Overcoming Youth Voter Decline

From a Canadian Perspective

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Introduction

The history of the franchise in Canada is cause for both shame and celebration. When Canada was confederated, a mere 20% of the population was enfranchised; being male, propertied and a British subject were necessary requirements. In several provinces, Chinese and other East Asian ethnicities were denied the vote, and in others, literacy tests were imposed to limit participation from Eastern European immigrants.1 Canada has come a long distance since then: John Courtney, part of the Canadian Democratic Audit, regards Canada as one of the most progressive countries in the world with regard to voter eligibility.2 At the end of the 20th century, arbitrary legal barriers to enfranchisement have been done away with, and the Supreme Court of Canada’s decision in Sauvé v. Canada (2002) affirmed that “[d]enial of the right to vote on the basis of attributed moral unworthiness is inconsistent with the respect for the dignity of every person that lies at the heart of Canadian democracy and the Charter.”3

Canada has spent the past hundred years exorcising legal barriers that prevent certain minorities from voting; the next step is to eliminate systemic barriers. Particularly, education, income level and age all play an extremely influential role in a given person’s likelihood to vote. This paper will deal with the problem of the widespread abstention by youth from the political process. Though the role that education, income level and other factors play in voting behaviour is an equally pressing topic for the Canadian governments and public, it is largely beyond the scope of this paper.

This essay will examine three interrelated issues: (1) the theoretical basis for the obligation of government to encourage youth to participate; (2) the root causes of youth disengagement from political life; and (3) possible solutions to the problem of youth voter

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2 Ibid., 40.
3 Sauvé v. Canada (Chief Electoral Officer), [2002] 3 S.C.R. 519, para. 44
participation, particularly in light of the reforms now being contemplated by the Citizens’ Assembly in Ontario.

Overview of the Essay

This essay will be broken down into four distinct sections. In the first section, I will present the theoretical underpinnings of government’s civic obligation to be concerned with the problem of youth political participation. Firstly, I will argue that because of youth’s unique position as the future of the electorate, special measures must be taken to ensure that they develop a healthy role within our democracy. Secondly, I will argue that, as I alluded above, the next step in equitably developing the franchise will be to take active steps to target those systemically alienated from the electoral system.

The second section will be devoted to examining the empirical evidence of youth’s disengagement, and its root causes. Comparative and investigative studies have revealed a number of worrying trends, among them that youth disengagement is worsening, that refusal to participate in the political system is not replaced by non-electoral political engagement, and that what was once a strictly life-cycle phenomenon is now evolving into a permanent disengagement from the political-electoral system. Studies have also revealed that political knowledge, feeling obligated to vote, and socio-economic factors all play key roles in determining the extent of youth participation in the electoral system.

The third section will be devoted to examining improvements that fall within the scope of the reforms being contemplated by the Citizens’ Assembly. Specifically, I will examine whether changing the electoral system and changing the eligible voting age are legitimate solutions. I will conclude that proportional representation is far more amenable to youth participation than majoritarian systems and that lowering the voting age to 16 would have positive results. Though
the choice of a specific electoral system lies at the heart of the Citizen’s Assembly’s mandate, the lack of sufficient evidence supporting a specific system forced me to not make any definitive recommendations. Nevertheless, there are strong reasons that proportional representation systems, whatever their form, generally favour youth voter participation, and this will be explored in the third section.

The fourth section will be devoted to the other major factor relevant to youth participation in the electoral system – education – and how to improve it in the Canadian context. While this is merely tangentially related the Assembly’s mandate, the weight of the evidence suggests that close attention should be paid to this non-electoral factor. In many respects, this factor is more influential on youth’s voting behaviour than any possible change in the electoral system, and moreover, the interaction with the electoral system and the education system drastically affects the likelihood of increasing youth participation.

