prepare students for active citizenship.

2. Political institutions and practices

- Legislatures and parliament need to better reflect youth and all the other under-represented groups - women, Aboriginal people, and our ethno-cultural diversity. Because many young people feel their votes don't count for much in a political system that caters to the baby boomers, they would like an electoral system that makes their vote more meaningful.
- Political parties need to pro-actively reach out to youth AND change how they go about their work. Parties would be more interesting to young people if they focus more on policies and less on the electoral machine. They need to find ways to talk about issues that youth can connect to their realities and include young people in ways that provide opportunity to influence.
- Politicians need to get closer to their constituents, be visible and get involved locally. Despite the perception of this connected age, young people want to see politicians face to face in their communities and not only at election time. They want to discuss real issues with politicians and parties, and not just why youth don't vote.

3. Supporting Indigenous youth engagement

- Our political institutions and processes need to do a better job of reflecting the indigenous perspectives. The participants feel that there is much to learn from indigenous values in addressing societal challenges (e.g. environment, human rights, community governance).
- Participants were very aware of their own lack of knowledge and understanding of Indigenous peoples' histories, traditions and realities and their role in Canada's history. They want their schools to teach this history and the contemporary reality of indigenous people to help disperse stereotypes.

- Youth-led groups are very important in supporting indigenous youth learn about and find opportunities to become involved. They need resources and mentors to provide active spaces, not just run-down buildings for youth to interact with each other and their communities.

4. How we think about and support youth participation

- Youth need to be invited to the table and have real responsibilities and opportunities to influence decisions. And they need feedback on what was done with their input. Token engagement only leads to frustration and alienation.
- To help increase youth interest in politics, governments need to demonstrate they care about the issues that are of interest to youth and about what youth have to say. They need to use language and tools that are accessible to young people.
- Just as with the rest of the population, young people are not a homogenous group. Different options and approaches are needed to appeal to youth in the urban or rural areas, as well as to youth with different backgrounds and interests.
- Families continue to have a critical role to play in supporting their children to participate in society, but not by indoctrination. Rather, they need to ensure exposure to newspapers or television news, act as role models in discussing current affairs and helping youth develop critical thinking skills.
- Support for the creation and operation of youth-led active spaces rather than drop-in centres, would provide effective ways to help youth and communities connect in meaningful ways. It would also offer opportunities for politicians and others to discuss challenging issues with young people, support their knowledge development and critical thinking skills.

Conclusion and Next Steps

In our experience, young people, who participate in respectful processes that promote open dialogue and learning with a diverse group of others, have much to contribute. The participants in this workshop were no exception. Many found the day too short. In their closing comments a number expressed the need for solutions to the problems they had identified. Through this research initiative, we hope to build on their ideas to offer concrete suggestions for governments, civil society and others to respond to their concerns.

Draft versions of the research papers will be discussed at a Roundtable, to be held in Ottawa on May 16th. Participants will include the researchers, young people, the Project Advisory Group, academics, policy makers and others with a relevant interest. The draft papers will incorporate feedback from the Roundtable and from peer review. The final papers will be released in the summer-fall 2007. CPRN will release a synthesis paper in the fall.

Appendix 1: Workshop Participants

Participants/ participants et participantes:

Tommy Akululjuk
Roya Atmar
Josée Madéïa Charlebois
Matt Clayton
Josh Greenwald
Victor Hilsden
Wagma Isaqzoy
Alexandra (Tori) Kellner
Kayleigh McEwan
Kate Primeau
Ben Siversky
Carey Teague
Joslyn Trowbridge
Kevin Wasacase

Researchers / les chercheurs:

Sharon Cook, University of Ottawa
Bill Cross, Carleton University
Kristina Llewellyn, University of Ottawa
Brenda O'Neill, University of Calgary
Jackie Price, Nunavut Sivuniksavut Training Program and University of Victoria
Joel Westheimer, University of Ottawa

Observers / les observateurs:

Project Advisory Group Members / Membres du groupe consultatif:

