



THE YOUTH VOTE

WHY YOUNG VOTERS CAN'T BE IGNORED

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In the 2015 federal election, young voters turned out to vote in record numbers and in the 2019 federal election youth voted in similar numbers. This sustained increase in youth voter turnout is more than an anomaly — it is a part of a larger trend of civic engagement amongst young people that is manifesting in electoral participation. Although British Columbia saw a decline in voter turnout in the last two general elections, the percentage decline was noticeably smaller among voters 18-24 years old than in the general population. Given that youth have borne the brunt of the negative economic impacts of the pandemic and have been the age group that has seen the least recovery, electors can expect youth issues to figure prominently in the next federal election and for youth voter turnout to remain at the 2019 levels, if not increase. These trends in increased youth voter turnout have been seen in the 2020 US presidential election (increase of 11 percentage point) and the 2019 EU parliamentary election (increase of 14 percentage points).²

The recent spike in youth voter turnout will undoubtedly have long term implications. Research shows voting is behavioural; a young person is 50% more likely to vote again after voting for the first time compared to a non-voter.³

The data shows a generational shift is occurring. The size and engagement of Millennials (born after 1980) is reshaping the social and political landscape; electoral success is beginning to rely more heavily on the "youth vote". Despite the false narrative that young people are apathetic, Millennials continue to prove that they are engaged on matters of great importance, such as climate change, affordability, human rights, and economic opportunity.

The generational shift is also being reflected in the age of three of the four major Canadian political party leaders. The 2019 federal election saw the youngest political leader candidates in Canadian history: Trudeau (47), Scheer (40), and Singh (40)⁴ will average only 43 years of age during the election. In 2021, this trend continues with Blanchet being the only leader over 50; Paul (48), Trudeau (49), O'Toole (48), and Singh (42).

This report explores demographic and voting trends amongst young Canadians and the impact it will have for political parties and governments for years to come. The report should serve as a warning — and an opportunity — for campaigns, pundits, the media, and elected officials: young voters can no longer be ignored.



Elections Canada figures show Millennials and Generation Xers represented two-thirds of the electorate in 2019, with Millennials forming the largest single voting bloc.⁵ Millennials and Generation Zers currently represent 40% of Canada's population, meaning that in a 2021 federal election, Canadians under 35 will form the largest cohort of voters.

As more Millennials and leading-edge Generation Zers become of voting age, the youth category of voters has grown significantly in size relative to other generations. By sheer numbers alone, these voters have the capacity to influence election outcomes. Millennials made up 37% of the eligible electorate in 2019, and that number will only increase after a 2021 election.

Political parties cannot ignore youth as a voting bloc any longer. Nor can they be written off as apathetic. Today's youth are not more politically active than their parents, but care about a wide variety of political issues. In addition to their preference for decentralized, grassroots and local activism, six in ten youth see elections as an important way to keep governments accountable.⁶

It is important to remember that Millennials and Generation Zers are not a homogenous group of people; though they may share concerns about the economy, environment, and affordability they do not all agree on the solutions. Abacus Data found that while 87% of Millennials consider themselves moderate or ardent environmentalists when asked about what components of a climate change plan should be, ideal solutions are split across many different political solutions including carbon taxes, better clean tech incentives, and vehicle emissions standards.⁷ In order to inspire support from this ever-increasing demographic of the electorate, politicians, pundits, and media need to stop treating Millennials and Generation Zers as a bloc easy to sway with flashy campaign promises that are specific to that age group or relying on their party's reputation amongst young people. Parties must fight for and to retain support from youth aged 18 to 40.

Many naysayers will jump on twitter or social media and say that young people do not vote because they do not trust the political system,⁸ which is also false. 73% of Generation Zers and 66% of Millennials are satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada, with the greatest satisfaction being among those with post-secondary and post-graduate degrees.⁹ Gaining the support of Generation Zers and Millennials can begin by treating them as fully engaged civic members and by ceasing the false narrative that young people have always been apathetic to the world around them, because it simply is not true.