Finally, a note on terminology. I will deliberately avoid a precise definition of youth, because there are a plethora of surveys with varying methodology. None of them regard those older than 30 as “youth” but beyond that, there are varying cut-off dates, e.g. 21 and 25 and 29. I would not want to preclude any of their applicability in this paper, particularly because some of them are from foreign countries which may have a differing cut-off for their definition of youth. On the face of it, this may seem to be a problem, but I would urge the reader to recall that sociologists regard youth as a cultural construct⁴; the problems facing “youth” in foreign countries likely affect “youth” in Canada as well, simply by virtue of them being placed in a similar cultural role.

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⁴ Raymond Hudon and Bernard Fournier, "How Old is Old enough to Vote? Youth Participation in Society," Electoral Insight 5, no. 2 (July 2003): 36.
Section 1: Government’s Obligation to Encourage Youth Voting

This section will deal with two separate issues. The first is whether the government ought to intervene to alter electoral participation when it is in the general interest of society, and the second is whether the government ought to intervene on behalf of a systemically disenfranchised group.

1.1 Youth as the Future Electorate

Section 3 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms reads: “Every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons or of a legislative assembly and to be qualified for membership therein.” In Sauvé, the Supreme Court read into that section that the “Canadian vision of democracy embodied in the Charter [is]… built upon principles of inclusiveness, equality, and citizen participation” and furthermore insisted that these principles ought not to be influenced by foreign conceptions of democracy. The Court established these guidelines in the context of attempting to define the limits on government power, but they are nonetheless instructive on the nature and conditions of our government as defined by our Constitution.

Citizen participation is thus a pillar of Canadian democracy. Canada has seen a rapid decline in overall voter turnout in the past twenty years, from 75.3% in the 1988 General Election to 64.7% in the 2006 General Election. Far more troubling, however, is that this

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6 Sauvé v. Canada, supra, para. 41
7 Elections Canada, Voter Turnout at Federal Elections and Referendums, 1867-2004 2006),
decline is not spread evenly though the generations, but is almost entirely due to a younger generation of far more disengaged Canadians replacing an older, more involved generation.\(^9\)

There are two forces which shape youth’s widespread abstention from politics. The first is what is termed the “life-cycle effect” the second is termed the “generational effect.”\(^{10}\) The former refers to purely age-related impacts on voting participation, and the latter refers to impacts which, though first manifested when individuals are young, continue to affect behaviour as that individual grows into older age demographics. The life-cycle effect is troubling because it alienates a segment of the population from full participation in their own governance, but it does not pose a threat to Canada’s democracy as a whole.

The generational effect is different. Elisabeth Gidengil and her co-authors\(^{11}\) assert that Canada’s falling electoral turnout is not due to a society-wide and relatively mild disaffection with politics, but rather an extremely concentrated and powerful disaffection with politics among the youthful generations, that is maintained as they grow older. This is not limited to merely a single generation, but all generations of incoming voters born after 1970.\(^{12}\) Lawrence LeDuc and Jon Pammett write, in the same vein, that:

> It is evident that the decline in voter turnout in recent elections is mainly attributable to the young, and that it is part of a demographic trend that shows every sign of continuing well into the future. It has serious implications for the kinds of issues that are likely to be addressed in the political arena, the types of candidates who seek election, the positions of the parties, and even possibly for the health of democracy itself.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{11}\) The work of Gidengil et al. will be used quite extensively throughout this essay. While normally reliance upon the data of a single source bias the methodology, I do not feel this is the case here. Not only has their work been frequently cited by all of the scholars in this area, but they were also commissioned to write both the 2004 Canada Elections Survey, and write the *Democratic Audit* book regarding citizen participation.


The statistical intricacies of this problem will be explored in full detail in the next section, but suffice it to say that Canada is facing a large and growing problem that stems primarily from the youth voters.

