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What it will take to rock the vote

Apr 16, 2011 by John Geddes

Photograph by Peter Bregg

Here's an unrepresentative moment from the campaign trail. Michael Ignatieff emerges from a hotel ballroom in London, Ont., where he has just whipped up an overflow crowd of supporters. As he wades through the packed lobby toward his waiting bus, shaking hands and gripping shoulders, a breathless young women in a bright red coat presses up and asks to pose for a photo with him. It's high school student Katie Miller, 18, who's leaning toward casting her first ballot ever for Ignatieff's Liberals, although she hasn't quite made up her mind. "I really enjoyed it, how personal it was," she says of the rally experience a moment later. "But I want to know what each party stands for."

Expressions of responsible enthusiasm like Miller's are almost enough to make discouraged old believers in democracy take heart. Unfortunately, they are fleeting. More durable are the hard statistics showing that her attitude is rare. Voter turnout has been falling for decades, and studies reveal that the decline is concentrated overwhelmingly among the youngest potential voters. A soon-to-be-published study by two Canadian academic researchers, André Blais and Daniel Rubenson, tracked the same long-term pattern across eight countries—from Canada and Britain, to Sweden and Spain. Differences among voting systems, party structures, and the flavours of national politics, it seems, don't count for much against the tide of youth disengagement. "Young people nowadays are less likely to view voting as a civic duty," says Rubenson of Ryerson University in Toronto. "They think you can choose to vote or choose not to vote, and a lot of them choose not to."

Turnout in Canadian federal elections has slid from the high of 79.4 per cent of registered voters who cast ballots in 1958, when John Diefenbaker's Conservatives won with a landslide majority, to the 58.8 per cent who voted in 2008, when Stephen Harper's Tories won their second consecutive minority. By far the biggest drop-off has come among those in the 18 to 24 age group. More than two-thirds of potential new voters turned out at the polls in the 1960s; by the 1980s, only about half of those eligible for the first time

were voting; in the 1990s, it was down to 40 per cent; and, by 2004, only a third of those who might have cast their first ballots bothered to do so.

Finding grim tidings for the future of Canadian political life in that descent is easy enough. But it's just possible, in sifting the data, to discover tentative grounds for cautious optimism. Consider the past three elections. The overall popular vote actually bounced up four per cent in 2006 over 2004, and the gain among the 18 to 24 age group was even better, nearly seven per cent. In other words, a somewhat more interesting election in 2006 boosted the number of young people voting by nearly double the increase among older voters.

But the 2008 election dampened overall interest again, largely because Stephane Dion's leadership failed to spark much enthusiasm among Liberal-leaning voters. Perhaps surprisingly, though, young voters were proportionately less easily put off by the lacklustre campaign than those who had voted in a few elections. In fact, an Elections Canada working paper shows that the biggest drop was among voters aged 45 to 54, down 10.3 percentage points in 2008 from 2006. Among those 18 to 24, the decline in 2008 was 6.4 points, still marked, but less pronounced for those novice voters than among their supposedly more democratically dutiful elders.

If the evidence from the past two elections isn't entirely discouraging, the 2011 campaign hasn't, so far, shown great potential for luring many more young adults out to vote. All of the main parties have aimed their platforms emphatically at middle-class parents, with fairly heavy emphasis on pensions. Policies of special interest to young voters don't get much attention. Even the Liberals' pledge of federal payments to help out with college and university costs is pitched more at parents than students. As for the general level of enthusiasm, Innovation Research Group's Canada 20/20 online panel for *Maclean's* and Rogers Media found only 16 per cent of Quebecers see this election as more interesting than most, a view shared by just 30 per cent in the rest of Canada.

Interest in elections isn't declining inexorably in every advanced democracy, however. The 61.6 per cent turnout in the U.S. presidental election of 2008, a return to the levels of the 1960s, was widely attributed to Barack Obama's unique appeal to younger and minority voters. But Michael McDonald, an expert on elections at George Mason University in Washington, says the undeniable "Obama effect" should be viewed in the context of a three-election, 21st-century rebound in voting: the low point for turnout in a U.S. presidential election came in 1996. "The frame has definitely shifted," McDonald says. Instead of viewing turnout decline as inevitable, he adds, U.S. researchers are increasingly studying factors like voter mobilization drives that halted and apparently reversed the downward cycle.

There's nothing like a close battle, interesting candidates, and well-defined issues to boost the voting rate. In Canadian politics, the most dramatic recent example came last fall in Calgary's mayoral election. It was a hard-fought, three-way race. The winner, Naheed Nenshi, at 38, represented youth, and, as a Muslim, his city's growing diversity. The former business school professor drew international attention for his sophisticated use of social media, reaching younger voters, in particular, through Facebook and Twitter. The result of his image and campaign style, plus the highly competitive race, was a 53.3 per cent turnout, up massively by more than 20 percentage points from 2007. A whole new generation of Calgarians suddenly got excited about municipal politics.

Lineups at the polls like those Calgary experienced show that many voters can be drawn out if the political personalities are compelling enough. Rubenson says past generations accepted voting as a moral duty, a responsibility that couldn't be shirked no matter how dull the candidates or distant the issues. But for four decades, new generations of voters have come to view voting as a choice, an option to be exercised only if the parties and platforms seem to matter. "There's moral panic around [the change] to some extent," he says. "In a sense, it's kind of arbitrary." Asked what his own classes of undergrads at

Ryerson think of the current federal campaign, though, Rubenson can't offer much in the way of inspiration. "I have to say they are not very interested," he admits. "And I teach political science."

The Canada 20/20 Panel results are drawn from 2,059 randomly selected responses to Innovative Research Group's nationwide online survey. Responses were from April 8-11; the Canadian margin of error is plus or minus 2.16 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, larger for provincial sub-groupings

On the Web: For more on the poll results see www.macleans.ca/poll or visit www.innovativeresearch.ca

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