

CANADA'S  
PUBLIC POLICY

**FORUM**

DES POLITIQUES PUBLIQUES  
DU CANADA

# Strengthening Civic Collaboration:

*New strategies for engaging young voters*

---

Roundtable summary report  
September 2013



CANADA'S  
PUBLIC POLICY

# FORUM

DES POLITIQUES PUBLIQUES  
DU CANADA

The Public Policy Forum is an independent, not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of government in Canada through enhanced dialogue among the public, private and voluntary sectors. The Forum's members, drawn from business, federal, provincial and territorial governments, the voluntary sector and organized labour, share a belief that an efficient and effective public service is important in ensuring Canada's competitiveness abroad and quality of life at home.

Established in 1987, the Forum has earned a reputation as a trusted, nonpartisan facilitator, capable of bringing together a wide range of stakeholders in productive dialogue. Its research program provides a neutral base to inform collective decision making. By promoting information sharing and greater links between governments and other sectors, the Forum helps ensure public policy in our country is dynamic, coordinated and responsive to future challenges and opportunities.

© 2013, Public Policy Forum  
1405-130 Albert St.  
Ottawa, ON K1P 5G4  
Tel: (613) 238-7160  
Fax: (613) 238-7990  
[www.ppforum.ca](http://www.ppforum.ca)

ISBN: 978-1-927009-47-5

**For more information on this project, please contact:**

**James McLean**  
Project Lead  
416-333-4930  
[james.mclean@ppforum.ca](mailto:james.mclean@ppforum.ca)

**Table of Contents**

Overview ..... 1

Low voter turnout poses a significant challenge to our democracy..... 2

Stakeholders need to focus on engaging young Canadians, as well as institutional reform..... 3

Improving youth voter engagement will require collaboration among all Canadians ..... 4

Next steps: action is needed ..... 7

Appendix 1: Agenda.....8

Appendix 2: List of participants.....9

**With thanks to our sponsor:**



**our lead project partner:**



**our project supporter:**



**and our roundtable host:**



## Overview

Over the past year, the Public Policy Forum has been working with elections management bodies throughout Canada to identify specific strategies for improving youth voter turnout in our country. At a time of ongoing and complex generational and economic challenges, youth civic engagement is an issue of paramount importance to our democracy and to the continued good-governance of Canada.

In June 2012, the Forum, in partnership with Elections Canada, convened the [\*Building Youth Civic Engagement through Collaboration\*](#) dialogue with 30 private, public, student, news media and civil society leaders to discuss whether and how collaboration can enhance youth civic engagement. Participants of this roundtable agreed that a more coordinated, multi-sectoral approach is needed to better engage youth in public issues, and that specific strategies are required to support civic education and engagement programs.

On March 4, 2013, the Forum convened the [\*Territorial Dialogue on Youth Civic Engagement\*](#) roundtable discussion in Yellowknife with youth leaders, territorial policy advisers, academics, and senior managers from Elections Northwest Territories. The dialogue focused on exploring the challenges relating to youth civic engagement in the Northwest Territories (NWT), particularly the decline in youth voter turnout. This discussion identified a number of key issues that stakeholders should consider, including:

- There is a need to emphasize collaborative action in increasing youth voter participation, involving leaders from all sectors;
- It is important to represent culture, language and traditions in the discussion and in policies created to address civic engagement issues;
- The school curriculum should be reformed with a focus on improving education around civic issues;
- Private industry has a role to play, especially in northern communities, and should be included in the discussion;
- Engagement should be embraced beyond elections, as something that represents a core element of civil society; and
- Parents and mentors must play a role in helping to foster engaged citizens

Building on these findings, on March 19, 2013 Canada's Public Policy Forum and the Forum for Young Canadians convened approximately 120 young and established leaders at Export Development Canada's headquarters in Ottawa to explore how we can increase youth voter participation in our country. The discussion was moderated by David Mitchell, President and CEO of the Public Policy Forum and included opening contextual remarks by Justine Hendricks, Vice President of EDC, Marc Mayrand, Canada's Chief Electoral Officer and Bruce Anderson, Pollster and Communications Advisor at Anderson Insight. During a lively discussion, participants offered the following observations:

### **Low voter turnout poses a significant challenge to our democracy.**

For over two decades, Canada has experienced a precipitous and steady decline in electoral participation among eligible voters. Despite the availability of technologies that make it easier to access information and cast ballots, only 61% of Canadians participated in the 2011 federal election, and less than 50% cast a ballot in the 2011 Ontario election, representing an all-time low for that province.<sup>1</sup>

Among youth voters, the statistics are even more concerning: only 38.8% of eligible young voters cast a ballot in the 2011 Ontario election, a figure that was up slightly from the 37.4% rate in the 2008 election, but still much lower when compared to other age groups. This trend is even more alarming when one considers that citizens who do not cast a ballot in the immediate years after they turn 18 are far less likely to participate in elections later in life.