In light of these conclusions, Canada will face a continuing decline in voter participation. What began as a decline in youth voting in the late 1980s has already permeated into significantly lower participation rates in the older demographics. The effects are already quite pronounced. The current government under Stephen Harper is fond of stating that the people of Canada have given it a mandate to govern. This is certainly true in a strict legal sense, but it rings somewhat hollow when one considers that, according to International IDEA, only 56.7% of potential voters participated in that government’s 2006 election (IDEA estimates that there is an 8% difference between registered and potential voters, and 66.7% of registered voters participated in 2006). Of those participating, only 36.3% supported the Conservative Party of Canada. This results in a mere 20.6% of the Canadian electoral base actively supporting the current government. When citizen participation is one of the pillars of Canadian democracy, a mere one in five eligible voters was sufficient to create a government.

This evidence and constitutional framework does not lead inexorably to the government supporting programs aimed specifically at youth. Any programs which sufficiently raise citizen participation will successfully discharge the government’s theoretical obligations as I have outlined them. However, as will be demonstrated in the final sections of this essay, the most effective ways of encouraging long term citizen participation is by targeting youth.

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16 Ibid.
1.2 Government’s Role in the Destruction of Systemic Barriers

Quite apart from its duty to society to ensure that the upcoming generations of voters are interested, informed, and participating members of the electorate, I would assert that the government ought to work to empower those sections of society which are systemically barred from full participation in the electoral process.

Of all the determinants for voting, young age is the single strongest indicator that one will not vote.\(^{17}\) In fact, André Blais goes so far as to assert that “[t]here is no evidence that the decline in turnout has been more acute among certain sub-groups of the electorate (leaving aside age and education)”\(^{18}\) There is a widespread misconception that youth purposefully abstain from voting, due to a supposed alienation with the Canadian system of government; in fact, youth are less likely than adults to not participate because of anger toward, or alienation from, the political system and its policy outputs. In reality, the great majority of youth do not participate in the electoral process because they lack political knowledge and political interest.\(^{19}\) Recalling that the entire notion of a systemic barrier rests on the idea that, though there is an undeniable element of personal responsibility, there is in addition, forces which make the exercise of that personal responsibility empirically more difficult. This is the situation that we are facing with youth voters. There is an undeniable element of blame that they do not vote in the same numbers as the rest of the electorate, but that the same time, as we will see in the next section, there are real reasons for this.

Like many things, systemic barriers are conceptualized in radically different ways depending on whether it is viewed from a conservative or a socialist perspective. The former

\(^{17}\) Courtney, "Elections," 41.
\(^{19}\) Henry Milner, "Are Young Canadians Becoming Political Dropouts? A Comparative Perspective," IRPP Choices 11, no. 3 (June 2005 : 5.)
philosophy is rooted in ideals of the liberty of the individual, and the corresponding desert to those who have succeeded or failed to act. The latter philosophy is rooted in a rights-centric approach to the construction of society, where notions of justice and equality are paramount to liberty, and where systemic barriers are recognized based on, among other things, vast statistical anomalies such as the youth voter participation rate.

I do not intend this to be an independently sufficient analysis of the superiority of social justice theories, and the concomitant adoption of the idea of systemic barriers. Perhaps more importantly, however, is the realization that such questions will likely never be definitively answered. The empirical requirements of proof are simply far too high; it is difficult to the point of impossibility to factually demonstrate the superiority of the doctrines of social responsibility and social democracy over a more classical liberal approach to society, and lacking factual proof, there can never be a definitive conclusion. Nevertheless, it is important to work openly and honestly from a coherent philosophical base so as to provide legitimacy and context to one’s arguments. I will be working from the assumption that social justice and systemic barriers are philosophically cogent ideas.

