

OPINION

Youth culture is renewing democracy, one click at a time

Young Canadians are not disconnected from politics and civic life—our political institutions are disconnected from our youth

By SHARON MANSON SINGER

Election speculation season has begun, and almost as fashionable as hypothesizing the date of our next federal election are media and political pundit musings on youth disengagement from the democratic process. Youth are typically described as self-centred, uninformed and deeply disinterested in political and civic life. Youth are responsible for our democratic decline, goes this line of argument—and we'd best find a way to get them interested in our political institutions before it is too late.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) commissioned a series of papers on the political and civic engagement of young people in Canada to get beyond surface characterizations; researchers found that youth are not only highly engaged in global and local civic causes, organizations and initiatives, they are savvy communicators, sophisticated networkers and soundly and demonstrably committed to democracy.

Youth disaffection with formal politics was clearly expressed in our deliberative dialogues and workshops with Canadian youth, and deserves our attention and concern, but this bare fact says as much about our political institutions as it does about our young people.

The CPRN research series highlights that youth engagement in political life is often misunderstood and misrepresented. Young people define political engagement in markedly different terms from previous generations, focusing more on individual action than institutional participation. Youth soundly reject partisan politicking and are impatient with the slow, hierarchical machinery of traditional political institutions. Young Canadians are more active in political demonstrations than their older counterparts, volunteer in higher numbers with organizations they care deeply about, mobilize impressive and effective social and political networks online and off, and are more likely to engage in 'consumer citizenship'—boycotts and buycotts as a form of political expression.

Youth in Canada largely bypass traditional politics to affect change, but that does not mean they are not invested in making the world a better place. In our consultations with youth, they define political engagement in personal terms—not along party lines. Youth largely feel alienated from traditional political parties which they see as self-serving and dismissive of youth views; this is not apathy, but a clear comprehension of a generational divide. Formal politics are often silent on issues that are important to youth, and function in hierarchical ways (party organization and mobilization) that youth reject. Youth are dismissive of the leader-driven structures and top-down practices of political parties, and have strong participatory instincts that drive them to grassroots participation instead.

CPRN researchers found that young Canadians feel that they have little influence on what governments prioritize and how they perform. Youth do not feel that joining a political party is an effective means to achieve social change, but they believe that joining an advocacy group or attending a lawful demonstration are

positive vehicles for change. In general, youth have a preference for "hands on" involvement which traditional political institutions do not typically offer.

The youth are not "uninformed" about civic life, as is often claimed, but gather and share information in highly specialized and niche communities and from alternative sources beyond the traditional broadsheets. Much has already been made about youth being more "wired" than their seniors: the prodigy of the internet and prolific social marketing and online communities that older generations often misunderstand and trivialize. But in many ways, the youth of today are more informed and more media savvy than their parents or grandparents were at the same ages, and have higher specialized and more diverse sources of information from which they draw.

Our traditional political institutions can learn much from young Canadians. Governments have been slow to understand and utilize the power of information and communication technologies to transform the relationships between citizens and decision-makers, and to embrace the participatory practices that youth have not only become accustomed to, but are demanding. Engaging citizens, especially our youth, can only make our institutions stronger, more effective and responsive to the values and needs of all Canadians.

Transparency and accountability are also important to youth, and they know that the technology now exists to make "open governance" possible. For example, youth in great numbers are mobilizing the "open government" movement—which calls for online access to all government raw data in a timely, open and transparent fashion without political spin; such immediate access to government source data could radically transform our institutions and recharge civic engagement as we know it.

It is time for the political landscape to embrace youth as *partners* in civic and democratic renewal in this country. It is not just about 'getting out the youth vote,' but addressing issues that young people care about deeply, engaging them directly with respect, and finding participatory methods, including online and social media, to reach out and communicate with—and be accountable to—them.

As one young participant in our youth dialogues put it: "We want our government not to be something untouchable, but rather a community in which we not only hear what everyone has to say, but we truly listen and care about the issues."

Youth want to know that their voices are heard and that their participation matters. Why should they think differently?

It is time forego this unproductive talk of "democratic deficits" and blaming it on the youth, and instead redirect our energies to broadening our understanding of political and civic engagement beyond partisan politics. The kids are already there.

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