

THE **360+** SERIES



YOU HAVE OUR ATTENTION:

Youth political engagement in Canada

360+

In March, the Samara Centre for Democracy released the 2019 Democracy 360, our biennial report card on how Canadians communicate, participate, and lead in politics. The Democracy 360 is partly based on data from the Samara Citizens' Survey, conducted in English and French between January 16 and February 6, 2019, using an online sample of 4,054 Canadian residents over 18 years of age. Drawing from that survey, this report is one of several short data stories on particular issues and themes in Canadian politics. The 2019 Democracy 360 as well as the 2019 Samara Citizens' Survey methodology can be found at samaracanada.com/2019-democracy-360.



The 2015 federal election saw a stunning surge in youth participation. Turnout increased from the previous election in 2011 by nearly 40% among 18- to 29-year-olds—an unprecedented increase. Was this a turning point—the end of a decades-long slide in youth voter participation? Or was it just a one-off event? Has the youth moment in Canadian politics arrived? Or is it already over?

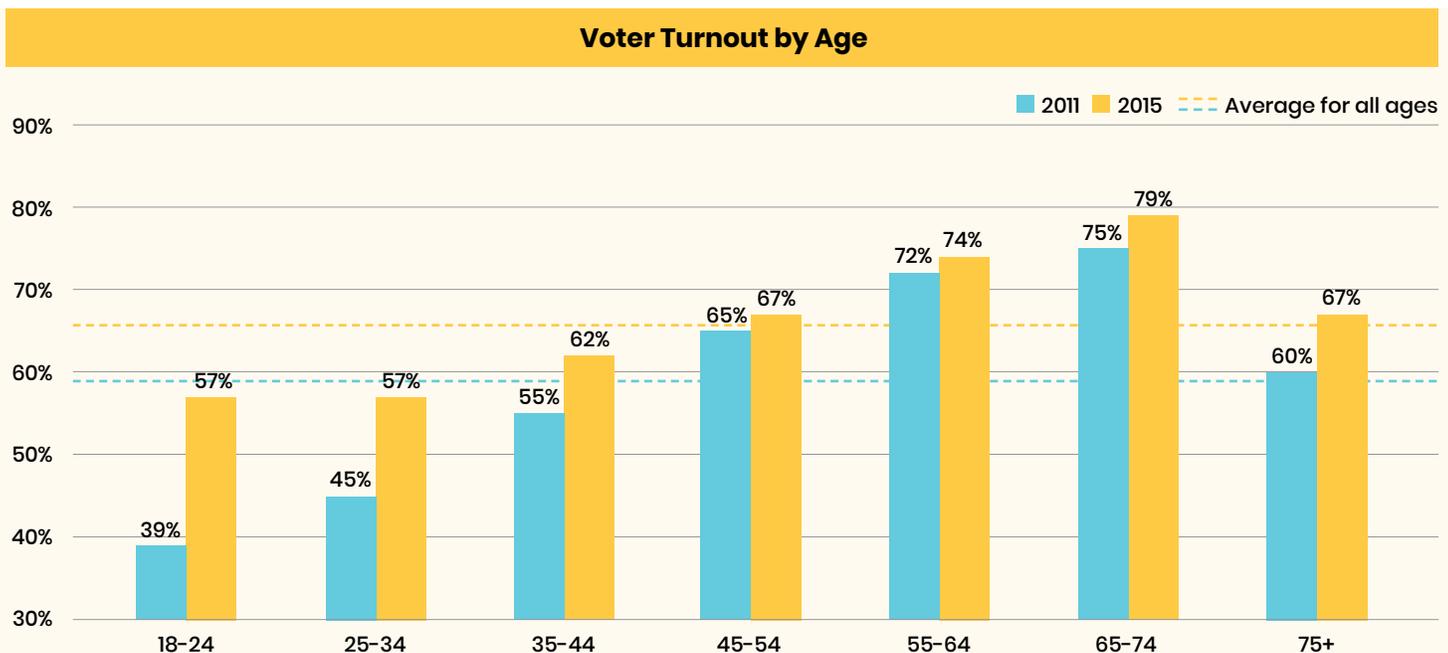
In the 2014 Samara Citizens' Survey, Canadians were asked about the different ways they engage in politics. Before the 2015 federal election, the Samara Centre for Democracy released "[Message Not Delivered](#)," which compared responses across three age groups.