Working from that basis, I find the history of property ownership in Western countries is illustrative of the direction the government ought to take on these systemic barriers in voter participation. Under the feudalist system of medieval Europe, extensive property ownership and similar rights were forthrightly denied to a vast portion of the population; land ownership was limited to members of the aristocracy. Following the advent of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain nominal rights of property ownership were extended to the people at large, but because of pre-existing social and economic inequalities, the majority of the wealth transfer was merely from the rich landed aristocracy to the newly rich, but similarly small industrial
bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{20} It was only after the Second World War that the welfare state apparatus, that the systemic difficulties facing the poor, women, and minorities were addressed by society at large. Welfare payments and indirect support from the social safety net came to be regarded as a right of citizenship, as opposed to the notion that such transfer payments belong wholly to the realm of charity.

There are two distinct shifts apparent in this history: one from bald faced discrimination through legal barriers to nominally equal legal rights to property ownership for all, and a second shift that helps to alleviate the systemic barriers imposed by poverty through a welfare state apparatus that has come to be seen as a right, not a privilege.\textsuperscript{21}

The development of the franchise in Canada now stands somewhere after the first shift but still well short of the second. Though the franchise was once strictly tied to status (e.g. being a property owner, of the male gender, and literate), it is now available to almost all Canadian citizens above the age of 18. The legal barriers to full enfranchisement have been removed. What faces the electoral system now is the next leap, the one that addresses those systemic barriers: the leap from a libertarian market to a welfare state, and the leap from a universally free franchise to one that takes active steps to ensure maximum participation.

The analogy is not perfect. It is far easier for a 19 year old citizen to vote than it was for an 18\textsuperscript{th} century serf to become a factory owner. But the underlying concept is the same: it is not enough merely to have equal rights when there is a pre-existing system which exercises strong influence on the system that replaces it. In order to have a fully equitable system of electoral participation, active steps must be made to eliminate any evident systemic barriers.

One of those active steps may well be the reform of the electoral system. As the third section will demonstrate, a shift to a PR-based system would assist youth voters a great deal. At the same time, a variety of other reforms to the operation of government and society will also work to that same end, and these include civics education classes, lowering the voting age, a resurgent allegiance to a particular political party, and steps to ensure young people stay in school longer. The reform of our electoral system is a grave and far-reaching shift in our society; it would have thousands of effects, some foreseeable, and others relatively unpredictable. That decision will rightly be made by the Assembly first, and by the electorate second; I will not go so far as to say that the government has an obligation to change the electoral system. Rather, they have an obligation to alleviate these systemic barriers, and this essay will demonstrate a variety of ways in which that can be accomplished.

Section 2: Empirical Studies of Youth Disengagement and its Causes

This section will analyze a number of important trends in youth disengagement from politics, and also the root causes of this worsening phenomenon. I will begin by explain some overarching Canadian electoral participation trends, and the impact of youth’s lower participation in shaping these averaged participation trends.

2.1 Overall Canadian Political Participation and Youth’s Role

As mentioned above, the overall voting participation rate has decreased quite dramatically since the late 1980s. Overall participation rates have fallen from a 1945-1988 average turnout of 74.7% to a post 1988 average of 64.7%, a full 10 percentile point decrease. Elections Canada uses a percentage of registered voters to compute their figures, whereas the

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22 Elections Canada, "Voter Turnout at Federal Elections and Referendums, 1867-2004,"
American authorities use a percentage of potential voters. Accounting for the difference in methodology, in 2004, and for the first time in recent memory, Canadian electoral participation fell below American electoral participation.\textsuperscript{23} Though other countries, such as the United States and Japan, currently have similarly low voter turnout, none save the U.K. have experienced such similarly precipitous drop in voter turnout.\textsuperscript{24} And while foreign countries’ electoral participation may be troubling because of its overall apathy, Canadian electoral participation is potentially more disturbing because, as mentioned above, almost the entire depressed turnout is due to the markedly low turnout among youth.\textsuperscript{25}

