



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

Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation

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Executive Summary

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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

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

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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