

Canada

Young Canadians are getting out the vote – even if they can't cast a ballot themselves



Samara Centre for Democracy has found youth becoming more politically engaged

[Clara Pasieka](#) · CBC News · Posted: Oct 19, 2019 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: October 19



Dania Qasem, right, has been working with other youth volunteers on the re-election campaign of Nepean Liberal candidate Chandra Arya. (Submitted by Dania Qasem)

Dania Qasem has been spending upwards of 40 hours a week working on the re-election campaign of Chandra Arya, the federal Liberal candidate in Nepean, Ont. But on Oct. 21, Qasem will not be voting.

That's because she's only 16 years old.

Qasem is not alone. Across the country, local campaigns are increasingly drawing minors into the partisan fold even before they can cast ballots themselves.

In the Ontario riding of Brampton-East, for example, there are more than 50 teens canvassing for the NDP on most days.

"I've never been involved in a campaign that has more youth. I've never seen anything like it," said NDP Brampton-East campaign manager Matias de Dovitiis, a 13-year veteran of the back rooms.

While much of the attention in this election has been on millennials — who for the first time make up the largest potential voting bloc in Canada — Generation Z could be this election's dark horse.

- [Can't vote but can volunteer: Teens dive into politics ahead of federal election](#)
- ['I wish it could actually count': Mock vote primes elementary and high school students for election](#)

Although many in this cohort will be unable to cast a ballot, they are influential players on the ground in some local campaigns. They are campaign managers, volunteer coordinators, social media coordinators, keynote speakers and organizers, as well as door canvassers.

'This is my choice'

This is happening across the political spectrum. Many campaigns find that their engaged youth partisans are not only increasing, but getting younger.

Twelve-year-old Spencer Lippa is one of them. He has been volunteering with his local Green candidate in Halton-Wellington, Ralph Martin, for about eight hours a week, occasionally giving speeches at events and donating half his allowance to the party.

Lippa loves the Green Party and its environmental goals. What he doesn't love is accusations that he is being coerced by parents or adults in his life into being politically involved – a frequent experience for most youth volunteers.

"This is my choice," he said. "My parents didn't have influence on me [when I joined the party], and this is how I want to live my life." He said he has been attending events such as all-candidate debates, rallies and party events where he has been asking questions for many months.



Twelve-year-old Spencer Lipka has been volunteering with the Green Party in Ontario, and even met party Leader Elizabeth May. (Submitted by Janel Bascom)

Esha Chauhan, 16, said the Toronto-Danforth's NDP candidate, Min Sook Lee, sought her out after her participation in a student walkout, which led to her role as youth executive and her involvement in the campaign. Many of her peers have become interested in partisan politics for the first time because of their participation in political actions such as walkouts and demonstrations over climate and education issues.

Chauhan said the reason for young people's passion and involvement this election is because "we know about the issues. They are happening to us."

Greater interest in politics

The Samara Centre for Democracy, a non-partisan Canadian charity, has found that youth in general are becoming more politically engaged. Samara collected new data that found people aged 18 to 29 are more likely than any other age group to have donated money to or volunteered for a candidate or party.

The report also found that between 2014 and 2019, this cohort's stated interest in federal politics rose from 59 to 71 per cent.

The 2015 election saw a huge uptick in youth voter turnout. Following that election, many MPs decided to create youth councils at the riding level.

Michael Morden, the research director at the Samara Centre, said these have been a game-changer, giving many campaigns a longer runway to engage more youth — often high school students.

Morden said youth councils have often been issue-focused, providing youth more authentic opportunities to engage with politicians than we have seen in the past.

Youth are now more likely than other demographics to have a positive view of MPs, parties and our democratic system. This lack of cynicism seems to be benefitting campaign back rooms.

Lucas Borchenko, chair of the Young Liberals of Canada (Ontario), said he's seen an increase in high school students becoming involved in local campaigns, riding youth councils and Young Liberal clubs.

'People underestimate youth'

Jake Hill, 15, a Conservative volunteer in Ajax for Tom Dingwall (and sometimes Scarborough North), sees volunteering as a way youth can have their say and affect the outcome.





Fifteen-year-old volunteer Jake Hill, middle, is seen with Conservative candidates Pierre Poilievre, left, and Tom Dingwall. (Submitted by Dan Hill)

With family in the military, Hill said he is unhappy with the recent direction the government was taking toward veterans and serving members. Hill went online and found his way onto the local Conservative campaign volunteer list. Now, he volunteers on Conservative campaigns almost every day.

For many youth, participating in campaigns has meant making some accommodations in their lives. Some have decided to go all-in.

Qasem took more than a full course load at Longfields Davidson Heights Secondary School last year so she could take the current semester off and work as the volunteer coordinator in the Liberal campaign office in Nepean full-time.

Through the riding's youth council, Qasem met Justin Trudeau at an event held at her mosque shortly after the Christchurch, New Zealand gun attack in March 2019. She feels her words helped shape his response to the attack when it was brought up in Parliament.

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While members of all major political parties have noticed that the help of minors could help their election fortunes, only two parties want to be able to send these young volunteers and their peers to the ballot box next election.

The NDP and the Green Party have announced that if they form government, they will lower the voting age to 16. For many of their volunteers, this would be a welcome move.

Whether or not it happens, youth will continue to shape this election.

"We're serious," said Lippa. "We're not doing this for status. We're not just doing this to be like, 'I'm into politics and I'm smart.' We're doing this because we believe in our future. People underestimate youth — some people."

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