



TERRITORIAL DIALOGUE ON YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Final Report
September, 2013

CANADA'S
PUBLIC POLICY

FORUM

DES POLITIQUES PUBLIQUES
DU CANADA

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

Foreword

Canada is experiencing a significant generational change. In fact, we recently passed the tipping point, where more people are reaching their retirement age (late fifties), than are reaching their early working age (late teens-early twenties). This will continue and grow even more pronounced in the years ahead. Simply stated, the larger generation of baby boomers is retiring, and the incoming generation of young Canadians due to replace them, will be much smaller.

This generational shift will have a profound impact on the governance and operation of our country – a new generation of leaders will need to step to the fore as the previous generation departs. This raises important questions about how emerging leaders will lead.

When asking such questions, we must look at young Canadians today, and their level of political and civic engagement. Research tells us that this presents a serious challenge. By conventional measures, such as voter turnout, youth are far less engaged than previous generations. Their relationship with traditional democratic institutions varies, or is sometimes non-existent. As this new generation will soon be called upon to lead these institutions, this is a pressing policy concern.

Youth civic engagement is an issue of paramount importance to Canadian democracy and to the continued good-governance of our country. Canada's Public Policy Forum has been exploring this issue through multi-stakeholder intergenerational dialogues, and we have found that there is both a broad-based recognition of the seriousness of the challenge, and a widespread sense of urgency about addressing it. Leaders from across sectors recognize that a new, more open, more authentic dialogue is required in order to build the trust and understanding necessary to effectively bridge meaningful civic engagement across generations.

The Forum has been pleased to work with electoral management bodies throughout Canada on this important topic. It was our pleasure to partner with Elections Northwest Territories in the spring of 2013 to explore youth civic engagement from a territorial perspective, and to gain the insight of youth and policy leaders in the North.

This report summarizes the body of work undertaken in partnership between the Forum and Elections Northwest Territories, including the recommendations of youth and key policy leaders regarding potential means of addressing youth civic engagement challenges. We look forward to continuing this important dialogue, and to making a tangible contribution in this vital policy area.



David Mitchell
President and CEO
Public Policy Forum

Introduction

On March 14, 2013, Canada’s Public Policy Forum (the Forum) and Elections Northwest Territories (Elections NWT) co-convened the *Territorial Dialogue on Youth Civic Engagement*, a day-long roundtable session in Yellowknife (see appendix A for session agenda). The dialogue featured the participation of a select group of youth leaders from the territory, policy advisers from the Government of the Northwest Territories, educational leaders, and senior managers from Elections Northwest Territories (see Appendix B for list of participants). The roundtable discussion was co-chaired by David Brock, Chief Electoral Officer of the Northwest Territories and David Mitchell, President and CEO of the Public Policy Forum.

This dialogue focused on the challenges related to youth civic engagement in the Northwest Territories (NWT). Under this broader subject, three specific areas for discussion included:

- how established democratic institutions should grow and adapt to the changing realities of civic engagement;

- how to create enhanced engagement for those who are hard to reach or have minimal attachment to existing democratic institutions; and,
- key mechanisms and leadership actions necessary to improve voter registration for young electors

Recognizing the value of extending this dialogue to policy leaders across sectors who were not able to attend the Yellowknife session, the Forum and Elections NWT augmented this roundtable discussion by engaging a select group of senior leaders through one-on-one interviews, in order to gain their insights on potential policy actions in the areas outlined during the roundtable report (see Appendix C for interview rubric). The supplementary information gained during these interviews has been included in this report.



Opening Comments

David Mitchell and David Brock provided opening comments for the dialogue, emphasising the importance of youth civic engagement issues, and how they relate directly to the policy leadership that is necessary in government today, and which will become of even greater importance in the future.