In time for the 2019 election, we've analyzed data

from our biennial Citizens' Survey to again capture a snapshot of youth political engagement in the lead-up to a federal election.

As before, the data confirm that beyond voting, young people are among the most active participants in Canada's civic and political life. They talk about politics more than anyone, are present in the formal political sphere, respond through activism, and are leading their communities through civic engagement. Whatever happens at the ballot box, political leaders overlook the passion and engagement of young people at their own peril.

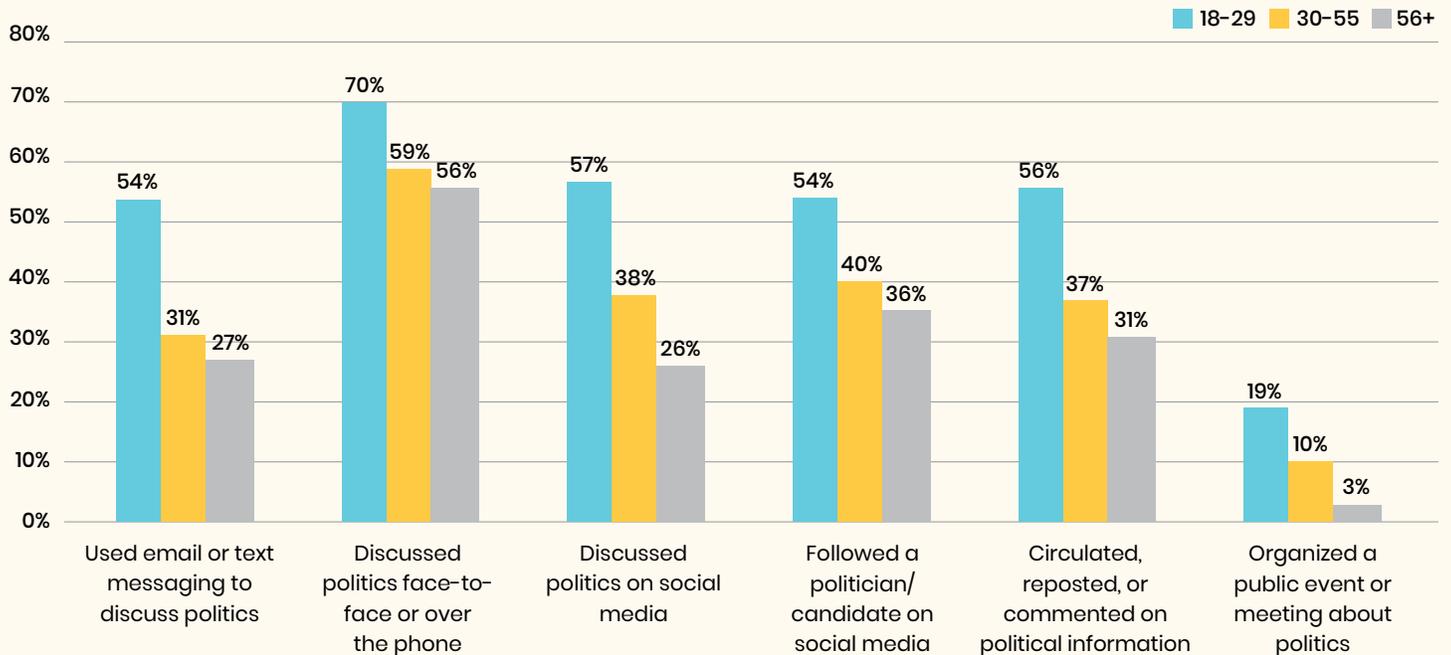
This report will examine differences across age groups in three areas of democratic participation: communication, formal political participation, and community civic engagement. We also reflect on how youth may participate in the 2019 election.