Katherine Bruce, HRSDC
Uttara Chauhan, Elections Canada
Nevin Danielson, Saskatchewan Culture, Youth and Recreation
Eriel Deranger, TakingITGlobal
Peter MacLeod, The Planning Desk
Deborah Monette, Canadian Council on Learning
Alison Luz Molina, University of Ottawa
Ranilce Guimaraes, University of Ottawa/ University of Brasilia
Sylvia Smith, Elizabeth W. Wood Alternative Program

CPRN/RCRPP:

Beth Allan, Facilitator

Jennifer Fry, Director, Public Affairs

Mary Pat Mackinnon, Director, Public Involvement Network

Sonia Pitre, Researcher, Public Involvement Network

Judi Varga-Toth, Assistant Director, Family Network

Judy Watling, Assistant Director, Public Involvement Network

Appendix 2: Workshop Participants Demographic Information*

Variables	N
Gender	
Male	6
Female	7
Age	
18-19	3
20-21	3
22-23	4
24-25	3
Education level completed	
Some High School	3
High School diploma	2
Community College/Cegep	2
Some College/University	1
Bachelor degree	5
Living with their parents	
Yes	9
No	4

* Based on results from 13 pre-questionnaires (there were 14 participants in all).

Appendix 3: Pre-questionnaire Results

Civic participation in the last 12 months

Over the past 12 months have you...	Yes	No
Volunteered	11	2
Given money to charity***	6	6
Written a letter to a newspaper editor/elected representative	3	10
Called a television/radio talk show about public issues	2	11
Been involved in a public demonstration/protest/attended a public meeting on an issue	7	6
Signed a petition	10	3
Been a member of a club/organization focused on public issues	4	9
Been a member of a student council/class representative	1	12
Participated in an online or e-mail discussion related to a public issue	7	6
Written an article for publication	4	9
Taken part in a government-sponsored consultation exercise***	1	11

*** Totals are based on the number of completed responses.

Political participation***

	Yes	No
Have you ever voted in a federal, provincial, municipal, band council or other election?	10	3
Do you plan to vote in the next election (at any level of government)?	11	-
Have you ever or do you currently belong to a political party?	2	10

*** Totals are based on the number of completed responses.

Level of government participants have voted at

At what level of government have you voted at	N
Federal elections	8
Provincial elections	4
Municipal or band council elections	4

Staying informed of public affairs

How often do you follow public affairs in the media?	N
More than once a day	4
At least once a day	4
Between 3 and 6 times a week	1
Once or twice a week	3
Rarely or never	1
Total	13

Appendix 4: Evaluation¹

Questions	Scale of 1 to 5 Mean score
Q1. <i>How helpful was the Workshop backgrounder in preparing you for the discussion?</i>	3.9
Q2. <i>How well did the morning small and large group discussion encourage your active participation and learning about other participants' views and ideas?</i>	4.4
Q3. <i>How well did the afternoon World Café enable you to contribute your ideas and views and consider those of the other participants?</i>	4.8
Q4. <i>How would you evaluate this Workshop as a learning experience?</i>	4.4

Open Ended Questions

Q5. a) *What was most useful or interesting to you in this Workshop?*

For half of the participants (7/14), the small group discussions and/or World Café was the most interesting. Another youth identified the design in general and how it allowed for meaningful discussion without passing judgment. Four participants valued listening to other people's views. One youth valued discussing indigenous issues most of all, while another participant noted liking everything about the workshop.

Q5. b) *What was least useful or interesting to you in this Workshop?*

While 3 participants did not answer, another 4 wrote "nothing" and one indicated "this question". While 2 felt the initial "post-it" exercise used to identify concepts linked to participation and citizenship was the least useful, one person felt that not enough time was devoted to it. Another participant indicated the discussion with authors the least helpful and one found the discussion on political parties to be the least interesting. This same participant also was looking for more answers to the questions that arose in the workshop and wanted more clarity on next steps.

¹ All 14 participants completed the evaluation

Questions	Scale of 1 to 5 Mean score
Q6. <i>To what extent were you satisfied with:</i>	
Q6. a) <i>The overall organization of the workshop?</i>	4.3
Q6. b) <i>The facilitator?</i>	4.3
Q6. c) <i>Your opportunity to participate?</i>	4.5
Q6. d) <i>Food and refreshments?</i>	3.4

Q7. *Did the Workshop change how you think about participation in society and political affairs? How?*

Of the 13 participants who answered this question, 8 agreed that the workshop did change the way they thought about participant and 5 disagreed. More specifically, the workshop helped clarify the role and purpose of political parties, presented different avenues for dealing with issues, showed how participation can be fulfilling and that being political is important. For one participant, the workshop was an incentive to get involved.