Mr. Mitchell provided an overview of the Forum's work to date in this area, including a brief précis of a similar session held in Ottawa in 2012. At this time, leaders from across sectors gathered to examine

civic engagement issues, and to explore means of addressing them. There is no doubt, based upon substantial expert research that, as measured by voter turnout, youth civic engagement is declining. The overall turnout in federal and provincial elections has been steadily falling for over two decades.¹

Youth today are far less likely to vote than in previous generations, and perhaps more troubling, are less likely to begin voting later in their lives. We are rapidly approaching the point where less than half of eligible electors vote in elections.

In providing the opening remarks on behalf of Elections NWT, David Brock highlighted the unique considerations of this issue in the territory (see appendix D). Electoral turnout varies greatly across different ridings, and there is a lack of adequate information to assess territorial voter turnout rates by age. Voter registration is a persistent challenge, especially given issues related to elector mobility. This issue must be addressed with a dedicated sense of purpose due to the accelerated pace of generational change in the NWT. The task put to the roundtable participants was to explore these issues, and to consider how they can be most effectively addressed. A particular emphasis was placed on the three key focus areas (institutional engagement, reaching the hard-to-reach and voter registration).



¹ Youth Electoral Engagement in Canada, André Blais and Peter Loewen, Elections Canada working paper series, 2011

Roundtable Discussion

Following opening comments, participants engaged in a roundtable discussion focussing on understanding youth civic engagement challenges in the NWT. Participants began by providing their first thoughts on the issue. Key reflections included:

- Need to emphasize collaborative action, involving leaders from all sectors
- Desire to view this as a continuous process, not a one-off exercise (i.e. civic engagement will continuously evolve)
- Importance of representing culture, language and traditions in the discussion and in policies created to address civic engagement issues
- Vital need for the education system to reform in order to address these challenges
- Role that private sector plays in northern society, and to include that perspective in the discussion
- Recognition that the NWT is a place where action can readily be taken – so there is an opportunity to experiment and try creative solutions
- Engagement as an ongoing effort, not just something related to elections but an important element of civil society
- Key role of parents and mentors in helping create engaged citizens
- Need for urgent action, and how the public awareness of this issue is growing to assist in this

An open discussion informed later breakout discussions in the afternoon. Input during the session focused on the opportunities and challenges that are unique to these issues in the NWT. It was noted that in the NWT, there are many potential mechanisms to increase civic engagement, but they are not yet being utilized to their full potential. For example, youth parliaments, and model United Nations do exist for students to take advantage of, but some participants opined that the emphasis tends to be on the higher levels of government (e.g. federal, international) rather than the local or regional levels which have the most direct impact on citizens. Participants suggested that educational focus on local and territorial governments would be prudent.

There was also discussion of the mechanism of voting, and the need for responsiveness from institutions.

In an age where youth are accustomed to instant response through electronic media, institutions cannot remain wedded to means of operation that exclude such avenues of communication. Some participants suggested that electronic voting is almost inevitable; however, there would need to be substantial preparation made before it could be employed in the NWT. This includes institutional adaptation, as well as connectivity throughout the territory. Some participants also suggested that, while electronic voting may be part of our future, it should not be seen as a means to address underlying engagement challenges.

Political considerations also require attention from an institutional perspective. There was some specific discussion regarding the role of parties, particularly in the context of the territorial government. The absence of political parties at the territorial level may actually be helpful in alleviating partisan tensions that can disengage voters, (e.g. party discipline and other activities which some voters may dislike). It is important to recognize that Elections NWT is limited in its mandate as far as encouraging direct political engagement (as opposed to the act of voting).

The prevailing theme of the morning discussion was education. If youth are disengaging from civic participation, then educational efforts must target youth directly. The best means of doing so, participants argued, is in the classroom (a captive audience). Encouraging MLAs to take part in education programs for youth, dedicated voting workshops, and curricula that emphasise the value and importance of taking part in democratic processes, were all suggested approaches. At the post-secondary level, the proliferation of political science courses, and the integration of some elements of these topics into other programs (such as business administration) were also suggested. During the interview phase of the project, participants pointed to the important opportunity presented by current educational policy renewal taking place in the Northwest Territories. This renewal presents a chance to better integrate Northern perspectives and issues into the school system.

