

LESSON 12

DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Canada, like many democracies around the world, has faced a clear erosion in democratic engagement over the last 30 years. This includes a decline in electoral participation as well as a general lack of knowledge, skills and habits associated with civic literacy.

More concerning is the fact that low voter turnout tends to be most often disproportionately concentrated among young people and the research paints a troubling picture. Firstly, each new generation is voting less than the first. In 1965, about two thirds of first-time electors voted in their first election and by 2004, that number had fallen to just over one-third. Secondly, studies have shown that habits of voting and non-voting persist over time, and one of the best predictors of individual turnout is whether a person voted in the previous election. Therefore, if young people do not vote during their first few years, they may never establish the habit.

Remarkably, the 2015 federal election saw the largest increase in youth voter participation on record. Electoral participation among 18-24 year olds increased by 18 percentage points to 57 per cent (up from 39 per cent in 2011). However, this trend is fragile and if we want to ensure a strong and inclusive democracy, the engagement of youth must be supported on an ongoing basis.

In 2011, Elections Canada commissioned the first *National Youth Survey* following the federal general election to better understand the reasons why youth may or may not participate in the electoral process. The most significant motivational barriers were a lack of political interest and knowledge, and a lower sense that voting was a civic duty. The greatest access barrier was a lack of knowledge about the electoral process, including not knowing about different ways to vote and not knowing how or when to vote. Youth who did vote were more likely to have discussed politics with their family while growing up.¹

Elections Canada conducted a follow up survey in conjunction with the 2015 federal election. The 2015 *National Youth Survey* found that youth who said they voted were much more likely than those who did not vote to say they learned about government and politics in high school, and more likely to have participated in a mock election (such as the Student Vote program).²

This research underscores the importance of civic education and election simulations, which increase political knowledge and interest, encourage political dialogue with family, and improve attitudes towards democratic participation and voting among young people. By giving youth an opportunity to practice voting in elementary or high school, they will be more likely to cast a ballot when they become eligible.

1 R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. National Youth Survey Report. September 20, 2011 www.elections.ca/res/rec/part/nysr/nysr-e.pdf

2 Nielsen Consumer Insights, 2015 National Youth Survey Report. May 6, 2016 – www.elections.ca/res/rec/eval/pes2015/nys/nys-e.pdf