Canadian Voting Trends by Age Demographic: 1965-2000

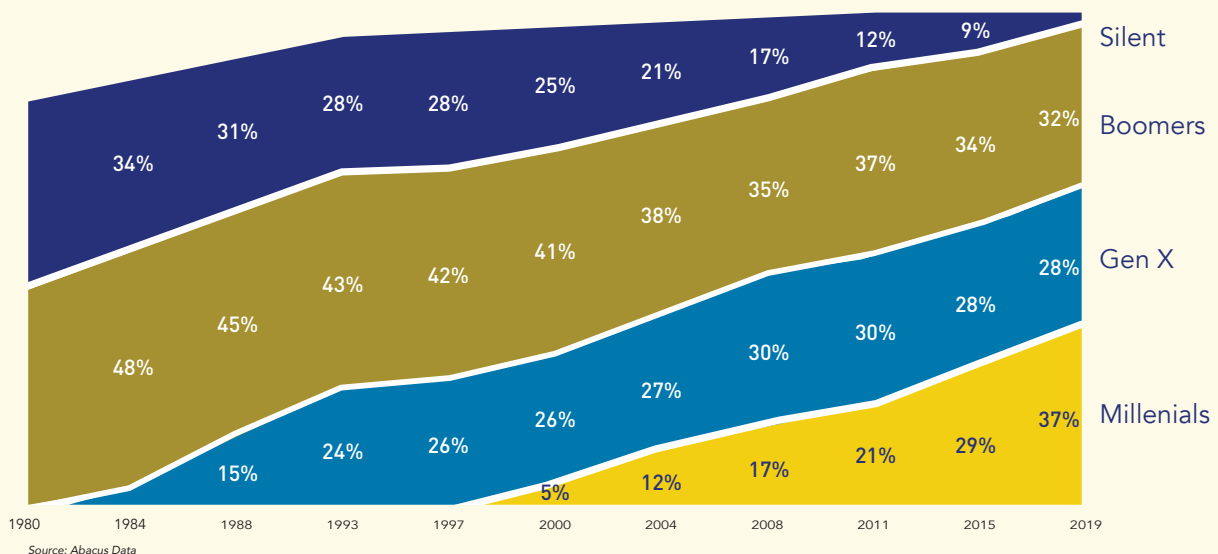
Looking at voting trends in Canada can be very challenging. Election data from the 1960s until 2000 relied solely on the Canadian Election Study, a post-election survey conducted via telephone. Those groups who are more impacted by 'social desirability' tend to answer self-reporting questions in a way that would be most favourable by others and could inflate the overall turnout numbers.¹⁰

Voting turn out depends on a number of factors which holds true to every age demographic. Issues like timing of an election, satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) of the current government, voting requirements, and socio-economic factors all play a role in assisting in voting turnout. Political events like wars, civil rights disputes, geo-political upheaval, and economic repressions will all inspire different turn outs at the polls.

Since voter data was collected, youth voter turnout has ebbed and flowed depending on the political spectrum at the time. Between the 1960s and 1980s, estimated turn out by 18-24 year old's was as low as 70% and as high as 85%.¹¹ There are many reasons one can point to between the 1960s and 1980s for the fluctuations in voter turnout, but it cannot be denied that young people were at the forefront of political activities. The height of the Civil Rights movement saw young people in the forefront of a fight for equality in the US. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was founded and saw young people emerging as leaders of sit-ins protesting segregation laws.¹² Young people were also on the forefront of the fight against the Vietnam War. University of Toronto students protested the war in their campus newspaper.

From 1980 through 2000 overall voter participation dropped precipitously, though the decline amongst Canadians under the age of 30 was the most significant. Voter turnout data of the 1980s and 1990s is often used to paint a picture of apathetic young people, but that data must be viewed within the context of the political landscape.