Further efforts to increase contact between youth and elected officials were suggested as a possible means to heighten awareness of the importance of voting and civic engagement. The aforementioned presence of MLAs in schools could be complemented by town-hall constituency meetings focused specifically on youth and their issues.

Reaching hard-to-reach youth in the NWT was discussed, though there are several challenges in

Key Issue Areas

relation to this issue. First, 'youth' is difficult to define. Some youth are also marginalized by the perception that they need to be highly knowledgeable and experienced in order to engage in the system. Online and other methods to conduct outreach were deemed important. However, further consideration of the term 'hard-to-reach' is also required, as is better understanding of whose responsibility it is to conduct such work.

Preliminary discussions of voter registration issues yielded important insights, principally that the high mobility of youth in the NWT is seen as a barrier to registration, and that the thought of registration usually does not occur to people until the time of an election. Finding means to account for mobility, and facilitating registration outside of the election cycle, are areas which Elections NWT is moving to address. Again, the importance of integrating registration into the education system was underlined.

Participants in the discussion were also asked their thoughts on two further proposals that have been enacted in other countries as means to address voter engagement: lowering the voting age and mandatory voting. On the issue of a lowered voting age (e.g. 16) participants were strongly in favour. However, all participants opposed mandatory voting.

In order to allow for in-depth examination during the roundtable, as well as the supplementary interviews, three key issue areas were selected for deeper discussion.

Voter Outreach

Discussions on reaching the hard-to-reach included numerous points of outreach and education, as they related to potential means to increase engagement. Several key points of context include:

- There is a great deal of community connectivity in the NWT, so there is less risk of disengagement because of lack of contact or social integration.
- Yellowknife, despite being the most densely populated centre, reportedly has the lowest turnout. The hard-to-reach may actually be the geographically closest to the government.
- The focus should not be about reaching people to further the act of voting, but rather the desire/motivation to vote. To accomplish this, creative solutions are needed which allow youth to see that their voice is heard.
- There is less likelihood of youth becoming hard-to-reach if we catch them early, in the education system.
- The term 'hard-to-reach' may not be a helpful connotation in the NWT.
- Youth may have negative opinions of current political systems, and this should be taken into consideration when examining means to encourage their engagement.

Areas for potential action, based upon input during the roundtable session and interviews, include:

- The overall importance of personal interaction was reinforced throughout the discussion. This includes a need for a 'boots-on-the-ground' approach to reaching people, for the purposes of both voter registration and ongoing engagement between individuals and political/public service leaders. Local community groups, NGOs and First Nations Councils have strong potential to contribute to these engagement efforts (e.g.



through providing volunteers to help conduct outreach) but it must be recognized that such groups are already pressed by many mandates and limited resources. To best leverage their connectivity, resources and training must be provided.

- Fostering authentic, face-to-face dialogue between youth, members of the legislature and public servants is important as a means to demonstrate to youth that their input is heard by decision-makers. It is important for this engagement to be carried out throughout the electoral cycle, and not merely during elections.
- Step-by-step voting guides should be better distributed for each specific language group in simple, easy to understand language. These guides have been developed by Elections NWT, but their use was not optimal during the last election. Renewed efforts to share and widely distribute these guides are required, with an emphasis on in-person distribution. This would require action on the part of Elections NWT.
- Supporting role-modeling by MLAs, community leaders, public servants and local councils was noted as a means to demonstrate positive civic engagement avenues for youth. Some existing models within the Government of the NWT (e.g. apprenticeship programs) could be adapted to include these elements. Undertaking greater efforts to encourage these activities would likely require development of specific programs/ modes of support. Opportunities may also exist in exploring and modeling voter engagement efforts on the basis of certain organizations within the Government of the NWT which currently undertake youth outreach (e.g. Skills NWT and Sport North). NGOs and community organizations such as DreamCatcher, Side Door Youth Centre and Alternatives North were also mentioned as points of expertise in potential mentoring efforts.
- There is value in training youth in voting, including internships with returning officers and recruiting youth to serve in such positions. This would create a network of alumni from these programs who could then encourage further engagement through their peer groups. It was specifically suggested that the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer would be an excellent location for potential role modeling, as well. (The Chief Electoral Officer of the Northwest Territories is a young, engaged

leader with whom youth can strongly relate and potentially emulate.) This would require action on the part of Elections NWT.

