

Are younger voters different than their parents? Canadian millennial and Gen Z voters split

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Published: Sep 20 at 12:01 a.m.

Updated: Sep 20 at 12:05 a.m.



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How might the new generation sway the vote? What kind of issues are motivating them? Experts weigh in on what we can expect to see over the next five weeks.

HOW MILLENNIALS CAN ROCK THE VOTE

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“These two issues I think are front and centre, How do I achieve a standard of living I’ve kinda come to expect, or was even promised?”

– David Coletto

If David Coletto were a betting man, he’d be hard pressed to pick a winning horse in this dead heat.

Coletto is the CEO of Abacus Data and the two horses are none other than the federal Liberals and Conservatives, who are in a virtual dead heat at 35 per cent for the Conservatives and 33 per cent for the Liberals in his firm’s latest opinion poll released on Sept. 14.

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But Coletto is well aware the millennial generation, which he defines as anyone born between 1980 and 2000, is the tiebreaker. On their shoulders rest the political futures of Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau and Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer, with New Democrat Leader Jagmeet Singh trailing a distant third.

"In a way, the future is in their hands here, in terms of the choice they make and I hope that they exercise their power to make their voice heard," said Coletto, speaking from Abacus Data's Ottawa office.

"There will be more millennial voters than baby boomers."

The election depends on whether the Liberals can mobilize a similar level of enthusiasm among youth as they did in 2015, or at least persuade enough of them to overlook setbacks like the recent SNC Lavalin controversy.

Meantime, the Conservatives are relying more on their base, according to Coletto, and could win if younger voters stay home while their more right-leaning parents and grandparents cast their ballots.

Coletto likened the upcoming campaign to Barack Obama's re-election in 2012, when he won a second term and enjoyed continued support from younger Americans, but failed to spark the kind of enthusiasm he enjoyed in 2008.

"The Conservatives are well-positioned, but they have a real challenge widening their audience," said Coletto.

At 38, Coletto is himself a millennial and well aware of the issues facing his generation that could sway the Oct. 21 federal election.

In his view, the top issue for all Canadians is the cost of living, with millennials being 13 points more likely to rate this as their biggest worry, according to Abacus's own statistics.

Following close behind is housing affordability, especially in major cities like Toronto and Vancouver, where both property prices and rental costs have skyrocketed.

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"These two issues I think are front and centre," said Coletto. "How do I achieve a standard of living I've kinda come to expect, or was even promised?"

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Linked in to housing affordability and living costs is the increasing difficulty millennials are facing in finding a stable, well-paid job, at a time when precarious, part-time and low-wage employment is becoming more common.

Other issues affecting millennials are a lack of support for people with mental illness or addictions, the rise of the racist right and of course climate change.

“There’s a subset who is intensely concerned about this issue,” said Coletto.

The state of healthcare and the environment are hot-button issues for Liberals and left-wingers nationwide and could swing the vote.

Assuming, of course, people actually bother showing up on Election Day.

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“I think that they’re more willing to demand their politicians follow through.”

– Don Desserud

But Dr. Don Desserud at the University of Prince Edward Island thinks this election will be an “apathetic” one for millennials.

Voter apathy means gains for the Conservatives in P.E.I., while the federal Green Party may score some local wins and the federal New Democratic Party will likely perform sluggishly.

“The Conservative Party is polling much better in Prince Edward Island than I thought they would,” said Desserud.

He said it was easy for many voters to feel turned off by electoral politics, as “party after party after party,” promises to govern differently but instead falls short on their promises.

For example, Desserud said political parties often renege on environmental promises.

As such, voters often do not see the link between voting and impact, a situation made worse by politicians’ failure to address issues like job security. At the same time, living costs in P.E.I. are climbing.

Desserud said the former provincial Liberal government took credit for a growing economy, without understanding the predicament faced by younger voters.

“The lack of security, or job precarity, is a huge issue,” said Desserud. “(Economic growth) is not translating into solid jobs with a future. People do not see a long-term future for the employment they have.”

