



SAMARA'S
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September 2015

Message Not Delivered:
The Myth of Apathetic Youth
and the Importance of Contact
in Political Participation

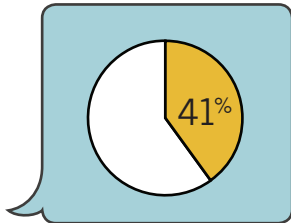
Not Delivered



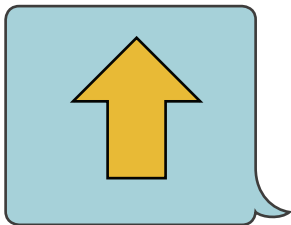
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Key Messages

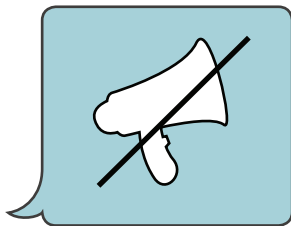
“Message Not Delivered: The Myth of Apathetic Youth and the Importance of Contact in Political Participation” looks at how Canadians experience politics by age.



Young people vote at much lower rates than older Canadians. (In the 2011 federal election, only 41% of Canadians under 30 voted.)¹



However, when it comes to rates of participation in political and civic life beyond voting, younger Canadians’ participation rate is 11 percentage points higher, on average, than their older counterparts across 18 forms of participation.



Political leaders fail to contact young Canadians: almost half of young people have not been contacted by political leaders, compared to only one-quarter of the oldest age group.



Contact from political leaders is important. Contact is linked to voting and an awareness that political decisions matter. Parties and candidates are well positioned to increase voter turnout.

The upshot is that younger Canadians aren’t more politically apathetic or tuned out than their older counterparts; they’re more ignored by parties, candidates and leaders than older Canadians, which may partially explain declining voter turnout amongst youth.

Introduction

Over the last 30 years, Canadians have watched with concern as voting rates among younger people have declined, with the result that in the 2011 federal election, the majority of young people opted not to cast a vote. If the number of non-voters increases, the legitimacy of Canada's democratic process may soon be called into question. Additionally, if groups of Canadians are not considered to be interested voters, will political parties and leaders prioritize their views during and outside of elections?²

The low voting rate among younger Canadians is often viewed as evidence that young people today are more apathetic or lazy than any other generation before. That—more than other generations—they don't care about politics and aren't interested in the world.

“Message Not Delivered” debunks these myths.

In this report, Samara Canada—a national charity dedicated to reconnecting citizens to politics—compares political participation and contact rates between citizens and Canadian political leaders across three age groups.

59% of voters under
30 didn't vote in 2011

Earlier this year, Samara Canada released the “Democracy 360,” the first-ever report card on the state of Canada's democracy. This definitive research report expanded the definition of political participation well beyond voting to look at how Canadians communicate, participate and lead in politics. While voting rates are an important indicator of the involvement of Canadians in politics, a robust political culture requires a broader definition of political engagement. Samara's “Democracy 360” includes 18 indicators of political participation, including how often people participate in campaigns, discuss politics or sign their name to a petition.

The results in the “Democracy 360” showed that Canadians are not participating in politics as much as they could, they don’t believe politics affects them, and they don’t see their leaders as either influential or efficacious. Indeed, the “Democracy 360” showed that Canadians of all ages think politics is irrelevant to them and, as a result, they are withdrawing from the democratic system.

“Message Not Delivered” delves deeper into how political participation differs between age groups and finds that—counter to popular belief— younger people are more than pulling their own weight.

This report also looks at one element that is known to encourage voting— contact from political parties, candidates or elected leaders—and reveals stark differences in the ways that parties communicate with the different age groups.

The report’s conclusion raises a question that requires discussion:
are young people more apathetic than their older cohorts or are they failing to cast a ballot because they’re ignored?