There is a consensus among experts in the area of voter participation that the only significant demographic decline since the late 1980s has been in those under the age of 30. The data in the graph, above, reproduced from \textit{Citizens}, a part of the Democratic Audit, demonstrates this fact. Each series is a specific generation, identified by birth year, and their data on the graph is that generation’s difference in voting habits relative to the oldest voters’ demographic in 1988.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{trends_in_turnout_by_age_group.png}
\caption{Trends in Turnout by Age Group}
\end{figure}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Year & Series & Decrease \% & 1988 & 2000 \\
\hline
1988 & Born since 1970 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
1993 & Born in 1940s & -5 & 10 & 5 \\
1997 & Born 1925-1939 & -10 & 20 & 10 \\
2000 & Born before 1925 & -15 & 30 & 15 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{23} Milner, "Are Young Canadians Becoming Political Dropouts? A Comparative Perspective," 2.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{25} Daniel Rubenson et al., "Accounting for the Age Gap in Turnout," \textit{Acta Politica} 39, no. 4 (Dec 2004): 408.
The overall trend is clear: each generation has voted markedly less than the one previous, with the most recent generation having the most precipitous decline. Notably, each generation has remained relatively constant in its voting habits, i.e. each generation did not radically decline their turnout through the late 1990s and 2000. Instead, the younger generations’ non-voting simply became more prevalent through generational replacement. In a separate article, Gidengal et al., cites their 2004 Canadian Election Study (CES) and write that “[t]oday’s young Canadians are much less likely to vote than their parents or their grandparents were when they were in their twenties.”

In a further separate study, Rubenson comes to the same conclusion, i.e. that:

[T]urnout decline has largely been confined to those born after 1970… there are no clear trends in rates of non-voting for generations born prior to 1970…. The post-generation X cohort stand out, however. Non-voting among this group increased 14 points between 1993 and 2000.

The problem, therefore, is clear. Canada is not facing a declining incentive to vote throughout the general population, but a trend that each generation is less inclined to vote than their predecessors.

To be fair, part of these results can be explained by the aforementioned life-cycles effect, whereby younger voters vote in lower numbers because they are less involved in community and political life, and thus feel as if they have a lower stake in voting. Gidengal et al. observe that, of the 30 point generation gap between those born after 1970 and those born before 1945, fifteen of those points are due to the life-cycle effect. This alone is cause for concern, particularly through the rubric of alleviating systemic barriers to participation. Though the majority of the concern from experts such as Gidengal, Milner, Blais and Howe stem from the generational divide, which I will speak to below, I would nevertheless highlight that even lower participation stemming

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27 Rubenson et al., "Accounting for the Age Gap in Turnout," 408.
from life-cycle effect deserves to be tackled, and is one of the tangential benefits of solving the undisputed problem of generationally motivated youth apathy.

The generational effect is more troubling because it combines the problems regarding systemic barriers with the problems affecting the potential democratic legitimacy of Canadian democracy. It is what accounts for the substantial gap between those of the post-1970 birth cohort from the generations-Xers. All other gaps are mostly attributable the lifecycle effect, whereas, most recently the generational effect is equally powerful; fifteen of the thirty point drop stems from generational differences. As an example, when the average generation-X was in their twenties, their voting participation averaged 10 points higher than the post-1970s cohort, and baby-boomers averaged 20 points higher than the post 1970s cohort.28 The next subsection will address what is causing those born post-generation X to be becoming so markedly politically disinterested.

2.2 The “Turned-Off” Myth

Before addressing the empirically tested roots of youth apathy, I will dispel a major myth; as I mentioned above, there is a general perception that youth are merely “turned-off” of politics, because politicians are not considering their interests.29 This is not the case. Henry Milner draws an informative distinction between “political drop-outs” and “political protestors:”

Political dropouts are young citizens so inattentive to the political world around them that they lack the minimal knowledge needed to distinguish, and thus to choose, among parties or candidates.…. Political protestors do not vote either, but, unlike the dropouts, they are sufficiently informed to deliberately forego traditional means of political participation — party membership and, especially, voting — and instead undertake unconventional forms of political engagement.30

Political protestors are a problem that ought to be dealt with, there is no question, but when looking at the overall problem of youth voter apathy, it should be kept in mind that there are two distinct orders of apathetic youth voters, and that political dropouts are far more common than political protestors. This is evidenced by data from the 2004 CES. The data is too numerous to discuss in full here, but Gidengil and her co-authors provided a comprehensive overview of how age influences policy stances; they concluded “[y]oung Canadians appear to have a set of priorities that are surprisingly similar to those of older Canadians.”

