



Lost in Translation: (Mis)Understanding Youth Engagement

Synthesis Report

Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation

Executive Summary

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Dedication

CPRN's journey leading to this synthesis paper on youth civic and political engagement has been motivated by the young people who have participated in our *2005 National Dialogue and Summit on Engaging Young Canadians*, our workshops, roundtables and advisory groups. We have been inspired by their energy and passion for issues that are critical to Canada's well-being. We offer these young people our sincere respect and gratitude, and we dedicate this research to them.

This synthesis paper was prepared for CPRN's Democratic Renewal Series, *Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation*. All six research papers and this synthesis report are available on the CPRN website 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

Foreword

When we connect with what matters to young people using language and concepts they understand, they engage. Generation Y (those born after 1979) has been told “to act locally and think globally,” that “less is more,” and that “small is beautiful.” They have been prodded to “be the change you want to see.” They were also warned that there’s no free lunch and they must be prepared to change jobs and retool throughout their working lives. So, we should not be surprised that youth have tended to reframe engagement in more individual and less institutional terms.

The message emerging from this research series on youth civic and political participation is clear: today’s young people are not disengaged from associational and small “p” political life but are increasingly disenchanted with formal political institutions and practices. Most care very deeply about issues that affect broader society – from the local to the global level – and many of them are engaged in various ways. How young people think and talk about their civic and political engagement is different from previous generations. Unfortunately, much of this is not captured by traditional research methods and academic discourse about what constitutes political participation. In this sense, their engagement is misunderstood or misrepresented. It seems to get lost in translation between the old and the new – traditional notions of civic and political engagement and youth ideas and actions.

It is also clear that disaffection with formal politics is not unique to the younger generation, but rather part of a broader challenge facing democracies today – at home and abroad. We have to be careful not to blame young people for their own marginalization from politics. Youth feel disconnected and are alienated from the political process partly because their issues don’t seem to be on the political agenda. Perhaps parties’ agendas don’t emphasize youth relevant policy in their platforms because young adults are less likely to vote. It is a vicious cycle.

One thing is certain: the civic and political engagement of youth will not improve if we persist in an institutional mindset that insists that young people must conform to the traditional political system. We must start with an honest assessment of existing democratic institutions and practices and a willingness to refurbish them to become more relevant to the needs and expectations of both young people and the broad population. As so aptly stated by Westheimer and Cook (2005), “Democracy is not self-winding.” Investing in youth is a pre-requisite to maintaining a strong democracy, and Canada needs the talents and passion of all of its generations. All of us – young people and older adults – must open our minds, revisit our definitions and diversify our research tools. By finding common language and fashioning new ways of engaging together, as Canadians, we can realize a more just, prosperous and caring Canada.

Executive Summary

Today's youth are turned off by the game of partisan politics and increasingly refuse to learn or apply the rules. In large measure, they are reinventing civic and political engagement. Unfortunately, their discourse is all too often either not understood or poorly captured by traditional surveys, academic research and their Baby Boomer parents. In this sense, their ideas and actions are misunderstood or misrepresented. They seem to get lost in translation between the new and the old – between their perspectives and traditional notions about political and civic engagement.

Lost in Translation elaborates on this message. The report synthesizes key learnings from CPRN's six commissioned papers and its dialogues/workshops and research on youth¹ engagement. All of the research has involved young people directly, as authors, critics, and subjects of research, as well as many seasoned analysts of political participation. The papers explore different facets of youth civic and political participation in order to create a composite picture of their attitudes and experiences. Building from this evidence, the report sets out policy directions and actions to prepare young people for active citizenship. It also identifies a research agenda to address gaps in knowledge about youth civic and political participation. It concludes with a call for deeper intergenerational discourse to move from meanings that are "lost in translation" to shared language and the identification of fresh approaches to strengthen the civic and political life of Canada.

What We Learned

The report organizes its findings about youth engagement into three broad categories: *sociological factors* (socio-economic status, childhood socialization, life cycle and generational effects, gender, and knowledge, skills and participation), *psychological factors* (identity, interest, efficacy, duty) and *institutional factors* (governments, political parties, educational institutions and civil society). The profile of youth participation that emerges is complex, sometimes contradictory or contested, and ultimately incomplete. But the parameters are clear: today's youth (sometimes called "Generation Y," which refers to those born after 1979) have less formal political knowledge than previous generations and yet are highly suspicious of political spin and insincerity. Despite having more formal education than their elders, many of them don't grasp how governments and political institutions work nor do they get the connections between their everyday lives and politics. Only one in 20 Canadians between 18 and 30 years of age (in 2000) had ever belonged to a political party, compared with one-third of those over age 60. And, as is well publicized, today's youth are much less likely to vote than other Canadians. While older generations across the western world also exhibit disaffection from formal politics, it is even more acute among youth.

