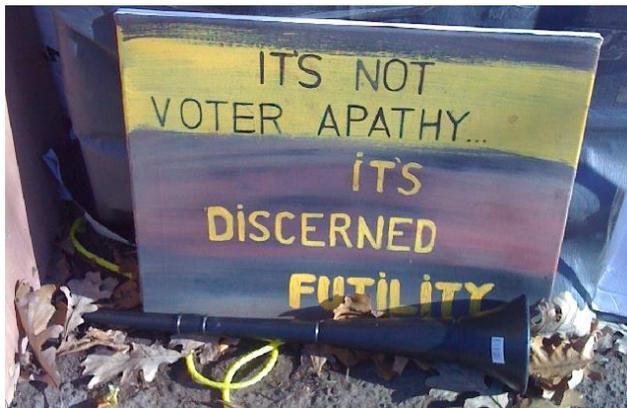


## Canada's Political Outsiders

**A new report offers insight into what's fuelling the political disengagement of Canada's youth.**

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December 7, 2011



The most recent round of provincial elections has revealed new lows in political engagement. Ontario, in particular, had the lowest level of voter turnout since Confederation, [dipping below](#) the psychologically significant 50-per-cent mark.

Notwithstanding some election-to-election variation, this watershed event should be viewed as part of a broader [trend of decline](#) that began in the 1980s. According to [survey data](#), the decline in electoral participation is largely attributable to younger voters “dropping out,” while other demographic groups’ participation remains fairly consistent.

Youthful angst, rebelliousness, and other aspects of a life cycle’s early stages fail to account for this emerging trend. Instead, there is something different happening that is causing today’s youth, particularly less-educated youth, to participate in politics less than they did a generation ago.

To understand this puzzle in greater depth, [Samara](#), a research organization that studies and encourages citizen engagement with Canadian democracy, has undertaken an unprecedented series of focus groups exploring the reasons Canadians are choosing (in greater and greater numbers) not to become politically involved. One of these groups was composed exclusively of less-educated young people (the average age was 21). This is significant because previous studies have tended to study disengagement among university-educated youth. Samara’s focus group was comprised primarily of participants who had completed high school but had not enrolled in college or university.

<http://pioneers.themarknews.com/articles/7709-canadas-political-outsiders/#.VW4Us89Vikp>

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Given that low turnout among young people is still disproportionately concentrated among those without a post-secondary education, such a focus is long overdue, and the [results of that study](#) provide some intriguing insights into the reasons for their disengagement from politics.

Whereas other disengaged groups in the study frequently expressed frustration with their inability to receive satisfactory services from government, disengaged youth tended to convey a fundamentally oppositional “us vs. them” attitude toward those in power. They spoke of political affairs as being characterized by “brainwashing” and “fear,” reflecting an estrangement from, and distrust in, the political process.

Despite this disheartening response, participants did express support for democracy, but with emphasis on a democratic style that has been less present in Canada in recent years. That is, they tended to define democracy as all voices being *heard*. The emphasis placed on equality of voice suggests that these youth value a more consensual and less majoritarian approach to governance. This observation stands in sharp contrast to the popular conception that young people are looking for decisiveness on the part of government. Instead, this focus group expressed a desire for government to more seriously weigh and address the concerns of a wide range of community voices before taking action.

The overriding sense of estrangement that became evident through this focus group suggests that establishing trust and a sense of belonging in Canada’s government and institutions will be a necessary step towards the restoration of youth participation. One remedy may be for politicians to adopt an approach to government that is more inclusive of a plurality of voices, and that shows genuine respect for, and appreciation of, those voices and interests that fall somewhat outside of the mainstream. The benefits of this more consensual approach to governance would not necessarily be realized by any one party or political faction – rather, the benefits would accrue for us all in the form of a more robust, inclusive, and participatory democracy.