It is important to note that youth were not always so reluctant to participate in civic society. According to one roundtable participant, a controversial business merger between two prominent Canadian oil companies in the 1980s generated such strong negative reactions from all age groups, especially among youth, that the deal was eventually abandoned. Today, as our country struggles to address numerous policy challenges – from government cut backs to slow economic growth and climate change – young Canadians are far less likely to elicit the same type of passionate response that could help protect the country's interests.

With Canada facing significant economic and generational changes, low voter turnout poses a considerable challenge to our democracy. In 2010, the Library of Parliament released a report that suggested that voting rates will continue to decline as active voters from the older

---

<sup>1</sup> CBC News. (2011). "Ontario election turnout hits record low." Accessed online at: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ontariovotes2011/story/2011/10/07/ontario-election-voter-turnout.html>

generations are replaced by a younger cohort who is disproportionately less likely to be interested in political issues or inclined to participate in general elections.<sup>2</sup>

## **Stakeholders need to focus on engaging young Canadians, as well as institutional reform.**

Although much of the focus on youth voter engagement has been on improving our democratic institutions, more work is needed to help inspire young Canadians to learn about civic issues and to participate in elections. Over the past decade, there has been a tendency to put too much focus on how we can adapt our institutions to the needs of youth, and not enough on how we can better communicate the importance of taking part in elections and other civic responsibilities. With many studies evaluating how best to improve our institutions, there is greater need to understand how we might inspire the youth demographic to engage with our institutions.

One participant suggested that what is most needed is a cultural shift that helps young Canadians see voting as an important rite of passage, much like acquiring a driver's license or joining the age of majority. In fact, conceptualizing the right to vote as an important milestone/privilege may create an intrinsic value among youth who would see the act of voting as a symbolic gesture for entering adulthood. And, as is noted above, youth who vote in their first few elections are more inclined to continue voting later on in life.

A cultural change may also be needed around how we view politicians. Far too often citizens only see their elected officials portrayed in attack ads or engaging in rancorous debate during Question Period. To address this issue, stakeholders need to do a better job of communicating positive political stories that could help the public fully appreciate the goodwill and sacrifice politicians often make when they decide to run for public office.

***“If you don't know the issues or how to participate in civic institutions, how can you get involved?”***

**-Roundtable participant**

---

<sup>2</sup> Barnes, Andre. (2010). “Youth voter turnout in Canada: 1. Trends and Issues” *Library of Parliament Research Publications*. Accessed online at: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/LOP/ResearchPublications/2010-19-e.htm#a6>

## Improving youth voter engagement will require collaboration among all Canadians.

According to roundtable participants, enhancing youth voter participation is possible, but will require that stakeholders work together to identify and implement sustainable solutions. Participants suggested that young Canadians could be more encouraged to participate in elections if there were more innovative opportunities to learn about the electoral process. There are a number of steps that could be taken by youth, teachers, parents, politicians and public servants to facilitate education around the electoral process and to increase engagement, including:

- **A greater emphasis on civics within school curriculums:** Since education is primarily a provincial/territorial responsibility, there is little consistency across Canada in how students learn about our country's democratic processes and institutions. Many participants agreed that students would benefit greatly from classes that teach the history and context of current political issues – especially those that directly affect young Canadians. To do this effectively, teachers may wish to facilitate mock parliaments and elections; create co-op courses that allow students to enrol in legislative internships; run workshops that allow students to explore current affairs, and; invite parliamentarians to visit schools to speak to, and engage with students.

In addition, some participants noted that schools may need to do a better job of educating students about the privilege of living in a democracy. As one participant noted, “even if the choices aren't ideal, voting is a right and a responsibility that should be appreciated by all Canadians.” Students should be given the opportunity to not only learn about parties and issues, but also how to register as voters.

*“Parents and teachers need to help students see voting as important in their everyday life. To do this, students should be given the opportunity to vote on key issues – through mock elections and other activities – in order to develop a habit of civic participation. Parents and teachers should develop ways that make voting easy, accessible, and above all else, ‘normal’ for youth.”*

- Roundtable participant



- **Encouraging parental support:** Regular voting habits begin at home with parents setting a positive example. There is often a sense of entitlement with voting rights and, as a result, parents may need to help youth conceptualise voting as a responsibility of citizenship. Parents and teachers are also valuable role models for teaching young Canadians how to think critically. Critical thinking is vital to our democracy because it encourages citizens to question policies and to engage in issues of public importance.
- **Increased peer-to-peer education:** Election campaigns may get more attention from young Canadians if they were to be promoted by younger individuals. In fact, having younger and thus more relatable representatives educate young voters on the importance of voting might have a positive effect on youth voter turnout.
- **Youth engagement through social media:** While civic engagement begins with education, social media provides additional opportunities to engage with young Canadians and promote civic participation. Developing a social presence on networking websites (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) could help make politics more accessible and fun to young voters. Recent web-based campaigns, such as KONY 2012 and Stop a Bully, have greatly benefitted from social media to mobilize action and raise awareness. In addition, strategic outreach programs that involve promotional items, such as wristbands and t-shirts, could help increase the visibility of youth voting campaigns. In addition, more traditional mediums, such as television ads and posters, could better target younger audiences.