Don't Blame the Millennials

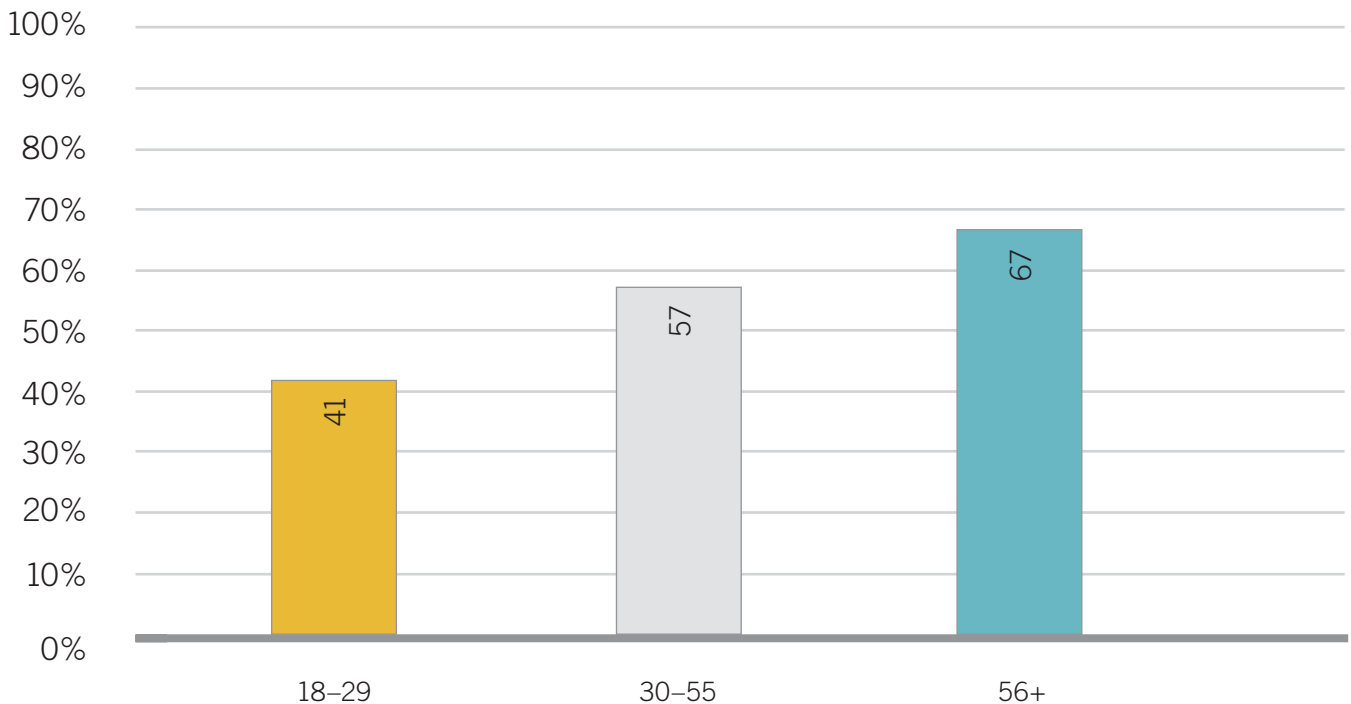
Samara's 2014 Citizens' Survey asked 2406 people in December about their political activity in the previous 12 months. The survey was performed in a year where there was no federal election, but there were several municipal and provincial elections. Eighteen activities were examined including signing a petition, discussing political issues over the phone and volunteering for a charitable cause (see chart on next page).

Canadians were divided out into three groups: eligible voters born between the years of 1985 and 1996 (ages 18 to 29); between 1959 and 1984 (ages 30 to 55); and between 1920 and 1958 (ages 56+).³

Across 18 different political acts—many of which are arguably more laborious than voting—Canadians under 30, on average, participated at a rate 11 percentage points higher than those 30 and over.

