

# Making politics matter to the next generation

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Like a lot of political junkies, I love a good election campaign. But lately, as I have found myself toggling back and forth between the dramas of the provincial election in Alberta, the Parti Québécois leadership campaign and the long run up to the 2015 federal election campaign, I have been left with the feeling that the process of Canadian democracy has taken on all the significance of a one-day-only blowout sale.

There is a discomfiting disconnect between our tendency to focus on election campaigns — the scandals, the personalities, winners and losers — and the fact that Canada has one of the lowest voter turnouts of any comparative Western democracy. Only 61.4 per cent of eligible voters turned out in the 2011 federal election. Put differently, 40 per cent of eligible voters in Canada just didn't bother going to the polls.

The 2014 general election in Quebec had a 71-per-cent participation rate. There was a 43-per-cent turnout in the 2013 Montreal mayoral election. In my column last week, I commented on the state of Quebec school boards and its dismal participation rates: 17 per cent in the English system, and 5 per cent in the French system.

At all levels of government, people — and young people in particular — are increasingly disengaged from Canada's democratic political processes. I wish someone would make this an election platform.

Back in March, Samara, a non-partisan charity organization dedicated to increasing civic engagement in Canada, released a research report titled Democracy 360 on the state of democracy in Canada. Their stance is that a healthy democracy is about more than just going to the polls every four years.

The Democracy 360 findings were grim, but not surprising. They indicate a high level of distrust and dissatisfaction with the performance of federal members of Parliament. Only 54 per cent of Canadians surveyed reported thinking that MPs are able to influence the direction of the country. Only 40 per cent of Canadians trust their MPs to do "what's right." Sixty-two per cent believe that candidates and parties "only want their vote."

We should care, because these sentiments translate into broader trends of low voter turnout and low participation in political activities. The report gives Canada's democracy a "C" grade.

One big challenge ahead of the 2015 federal election is to make politics matter, especially to younger generations. This means focusing on "everyday democracy," as Samara calls it. Let go of the talking points, photo-ops and bald vote-pandering. Political parties need to work harder to make our political system responsive, useful and positive, rather than something that sidetracks us from the real work of building a better Canada.

Young people may be eschewing traditional politics, but they are busy circulating online petitions, taking to the streets to protest, starting online blogs and working through social media to build movements and fundraise for issues they believe in.

In fact, while Samara's research shows that rates of formal political engagement in Canada are at 37 per cent, the number of Canadians who participated in at least one form of activism comes in at 69 per cent. The combination of globalization and the digital revolution have made many of Canada's political institutions and processes feel distant, clunky and outdated.

This matters more than people think.

In the years to come, it is younger generations who will decide which political institutions and parties are irrelevant and need to be torn down. They will also decide which have value and purpose. The parties left standing will be those that take civic engagement seriously. Maybe we could all benefit from putting a little less emphasis on elections and more on the day-to-day features of maintaining a healthy democracy.