***“Communication and education are important for informing youth about politics, how it works, and why it is important to them. Politicians need to keep in mind that these young people will vote one day, so they should connect with them.”***

-Roundtable participant

**Better coordination among First Nation groups and the hard-to-reach:** Participants agreed that reaching-the-hard to reach will require that community leaders instill in their youth a sense of civic responsibility. To accomplish this, participants suggested that there is a need to foster creative solutions that allow youth to see that their voice is heard in their communities, their schools, and in their legislatures. One participant suggested that even “hard-to-reach” communities can develop a culture of civic participation through grass roots initiatives around education and engagement. Greater use of technology could also make it easier for these groups to learn about and interact in the broader public discourse.

- **Electoral reform to increase voting accessibility:** A lack of accessibility is often identified as a major voting barrier among Canadian youth. In the digital age, mail-in options for voter registration have become dated and impractical. The implementation of online/mobile voting could thus reduce voting barriers and help boost voter turnout among tech-savvy young Canadians. There are, however, significant fraud concerns associated with e-voting and this method could further distance young voters from politics. While electronic voting provides a significant opportunity to promote civic participation, there is little evidence of public support for such an option. In fact, when surveyed, only half of participants in one breakout group were in favour of electronic voting and lowering the voting age.
- **Greater use of youth parliaments:** Considering that in-school simulations (e.g., student governments, mock elections) are not perfect reflections of political life, other opportunities such as youth parliaments may provide a more realistic experience to participants. Youth parliaments would help young Canadians understand the political process, how budgets are developed, and the rights of citizenship. Similar initiatives are already in place and successful. For example, municipal junior councils allow youth to get involved in local government by providing youth aged 16-19 to work directly with city council.
- **Connecting politicians with Canadian youth:** Low youth voter turnout may be the result of a lack of attention from political parties, rather than a lack of motivation among youth. By increasing their presence in the classrooms, representatives from political parties could have a positive impact on electoral campaigns; giving students something to *vote for* rather than *vote against*.

*“If politicians come to our schools to engage with students, we would be more inclined to contact government officials or go to [civic] discussions like those held by the Forum for Young Canadians...”*

- Roundtable participant

- **Focus on issues that interest youth:** When young Canadians see the direct consequences of legislation or feel that issues directly affect them, they become more interested in politics. Once a month, provincial and federal governments could hold a question period focused on youth.

## **Next steps: action is needed.**

There was widespread agreement that further multi-sector dialogue is needed to identify how best to implement some of the strategies listed above. Some participants suggested that a more focused discussion, particularly one that focuses on a specific strategy or issue area, could be useful in helping to move from dialogue to action. Above all else, participants agreed that greater coordination and collaboration amongst youth leaders and representatives in the private, public, non-profit, academic and news media communities could help to improve voter turnout and civic engagement among young Canadians.

## Appendix 1: Agenda

# Strengthening Civic Collaboration

## New strategies for engaging young voters

March 19, 2013  
3:00 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.  
Export Development Canada, 18<sup>th</sup> floor  
150 Slater Street

### Agenda

---

- 3:00 p.m. Welcoming remarks**  
David Mitchell, President & CEO, Canada’s Public Policy Forum  
Justine Hendricks, Vice President, Export Development Canada; Chair of the Board, Forum for Young Canadians
- 3:05 p.m. Opening remarks**  
Marc Mayrand, Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada
- 3:25 p.m. Breakout roundtable discussions**  
*Participants will be assigned to one of four roundtable discussions that will focus on one specific issue area, including:*
- institutional engagement;
  - reaching the hard-to-reach;
  - First Nations, Métis & Inuit participation, and;
  - voter registration.
- 4:50 p.m. Plenary discussion & group presentations**  
Facilitated by David Mitchell
- 5:15 p.m. Keynote address**  
Bruce Anderson, Pollster & Communications Advisor, Anderson Insight
- 5:30 p.m. Concluding remarks**  
David Mitchell

## Appendix 2: List of participants, divided by breakout group

# Strengthening Civic Collaboration

## New strategies for engaging young voters

### Breakout roundtable discussions

#### Roundtable 1: Institutional Engagement (*Board Room*)

*Exploring how our public institutions could potentially grow and adapt to the changing realities of civic engagement.*

- What motivates youth to vote?
- How can our public institutions better use tools (e.g. social media) to connect with the public?
- Is it possible, or desirable, for our public institutions to collaborate with businesses, schools and other organizations to engage young voters? What might these partnerships look like?
- What actions can young voters take to better connect with our public institutions and elected officials?