FIGURE 1: GENERATIONAL PROPORTION OF THE ELECTORATE

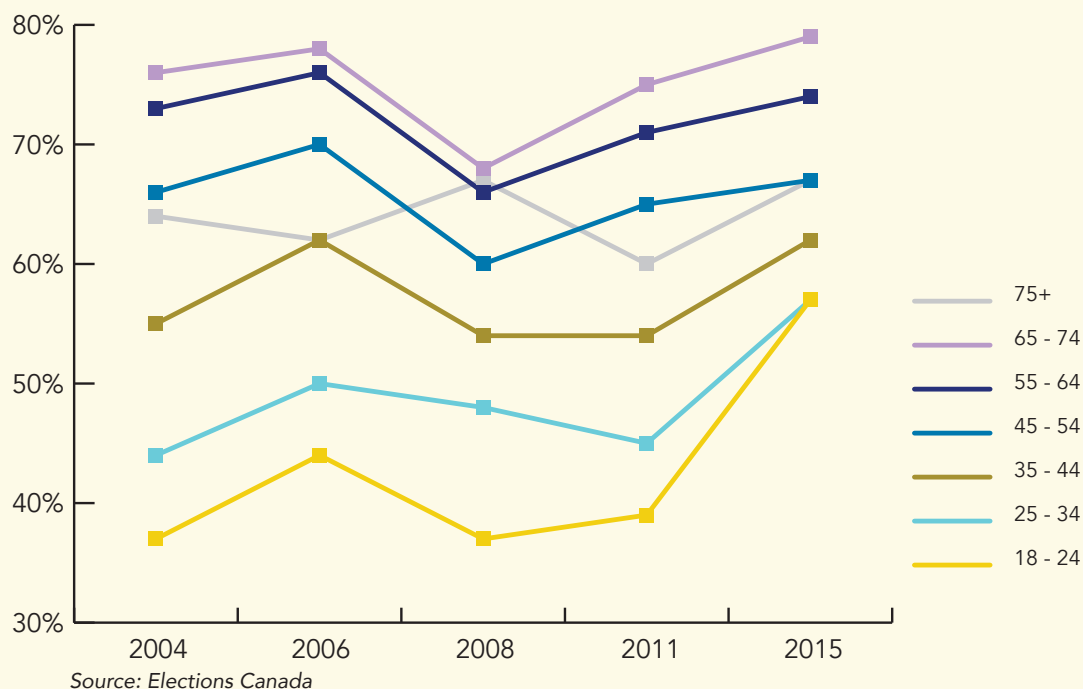


The 1984 federal election marked the emergence of neo-liberal politics in Canada with the election of the Progressive Conservative Government. During that time, much of the political conversation in the country shifted away from issues of social justice and equity, to high-level fiscal matters which young people tend to feel alienated from.¹³ The drop of voters under 30 also explains the slow decline of voting over the last 35 years as voting becomes a habit.

However, this decrease in voter turnout does not mean young people were apathetic. During this time of declining electoral engagement, young Canadians continued to be involved in political, social, and community initiatives. In 1996 for example, over 10,000 students in Québec took part in a student strike against a proposed 30% increase to tuition fees, successfully winning a tuition fee freeze. In 1999, when the City of Seattle hosted the World Trade Organisation Ministerial Conference, approximately 40,000 protesters, many of whom were students and young people, gathered to protest against globalization. Continued research shows that younger people are more likely than their grandparents to engage in cause-oriented political actions.¹⁴

This was a time of many young people being involved in direct action against issues they were passionate for whether it was human rights, globalization, war, or the environment. Since much of the political discourse at the time was discussed through a neo-liberal lens, young people found other ways to fight for change in their communities.

