

# Youth study shows parties may have it wrong: Delacourt

Samara study reveals high percentage of young Canadians talk politics, though they're not targeted by many ads.



A study of more than 2,000 voters indicated your likelihood of engaging in political conversations declined with age during last year's 78-day election campaign. (PETER POWER / THE CANADIAN PRESS FILE PHOTO)

By **SUSAN DELACOURT** Parliament Hill

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Advertisers, at least the ones who buy spots on TV, clearly don't believe that young people are interested in politics.

Tune into any one of the daily political broadcasts on Canadian all-news networks and you'll see an array of pitches for stair lifts, walk-in baths or retirement-planning tools — not exactly items on any young person's shopping list.

But a [new report out this week](#) delivered the surprising news that young people in Canada actually are interested in talking about politics — even more than those consumers of elderly-assistance products.

An in-depth study by the Samara organization revealed that 72 per cent of Canadians under 30 talked about politics with friends, family and colleagues during last year's election, compared to 62 per cent of those aged 30 to 55 and 58 per cent of Canadians 56 years of age and older.

Yes, you read that correctly — according to this study of more than 2,000 voters, your likelihood of engaging in political conversations declined with age during last year's 78-day election campaign.

As Samara points out in its report — titled “Can You Hear Me Now?” — this finding represents a big culture change surrounding voting in Canada. It's described as “a generational shift in attitude, from voting as a private act of duty to voting as a social, shared experience.”

That is a big change. Though no one in this country is old enough to remember when Canada didn't have a secret ballot, many people older than 30 grew up with the idea that voting should be a supremely private, individual act.

This idea, however, only came about in the 1870s in Canada. In Elections Canada's online history of the vote in Canada, the [emergence of the secret ballot](#) in the late 19th century is explained this way:

“Some of the rules in effect at that time did nothing to promote fair and equitable polling practices. In all provinces but New Brunswick, which had adopted the secret ballot in 1855, electors voted orally, a polling method manifestly open to blackmail and intimidation.”

Subsequent generations would have their own, good reasons for keeping their voting choices secret: fear of losing jobs, or money doled out as rewards by politicians to loyal supporters.

That still happens (see the Star's report last week on which ridings [received the lion's share](#) of money in the old Conservative government's infrastructure program, for instance,) but not to the extent that used to be common practice in politics.

So we could see this “generational shift” around voting as evidence that all the attention on cleaning up politics over the past few decades — accountability and transparency measures — have made a mark on the electorate. Today’s younger voters simply don’t fear that their incomes or relationships will suffer if they are open about their political preferences.

When it comes to buying and selling politics to Canadians, meanwhile, Samara’s report also shows that voters in this country — across all ages — are discriminating consumers.

They draw an interesting line, for instance, between online political advertising and bona fide contact with political parties.

“When asked whether or not they saw an advertisement on social media from a political party, 40 per cent indicated that they had. Yet, only 22 per cent of Canadians reported any online contact,” the Samara report states. “This difference suggests that Canadians could tell the differences when a party was broadcasting a general message or using more personalized outreach.”

That’s a heartening finding as well. It means that Canadian voters don’t see themselves as mere consumers of political marketing; that it takes more than an ad or a slogan to make them feel like they have communicated with political parties.

Political parties might also want to take note of where they were channelling those outreach efforts in the last campaign. The Samara study asked all respondents whether they had contact with parties during the 2015 election. A full 82 per cent of people 56 years of age and older said yes to that question, compared to 72 per cent for people between 30 and 55 and just 52 per cent for voters under 30.

Put that next to the surprising findings about who’s most likely to converse about politics and you see a big mismatch. Canada’s political parties were having the most contact with the people least likely to have discussions with friends, family and colleagues about the election.

It could be that the parties were trying to talk to the people historically most likely to vote (though the higher turnout from young people in the last election could soon shatter that assumption, too.)

Or it could be that the political parties have been watching too much TV, believing that the only people interested in elections are the voters also eligible for seniors’ discounts.

[sdelacourt@bell.net](mailto:sdelacourt@bell.net)