

Millennials want to talk politics, but politicians won't call: Teitel

A study shows that younger voters talked about voting ahead of the 2015 election far more than older voters — and they did so in person and on the phone, not social media.



Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau poses for a selfie with a student while touring Mohawk College, in Hamilton, Ont.. A new study by Samara found that the majority of younger voters talked about their experience at the ballot box not on social media at all, but in person or on the phone. (PAUL CHIASSON / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

By **EMMA TEITEL** National Columnist
Sun., Oct. 23, 2016

This might be tough. For the next few minutes of your life, or however long it takes you to finish reading this column, I'm going to request that you refrain from thinking about the addictive madness across the border and focus instead on an event that occurred not so long ago in our own slightly less engrossing political landscape: the [2015 Canadian federal election](#).

I know it's been a year and a few days since Justin Trudeau won the hearts of hair fetishists and the keys to the highest office in the nation. But it was only this week that Samara, a non-partisan independent research group, released a brand new study called "Can You Hear Me Now? Young People and the 2015 Federal Election."

Samara collected information online from 2030 Canadian citizens in 10 provinces across the country, in the weeks after the election. The survey brings to light something far more engrossing, in my view, than simply Justin's hair or life on the job: namely, the stark difference in the way older and younger Canadians talk about voting.

It's fairly common knowledge, for instance, that the 2015 federal election reversed a 20-year decline in voter turnout — which jumped to 68 per cent in 2015 from 61 per cent in 2011. But according to the Samara study, it wasn't famously politically engaged older Canadian voters (a.k.a. baby boomers) who talked most amongst themselves about their voting experiences, but in fact the youngest voting demographic, Canadians aged 18 to 29. The difference was almost double: "53 per cent of young Canadians (reported) talking about their voting experience with people they knew, while only 33 per cent of Canadians aged 56 or older did." I.e., older people didn't talk a lot about voting, while a majority of younger people did.

"These patterns," Samara concludes, "capture a generational shift in attitude, from voting as a private act of duty to voting as a shared social experience."

Well, of course, you might say, that's the answer right there: A "shared social experience." Younger people have far more technological tools they use to talk to each other these days: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat etc., whereas the 55-plus demo tends to rely on voice-to-voice and face-to-face communication.

Except you'd be wrong. It turns out that the majority of younger voters talked about their experience at the ballot box not on social media at all, but in person or on the phone. Conversely, only 13 per cent of younger voters posted about their experience on Facebook, and only 12 per cent did so via text message.

Not only does this finding fly in the face of the rampant popular stereotype that young people are hyper-connected zombies incapable of carrying on a real-life conversation to save their lives; it flies in the face of the stereotype that they are apathetic.

In fact, Samara's research indicates that millennials are more likely than older Canadians to discuss politics in polite conversation.

Why then, don't politicians seem to want to discuss politics with millennials?

According to Samara, only 52 per cent of younger voters reported that political parties contacted them, compared with 82 per cent in the older cohort (56-plus).

Part of the explanation for the difference has to do with landlines: older people have them and younger people tend not to. Consequently, when parties try to reach younger people through traditional channels — which include not just campaign flyers, but cold phone calls — they connect less frequently. But Jane Hilderman, Samara's executive director, explains that cynicism is at play as well: parties often assume young people won't vote in large numbers and aren't worth mobilizing as a result.

But, she says, "Given the dramatic jump in turnout (in the last election), I think the calculus is shifting." In other words, young people may be worth it after all.

And political parties, fuelled by a combination of cynicism and ignorance, may be doing themselves a large disservice when they choose not to engage with a demographic that isn't merely interested in politics, but actually welcomes direct communication from policy-makers.

So here's a suggestion for federal political parties: Create a special, election-season chat room on your websites, staffed at least 12 hours a day by paid staffers or volunteers. A *live* chat room designed to answer voters' questions about your respective plans for the nation. You will reach everyone you ever wanted to (and many you didn't.)

And while you're at it, please, please, stop sending those campaign flyers in the mail. No one in the history of time, baby boomer or millennial, has ever read them. And no one ever will.

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