FIGURE 2: VOTER TURNOUT IN CANADIAN FEDERAL ELECTIONS



Canadian Voting Trends by Age Demographic: 2004-2015

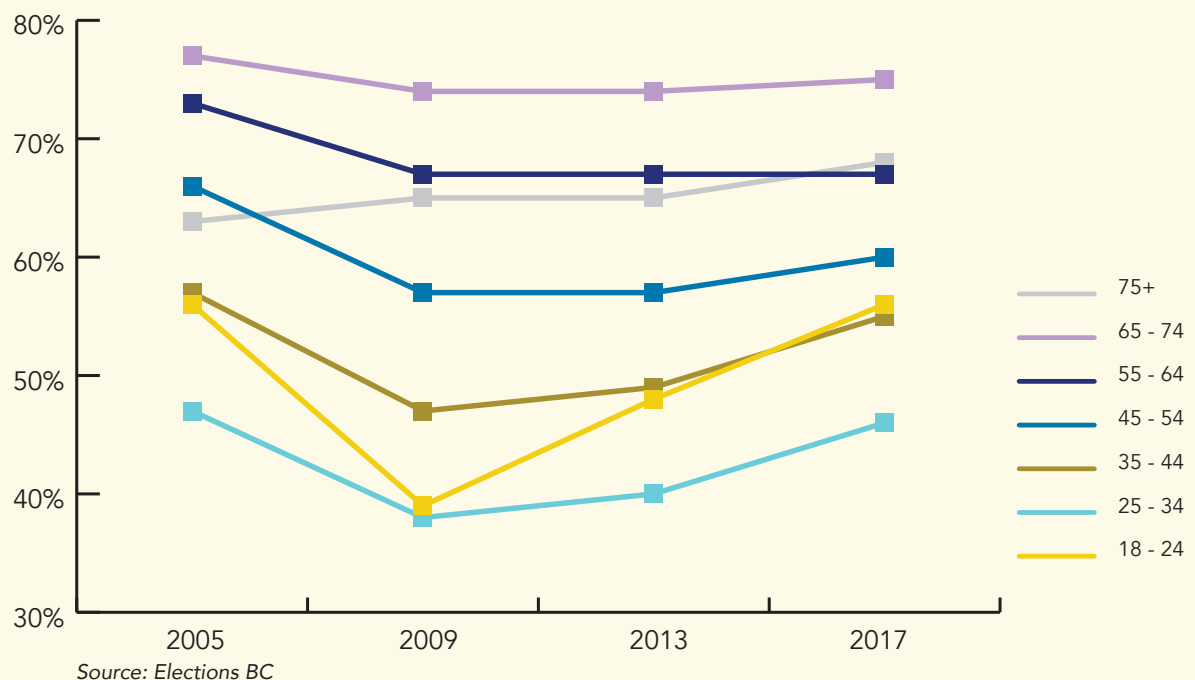
As of the early 2000s the trend lines have shifted. In 2004 Elections Canada began using a different method to collect and analyze voter data. The previously-used Canadian Election Survey tended to produce higher voter turnout rates than official records showed, likely as a result of self-reporting and the nature of demographics who participate in surveys. As of 2004, Elections Canada now cross-references a large sample of electors who voted in the federal election with data from the National Register of Electors for a more verifiable and more accurate representation of actual voter turnout.¹⁵ Because voter turnout has been estimated using two different methodologies pre-2000 and post-2000 it is difficult to directly compare the data from the two periods. General trends, however, seem fairly certain.

In the 2015 federal election 18 to 24 year olds experienced a record-breaking surge. In 2011 only 38.8% of this age group voted, and in 2015 57.1% voted — an incredible 18.3 percentage point increase between elections.¹⁶ No age group has increased its voter turnout between two consecutive elections by such a significant margin since 1960. Millennials truly made history in 2015.

Due to this record-breaking increase, voters aged 18 to 24 turned out at the same rates as voters aged 25 to 34 (both reached 57%) and were not far behind those aged 35 to 44 (voter turnout was 61.9%).¹⁷

The increase in youth voter turnout in the 2015 federal election was seen across the country; all provinces except PEI saw a major increase in youth voter turnout – New Brunswick saw the highest turnout at 67% and British Columbia was a close second at 66%.¹⁸

FIGURE 3: VOTER TURNOUT IN BC PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS



Provincial Elections: British Columbia

In the past decade, youth in British Columbia have been coming out in force. According to Elections BC, 56.2% of voters aged 18 to 24 voted in the May 2017 BC election.¹⁹ Not only is that a notable 8.3 percentage point increase over the 2013 election, but it's also a higher turnout than those voters aged 25 to 44.²⁰ Since 2009, the youngest cohort of voters has increased their turnout significantly, while most other age categories have remained stagnant in their percentage of voter turnout. Despite the decrease in overall voter turnout, younger Millennials surpassed the next closest age bracket to make their voices heard prominently in the 2020 BC general election.²¹ This trend has been viewed across the globe over the past decade. In countries like the USA and the UK, young people are showing their democratic strength by voting in high numbers.

