

Engaging Youth Between Elections: A Report on Local Youth Councils*

**Also known as youth advisory groups, boards, committees, task forces, forums, assemblies or panels*

*“Youth have a lot to contribute and it’s worth it to listen to them
and have them get involved.” – Youth council member*

The Project

Following the 2015 federal election, when youth (ages 18-24) voted in record numbers, Samara Canada noticed that several Members of Parliament (MPs) from different parties and regions were setting up their own youth advisory board or council. These local youth councils are generally organized by the constituency office, and provide a non-partisan forum for local youth (both under 18 and over) to meet with their MP and discuss political issues.

Samara sought firsthand knowledge of the purpose, operations, and impacts of these councils, and has developed a practical guide to help elected representatives and their staff at all levels of government run successful youth advisory bodies. [The Guide](#) is a shorter summary of what’s presented here, for the time-crunched elected leader or constituency staff.

These insights are drawn from a small number of interviews with MPs, constituency office staff, and youth members themselves. The report provides a glimpse into how several youth councils have formed, the various ways they can be run, and the impact they can have. We found that youth councils are highly adaptable to the interests and needs of the youth and the elected representative involved. As such, there is no single “correct” way to organize a youth council.

We hope these accounts encourage elected leaders to engage youth and start their own councils or, if they already have one, to reinvigorate their methods of fostering democratic involvement in youth.

Why young people?

Young people are just as much – if not more – socially and civically engaged than older generations. Studies find that Canadians 15-24 years of age are [more likely to volunteer, be members of an organization, and have greater trust in public institutions](#). Youth also [participate at higher rates](#) across a range of avenues of politics, activism, and political discussion. And yet, youth who are eligible to vote are [less likely to cast a ballot or to consider voting a civic duty compared to older voters](#). As a result, [politicians tend not to speak to or hear from young people](#) while canvassing and consulting. This, in turn, can alienate young people from the political system.

One way to break this vicious cycle is to provide youth with direct opportunities to take part in political decision-making, share input on issues that matter to them and meet with politicians between election periods. Organizing a youth council or advisory board is one promising method of doing all three.

Who did we talk to?

For this project, Samara surveyed a small sample of youth councils that reflect a mix of regions and riding types, as well as MPs from different parties and with different demographic profiles. We were not able to include every council in this effort, so we selected ten constituencies that responded to our initial request. Interviews were kept confidential. If the MP was unavailable to participate in a phone interview, a constituency staff member familiar with the council was interviewed instead. Several current or former youth members were also interviewed. In total, two MPs, six constituency staff, and fourteen youth (some members of the same council) provided feedback on ten different youth councils.

Youth council interviews according to MP demographics					
Party	Location	Gender	Age	New MP? (2015)	Riding type
7 LPC	2 West Coast	7 Male	3 in their 30s	5 Yes	8 urban
2 CPC	1 Prairies	3 Female	3 in their 40s	5 No	2 rural
1 NDP	4 Ontario		1 in their 50s		
	2 Quebec		3 in their 60s		
	1 Atlantic				

Why do youth and elected leaders participate in youth councils?

YOUTH

“I told my dad I was going to apply [to the council]. He told me that I was too young, that I was not yet a citizen. He asked, ‘Why would politicians care about your opinions?’ And so I applied to prove him wrong.” – Youth council member

When asked why they joined the council, every youth member brought up their personal interest in politics and their desire to become more involved. Youth councils are overwhelmingly made up of youth who already hold a positive view of formal politics.

Some young interviewees mentioned that the council was their only opportunity to take part in politics, or that other avenues of participating – such as student government at the university level or youth clubs – were not as meaningful, or too competitive. Several were attracted to the

non-partisan nature of the council, as they were not yet attached to a party. They also valued the opportunity to talk about issues they cared about in an open forum.

Having a direct exchange with their elected representative was also a source of motivation for all the members we spoke with. Several members also wanted to learn about the social issues and remedies unique to their constituencies, or how to get better involved in politics generally.