Source: Elections Canada

*Turnout rates are based on the number of eligible voters

Rates of Discussion



Communication: Talk politics to me

Before casting a ballot, before joining a party or joining a protest—there’s talk. Politics is something we do together and out loud. Young people get it. In fact, one of the most surprising findings from our 2014 survey was that young people are actually the most likely to take the simplest but most foundational form of political action: talking about politics.

In 2019, that still holds true across every medium. Over half of young Canadians are discussing politics over email or text, on social media, by re-circulating political information, or by following a candidate or politician on social media. In contrast, no more than 40% of older Canadians are active across any of those forms of communication.

Maybe we expect young people to be the most active in digital communication. But that’s not the whole story. Even more young Canadians (70%) discuss

politics offline (face-to-face or over the phone)—significantly more than older Canadians.

And young people are hearing from a range of perspectives. Sixty-one percent say they’ve discussed politics with someone they disagreed with in the past month, compared to 51% of 30- to 55-year-olds and 47% of Canadians aged 56 and older. Beyond just discussing online and within their social circles, 19% of young people organized a public event or meeting about politics. Just under one in five young Canadians are bringing the conversation to their communities—that’s something to talk about.

Communication is key?

Overall, political communication is on the rise for all Canadians.¹ But young people report a bigger jump than older Canadians in all indicators, compared with 2014, a year before the last federal election. Why are we talking about politics more? And why is that particularly the case among young people? Do we just have more to talk about (is it simply the “Trump effect”)? It could also be an encouraging sign that whether or not it manifests on Election Day, youth engagement has not diminished since 2014, and may have even intensified in some ways.

Discussion rates over time, Canadians aged 18–29	2014	2019	Change
Discussed politics face-to-face or over the phone	57%	70%	13% ↑
Used email or text messaging to discuss politics	48%	54%	6% ↑
Circulated, reposted, or commented on political information	48%	56%	8% ↑
Followed a politician/candidate on social media	33%	54%	21% ↑
Organized a public event or meeting about politics	18%	19%	1% ↑