United States

Voter turnout trends across all age groups in the US presidential elections have been increasing since 1994, with the highest voter turnout in 2021, reaching almost 67%. In the 2021 presidential election, 50% of young people ages 18-29 voted, marking an 11-point increase from 2016.²² In addition, there was a spike in voter turnout for all ages for the 2018 midterm election;²³ the highest midterm youth turnout in a quarter century.²⁴ Between the 2014 and 2018 midterm election, general voter turnout increased from 41.9% to 53.4%, the largest voter turnout since 1978.²⁵ Much of that can be attributed to the increase of young voters. According to the US Census Bureau Current Population Surveys, youth (18 to 24) voter turnout increased from 17% in the 2014 midterm elections to 32% in the 2018 midterm election, making it the largest increase for any age group — an 88% jump.²⁶ According to the research group Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), youth voter turnout increased in every state. The researchers argue that this has happened because of the recent youth activism post-Parkland shooting, protests and student-led calls to action which have continued the growing momentum that youth believe they can affect real political change. According to the Centre, "despite some popular cliches, youth are not apathetic about politics, but they have been frustrated by political messages and actions that do not include their voices, and skeptical about the political process' ability to deliver positive social change." They argue that disillusionment may have grown lately because of the recent wave of populist world leaders, however this has not led to disengagement. Rather, their youth survey found that "those who felt the most frustrated by politics were more likely to participate and vote."

European Parliament

Increased youth engagement is also happening in Europe. The post-electoral Eurobarometer survey noted that voter turnout for the 2019 European Parliament election was the highest, at almost 51%,²⁷ since 1994. 19 of the 28 member states saw an increase in voter turnout since 2014, and only three saw declines. Youth powered the voter turnout increase, where youth 25 and under saw an increase of 14 percentage points and youth aged 25 to 39 years old saw an increase of 12 percentage points. The survey also found that turnout in the 2019 election was "driven increasingly by citizens who would not always or traditionally vote, as the relative proportion of respondents stating that 'they always vote' fell by 6 points compared to 2014".²⁸



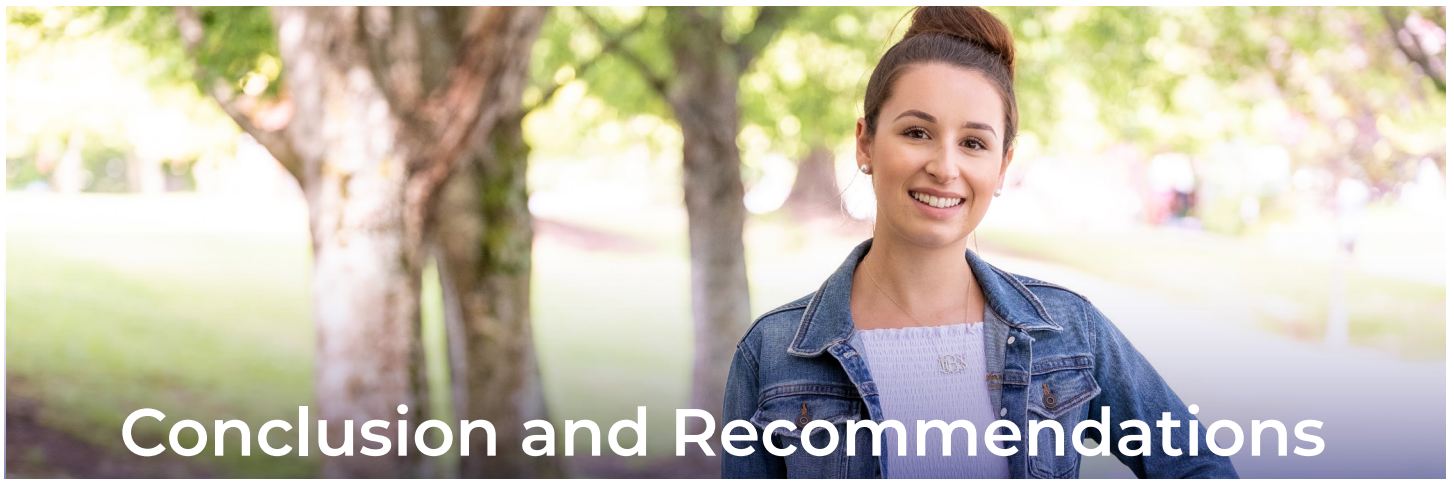
What Is Motivating Millennials and Generation Z?