Other youth wished to “get outside the bubble” of their usual social network and meet with peers who had different perspectives. Interestingly, some of these same members also noted that they applied to the council in order to connect with peers who shared similar interests.

Finally, youth council members reported that they wanted to learn practical new skills that they could add to their résumés.

ELECTED LEADERS

“School visits are limited to a show of hands. I wanted to give youth a chance to have a voice.” – MP

When asked why they created a youth council, each MP and constituency office staffer replied that it was primarily to initiate a more meaningful dialogue with youth in the community. Several mentioned that they wished to go beyond the usual outreach strategies in schools and universities, and that a youth council would give young people a chance to speak more candidly and in greater depth.

Other MPs and constituency staff explained that there was a need to provide space for youth perspectives, and that they had started their councils in order to better represent youth opinions in the riding.

Another common reason for creating a youth council was to increase the interest of youth in their community and to engage them in politics. MPs and constituency staff hoped to inspire youth to pursue careers in politics and to provide members with a personal connection to government officials.

Some councils were created to gain insight into young constituents’ opinions on specific policy issues. Two MPs wished to learn how to connect with youth in general, and to use the formation of a youth council to address the accusation that sometimes politicians “speak past” young people.

For others, the decision to create a youth council included a strategic incentive. Some said that they were responding to the higher youth voter turnout of the 2015 federal election – highlighting the power of turnout to capture the attention of politicians. Others shared that establishing better relationships with youth was a party objective, and one signaled that they would use the council to “get ahead of the curve”. Another presented the formation of the youth council as a way to not

“fall into the trap of having youth say [MPs] have sidelined us.” No MPs or constituency office staff mentioned the explicit objective of recruiting campaign volunteers. However, two offices noted that a few youth members moved on from the council to volunteer or work for the MP. This was an unintended effect, but provided an additional incentive to continue running the council.

How are councils operated?

SELECTION

“The council was representative of youth who want to get involved, not all youth. There is, in my opinion, a large part of the population that isn’t interested at all in these kinds of committees and so this part of the population isn’t represented.” – Youth council member

Two councils had a competitive selection process, while others accepted all who applied. Most applicants were asked to fill out an online form accessible through their MP’s website, and provide information about their previous volunteering experience and why they wanted to join the council. Phone interviews were also used in one case.

Selection criteria were flexible. Many members were accepted even if they lived or studied outside the constituency, and those slightly older than the cutoff were not turned away. In the case of a council that restricted its membership to high school students, youth were still welcomed back after graduation. When the selection process was competitive, constituency staff shared the task of choosing the members. In these cases, applications were anonymous, but attention was paid to include youth of different backgrounds, ages, and experiences. Members were selected exclusively at the beginning of the councils’ operating periods, although one council had a drop-in policy for interested youth.

COMPOSITION

“I didn’t want the council to get political. There needed to be a full tent [of perspectives] for open conversations to take place.” – MP

The sizes of the youth councils we interviewed varied between 10 and 36 members. Participants ranged from 14 to 30 years of age, with most councils accepting youth between the ages of 14 and 24, although several councils restricted their membership to high school students. A common rationale for limiting councils to under-18s was that older youth already have plenty of opportunities to become involved in politics (through youth party wings and university groups, for example). Those who included over-18s were adamant that opportunities for older youth were generally relegated to partisan initiatives, and that the council provided a chance to talk about politics without having a political label attached to them.

There was no consensus regarding what age range youth councils should include. Youth were polarized in their opinions. For example, those who were members of a high school-only council appreciated the chance to socialize with peers their age and felt more comfortable voicing their opinions. However, a youth member who had experienced both a younger council and one consisting of older youth preferred the older group. According to her, older members contributed better advice and made realistic observations, while the younger council required special considerations that stalled the group (such as parental approval) and the younger participants did not understand issues or “how the real world works.” Meanwhile, other observers mentioned how a large age range resulted in animated conversation among the council members and a wide variety of perspectives, and did not cite it as an operational difficulty.