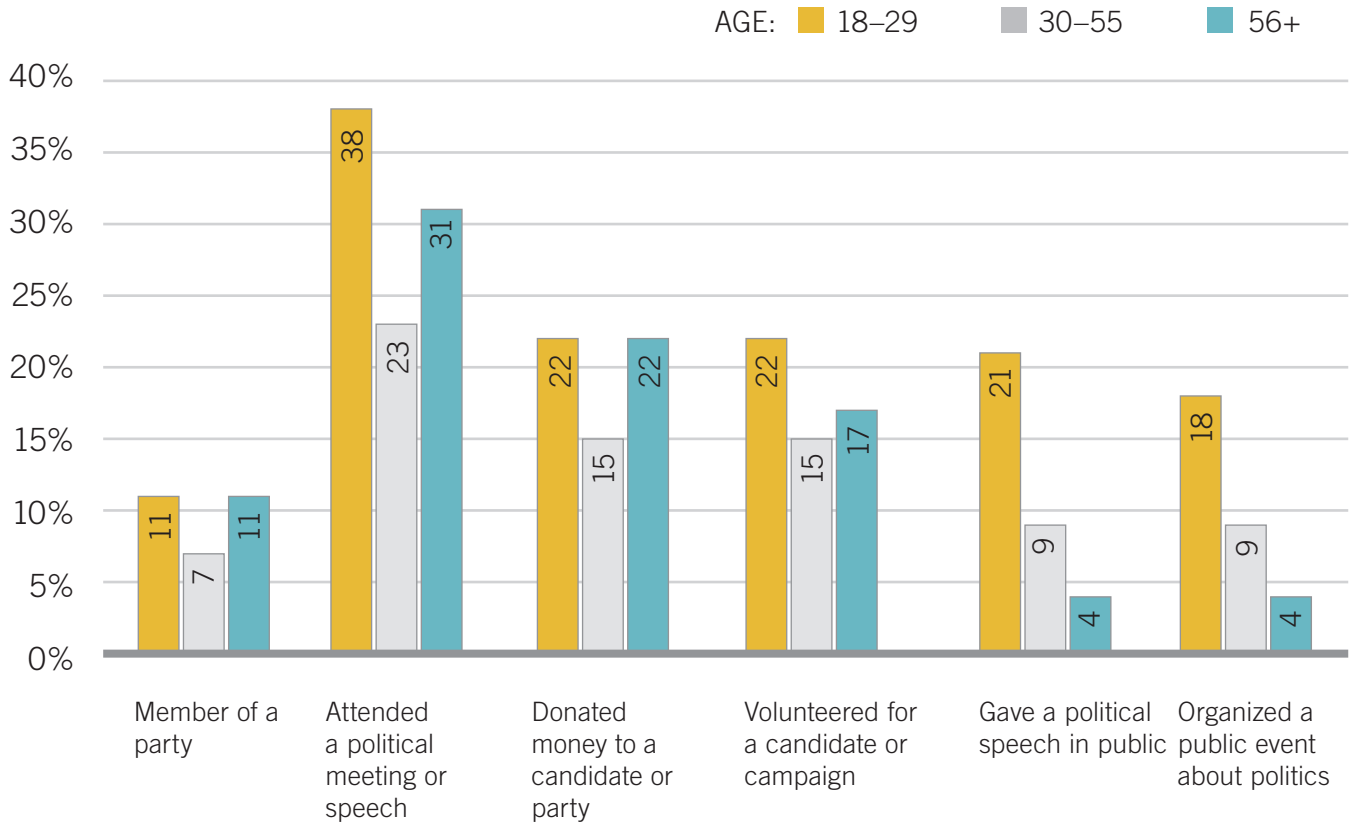
But when it comes to voting, the trend reverses: young voters are the least likely to cast a ballot in any federal election. Why is that?