Desserud said healthcare is also a tricky issue for millennials, as it is easy to feel immortal at a young age, when most people do not experience major health problems. That said, a major health-related concern for many is finding a family doctor, who are often in short supply both in P.E.I. and elsewhere in Atlantic Canada.

While Desserud noted many millennials are feeling indifferent towards the election, it does not mean they aren’t politically active citizens.

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According to a report issued this year by the Samara Centre for Democracy, 71 per cent of youth aged 18-39 expressed interest in federal politics, compared to 73 per cent of those aged 30-55 and 84 per cent of people over 56. The report sampled 4,054 Canadian residents over 18.

Meantime, youth lead the way in civic engagement and activism, even as voting numbers continue to lag.

For example, the report notes 51 per cent have encouraged others to take action on a political or social issue, compared to 40 per cent of those in the 30-55 group and 32 per cent over people over 56. Samara's numbers show 66 per cent of 18-29s have signed a petition, compared to 55 per cent of 30-55s and 53 per cent of those over 56.

Twenty-eight per cent have partaken in demonstrations and protests, compared to 18 per cent of 30-55s and just nine per cent over those over 56.

"They see other ways they can manifest their political and social interests outside traditional parties," said Desserud.

Issues that motivate activism outside elective politics may include anti-pesticide campaigns, or the ongoing school strikes protesting politicians' inaction on climate change, both in Canada and worldwide.

On top of the activism, people are increasingly breaking with traditions and voting with their hearts at election time, for politicians speaking directly to their interests.

"I think that they're more willing to demand their politicians follow through," said Desserud. "The idea that we see, particularly in Atlantic Canada, about voting the way your parents vote has declined considerably. These patterns are no longer valid. I'd liken it to church attendance."



35%

Percentage among decided voters who would vote Conservative, according to an Abacus Data poll released on Sept. 14. The results indicate a dead heat between the two main parties, with 33 per cent support for Liberals. The NDP were third with 15 per cent.

44%

Percentage among decided voters in Atlantic Canada who would vote for the Liberals, according to the same Abacus poll. The Conservatives would take 26%; the Greens are third with 16% and the NDP are at 12 per cent.

62%

Percentage of voters under the age of 30 who are prepared to switch their votes, again according to Abacus. Among those aged 30-44, 51% say they might switch their vote during the campaign.

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“I’m optimistic that the forces of democracy and social justice will win out over barbarism in the long run,”

– Tanner Mirrless

How the far right has launched a war for the millennial soul

Social media savvy neo-Nazis are working hard to affect this election, and they’re targeting young people

While millennials are increasingly mobilizing to fight for causes they feel passionate about, some of the activism is taking a darker turn.

This is a move from the resurgent far right or alt-right, which has made inroads with millennials across the globe and may yet influence the federal election in Canada.

Such forces were emboldened by the election of Donald Trump, as well as European leaders like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, helped along by ‘fake news’ propaganda on social media.

“The millennial is not a unified political category,” said Tanner Mirrless, a political economist of digital media at Ontario Tech University.

“Often, when we talk about millennials, we assume they share the same beliefs or political ideology, when in fact it’s just not the case.”

Instead, millennials are divided among themselves, often as mainstream Liberals, Conservatives, Greens and NDPers, but also as radical socialists and fascists. For Mirrless, such divisions are similar to what their baby boomer parents experienced.

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This has opened the way to a battle for the millennial 'soul', between mainstream politicians like Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Green Party Leader Elizabeth May, and extremist figures like Faith Goldy, a Toronto political commentator whose far-right views were considered too extreme for Rebel Media, which fired her in 2017 after she appeared in a podcast on The Daily Stormer, a neo-Nazi website.

Mirrlees warned Canadians not to take their socially progressive society for granted, as far-right figures are making inroads into the Conservative Party and People's Party of Canada ahead of the October election.

Conservative leader Andrew Scheer appeared at the 'United We Roll' yellow vest rally in Ottawa earlier this year, where both Goldy and PPC leader Maxime Bernier also addressed the crowd.

Far-right personalities such as Goldy are typically social-media savvy and have seen success recruiting followers in what Mirrlees describes as "increasingly horrid economic times."