Institutional Engagement

Discussions focussing on institutional engagement included many considerations for encouraging and directly facilitating youth civic engagement through adaptations to existing institutional practises and policies. These include:

- Focusing attention on, and continuing the development of, student vote initiatives and programs in the NWT. This will help create greater awareness of the plausibility of lowering the voting age. Youth should also be engaged in a plebiscite on lowering the voting age.
- A youth council or dedicated youth attaché should be a part of the constituency representation for each MLA. This would help foster dialogue between elected officials and youth outside of election periods (which is the only time young people currently feel MLAs pay any attention to them). Existing institutions, such as student councils, are under-utilized. To demonstrate the value of civic engagement to students, giving these organizations tangible areas of input into policies that effect students (e.g. the timing of class schedules) may be worth considering.
- Curriculum reforms should be undertaken. More local-based programs, such as the Northern Studies program, should be available. Further availability of political science courses is also needed. Included within these curriculums should be easy-to-understand demonstrations of how to register and vote. Ongoing curriculum renewal currently underway in the Northwest Territories is an opportunity to better integrate these important perspectives.
- Youth forums and symposiums with a political or democratic focus area should be encouraged and supported. This could be added to existing forums on other topics (e.g. at Aurora College). Organizations such as Skills NWT frequently put on job fairs and other symposia where youth can be reached, and existing community environmental/culture camps could also be effective avenues.

- Youth should be given a direct voice in the largest policy issues. The ongoing process of finalizing devolution is a prime opportunity for the development of a youth-oriented input mechanism. It was suggested during the project that youth (and some older citizens) may perceive a disconnection between voting and genuine engagement. While often called upon to vote as a way to make their voice heard, there are few properly-established mechanisms for youth engagement in major policy issues between elections. This includes major issue areas such as large-scale resource development, social policy and education. To truly engender a spirit of civic engagement, the engagement must be continuous. Efforts to renew or reform public engagement processes to include youth are needed.
- Certain private companies may have access to usable information that may help facilitate registration (e.g. banks, power companies, phone companies, recreational institutions, fishing/hunting licenses, airlines). There are privacy issues here, but further exploration is warranted.
- Educational workshops on voter registration have value and should be included in suggested educational reforms.
- Increased awareness of electoral district boundaries is necessary, particularly with pending boundary changes. Potential shifts away from geographic-based representation were also mentioned (though this is a larger consideration).
- The creation of a provisional voters list for youth age 16 and over was supported by participants.

Voter Registration

On the topic of voter registration, ideas were proposed relating to the collection of registration data, as well as opportunities to encourage voter registration through existing channels:

- Overall, a human element is needed to conduct outreach and share the information necessary to conduct voter registration, particularly in small communities. Existing community groups may be channels through which face-to-face contacts could be made, but such groups will need resources to support this work.
- Recreational events and gatherings should be seen as opportunities to register new electors, and registration communications should focus on visual projects.
- Piggybacking registration in the territorial list of electors on other data gathering exercises (e.g. tax filings) was also recommended, as was the permanent placement of registration drop-boxes in communities with lower broadband connectivity.
- The forthcoming work on an online-searchable database of electoral information, to allow citizens to view and verify their registration, was viewed positively.
- Creation of a legislative office for youth advocacy is worthy of exploration.



Conclusion

The Territorial Dialogue on Youth Civic Engagement, undertaken through the March 14th roundtable and the supplementary interviews, provided interesting and insightful perspectives on a host of civic engagement issues. A selection of these points has been distilled into a series of recommendations for leaders in the public and community sectors throughout the Northwest Territories.