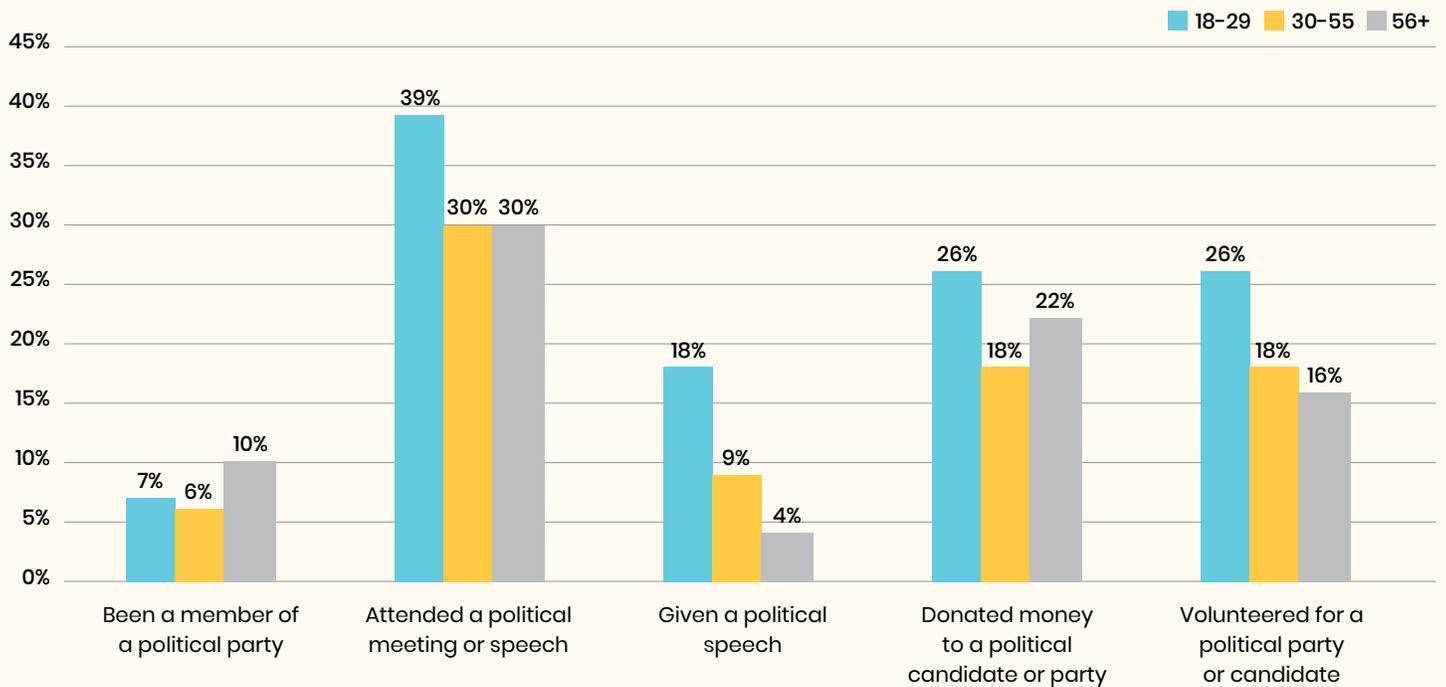
Looking up

Young people are often portrayed as disaffected, angry, and untrusting. Public opinion research tells a different story. In an age of political discontent, youth actually tend to hold more positive views than older Canadians about our institutions and leaders.

Canadians' satisfaction and trust in 2019	18–29	30–55	56+
Satisfied with how democracy works	76%	74%	77%
Satisfied with how MPs do their jobs	60%	53%	50%
Trust MPs to do what's right	57%	50%	50%
Satisfied with how political parties do their jobs	56%	50%	44%
Trust political parties to do what's right	53%	45%	42%

¹ Adelina Petit-Vouriot, Michael Morden, and Kendall Anderson 2019. “2019 Democracy 360: The Third Report Card on How Canadians Communicate, Participate, and Lead in Politics”. Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy.

Rates of Formal Participation



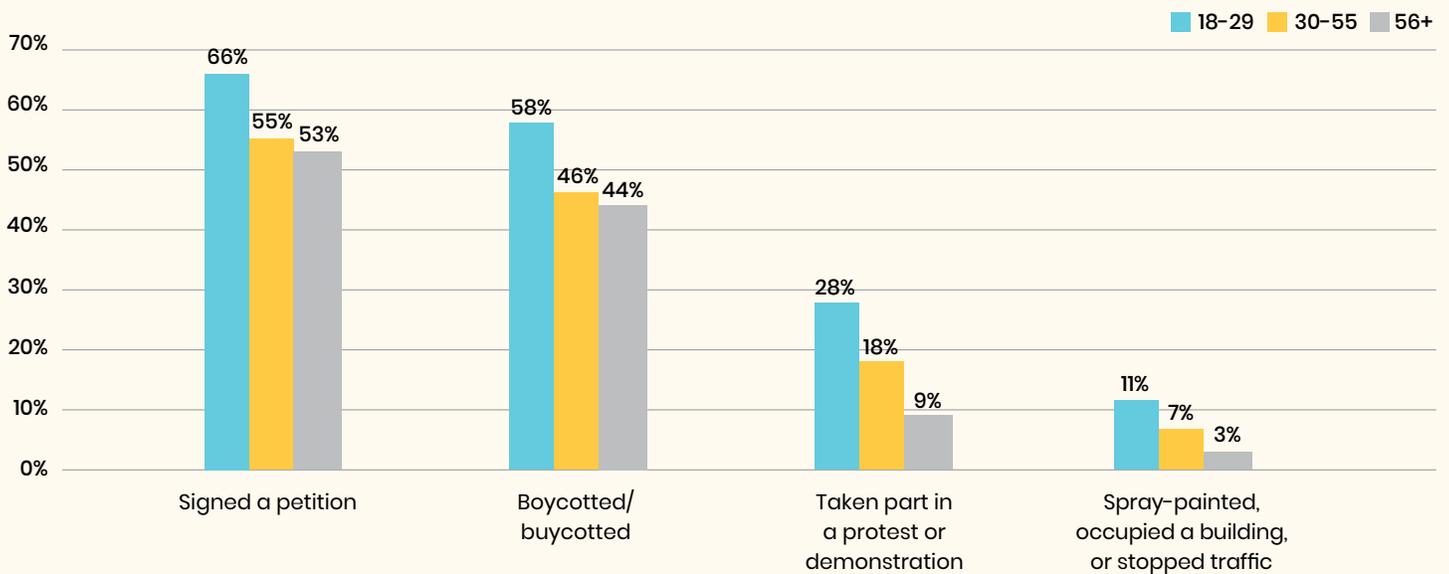
Formal engagement: Where's the party at?