Turnout in the 2011 Federal Election

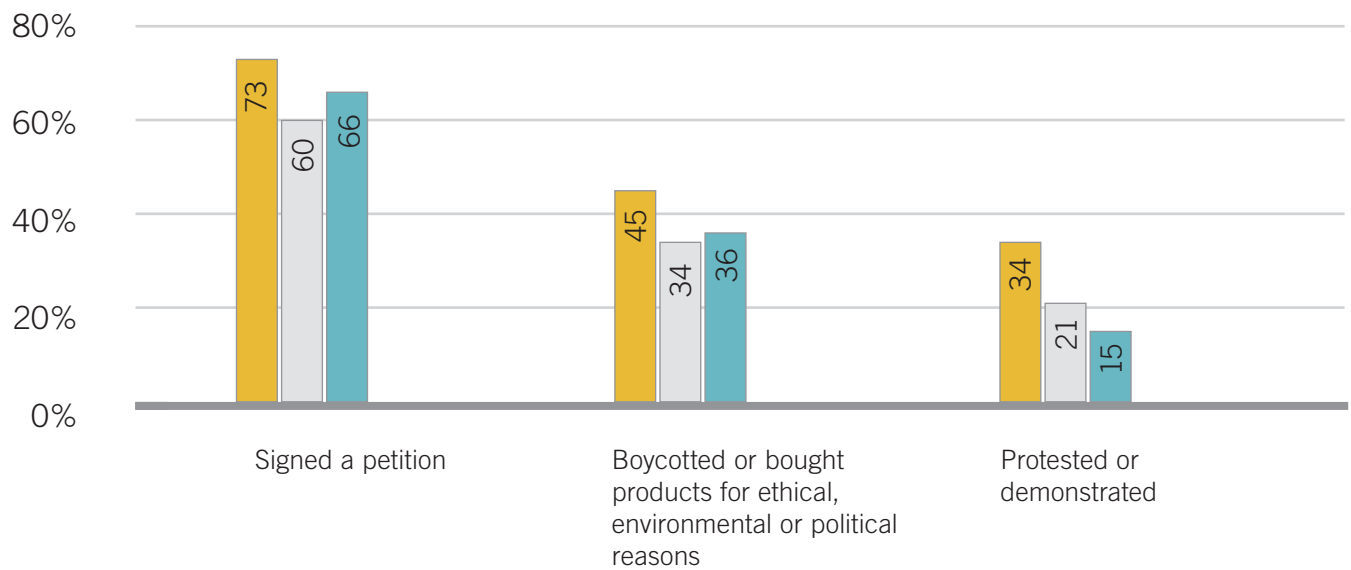


Debunking the Myth

Rates of Formal Engagement



Rates of Activism

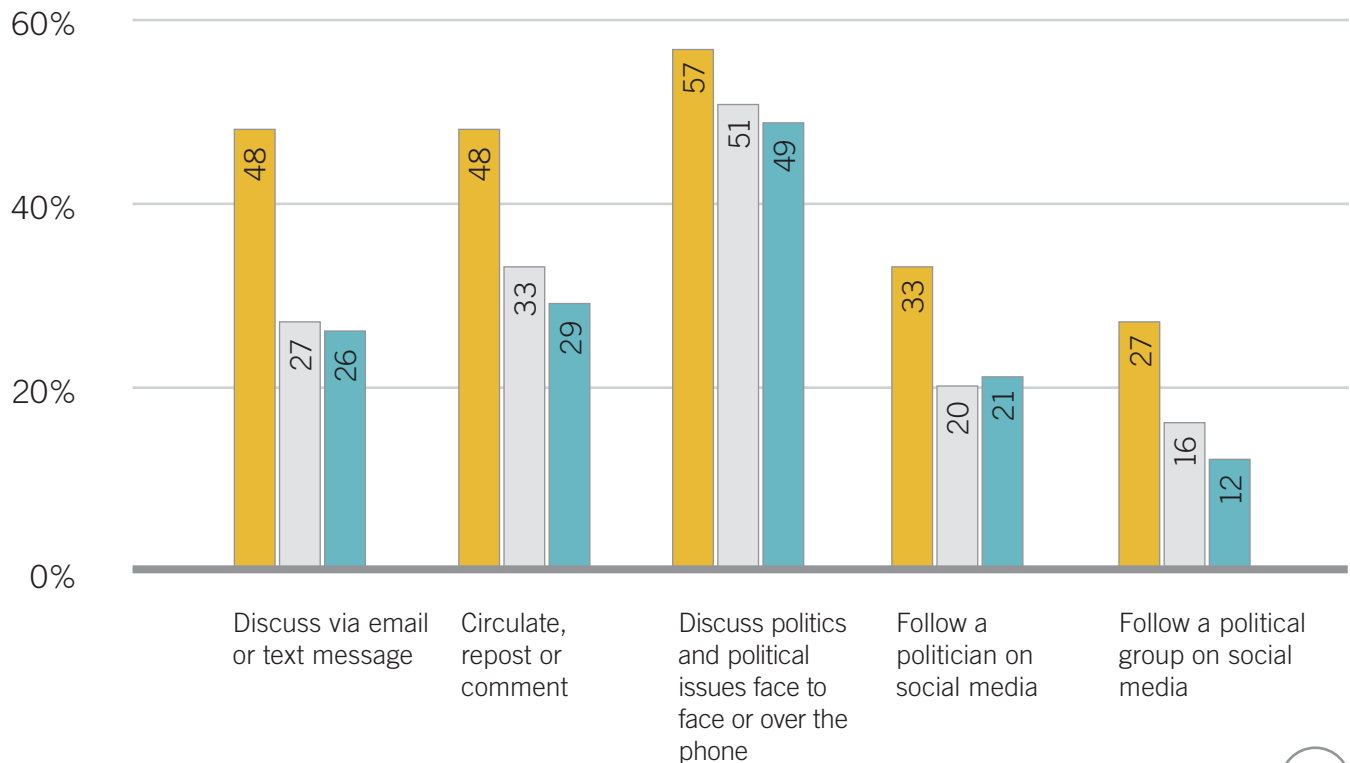


Rates of Civic Engagement

AGE: 18-29 30-55 56+



Rates of Discussion



What Makes Someone Vote?

Why do some Canadians decide to vote while others abstain?

In a federal election campaign, millions of public dollars are spent explaining when, where and ways to vote. Moreover, people are legally entitled to take time to vote, and tens of thousands of polling stations are open across the country—advance polls and mail-in ballots are available too. Yet in the 2011 federal election, two in five Canadians didn't cast a ballot. Why?

While there is no easy answer, academic research has articulated six general explanations for why people may choose to cast a ballot:

- 1 They feel obligated:** people feel as though they should vote because it's expected of them as citizens.⁴
- 2 They feel social pressure to vote:** friends or family, teachers or colleagues show them that political participation is valuable. After all, people are social creatures—we like to do what others are doing.⁵
- 3 They see that something is at stake:** voting rates tend to go up when voters think every ballot counts, such as when there's a close race or a particularly critical issue being debated.⁶
- 4 They have already voted:** after their third time voting, people are more likely to continue doing so because it's become a habit.⁷
- 5 Barriers have been eliminated:** people are more likely to vote if it's easy—they have the required documents (e.g. photo ID, voter information cards); know when and where to cast a ballot; and can get there easily, without geographical barriers or mobility issues.⁸
- 6 They have been contacted:** people are more likely to vote once they've been asked to. They're most likely to vote when the person asking them is a friend or someone familiar to them, but even a stranger can affect someone's willingness to vote.⁹

When a potential voter experiences some or all of these elements, they are much more likely to vote.

Contact Counts

Although the reasons for voting outlined are important, “Message Not Delivered” examines contact from a political party, candidate or Member of Parliament (MP) as a means to encourage participation. The report studies how amounts of reported contact differ by age in a non-election year.

What counts as contact?

In Samara’s 2014 Citizens’ Survey, Canadians were asked about five different methods federal political parties, candidates and MPs had used to reach out to them: mail, phone, email, in person and on a social network. (The survey asked about contact by federal politicians, but some reported contact may have come from provincial or local leaders.)