FREQUENCY OF MEETINGS AND ATTENDANCE OF ELECTED REPRESENTATIVE

“The youth are so enthusiastic about the council and want to meet more often. The MP mentioned the council is starting to take up too much of her time, so she’ll likely have to cut back on her attendance to every meeting.” – Constituency office staff

Among the councils interviewed, half met every two or three months, and the MP was present for each meeting. The other councils had either split into sub-committees or task forces, meeting independently every four to six weeks in addition to their regular council meetings, or organized more regular meetings with their MP. At most, MPs met monthly with their councils. Constituency office staff were typically present at all meetings and undertook much of the logistical organization.

In two instances, councils met weekly, but these councils had restricted their membership to high school students and faced fewer scheduling conflicts. Several interviewees commented about the difficulty in scheduling meetings for councils that had wide age ranges. Generally, councils tried to accommodate students’ schedules by operating in harmony with the school calendar.

What do councils do?

“We organized [a public debate] because we thought the council should be listening to everybody in the community. Our goal was to take the stigma [that youth are apathetic] away, for the community to take us seriously and for people in the community to listen to us as well.” – Youth council member

Youth councils’ most common activity was hosting general discussion about current affairs, issues that were important to youth members, or subjects that were seen as important to the community. Generally, the first meeting of a council consisted of identifying issues and having members explain why they thought they were important. Several councils identified their top concerns in this first meeting and based their future meetings and activities around them.

Several councils provided services (such as organizing toy drives, fundraising, or volunteering for charities), while others focused on local research to develop policy recommendations and better understand the interests of the constituency. These campaigns tended to focus on the needs of the community, and were not solely youth-related.

Many youth councils wrapped up the year by hosting public dialogue events. Youth members organized conferences, hosted speakers, set up town halls, and prepared public debates. Some were aimed at youth in general, while others had the objective of bringing many generations together to talk about common issues facing the community.

Council members also participated in skills training and educational activities. Several councils invited speakers, community mentors, or local experts to conduct workshops with the youth members. Topics included an introduction to Canadian government, communications, and gender-based analysis certification, as well as expert analyses of current events that were of interest to youth. One council itself played an educational role by visiting classrooms to speak on the importance of civic engagement.

Developing policy recommendations was one youth council activity that had a direct connection to the political decision-making process. Many committees or task forces presented written policy reports to their MP to bring to Parliament. Others wrote letters to ministerial department heads or to the Prime Minister. Some also presented their ideas to their MP during council meetings in a more informal way.

What did youth and elected leaders get out of their experience?

"The [council's] impact is tough to measure, but still meaningful." – Youth council member

All youth described a positive social impact from their involvement in the council. They had fun, enjoyed meeting new people in their community, and connecting with peers. Some also reported greater feelings of self-worth. Others spoke of how the council had given them an opportunity to develop their skills in leadership, event planning, volunteer management, and public speaking, among others. Participants reported learning a great deal about politics, including about the Canadian political system, levels of political responsibilities, the role of an MP, career paths to become a politician, local issues, and ideas for how to solve them.

Across the board, MPs and their constituency staff reported feeling like they better understood the issues affecting youth and their riding. Other political leaders were also reportedly inspired by the activities of successful youth councils to start their own.

It is harder to gauge the impact that youth councils had on providing young people with influence over the political decision-making process. Youth council members were realistic, and understood that their input had to be balanced against other considerations. However, the majority of them said they wished they received more feedback on how their advice was

received, even if it was not accepted. Hence, Member Statements on youth council activities read in the House of Commons, or responses to their letters from ministerial departments or the Prime Minister's office, were greatly appreciated.

While the councils vary greatly in their purpose, operational style and impacts, they generally fill a gap for young people looking to become involved in politics in a non-partisan manner. They help connect MPs with a group of young constituents by fostering personal relationships between elected leaders and those they represent.

Advice for elected representatives and their staff (from people who have done it before):

The feedback Samara gathered from the elected leaders, constituency staff and youth members offer some universal insights on how to run an effective youth advisory body.