Moreover, as was mentioned above, Milner asserts that “bringing political protestors to the polls will have, at best, a marginal effect… [because] respondents in their 20s turned out to be the most satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada.”

I will not, therefore, be dealing with the problem of youth political protestors in this essay because, as the evidence demonstrates, they are merely subject to a wider trend that is, in fact, far more prevalent in other age demographics; thus it does not speak specifically to the problem of youth voter participation.

2.3 The Role of Political Knowledge

After reviewing the literature, there appears to be three principle root causes of youths dropping out of the political system. The first root cause is lack political knowledge, the second is the erosion of feeling obligated to vote, and the third is socio-economic factors.

Political knowledge has received the most attention in the academic literature. Originally developed by Henry Milner, it has gained support from Paul Howe, Elisabeth Gidengil, André Blais, Neil Nevitte and Richard Nadeau. The growing Canadian consensus is reflected in the

32 Milner, "Are Young Canadians Becoming Political Dropouts? A Comparative Perspective," 5.
CES itself, which asks more political knowledge questions than almost any of its international counter-parts.

Political knowledge is radically lower in young generations than in older ones. Though this seems to be a global trend, the effects are particularly pronounced in Canada. In 1990, there was a negative fourteen point differential between the 18- to 29-year-olds’ responses to political questions, and the response of the entire sample; by 2000, that worsened to a 21 point differential. Gidengil has confirmed that this trend has worsened even further after 2000.

The research conducted by Milner and Gidengil et al. establishes that there is a remarkable inverse proportionality in Canada between age and political knowledge, and that, likewise, there is a similar inverse proportionality between age and voting. Paul Howe establishes the relationship between voting and political knowledge, specifically with regard to youth, in greater depth and with more conclusivity. Through a variety of statistical regression models, and a more comprehensive data set, Howe comes to two conclusions regarding the intersection of age, knowledge, voting, and education. First is that he confirms the hypothesis that the age-knowledge interaction is a genuine effect in electoral participation. Secondly, he confirms that, though there exists in the raw data correspondence between age and education, this trend is a spurious side effect of the age-knowledge interaction. Because those with more education are more likely to be politically knowledgeable, the two data sets appear similar, but this should not be confused with a conclusion that education is a definitive indicator of political participation. Now, this should not detract from a focus on education. It is evidently a key

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37 Ibid.: 146.
ingredient in the development of sufficient political knowledge to participate in the electoral process; but from the data, we know that it is not education *qua* education that leads to higher turnout.

Finally, the relationship between political knowledge and age is further confirmed in a separate article, by Howe, in which he compares political knowledge data from Gallup polls in 1956 to data from the 2000 CES, and concludes that young Canadians are now not only less politically knowledgeable, but that political knowledge is more likely to influence their decision to vote.\(^3\)

### 2.4 The Role of a Decreased Duty to Vote

The reason that political knowledge is now not only lower, but more influential is due to the second contributing factor in declining youth electoral participation: the waning notion that it is every citizen’s duty to vote. This makes sense. The two exist in a symbiotic relationship with regard to one another, in that both can provide sufficient reasons to vote. The turnout of those youth who feel a strong civic duty to vote is substantially less affected by having low political knowledge; likewise those with a low sense of civic duty place a great deal of weight in their level of political knowledge.\(^3\) Feeling a strong civic duty is an independently sufficient reason to vote, i.e. that *even in the face of little political knowledge*, previous generations were far more likely to vote, by virtue of their higher sense of civic duty alone. This is evidenced by the fact that in a 2002 U.K. survey, of those who responded that they were not at all interested in the turnout of the election, 63% still voted. This study also brings into focus the youth-centricity of

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\(^3\) Paul Howe, "Where have all the Voters Gone?" *Inroads* 12 (2003): 75-82.