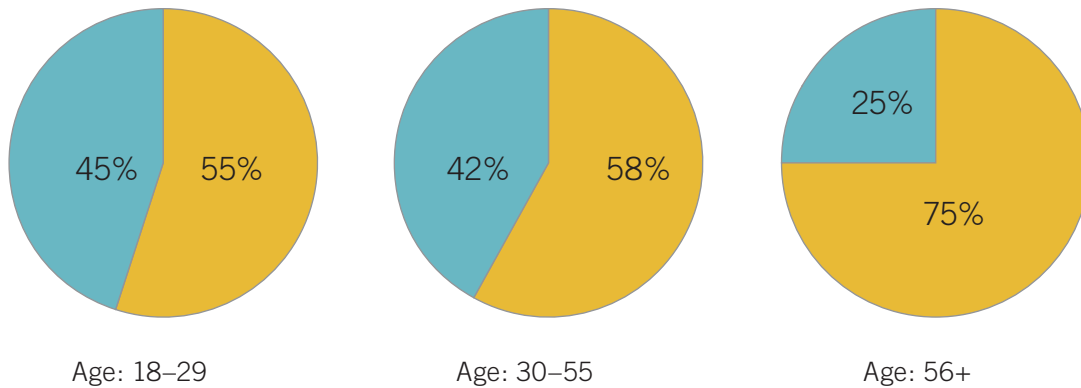
During elections, political candidates (and the thousands of Canadians that volunteer for them) knock on your door to chat about the election, drop-off information on their party’s platform, and call to ask what your decision will be on Election Day. By stopping by voters’ homes, candidates can begin to forge relationships and encourage prospective voters to cast a ballot.

Elections Canada’s 2011 National Youth Survey found that turnout for youth contacted by political leaders was 15 percentage points higher.¹⁰

While democracy doesn’t end on Election Day, that’s how many Canadians feel parties’ treat it: over 60% of Canadians believe that parties are only interested in their votes.¹¹ Canadians are hungry for more contact during non-election years. When asked to choose the most important role of political parties, Canadians answered “reaching out to them so that their views can be heard.” If parties, MPs and candidates approached citizens in a non-election year, it would show Canadians that they are interested in more than just a transactional relationship.

Report of One or More Methods of Contact

■ No ■ Yes



When the contact numbers are divided by generation, the youngest respondents reported the lowest amount of contact. Nearly half recalled no contact at all, compared to only one quarter of the oldest cohort. Young respondents who are less educated (those with a high school diploma or less) were even less likely to be contacted: only 47% report receiving contact. (See Supplemental Table 1.)

For those Canadians who did report contact, there was a large variation in the method. For each age group, the most popular form of contact was mail, which is generally shown in voter mobilization research to have the least impact. In contrast, the majority of Canadians hadn't been contacted in person, which is the method most likely to increase participation.¹²

Besides triggering people to vote, contact from a politician can also reinforce an individual's connection to politics. Among Canadians who reported contact via all five methods, 55% agreed that they are “affected by the decisions made by elected officials every day.” For those who reported no contact, only 23% agreed with that statement. For the youngest group, the decline was even greater: 61% and 22% agreed respectively. (See Supplemental Tables 2 and 3.)

Contact Method

	18–29	30–55	56+
Email	18%	14%	20%
Phone Call	29%	22%	21%
Mail	36%	49%	69%
In Person ¹³	16%	11%	12%
Social Network	17%	9%	12%

But Gen Xers Still Vote?

Though the middle age group's rates of contact mirror the low rates of the youngest, they voted at much higher levels than people under 30 in 2011. Why? Three conditions that increase the likelihood of voting are already more common among members of this middle group. First, this group of voters tends to have a stronger sense of political duty than Millennials, and this feeling that they ought to vote can persist even without political contact.¹⁴ Second, voting has already become a habit because they were more likely to vote on their first opportunities to do so.¹⁵ Finally, members of this age group are less likely to change their permanent home addresses as often as younger age groups, which increases the likelihood that they will have proof of their address (an important part of Canadians' eligibility to vote).