While they may not get much credit for it, more young people are active in more kinds of formal political engagement activities than is the case for older generations. Young Canadians show up in direct political activity, like the 39% who attended a political speech or meeting in the last year (compared to 30% of older Canadians). Young Canadians also remain, in many ways, the engine that powers political parties; they're more likely to be both donors to and volunteers for candidates and parties. In fact, slightly more youth have been donating and volunteering than was the case before the 2015 election year (26%, compared to 22% in 2014).

At the same time, young people are marginally less likely than older Canadians to belong to parties as members. That being said, more young people say they would consider joining a party in the future—21%, compared to 15% of those aged 30 to 55 and 12% of those aged 56 and older.

Young Canadians are present within the political sphere—and have even increased their involvement in supporting parties and candidates, even if fewer are members of a party compared to older Canadians. In the coming months, will federal candidates recognize youth as integral to their campaign efforts?

Rates of Activism



Activism: Dollars and change

It probably comes as no surprise that young people report higher rates of activism than older generations. Young people were more likely to participate across a range of activities, from signing petitions to taking part in protests.

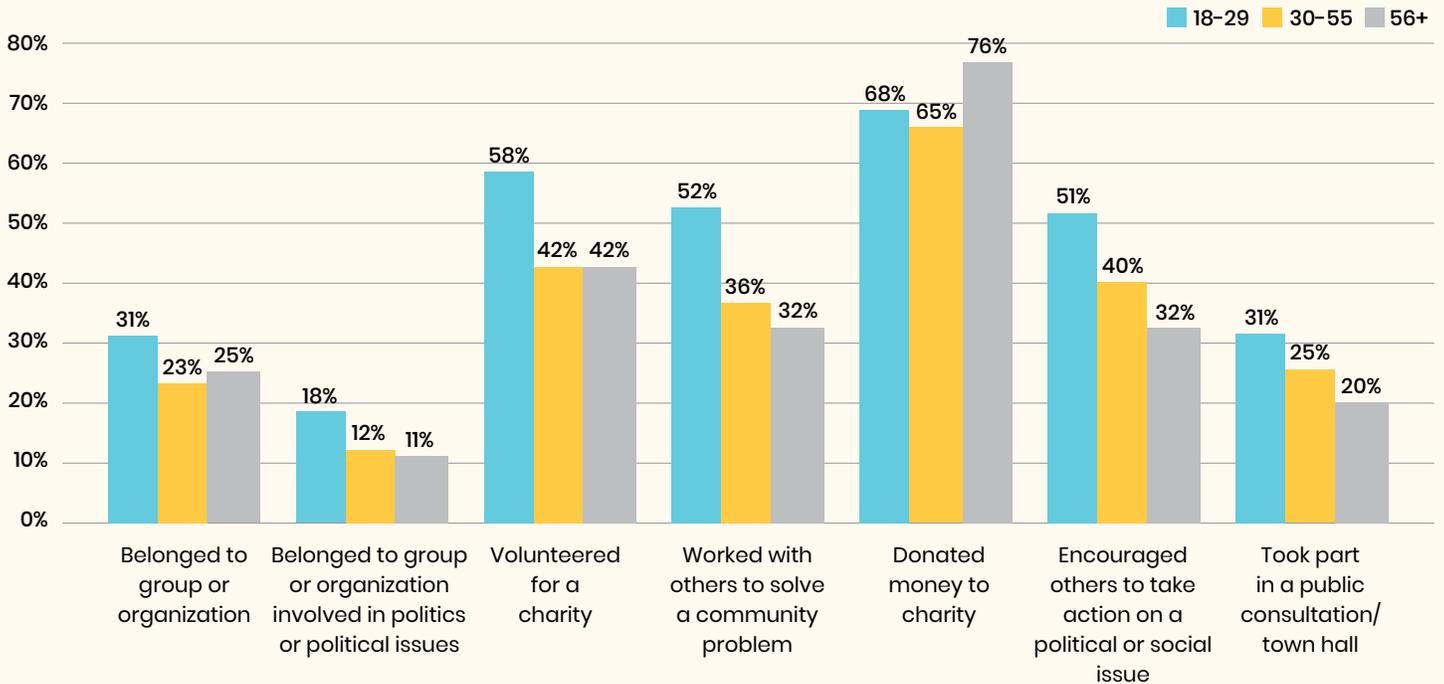
Ethical consumerism is emerging as a leading form of activism. Over half of young Canadians are directing their purchases to advance a political response to an issue they care about—a 13 percentage point increase from 2014. But while young people remain most likely to adopt activist methods, they are overall marginally less activist than they were before the last federal election. Among youth there has been an eight percentage point decrease in signing

