



A Group Apart: Young Party Members in Canada

Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation

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Executive Summary

June 2007

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This research paper is one of the six papers prepared for CPRN's Democratic Renewal Series, *Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation*. All research papers and CPRN's synthesis report for this project are available on the CPRN Web site at www.cprn.org. The six papers are listed below.

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

This research paper benefited from the financial contribution of Elections Canada.

The observations and conclusions are those of the author(s).

Executive Summary

This paper is premised on compelling evidence that young Canadians have become less likely to join political parties than their counterparts in their parents' or grandparents' generations. Should it continue, this trend will move Canadian political parties further away from being participatory membership organizations, thereby rendering them less effective as bridges between the electorate and the government.

To better understand the factors underlying this tendency, we conducted a survey of young party members and of other politically engaged young Canadians on university campuses. This paper analyzes the differences between these two groups, finding that young party members are more traditional in their orientation and outlook and somewhat more deferential to authority than their non-partisan but engaged counterparts. In many instances, the young party members' upbringings have primed them in the following ways to join parties:

- Young party members' parents are much more likely to have belonged to political parties.
- Young party members are more likely to report having discussed politics at home when they were growing up.
- Young party members are somewhat more likely to have taken a high school civics class or a university-level Canadian political science course.

Moreover, young party members differ from other engaged young Canadians in their orientations toward the political system. Specific differences include these:

- Young party members consume slightly more news than their activist counterparts and are less likely to rely on the Internet as a source of information regarding current events.
- Young party members express slightly higher levels of confidence in social and political institutions.
- Although both young activists and young party members are positively inclined toward interest groups, young activists are substantially less positive toward political parties than are young party members.
- Young party members are considerably more likely to think that joining a political party is an effective way of achieving social change.
- Young activists perceive joining a political party as the *least* effective political tactic, while young party members see it as the *most* effective.

Overall, the young non-party members surveyed see parties as hierarchical organizations that do not welcome young people and that do not give members an adequate role in directing the organization. In essence, there is a culture clash between these egalitarian members of Generation Y and the top-down organization of Canadian political parties.

Many of these findings suggest that declining rates of youth membership in political parties are a product of structurally grounded generational change. It follows that any consideration of policy reforms or changes to party practice would have to be adaptive: there is little likelihood of

reversing the process of attitudinal change underlying these perceptions. To the extent that public policy can influence such tendencies, it would take the form of encouraging more extensive exposure to the operation of the Canadian political process within the formal education system.

The most likely agents of change are the parties themselves. A party that wanted to attract and retain young members could consider the following:

- Focusing resources on creating or maintaining a vibrant network of campus and/or youth clubs (Such groups need to be both social and political in their organization, as social incentives matter more to young people than to older potential members whose social networks are already established.)
- Engaging in meaningful internal reforms that enhance the involvement of individual party members beyond the moments of leadership selection and candidate nomination, bringing members into discussions of policy and party direction
- Encouraging a concentrated effort on the part of all political parties to improve their image, demonstrating to Canadians that they do play a role in stimulating national debates on public policy, and generate and implement new ideas
- Making efforts to reach young Canadians in new and innovative ways, using Internet and related technologies

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge funding for this project provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through a Standard Research Grant and from Canadian Policy Research Networks. We are grateful to the following for valuable research assistance: Melanee Thomas, Frederic Bastien, John Crysler, Hilary Pearse, Kashi Tanaka and Adam Binet. We wish to acknowledge the helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper from CPRN's anonymous reviewers and useful commentary on the broader research project from the participants in the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) workshop "Partisanship in Europe: Members, Activists and Identifiers," held in May 2007.

We at CPRN would like to express our appreciation to the following financial and in-kind contributors:

Laidlaw Foundation

Elections Canada

Human Resources and Social Development Canada

Government of Saskatchewan, Department of Culture, Youth and Recreation

Canadian Council on Learning

Government of Nova Scotia, Nova Scotia Youth Secretariat

Fireweed Democracy

Laboratoire en Loisir et Vie Communautaire (LLVC), Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, in collaboration with la Table de concertation des Forums jeunesse régionaux du Québec

The project also benefited from the collective insights and advice of our Project Advisory Group (PAG). We also wish to thank them for attending (as observers) the March 7th Youth Workshop and for their participation at the May 16th Roundtable. The PAG members are:

Rick Anderson, Fireweed Democracy

Uttara Chauhan, Elections Canada

Jennifer Corriero, TakingITGlobal

Nevin Danielson and Spencer Robertson, Government of Saskatchewan, Department of Culture Youth and Recreation

Violetta Ilkiw, Laidlaw Foundation

Peter MacLeod, The Planning Desk

Andrew Medd, Canada 25

Melinda Morin, Aboriginal Youth (Saskatchewan)

Deborah Pellerin, Government of Nova Scotia, Department of Education

Daryl Rock and Deborah Monette, Canadian Council on Learning

Tom McIntosh, University of Regina

Thanks as well to the anonymous reviewers of the papers, the youth participants of the March 7th Youth Workshop and the May 16th Roundtable attendees for their helpful comments and suggestions. Special thanks to Larry Booi, Canadian Council on Learning (Board Member), for his additional insights and advice.