Message Not Delivered

There are three possibilities why 45% of youth haven't reported contact:

- 1. The message doesn't resonate:** parties' communications may fail to share a message that resonates with youth. This failure could be a result of the way the message is framed or the type of language that's used. It could also be that the issue itself isn't appealing to youth and doesn't stand out amidst all the other media competing for their attention.
- 2. The message doesn't arrive:** youth are generally harder to reach because they move more frequently than other age groups and rarely have a landline telephone or listed address.
- 3. The message is never sent:** candidates and parties may not try to reach out to young people.

The answer is likely a combination of these three factors.

It's important to bear in mind that both parties and candidates are often stretched for resources—they lack time, money and people—which may affect their ability to reach out to all Canadians equally. As a result—and out of necessity—they allot resources where they're likely to have the most impact. This may go some way towards explaining why groups that typically don't vote, such as younger voters, aren't prioritized.

Why are Parties so Important?

In the Canadian political system, parties have unparalleled influence. During elections, parties select candidates, present policy platforms and encourage citizens to vote. Between elections, parties are a gateway to the political process and maintain a local presence in ridings across the country. Once MPs are elected, parties structure governments and determine the function of legislatures. As a result of their important roles, parties benefit from generous public subsidies including tax credits to donors and election expense reimbursements.¹⁶

Political parties play an essential role in Canada's democracy and have the responsibility to ensure all Canadians are invited to the political process.

From “It’s Complicated” to “In a Relationship”

“Message Not Delivered” shows that there are clear generational differences in how our political leaders communicate with Canadians. Is it any wonder that so many young people aren’t voting if they aren’t being asked to by the people they are supposed to be electing? Meanwhile, is it any wonder parties don’t put issues affecting youth at the top of their agenda when youth vote in dramatically lower numbers?

Canada is now in a vicious circle where young people largely don’t vote, in part because they aren’t contacted by political leaders, and they’re not contacted because they don’t vote. However, at more than five million strong, people 18 to 29 make up a significant portion of the Canadian population and hold a major stake in the future of the country.

For the future of Canada to be strong, it’s vital that everyone votes. This fall, with the approaching federal election, political parties are the best positioned to issue that invitation to all Canadians. With the national media spotlight on them and a coordinated volunteer effort primed for increasing voter turnout, parties can lead the way and make youth outreach and inclusion part of their campaigns.

Other organizations, beyond parties, have a role to play as well: workplaces should ensure employees have time to vote, community organizations should continue promoting civic responsibility and awareness, and university campuses should ensure their students know how and where to vote.

While elections reflect a heightened period of contact, it shouldn’t be the only time younger Canadians are invited to join the political process. After the dust settles this fall, newly elected MPs should consider how they would increase the frequency and quality of conversations with youth year-round. It’s time to send a message to youth that their votes are valued.

But young people also have to step forward and claim their place in formal politics by accepting invitations to participate and rewarding parties that attempt to practise politics differently by voting.

Young people who are contacted tend to turn out at higher rates and are more likely to think that politics matters every day—a promising sign that the newest generation of voters can become part of Canada's formal political culture. Moreover, if Canada can show young people that they have a place at the table, our politics and democracy will be better prepared for the future.

What Can Interested Citizens Do?

- Talk about politics and connect it to issues people care about as a way to make change.
- Social pressure works: tell your friends and co-workers that you're voting and ask them to do the same.
- Be encouraging and don't use guilt or a sense of duty to convince people to vote.
- Ask your friends and co-workers to make a plan to vote: What time of day are you voting? How are you getting there? Who are you taking with you?
- Ask candidates at your door how they're reaching out to youth.
- Ask political parties how they're incorporating youth into their federal election plans.
- If you're part of a community group, organize a Vote PopUp—a simulated polling station, developed by Samara and Elections Canada, that helps prepare infrequent and first-time voters to vote.