\(^3\) Howe, "Political Knowledge and Electoral Participation in the Netherlands: Comparisons with the Canadian Case," 150.
the problem: of the respondents in the 18 - 24 cohort who replied they were not at all interested, a mere 16% voted.40

The problem then, in not merely that the newest generations of voters have low political knowledge; rather it is that they have low political knowledge, combined with the rapidly falling sense of civic duty, which result in such low voter turnout. This falling sense of civic duty is further evidenced in the 2004 CES: a full 75% of respondents said that they “strongly agreed” that it is “every citizen’s duty to vote in federal elections.” Conversely only 55% of young respondents strongly agreed.41 Comparative data from several countries confirm, in Milner’s opinion, the generational character of this shift.

As above, Paul Howe conducts a more thorough and statistical analysis of the assertions put forward by Milner. He agrees with the assertion that there is a decreased obligation to vote, but his analysis reveals several caveats. It is not merely the waning of a civic duty to vote, but the waning of several institutions, which together imbued in previous generations a strong likelihood to vote absent sufficient political information. The three variables he isolates are a feeling of a civic duty to vote, belonging to a religious organization, and strongly affiliating with a particular political party. He concludes:

All three interactions are negative, indicating that as duty, partisanship, and religiosity increase, the effect of political knowledge on participation decreases. The most notable result, however, is that the inclusion of these interactions produces a marked weakening in the interaction between age and knowledge.42

From his analysis, we can therefore conclude that age, in and of itself, is an irrelevant factor, in the sense that an 18 year old would respond in like manner to a 70 year old, if they had exactly the same degree of political knowledge, duty, partisanship, and religiosity. This conclusion is

42 Howe, "Political Knowledge and Electoral Participation in the Netherlands: Comparisons with the Canadian Case," 137-166.
confirmed in a similar study performed by Rubenson, Blais and Gidengil, et al.\textsuperscript{43} This is heartening in that it shows that there is nothing intrinsic about Canada’s youth which precludes them from full participation in the electoral process; rather, the above four forces merely operate far differently on them than they do on older Canadians.

2.5 The Role of Socio-Economic Status

The third factor, socio-economic status, will not be dealt with in depth, because there is no relevant way in which the Assembly can deal with trends at the most macro level. It will however, be helpful to identify precisely what degree of the generation gap in electoral participation is due to uncontrollable social trends. The primary study in the impact of socio-economic factors on youth voter decline, conducted by Rubenson et al. takes into account religiosity as a sub-factor. Both Paul Howe and I prefer to consider religiosity one of the factors affecting a decreasing feeling of duty to vote, so the results presented here are \textit{slightly} inaccurate. The “religiosity” effect is not large, however; the largest effects stem from income which is positively related to voter turnout.\textsuperscript{44}

It is a trite prediction that because those under 30 earn less, they vote less than those over 30. This is an obvious manifestation of the life-cycle effect. The more important observation is that income disparity is one of the contributing causes of the \textit{generational} gap in voter participation. Those under 30, as a group, are voting less today than previous cohorts voted when they were 30 years old. Given that GDP rises, year over year, one would expect that this effect would cause younger cohorts to vote in slightly higher amounts than older cohorts; however, this obviously not the case. I would suggest that it is obviated by the growing gap

