

Don't blame the young

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Voter turnout among young Canadians in the last federal election [was around 39%](#), and in a perfect world that would be distressing on its face. In this imperfect world, however, I can't get too excited. Politically engaged people tend to massively exaggerate small and medium-sized differences between policies and parties. The majority, meanwhile, seem to believe — correctly, in my view — that no federal government on offer is likely to govern this great country in a way that augurs catastrophe for their day-to-day lives. When Elections Canada asked young people why they didn't vote in 2011, common answers included spiffed-up variations on “didn't care” and “couldn't be arsed.” And when it asked young people why they *did* vote, the most common answer was that it's a “civic duty.” That's an arguable point, but a long way from “to change the world.” Don't get me wrong. I wish there were more ideas, more difference, more bold leaders to get excited about. But in their absence, I can't much fault anyone, of any age, for not voting.

Nor can I fault all the other ways young people aren't engaging in politics, as detailed in [a new report from Samara](#). They aren't joining political parties (91%), donating money to parties or candidates (92%), volunteering in election campaigns (82%) or even contacting elected officials (75%) if they have a beef. Against stereotype, they aren't even posting “political information or content” on social media (70%).

They're not locked in their basements, though. Around 60% said they had volunteered their time to some cause or organization, or “been active” in a neighbourhood group, church or other organization. If anything one might worry *those* numbers are too low. But if they were turnout numbers, the anti-apathy league would be over the moon. No offence intended to political volunteers or parties — we need them both — but if their goal is quantifiable improvement in people's lives, they have chosen a fairly indirect avenue of achieving it.

If federal turnout isn't a crisis, though, it's certainly an opportunity for strategists in the 2015 election — just like every election. Some two million more Americans aged 18-29 voted for president in 2008 compared to 2004, [according to](#) the Center for Information

and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University. That pushed turnout in that age bracket up to 51% from a low point of 40% in 1996. And Barack Obama was the primary beneficiary, of course: 66% of young people voted for him, [according to exit polls](#).

Like every election, 2015 will also represent an opportunity to rebuild public interest, trust and participation in the political system. This is hardly a piercing insight, but there remains only one way to do that: You have to promise things people want; and then, if you win, you have to at least try to do those things, competently, while behaving in a reasonably dignified manner.

Mr. Obama's re-election campaign is a cautionary example. With significant elements of his progressive agenda botched, postponed or abandoned, his share of the youth vote dropped to 60% in 2012, which [by CIRCLE's count](#) represents something like 2.4 million lost votes. All the rhetoric about transforming American society in 2008 had become "sorry about the last four years but holy good God look at these Republican lunatics" in 2012. But more to the point, he simply couldn't deliver on his agenda. And people noticed.

Closer to home, Parti Québécois leader Pauline Marois shamelessly hopped aboard the printemps érable protests. And then, mere months later, she was raising tuition and staring down the protesters. By playing footsy with people who think tuition should be free, she managed to turn *cheaper* tuition — which she did deliver — into a failure. This is how downward spirals of political participation accelerate.

It's all very well to encourage Canadian youth to get involved in politics. But the idea that their collective force of will is going to fix the basic issues that drove them away is hopelessly naive. If they don't fall prey to partisan mania, many would be chewed up and spat out by those that do. Watch a room full of young Conservatives in Ottawa applaud lustily for speakers supporting everything their party has abandoned over the past seven years, and then just as lustily at the mention of Stephen Harper's name, and then tell me we need *more of these people*.

No, if politicians want reasonable folks to check back in — and it's arguable many of them do not — then the onus is squarely on them. Don't treat voters like idiots. Don't behave like an imbecile. Say what you mean. Do what you say. It's nothing you didn't learn in kindergarten.