Next Steps

“Message Not Delivered” looked at the methods and quantity of contact, but not at either the content of the interaction or the reaction it elicited. A deeper look into different approaches for candidates or elected officials’ messaging would help illuminate what strategies could most encourage political interest and activities. It would also be worthwhile to further examine how demographic subgroups within the younger age group differ in response to contact and messages from parties and candidates: contact that is most effective in an urban setting may not be as effective in a rural area; young people on post-secondary campuses may respond differently to a party’s communication than those who entered the workforce without either college or university experiences.

This fall, Samara will be exploring how people experience the 2015 federal election campaign across the country—from how often and where youth are contacted, to the messages the parties are communicating. This research will begin to look at subgroups of “youth” and develop a deeper understanding of how the differences within the group—family life, education, address—affect young people’s willingness to participate in public life.

Methodology

Public opinion data in the “Democracy 360” was drawn from the Samara 2014 Citizens’ Survey, which was conducted in English and French using an online sample of 2406 Canadian residents over 18 years of age living in ten provinces. Data was collected between December 12 and December 31, 2014. The survey has a credibility interval of 1.99 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Responses were weighted to ensure they reflect a national representative sample of Canadians. Questions that asked about Canadians’ participation and contact were limited to the last 12 months. Data missing at random were imputed using the mi commands in STATA12.

Generational breakdowns only include statistically significant information (p value \leq .10).

Samara worked with Professors Peter Loewen (University of Toronto) and Daniel Rubenson (Ryerson University) to complete the data collection, cleaning, weighting and imputation.

Please request the Appendix for survey question wording and unweighted frequencies from info@samaracanada.com.

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Supplemental Tables

These data points were referred to in this report. To see the full breakdown across all education levels or ages email info@samaracanada.com.

Table 1

Contact by Education (High School or Less)

Contacted via	18-29	30-55	56+	TOTAL
No contact	53	51	30	42
Contact	47	49	70	58
<i>N</i>				638

Table 2

Decisions Matter Every Day by Rate of Contact

	No Method	One	Two	Three	Four	All Five	TOTAL
Every day	23	34	39	42	36	55	32
Once or twice a week	9	9	9	14	7	11	9
A few times a month	11	18	14	14	22	18	14
A few times a year	20	23	23	19	25	12	21
Never	12	5	3	6	5	0	7
Don't Know	25	13	12	5	5	4	16
<i>N</i>							2205

Table 3

Decisions Matter Every Day by Rate of Contact for those Under 30

	No Method	One	Two	Three	Four	All Five	TOTAL
Every day	22	19	25	39	33	61	25
Once or twice a week	11	15	11	23	19	13	14
A few times a month	13	24	18	26	4	6	17
A few times a year	20	25	29	8	28	18	21
Never	15	1	4	0	16	0	8
Don't Know	19	16	13	3	0	2	14
<i>N</i>							404

Endnotes

1. Elections Canada, "Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group and Gender at the 2011 Federal General Election" (2012).
2. Tom Flanagan, *Winning Power: Canadian Campaigning in the 21st Century* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014).
3. Age groups as of December 2014.
4. Andre Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote: The Merits and Limitations of Rational Choice Theory* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).
5. Alan S. Gerber et al., "Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment," *American Political Review* 102, no. 1 (2008): 33-48.
6. Mark N. Franklin, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).
7. Paul Howe, *Citizens Adrift* (UBC Press, 2010).
8. Elections Canada, "National Youth Survey" (2011).
9. Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, "The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 3 (2000): 653-663.
10. Elections Canada, "National Youth Survey" (2011).
11. Samara Canada, "Democracy 360" (2015).
12. For more information on the effectiveness of contact methods see Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004).
13. Contact in person does not reach traditional level of significance $p = .102$.
14. Andre Blais et al., "Where Does Turnout Decline Come From?," *European Journal of Political Research* 43, (2004): 221-236.
15. Paul Howe, *Citizens Adrift* (UBC Press, 2010).
16. Samara Canada, "By Invitation Only" (2013).



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