Young Canadians are facing major challenges such as the cost of post-secondary education, the affordability crisis in the housing (including rental) market, the precarious nature of today's job market, and the global climate crisis. These major challenges are compounded by the youth being disproportionately hit by economic hardships caused by COVID-19.

Canadian researchers have rightly argued that young voters are more engaged in elections when candidates discuss on issues that interest them, with a focus on equality and human rights. These themes can be seen in the issues that young people identify as most important. According to a recent report published by the Environonics institute, those aged 18-40 ranked COVID-19, climate change, and racism/discrimination as pressing issues. The same study saw racism/discrimination replaced by unemployment as the top 3 problems if left unaddressed.²⁹

Educational attainment is an important factor in voter confidence and thus, voter participation. Elections Canada reports that university graduates and electors with some post-secondary experience report more satisfaction in how Elections Canada ran the 2019 election than those with no post-secondary experience.³⁰ Research also shows that students aged 18 to 24 are 9% more likely to vote than those of the same age who are not engaged in post-secondary training or studies.³¹ Young Canadians that have greater political knowledge are more likely to vote, but many young people find it more difficult than their older counterparts to access helpful information about political campaigns and candidates.³² Engaging with and motivating young voters can be as straightforward as providing clear and concise materials, and ensuring easy access to party platforms, to help them make an educated decision on voting day.

Voting is habit-forming: research shows that if you vote once, you are more likely to vote again.³³ Once young voters gain that experience, they're more likely to keep voting, and encourage others to go out to vote. The key to helping new generations of voters, including new immigrants, is to remove informational and geographical barriers for first-time voters and demographic groups that report being least likely to vote. Recent research from the US shows that young voters can be encouraged to participate through peer-to-peer outreach, social media, and by highlighting issues youth care deeply about, and by getting them involved from an educational standpoint.



Conclusion and Recommendations

Organisations across Canada engage in this work during provincial and federal elections to help remove barriers to youth participation and encourage voter turnout.³⁴

The increase in Millennial and Generation Z voter turnout is not a simple “flash in the pan”. There are real struggles facing these generations, including social/racial justice issues, climate change, human rights, and limited access to stable economic opportunities. As long as these struggles persist Canadian youth will be galvanized to seek solutions. And right now, as shown in this report, they are turning to the ballot box in record numbers.

If political parties are serious about engaging with young people, their party platforms must reflect issues that young people care about: the cost of education, the environment, good jobs, the economy and health care. Young people are not a homogenous group that only care about ‘niche’ issues.

Some of the common barriers faced by young voters is a lack of clear information on when and where to vote, identification requirements, and lack of accessible voting stations. Elections Canada can help alleviate these concerns by continuing its voter engagement campaigns, having polling stations on campuses, and providing information for people voting outside their home communities.

Negative tropes about youth apathy perpetuated by the media and by pundits are a form of voter suppression: telling a group of citizens who have clearly demonstrated their desires to participate in the electoral system with their participation in other political actions, that their vote will not matter because not enough of their peers vote is not only false, but harmful. It is evident that young people are engaged in their communities and are active at the ballot box. To further bolster youth voter turnout, the negative — and more importantly, false — messaging must end.

The Millennial and Generation Z generations are a rising power in electoral politics and in society. In the 2021 federal election, candidates, political parties, and the media must recognise and respect the potential influence that young Canadians will have on the outcome.

Endnotes

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