#### List of participants

##### Facilitator:

Cathleen Cogan Bird      Executive Director, Forum for Young Canadians

##### Researcher:

Samantha Manto      Intern (Research), Public Policy Forum

##### Senior Leaders:

Debbie Cook      Director, Public Engagement, Privy Council Office  
Ilona Dougherty      Executive Director, Apathy is Boring  
Fiona O'Connor      Project Manager of Democracy Talks Program, Samara

##### Young Leaders:

Noah Ahmadi	Cora Hansen	Kirstyn Nygren
Alex Berthelot	Shannon Hawthorne	Tolulope Omoyefa
Olivia Boersma	Ali Jamal	Shannon Payne
Norah Chaput	Kendra Klick-McMahon	Neil Peddle
Kelvin Chukwu	Jack LeGresley	Kerry Poon
Farah Davie	Bianca Annie Marcelin	Nicolas Roy
Ahmed Dharamsi	Patricia Masur	Kaitlyn Stadnyk
Daniel Escott	Jacob Mitton	Aidan Swirsky
Reid Gomme	Nika Moeini	Jeff (Zefang) Wu

## **Roundtable 2: Reaching the Hard-to-Reach (Room #1831)**

*Discussing how we could enhance engagement among individuals with minimal attachment to our democratic institutions, and who may also face cultural, socio-economic or other institutional barriers to participation.*

- What motivates youth to vote?
- What groups (e.g. cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, etc.) are the hardest to reach in Canada? Which programs have been successful in engaging these groups?
- Among those who are the hardest to reach, where can action have the most impact?
- Is it possible, or desirable, for our public institutions to collaborate with businesses, schools and other organizations to engage hard-to-reach voters? What might these partnerships look like?

### **List of participants**

#### **Facilitator:**

Ryan Conway                      Project Lead, Public Policy Forum

#### **Researcher:**

Jonathan Perron-Clow          Manager of Programs and Outreach, Forum for Young Canadians

#### **Senior Leaders:**

Justine Hendricks                Vice President, Export Development Canada

André Plourde                    Dean, Carleton University

Chris Smillie                     Senior Advisor, Building & Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO

#### **Young Leaders:**

Laura Anderson

Yuqi (Sofia) Lin

Nicolas Beaudoin-Lahaie

Patrick Martel

Antoine Bernier

Lucas Morehouse

Elizabeth Burton

Zachary Northcott

Vivian Chow

Julia Olsen

Kerris De Champlain

Cathy Hui Xin Pan

Jason Essery

Kassidy Pedersen Kempf

Harnoor Gill

Tamsyn Riddle

Ha Bin Gu

Roya Shams

Dina Hansen

Robert Sheardown

Cole Janke

Morgan Swan

Jonah Kurylowich

Zachary Tarrant

Raphaël Langlois-Oligny

Sharon Xie

Jinnan Li

### **Roundtable 3: First Nations, Métis & Inuit participation (Canada Room)**

*Exploring the key issues that affect civic engagement among Indigenous Canadians.*

- What motivates youth to vote?
- Which are the main barriers that limit Indigenous youth from participating in elections? What action or policy response could have the greatest impact?
- Is it possible, or desirable, for our public institutions to collaborate with businesses, schools and other organizations to engage First Nations, Métis & Inuit participation voters? What might these partnerships look like?
- Which programs have been successful in engaging Indigenous youth in the voting process? Can this be adapted to other jurisdictions?

#### **List of participants**

##### **Facilitator:**

Jill Baker Vice President, Public Policy Forum

##### **Researcher:**

Natasha Gauthier Director of Communications, Public Policy Forum

##### **Senior Leaders:**

Kluane Adamek First Nation Liaison Officer and Advisor, Office of the National Chief, Assembly of First Nations  
Terry Goodtrack President & CEO, Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Canada  
Marc Mayrand Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, Elections Canada

##### **Young Leaders:**

Shavannah Anderson	Kelsey Longclaws
Dayle Blackbird	Alannis McKee
Monique Chapman	Emilie Medland-Marchen
Arctica Cunningham	Taron Okemow
April Hall	Rachèle Paquet
David Hickey	Thomas Soulard
Sheena Kilabuk	Robert Wisla
Hayley Krasowski	