Summary of Key Recommendations

The following recommendations are based upon the input of participants during the roundtable as well as interviews conducted by the Public Policy Forum:

Attention of:	Recommendation:
Voter Outreach	
GNWT, Elections NWT, Community Groups	Improved in-person interaction: engage local community groups to lead, and provide them with the necessary resources to carry it out effectively
GNWT, Legislature	Ongoing in-person engagement with elected officials and public servants
GNWT, Legislature, Community Groups	Role-modelling by elected officials and public servants, with the support and expertise of NGOs and community groups
Elections NWT	Expanding the reach of the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer through more youth internships, and opportunities for youth to directly engage with the Chief Electoral Officer
Institutional Engagement	
GNWT, Legislature	Begin discussions, fully engaging youth at the outset, about lowering the voting age
GNWT	Better use of youth civic engagement institutions (e.g. student councils) to make decisions which impact students
GNWT	Curriculum reform to include more Northern perspectives and enhanced civics components, along with enhanced awareness of voter registration procedures and electoral boundaries
GNWT	Direct engagement with youth on issues of civic importance during existing forums and symposiums
GNWT, Legislature	Giving youth, and all citizens, a more direct voice in large-scale policy discussions in between elections
Voter Registration	
Elections NWT	Human element needed in outreach, using local community groups
Elections NWT	Make use of large gatherings and events to access registration data
Elections NWT	Explore potential to use information from private companies, while being wary of privacy concerns
Elections NWT	Piggyback registration on other data collection efforts
GNWT, Legislature	Create a legislative office of youth advocacy

Two issues were also raised through the discussion, which, while not necessarily forming part of the recommendations, remain important contextual considerations for those seeking to foster enhanced youth civic engagement in the Northwest Territories. First among these is the need for broad-based community leadership from outside of government, to call for and to facilitate, better public engagement on civic issues. A groundswell of leadership outside of government is needed to help create a cultural shift in favour of civic engagement. Movements such as Idle No More are viewed positively in this regard.

The role of other sectors (NGOs, private sector) in fostering this engagement is another important consideration. While NGO and community group engagement was viewed as key to the success of civic engagement initiatives, the prospective role for the private sector was less clear. Participants felt there could be a role for the business community, perhaps in assisting with providing resources and capacity building, but that there seems to be little desire among private sector leaders to fill this role. Indeed,

several business leaders were invited to take part in the roundtable and interview process for this project; however, they declined. The best means to engage the private sector in youth civic engagement leadership has yet to be found, but it may include helping to fund NGOs doing valuable work in this area.

The overall prospects for a stronger focus on youth civic engagement in the Northwest Territories are good. With leadership from the community, legislative and public service sectors, there is potential for advancement.

The territory would be well-served to give serious consideration to some or all of the recommendations put forward by citizens during this project. The goal of stronger youth civic engagement in the Northwest Territories is attainable, but leadership across key sectors is a prerequisite.



Appendix A – Session Agenda

Territorial Dialogue on Youth Civic Engagement

9:00 – 4:00, March 14th, 2013.

Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, Elections NWT
3rd Floor, YK Centre East
#7, 4915-48th Street Yellowknife NT X1A 3S4