1. Be non-partisan

Opportunities already exist for youth to participate in partisan activities – like party youth wings and campus clubs. Youth joined the councils specifically to find an open and impartial forum for discussing public affairs. Keep it that way, so more youth can see how they fit into formal politics.

2. Establish the purpose of the council with input from youth members

Are you looking for advice on specific issues, trying to get the general pulse of the youth or the community, or just looking to introduce some young people to the political process? These objectives are all worthwhile. Being open to a co-designed process with youth will likely create a purpose for the council that is more valuable to youth and to you. That said, this should be balanced by being honest with youth about expectations, so council members don't feel misled or disappointed.

3. Consider the council's size carefully

Be cautious about quickly exceeding the capacity of your staff, as cultivating and maintaining meaningful relationships takes a lot of time and attention. A dozen youth is a good number for a motivated council with a precise action plan, while a larger group is more effective for gathering diverse opinions (but might lack intimacy). Use subcommittees for focused work, and consider keeping some continuity in membership from year to year.

4. Select an age range according to capacity and objectives

Do you have staff who are experienced in working with youth under 18? Youth under 18 can bring something special to the group, but there are logistical and legal ramifications to plan for. Consider whether you seek to prioritize diversity in life experience (i.e. a wide age range) or to build a tight knit, focused group (i.e. a narrow age range).

5. Conduct intensive recruitment
Recruitment should be active and take you outside your normal networks. Schools and community groups can be great places to start, but try to find the unusual suspects – the young people who may not be putting up their hands. No matter how diverse the council, remember that it will always be somewhat self-selecting, and therefore will never replace broader community consultations.
6. Decide on meeting frequency and be wary of scheduling conflicts
If meetings are infrequent or haphazard you will lose momentum. Consider an initial “kickoff” period of more frequent meetings to establish a plan for the year and for members to get to know each other. Set up the schedule in advance with input from members, staying clear of exam periods.
7. Choose meeting locations that are welcoming and easy to get to
Libraries, community centres, schools, and constituency offices are good places to meet. If your riding is large and you cannot subsidize travel for youth, vary locations throughout the year or try to find a digital fix. If internet connections are unreliable for video conferencing, allow for participation in other ways such as conference calls or sharing written input submitted ahead of time.
8. Connect youth members’ immediate issues with larger policy debates
Take time to thoughtfully review how young people’s personal experiences are related to systemic challenges or wider policy questions. The goal is to show how political actions have a real impact on peoples’ lives. Pro tip: Help youth to understand the responsibilities of different levels of government, and the basics of the policy process. This will help them direct their political energy in the future.
9. Offer opportunities to learn while doing
Youth will find council initiatives more meaningful if they have an interactive component, and will appreciate the chance to apply new skills. Community leaders, experts and local mentors are great resources for equipping youth with skills and knowledge to integrate into council activities (and your office likely has rich connections to utilize in the community).
10. Provide opportunities for youth to make recommendations to you or other elected officials
Offer concrete ways for the council to advise officials and policy makers, such as feeding into public consultations, presenting to legislative committees, or producing policy reports that will be shared. If you are tasked with bringing these recommendations to your elected colleagues, be sure to report back to the council on the feedback you received.

A Final Word

During Samara's interviews, a number of participants recalled how they were contacted for advice on how to set up a local youth council by other elected leaders who wanted to hear from and speak to youth. Samara hopes this report and Guide can be a resource for elected representatives and their staff at all levels of government – supplemented with advice from experts in the field of youth engagement, facilitation, and recruitment – to engage young people in politics

There was tremendous diversity in experiences among those Samara spoke with – a reminder that there is no one right way to organize a local youth council and that youth councils can succeed in a variety of settings. Ultimately, such success rests on careful planning, a commitment to non-partisanship, and most of all, firm belief that youth are capable and have a place in politics.

Samara would especially like to thank the MPs, constituency office staff, and youth council members who contributed to this project.



To learn more about Samara Canada's work or to make a charitable donation to support our research, please visit samaracanada.com or contact us at 416-960-7926.



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