

City election app struggles to interest voting Vancouverites

ALEXIS BECKETT, THE TYEE

Published on: November 18, 2011

Vancouverites are showing little interest in the city's new \$10,000 iPhone app developed for the municipal elections.

The Vancouver Votes [app](#) was released on Oct. 27 to encourage more people to vote. By Nov. 14, it had only been downloaded 1,000 times, though the city has 400,000 registered voters.

By comparison, a similar app released for Calgary's municipal elections a year ago hit 4,000 downloads.

City officials have not set a target for downloads and say there will not be a way to tell if the app has any impact.

"You never know with elections whether the tools you use got people out to vote," said City chief election officer Janice MacKenzie.

The goal with voters is to "get the information into their hands and by virtue of that encourage them to vote," she said.

Voter turnout has fallen in the last two municipal elections, and the City is particularly concerned about trying to reach young adults who shun the ballot box.

But experts who research youth engagement in politics say an app fails to address the real reasons why so many young people do not vote.

Heather Bastedo, a research specialist studying Canadian political participation with [Samara](#), said youth were disengaged because they don't identify with candidates and their values.

"It can't make you care about your candidates, and can't give you confidence in your vote, and that's a big part," she said.

Voter engagement advocates are pleased the City has developed a tool they can use in their own work, encouraging the public to get more involved in the election.

"It's one more thing we can pick up without developing it ourselves," said Andrea Curtis, a coordinator for [Get Your Vote On](#), an advocacy group working specifically to increasing young voter turnout.

<http://thetyee.ca/Blogs/TheHook/Municipal-Politics/2011/11/18/Vancouver-Election-App/>



The idea for an app came from Vancouver's communications department.

They approached developers Purple Forge based on apps they had developed for Calgary's municipal elections and the 2010 byelection in Victoria.

Victoria's app saw 1000 downloads last year, matching those of the Vancouver Votes app, though Vancouver's population is more than seven times greater.

City officials said the app was mainly marketed on the [official election website](#) and voter's guides distributed throughout the city.

When asked if any attempt had been made to specifically target younger voters, officials said that because their budget was limited their ads were very "broad and generic" and "don't target any one demographic."

They described Facebook and Twitter accounts as their best avenue of communication. The app had been mentioned by city officials twice on [Facebook](#) on Oct. 27 and Nov. 1, and once on [Twitter](#) on Oct. 27.

In an effort to keep costs down, the city chose to only commission an iPhone app at the recommendation of the developer.

The iPhone has 31 per cent of the smartphone market compared to the market leader, Blackberry with 38 per cent, according to comScore figures reported by [iPhoneinCanada](#).

With the goal of reaching out to young adults, Bastedo cautions that those young people least likely to vote are also least likely to own an iPhone.

Unfortunately, she said, when it comes to increasing voter turnout, it's a matter of experimentation. It's not easy to know what will have an effect on numbers and "this may be as good as it gets."

Alexandra Samuel, director of the social media and interactive media centre at Emily Carr, said the cycle of elections means there will always be a new technology to test.

What is important to consider, she said, is "what kinds of technologies and approaches will generate the best kinds of outcomes."

"These kinds of apps are most likely to appeal to motivated citizens, that is, to people who would vote anyhow," she said.

<http://thetyee.ca/Blogs/TheHook/Municipal-Politics/2011/11/18/Vancouver-Election-App/>



One advantage the app has is its ability to send push notifications to users, reminding them when and where to vote.

Bastedo said this could be the most important feature of the app for improving voting numbers. It's a non-partisan mimic of the scrutineers hired by political parties to call supporters with a reminder on voting day.

"Getting people out on voting day is the success or failure of a campaign," she said.

Alexis Beckett is a first year student at the UBC School of Journalism. Her work has appeared on the school's award-winning website [TheThunderbird.ca](#). You can read more by Alexis on her [blog](#), or [follow her tweets](#).