- 9:00 a.m. Arrival and networking
Coffee and refreshments available
- 9:15 a.m. Welcoming remarks
David Mitchell, President & CEO, Canada's Public Policy Forum
- Overview of the day's objectives and proceedings
 - Précis of Public Policy Forum work in this area, and the purpose of multi-sector dialogues
 - Outline of the three key focus areas for discussion (see below)
- 9:25 a.m. Introductions icebreaker
An introductory exercise utilized by the Forum to allow participants to demonstrate their stake in the issue, and their motivation for participating
- 10:05 a.m. Animating remarks
David Brock, Chief Electoral Officer, Elections NWT
- Overview of key voter engagement issues in the NWT
 - Key background information and stats
 - Session goals and objectives for Elections NWT (i.e. tangible policy options)
- 10:20 a.m. Opening roundtable discussion
Preliminary discussion of the 3 focus areas, facilitated by David Mitchell
With reference to the initial discussions/recommendations on these topics from the June 2012 National Roundtable, participants will consider three focus area from a territorial perspective:
- how established democratic institutions should grow and adapt to the changing realities of civic engagement;
 - how to create enhanced engagement for those who are hard to reach or have minimal attachment to existing democratic institutions; and,
 - key mechanisms and leadership actions necessary to improve voter registration for young electors
- 12:00 p.m. Light lunch and break
Break for lunch, to be served in the workshop room and allow participants to undertake independent discussion
- 12:45 p.m. Working groups
Three breakout groups struck (5-6 participants each) around the three focus areas. Each will be assigned to examine the proposed challenges in that area from an NWT perspective, and to discuss/propose tangible solutions to key issues under this subject. Forum staff will move among the groups to observe, but groups will be small enough moderate themselves.
- 2:45 p.m. Working group reports
Brief reports by a designated presenter from each working group re: discussion and outcomes (i.e. tangible policy options)
- 3:15 p.m. Closing roundtable discussion
Final discussion, moderated by David Mitchell
Open discussion of working group ideas, with a view to reaching a consensus endorsement of tangible recommendations
- 3:45 p.m. Concluding remarks and thanks
Closing remarks from co-chairs David Brock and David Mitchell
Final comments, with an indication of the necessary future work to follow-up on the day's outcomes

Appendix B – List of Participants (Roundtable and Interviews)

Erin Freeland Ballantyne
Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning

Joe Borkovik
Department of Municipal and Community Affairs
Government of the Northwest Territories

David Brock
Chief Electoral Officer
Elections NWT

Adrienne Cartwright
Communications and Research Officer
Elections NWT

Liam Case
Student
Sir John Franklin High School

Ryan Conway
Project Lead
Public Policy Forum

Charles Dent
Chair
NWT Human Rights Commission

Gabriela Eggenhoffer
Deputy Minister of Education, Culture and Employment
Government of the Northwest Territories

Jan Fullerton
Executive Director
Skills NWT

Deserae Jonasson
Youth Counsellor
Lutsel K'e Wellness Centre

Nicole Latour
Deputy Chief Electoral Officer
Elections NWT

Ruth McKeown
Manager, Victims Services
Department of Justice
Government of the Northwest Territories

David Mitchell
President and Chief Executive Officer
Public Policy Forum

Shauna Morgan
Technical and Policy Analyst
Pembina Institute

Lawrence Nayally
CKLB radio

Delphine Paulette
Director of Student Services
Aurora College

Ben Scott
Department of Education, Culture and Employment
Government of the Northwest Territories

Alexander Weir
Student
Sir John Franklin High School

Appendix C – Follow-up Interview Rubric

Following from the *Territorial Dialogue on Youth Civic Engagement*, the partners have expressed a desire to continue the dialogue through interviews with policy leaders in the public, private and education sectors in the Northwest Territories.

The purpose of these interviews is to consider the outcomes of the March 14th dialogue session in Yellowknife, and to lay out potential tangible policy options for consideration in the areas identified by roundtable participants.

Potential interview questions, relating to the means of increasing youth civic engagement, included:

1. Much emphasis was placed on educational reform during the dialogue (new curricula, engaging students and political leaders in dialogue, etc.). What do you see as the most achievable education reforms in the near-to-medium-term? What do think should be the long-term priorities in this area?
2. Supporting voter registration through new avenues of data collection was emphasized by participants. Do you have additional thoughts on available sources of data which could be considered for registration purposes?
3. The development of forums or symposia to raise awareness of youth civic participation issues was suggested. Are there existing forums which come to mind that could possibly be included?
4. Role modeling and mentorship of youth was deemed essential in helping to foster youth civic engagement. What opportunities and challenges do you see in terms of creating effective opportunities for such role modeling?
5. Reforms to existing institutions (such as the legislature and education system) may require substantial policy shifts in the NWT. Do you believe there is adequate will and capacity to undertake such changes at this time? If yes, how?
6. What role should other sectors (non-profits, educators and the private sector) have in leading some of the suggested changes?