¹ In general, CPRN's dialogues and workshops have engaged young people aged 18 to 25. The authors of the six papers used roughly similar age groupings, though some included 15- to 18-year-olds and/or 25- to 30-year-olds as well.

Although less politically literate than previous generations, members of Generation Y are knowledgeable and sophisticated in many ways. For instance, they are quick to apply online tools and networks to mobilize socially and politically, but often do not identify their activities as being political. They are very impatient with traditional ways of political engagement – they are turned off by political parties and partisan politics, dislike hierarchical approaches to organization and mobilization, and don't think that formal politics is an effective route to affect change. They use the marketplace to practise consumer citizenship and turn to boycotts and buycotts as forms of political expression. This generation is much more wired, getting more of its news and information online and from alternative sources, rather than mainstream media. These youth are more likely than older Canadians to participate in political demonstrations, to volunteer and to be a member of a group or organization. They volunteer for different activities and are motivated by different reasons (e.g. reciprocal relationships, skills development, social purposes). They look for engagement that has personal meaning and delivers faster results than traditional routes.

Today's youth are not disengaged from associational and small "p" political life but are increasingly disenchanted with formal political institutions and practices. Most care deeply about issues that affect society – from the local to the global – and many of them are engaged in various ways. The ways in which young people think about and discuss politics and engagement are very different from their baby boomer parents.

What Needs To Be Done

Guided by a belief in the importance of enabling youth to find and articulate their voice, secure a sense of belonging, establish their identity and learn citizenship through participation, the report maps directional actions to help achieve this. Preparing youth for active citizenship requires the collaboration of educational institutions, governments, political parties, politicians, families, the community sector and youth themselves. But this is not about simply transferring knowledge from one generation to another – **rather, it is about embracing youth as co-creators and partners in renewing civil and democratic life in Canada.**

As young people reflect on their civic and political roles, it is clear that many of them must first find their own identity as a Canadian. This is especially true for Indigenous youth and for newcomers to Canada. They need opportunities to practice being a citizen – through discussion and debate, at home, in schools and in their own and broader communities. Out of this experience, they begin to develop a sense of efficacy and a growing sense of belonging.

Key initiatives include these:

- Launch a civic literacy strategy that positions reframed, revitalized and diversified citizenship education as a key plank.
- Democratize governance (adopt more participatory methods, lessen executive control).
- Create a federal ministerial portfolio for youth policy and programs.
- Renew political parties (reach out to youth, democratize party structures and practices).
- Realign community sector engagement strategies (tailor opportunities to youth interests).

- Leverage community organizations' trusted status to raise youth civic literacy and engagement.
- Start at home: mobilize families as agents and role models.
- Challenge youth to exercise their voice, improve media/political literacy, balance personal and collective needs and expectations, and develop patience.

What We Need to Learn: A Research Agenda

The report also identifies research gaps, limitations and challenges. A research agenda, motivated by the desire to build and mobilize knowledge to inform policy interventions and action, is laid out. These research priorities include the following:

- Probe motivations for voting (and not voting), identifying effective incentives to increase turnout.
- Identify promising and best practices for citizenship teaching, including comparative work.
- Study the impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) on civic literacy and engagement.
- Unpack youth diversity to identify the commonalities and differences among various subgroups (ethno-cultural youth, young women, Indigenous youth, those with disabilities, religious groups, etc.).
- Make use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods and treat them as complements, and create longitudinal datasets.
- Re-examine and expand definitions of participation and clarify concepts.
- Discover the connections between formal and informal participation.

Conclusion

Youth are not disconnected from politics; it is political institutions, practice and culture that are disconnected from youth. And yet when we listen carefully to young people, we see that they have not given up on democracy. We need to redirect public energy from a fixation on getting youth to vote, and conforming to traditional ways of doing politics, to find constructive and respectful ways of co-creating a better politics to serve political and civic society. Given their heterogeneity, there can be no single way to engage youth. However there are good criteria for successful engagement (e.g., participatory methods, engage them on their turf, focus on relevant issues), the most important of which is to treat them with respect. They deserve no less than meaningful opportunities to discover what citizenship means to them by developing and applying interest, knowledge, values, and skills as full participating citizens.

Welcoming youth as co-creators of and partners in our collective life is essential if democracy is to be strengthened.

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