petitions, and a six point decrease in protesting or demonstrating since 2014 (though activism is down across all age groups).

Civic engagement: A night out on the town hall

Democracy happens outside of capital “P” politics as well, which is why our Citizens’ Survey looks at broader forms of community civic engagement. Once again, across seven forms of engagement, youth are the most active—with the single exception of donating to charities. Young Canadians are more likely to belong to a group or organization, political or otherwise, and take part in public consultations and town halls. Over half of young people

Rates of Civic Engagement



have volunteered for a charity, worked with others to solve problems in the community, and encouraged others to take action (among older cohorts, no more than 42% participated in any one of those activities). On the sole form of participation youth did not lead—donating to charity—a still-strong majority (68%) of youth were donors, more than Canadians aged 30 to 55.

Political interest: Expressions of interest

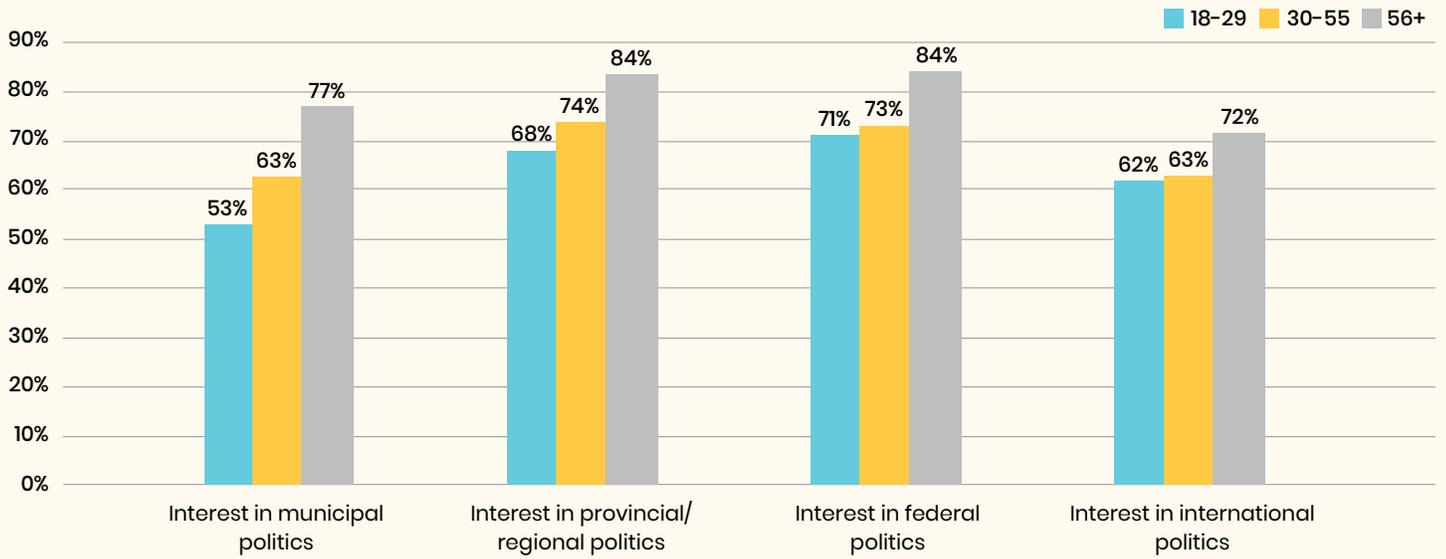
There's a curious paradox in the data. When young people are asked to describe their behaviour, their responses suggest a high level of political engagement. And yet, at the same time, they're much less likely to say they're interested