Q8. *Do you think that you are likely to become more actively involved in community activities? Why? Why not?*

Seven participants found that the workshop gave them an incentive to get more involved in their community, especially at the local level said one. Among the others, 4 indicated that they are already very involved while the last 2 were definite maybes, although one of these respondents still felt a need for additional information.

Q9. *Do you think that you are likely to become more actively involved in political activities? Why? Why not?*

Of the 12 respondents, 5 indicated that they are more likely to get involved now. More precisely, one respondent noted that if they found a party that suited them they would get involved. Another respondent noted that in spite a previous negative experience with political parties, the workshop had convinced them it was more important than ever to get involved in formal politics. Another 5 respondents did not think it likely that they would become more politically active. One of these respondents indicated a sense of disillusionment notwithstanding the positive workshop experience. Two respondents replied that they are already very involved. Several replied that they might become more involved.

Additional Comments

- People were appreciative and thanked CPRN for the opportunity to participate in the workshop.
- One respondent noted that the authors were interesting and motivating.

- Another wrote about the need for accessible activities and infrastructures for youth to be creative and to get involved.
- And yet another lamented not having enough time for discussion.
- One would have appreciated more in-depth analysis and critical thinking throughout the workshop.

Appendix 5: Workshop Agenda

Youth Workshop on Democratic and Civic Participation March 7, 2007

14th Floor, 250 Albert Street, Ottawa

Agenda

- 9:00** **Registration / Questionnaire**
Coffee, tea, juice and muffins
- 9:30** **Welcome and Overview**
- 9:50** **Opening comments from participants:** Introductions and hopes / expectations for the day.
- 10:10** **First Discussion (large group):** *What does participation mean to you? What does it mean to you to be a citizen?* Identify common themes and differences.
- 10:50** **Break**
- 11:00** **Second Discussion (small groups):** *Drawing on the ideas raised in the first discussion, what are the opportunities and barriers encouraging or discouraging your participation? For others?*
- 11:20** Round robin reports from groups. Questions from authors and discussion to deepen understanding.
- 12:00** **Lunch**
- 12:45** **World Café**
Introduction: What is a World Café and how does it work?
Authors host 4 different tables for participants to discuss questions that will further the research. Participants will rotate to each table:
- 1. Participation (Brenda O'Neill)**
- Surveys reveal that young Canadians have very low levels of interest in politics. Are you interested? Why or why not? What would make politics more interesting and relevant to young people?
 - What role does the family play in helping young people learn about and become involved in political and

community activities? What role do you think families should play?

2. Civic Learning (Sharon Cook)

- Is school a place where you have discussed, or think you should discuss, political issues (e.g. war, environment, homelessness)?
- How can schools help youth to take an interest in solving social / political problems?

3. Political Parties (Bill Cross)

- Why do you think so few young Canadians belong to political parties?
- What do you think parties could do to make themselves more attractive to young Canadians?
- Do you think it matters that the parties' members are disproportionately older?

4. Indigenous Youth (Jackie Price)

- What are some indirect ways of supporting Indigenous youth political participation? More specifically, what are your thoughts on the role of Indigenous youth groups and organizations? What supports are necessary to support youth groups?
- Are you more active/interested in one level of politics (federal/provincial/land claims/municipal/international) over another? What are your reasons for this preference?

Report back from each table by host and one participant (chosen by group) and questions and discussion of ideas raised, common themes and differences.

2:45	Buzz Groups: Advice on how to make research accessible and support action by politicians, decision makers, educators, young people, etc.
2:55	Post-questionnaire / Evaluation
3:00	Closing Comments by Participants
3:25	Closing Remarks - CPRN
4:00 – 5:30	308 West Block, Parliament Hill to meet and talk with several local MPs (10-15 minute walk). Bring your ID for Hill Security.