Appendix D – Opening Remarks

David M. Brock

Chief Electoral Officer, Northwest Territories

14 March 2013

Yellowknife, Northwest Territories

Welcome to Elections NWT.

At the outset I would like to thank each of you for participating today. I recognize that you all maintain busy schedules and, as such, I appreciate that much more that you've set aside a full day to discuss electoral democracy.

Our agenda today describes three specific areas of focus for our dialogue, all with a view towards identifying tangible policy options.

Before we get into the plenary discussion, I would like to help contextualize the problem, provide some statistical perspective, and say a little bit about what I mean by tangible policy options.

Electoral Engagement in the NWT

Allow me, for a moment, to take you back to the most recent general election - in Quebec.

PLAY VIDEO – 'VOTING, IT ALSO PROTECTS OUR DEMOCRACY' (DGE)

You may recall that the student movement became the central storyline of the 2012 provincial election in Quebec?

The student movement had an effect not only on the dynamics of the political campaign, but also on the administration of the election. The DGE – le directeur general des elections du Quebec – has been, similar to other election agencies, committed to improving civic engagement among youth. However, as the central political issue of the campaign became more apparent, the DGE was forced to assess the possible risks inherent in promoting youth civic engagement. By specifically encouraging higher rates of turnout among youth, the DGE may have risked being perceived as politically motivated - a serious risk for any independent non-partisan agency. They had to strike a fine balance.

It is important for us to better understand the appropriate role of an election agency regarding issues of civic engagement.

Most election agencies in Canada have a well-defined role in public education.

For example, the mandate of the Chief Electoral Officer of the Northwest Territories, as it relates to public information, is "to implement a program to disseminate information to electors about elections" (s. 8(c), *Elections and Plebiscites Act*).

In 2011, the year of our most recent territorial general election, Elections NWT interpreted this mandate broadly. We chose not to focus just on polling day or voting. We consciously sought to place the act of voting on a continuum and within a broader set of democratic practices that included activities such as donating money to a candidate, serving with Elections NWT, and having conversations in public spaces about public policy – that is, societal issues that matter to individuals and communities.

We did not have a specific information program that targeted youth. However, we did try to produce materials and use methods that were accessible in their design and language, and would thus appeal to young people. This included conveying more information using our website and Facebook, producing brochures and posters with attractive photos and straightforward language, and making Elections NWT more visible in all of our communities.

The overall voter turnout figure reported for the 2011 territorial general election was 48 per cent. Similar turnout figures were reported for provincial elections held in Ontario and Manitoba during the same week.

One of the curious aspects of voter turnout in territorial elections is the range of results. In the 2011 general election, turnout ranged from a low of 30 per cent in the riding of Frame Lake to a high of 87 per cent in the riding of Monfwi.

Is there a problem with our levels of civic engagement?

Yesterday the Legislative Assembly's Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures tabled its review of my report on the 2011 election. The issue of citizen engagement was addressed on page 2 of the 13 page report. I think it worth quoting this section of their report in full. The Standing Committee states:

Citizen Engagement

The Committee is not convinced that citizen engagement is as low as the voter turnout numbers reported in some electoral districts suggest. As stated earlier, inaccuracies in the voters list created the appearance of a much larger number of eligible voters than actually existed. Difficulties with voter registration and identification, and limitations on voting opportunities for some voters may also have discouraged some eligible voters from voting. Some of the recommendations for amendments to the Act outlined later in this report will help to address these issues. However, the Committee would be supportive of efforts to promote civic engagement in youth and a lifelong habit of voting through enhanced curriculum content.

Generally speaking, barriers to electoral participation are categorized into two types: administrative barriers, such as voter identification requirements; and motivational barriers, such as lack of interest in politics.

It appears to me, judging from the statement above, that the Standing Committee primarily sees administrative barriers to engagement, rather than motivational challenges.

Nonetheless, the Committee has placed a priority on promoting civic engagement among youth. And that makes our dialogue here today that much more timely.