Indeed, a well-educated and digitally-connected generation, coming of age at a time of poor job prospects and a general sense of hopelessness is an ideal breeding ground for the far-right. Social media networks have also allowed previously-marginalized extremists to come increasingly into the mainstream.

The future that far-right ideologues are pushing for is a white ethno-state at the expense of other racial groups, according to Mirrlees. Some even advocate all-out ethnic cleansing of anyone who does not conform to a white European racial identity.

"What the far-right has done is say, 'We are able to explain it to you and offer you some sort of path to a better and different future', " said Mirrlees. "Of course, the path they offer is xenophobic, hateful and often terroristic."

Despite such worrying trends, Mirrlees is still hopeful the far right's rise will be thwarted.

The Canadian government and security services are also waking up to the threat of neo-Nazi terror attacks, in the wake of the Christchurch and El Paso massacres.

"I'm optimistic that the forces of democracy and social justice will win out over barbarism in the long run," he said.



“It’s our generation that’s going to be left with this huge disaster, so we might as well start acting now.”

– Stella Bowles

The next generation

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Sure the next election is just around the corner, but what about the next-next election?

Stella Bowles, 15, lives in Upper LaHave just outside of Bridgewater.

She's part of a generation of activists who aren't waiting around for someone else to tackle what they believe to be the biggest issue -- the environment.

And although she's not old enough to vote yet, she's already making political waves.

It all started with a school science experiment.

"When I was in Grade 6 we had to do a science project and I did mine on testing the LaHave River for fecal bacteria, which is not the typical 11-year-old science fair project, but it was a lot of fun and my results showed that it was not safe to swim in the river and I wanted to let the community know," Bowles said. "I wanted to make sure people knew that if you were swimming in the river, you could get really sick from it."

She begged her mother to set up a Facebook page, and she was hesitant at first, but capitulated and agreed to put a sign up near their wharf, which read 'The river is contaminated with fecal bacteria.'

That got the attention of the community.

A Facebook page was eventually set up as a way for Bowles, who shares Facebooking duties with her mom, to highlight her testing results and engage the community.

The attention quickly exploded, members of the media were asking for interviews, meetings were organized. It was a lot more than 11-year-old Bowles was prepared for at the time -- but it's since turned into a major project for her.

The source of all of that bacteria? About 600 straight pipes along the LaHave dumping raw sewage directly into the river.

Or as Bowles bluntly describes it: "It's poop."

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"I really just wanted the river to be clean," she said. "I really didn't care how they fixed it; I just wanted it to be fixed."

Her advocacy led to direct government action. In 2016 the municipality, provincial and federal governments committed over \$15 million to fix the sewage problem on the LaHave.

The project will divert 100 straight pipes per year until 2023 when all of the raw sewage will stop flowing.

Bowles said people have already noted a reduction in the odour emanating from the LaHave.

There were some bumps along the road -- some folks called her data into question and suggested her efforts should be ignored -- but as the kids say, she showed her receipts, backing up her data with duplicate lab testing.

"It was really nice seeing everybody come together around this, saying 'OK, this kid is right, we have to do something,' " she said. "It's incredible to see what one person can accomplish. But it's not just my success, it's really the whole community's success."

She hasn't slowed down, speaking across Nova Scotia and showing other young people how to test their own waterways for contamination.

"We only have one Earth and it's kind of going downhill right now and a lot of people aren't standing up, and I really want people to know that even if you're 12 or 50 or 80, you can make a difference."

"It's our generation that's going to be left with this huge disaster, so we might as well start acting now."

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She can't vote in the federal election this October, but that's not stopping her from rubbing shoulders with some of the most powerful people in Canadian politics.

"I've spent a day with Elizabeth May at Parliament and she actually called me right when my project was getting started," she said. "We were having a pretty long conversation and they were like 'OK, Elizabeth, we need to go,' and she said 'I need another minute.' And that felt really great that she took time to talk to me."

She also introduced Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a gathering at St. F.X. and had a meeting with him afterwards.

"It's nice knowing they're listening to me," she said.

She said she wishes she could vote in the upcoming election but will have to wait until next time.

Who would she vote for? She's keeping that pretty close to the vest.

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