in politics when asked.

The good news is political interest is growing. When we asked Canadians [in 2016](#) if they were interested in politics, 59% of youth said yes. We asked the question again in 2019, but this time we asked about interest at different levels of politics. We found that, with the exception of municipal politics, more youth are interested at every level of politics now than were interested in politics overall in 2016.

The vast majority (84%) of youth are interested in at least one level of politics. And while youth are overall less likely to express interest in politics than older Canadians, the level of politics matters. Young people are much less interested in municipal politics, for example. But when asked about interest in federal politics, the interest gap between 18- to 29-year-olds and

Interest in Politics



30- to 55-year-olds shrinks to almost nothing. The same is true for international politics. So there is work to do to encourage greater youth engagement in their local and provincial or territorial democracies—but for national politics, young people are already tuned in.

Conclusion: Call me maybe?

We've said it [before](#) and we'll say it again: youth are not apathetic. They are well-rounded political citizens that talk about politics, volunteer for political parties and charities, and attend political and community meetings as much or more than older Canadians. Across almost all forms of democratic participation, they are highly engaged.

While it's impossible to predict if young Canadians' increased engagement will translate into higher rates of voting in the upcoming federal election, at the very least it is clear they will be paying attention. Political parties and leaders

should recognize the untapped potential that youth represent, and reward their attention by reaching out in ways that are meaningful and relevant. In doing so, they can help to ensure that the youth moment in Canadian politics hasn't passed, but has only just begun.

Recommendations

Based on [what's generally known](#) about how to increase voter turnout, we have a number of recommendations to make.

For citizens:

- Social pressure works: Tell your friends and co-workers that you're voting and ask them to do the same.
- Be encouraging and don't use guilt or a sense of duty to convince people to vote.
- As your friends, employees and co-workers to make a plan to vote and put it in their calendars.
- Ask candidates at the door how they're engaging people on the issues, beyond just asking for their vote.
- Promote civic responsibility as a fun social activity instead of a lonely duty.

For political parties and candidates:

- Work on your outreach to youth—both through traditional methods and on digital.
- But don't count on digital—young people want an in-person connection to politics.
- Ask young people what matters to them.
- Encourage people to vote—for anyone.
- Invite your young supporters to share their voting experience on their social networks.

PUBLICATION DATE: 21 August 2019

Copyright © The Samara Centre for Democracy 2019

CITATION: Callista Ryan, and Michael Morden 2019. "You Have Our Attention: Youth political engagement in Canada." Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy.

EDITOR: Allison Jane Smith

SURVEY DATA COLLECTION: Dr. Peter Loewen, Dr. Daniel Rubenson, and Benjamin Allen Stevens

DATA ANALYSIS: Adelina Petit-Vouriot and Michael Morden

DESIGNER: Geneviève Biloski

The Samara Centre for Democracy is a non-partisan charity dedicated to strengthening Canada's democracy, making it more accessible, responsive, and inclusive. The Samara Centre produces action-based research—as well as tools and resources for active citizens and public leaders—designed to engage Canadians in their democracy.

The Samara Centre would like to thank all of our individual donors as well as BMO, Bennett Jones LLP, and Your Canada, Your Constitution for their continued support of the Democracy 360 project.

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



33 Prince Arthur Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5R 1B2
416-960-7926 | info@samaracanada.com

@SamaraCDA SamaraCanada @SamaraCDA