Youth Civic Engagement

Before contemplating policy options to improve youth civic engagement, it may be helpful to know more about how youth are currently engaged.

Unfortunately, there is, generally speaking, a dearth of social science research in the North. Moreover, Elections NWT does not track turnout by age. This limits our specific knowledge of the problem, or even our ability to accurately identify a specific problem.

The NWT has a total territorial population of more than 43,000 people, with 38 per cent of our residents under the age of 25. There are approximately 7000 northerners currently under the age of 25 who will be eligible to vote in the next territorial general election in 2015. Knowing that the total number of eligible electors in the territory is approximately 28,000, we get a better sense of the electorate.

By 2015, the number of potential voters who could be classified as 'youth' may be as high as 1 in 4.

Although we know relatively little about the specific electoral behaviour of young northerners, we know a lot about the behaviour of young eligible electors in the rest of Canada. The word most frequently used to describe that behaviour is disengaged.

Recent research by Paul Howe, a professor of political science at the University of New Brunswick is particularly informative because it studies democratic engagement looking at multiple measures, not just voter turnout, and because it tests theories about influences such as media and education.

He arrives at clear conclusions in his book *Citizens Adrift*. One of the primary factors he points to is the relatively recent extension of the meaning of youth. On average, people today get married, purchase property, or have children at older ages than in decades (or centuries) past. One of the effects of this delayed entry into adulthood is the continuation of youth-like behaviour for longer periods of time.

And one of those youth-like behaviours is democratic disengagement.

Habits of non-voting being developed in youth are becoming more frequent and on average lasting longer throughout one's life. As a consequence, the proportion of societies' habitual non-voters – those people who vote rarely or never – is growing.

Democratic disengagement by youth is therefore not just a youth issue.

This could have profound consequences for relatively youthful populations such as ours in the Northwest Territories.

As a student of political systems, I have long feared that our measures of civic engagement are too simple – especially when using the metric of voter turnout. This isn't just a question about the accuracy of the metric. As a citizen, I am concerned that we demonstrate disproportionate concern for a relatively limited form of participation without adequately encouraging real political activity.

Here I am distinguishing between 'citizen-as-participant' and the 'politicized citizen'.

Students in Quebec in 2012 are a good example of where youth were both participating and politicized. I am concerned that too often we elevate participation and demonize politicization without sufficiently recognizing how tightly coupled these concepts may be.

A paper published in 2010 by Darin Barney, who is Canada Research Chair in Technology and Citizenship at McGill University, underscores the problem through its provocative title: "Excuse us if we don't give a fuck."

As Barney reminds us, "Nothing could be more politically volatile, more fatal to the stability of an established regime, than a refusal by its youth to participate."

However, this view is countered by the position that those youth who are hardest-to-reach or the most disengaged may in fact have the most to be gained or lost through their decisions about electoral participation. Whether or not young people vote, elected governments will still make decisions that affect food prices, Internet freedom, human rights, and our physical environment.

Are those youth who display minimal attachment to democratic institutions consciously rejecting the political system, or is the political system failing to engage them?

In many ways, our institutional models – and especially our electoral system - have changed very little from the early part of the 20th century. However, the operating environment has changed and is changing significantly. These changes are not just technological, but social. Disruptive technologies have not only changed people's electoral behaviour, but also their democratic expectations.

Tangible Policy Options

It is my hope that this dialogue will begin to yield policy options that will help Elections NWT recognize and respond to the democratic expectations of young people.

In order to arrive at tangible policy options, I think this group can contribute in two ways.

First, this group is very well placed to help us better understand the nature of the problem from a northern perspective.

Do you think the electoral behaviours of young people in the NWT reflect those of other young Canadians?

Is disengagement, where it is found, a conscious political decision or is it a by-product of institutional design that is created by administrative barriers?

Second, this group might help us to identify policy solutions, especially in areas where Elections NWT has a mandate to act (e.g., voter registration).

The more specific you can make your recommendations, the better we will be placed to assess the options available to us. I look forward to hearing your reflections and ideas.

NOTES

NOTES