\textsuperscript{43} Rubenson et al., "Accounting for the Age Gap in Turnout," 407-421.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.: 409.
between rich and poor, and the increasing absolute numbers of impoverished individuals.\textsuperscript{45} There are both more rich persons, and more poor persons today than in previous generations; for already well-off individuals, becoming richer has very little electoral effect, but steadily increasing numbers of impoverished individuals will lead to depressed voter turnout. This is compounded by the increasing rates of child poverty in Canada.\textsuperscript{46}

For problems arising from socio-economic disparity, there is no single solution. Aside from limited tangential benefits resulting from shifting the electoral system to a more proportional model, none of the changes offered below offer much help to those alienated from the system as a result of income level. This income disparity is a problem for society as whole; it will hopefully be tackled in earnest sometime soon, but doubtfully for its impact on youth voter participation.

The statistics outlined in this section are cause for concern under the rubric of government action outlined above. Evidence clearly demonstrates that large numbers of young generation Canadians are dropping out of the political system, and that this is due to the conjoined effects of a lack of political knowledge and a lack of coercive forces compelling them to vote. This evidence thus speaks to both of the concerns raised in the first section: the legitimacy of our democracy is increasingly at risk, as participation rates will likely continue to fall. Furthermore, these forces evidently affect the youth minority far more than other demographics or other minorities; thus, the government is obligated to take measures to obviate the systemic character of these developing electoral trends.

\textsuperscript{45} Marc Lee, "Are we all Capitalists Now?" \textit{Behind the Numbers: Economic Facts, Figures and Analysis} 3, no. 4 (May 15, 2001)
\textsuperscript{46} Campaign 2000, \textit{Decision Time for Canada: Let's make Poverty History} (Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2005), 1
Section 3: Solutions within the Mandate of the Citizens’ Assembly

As I mentioned in the outline, there are two solutions to the above mentioned problems which are within the mandate of the Citizens’ Assembly. The first, most prominent solution is to change the electoral system to one of greater proportional representation and the second will be to provisionally lower the voting age to 16. Each of these solutions, particularly the first, have wide ranging effects and are supported by different groups for different reasons. I am presenting these solutions as ones which will alleviate the problems identified in this essay. This does not mean that I am suggesting that Ontario ought to convert to a PR electoral system solely on this basis; rather, I will demonstrate how these solutions impact on the causes of youth voter apathy, so that the Assembly may deliberate on the correct course of action being fully aware of the facts. Finally, as I mentioned in my first section, I am asserting merely that the government has an obligation to take action in one form or another; there is no evidence to support the notion that electoral reform is the only way in which to effect the necessary action.

3.1 Proportional Representation’s Effect on Political Knowledge

Developed democracies with proportional representation have both higher turnout, on average, than democracies with majoritarian systems.\textsuperscript{47} Furthermore, PR democracies have a higher average level of political knowledge.\textsuperscript{48} On the face of it, it certainly seems that PR engenders a much higher level of political knowledge than majoritarian systems. Upon examining the available data on this issue, such a conclusion is indeed appropriate.

Milner asserts that the incentives to create a politically knowledgeable electorate are much higher in proportional representative systems because there is an exponentially larger base

\textsuperscript{47} Mark N. Franklin, \textit{Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945}, (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004)
\textsuperscript{48} Milner, "Are Young Canadians Becoming Political Dropouts? A Comparative Perspective," 8.
of potentially helpful voters. Under majoritarian systems, voters in “unwinnable” districts are largely abandoned by the party apparatus, because they are “low-benefit,” and cost just as much, if not more, to persuade than voters in winnable districts.\textsuperscript{49} Thus, strategic or economically rational parties will spread their resources more evenly under a proportional representation, because each voter is of a far greater uniform benefit. Under a proportional representation system, there would be no unwinnable districts because, even under a mixed-member plurality system, the party list vote will affect electoral outcomes. It is accepted knowledge that greater exposure to political parties and to campaign workers creates a higher probability of turnout,\textsuperscript{50} and this would most certainly occur under a PR system.

Aside from the actual resources spent by parties under a proportional representation system, there is evidence that parties are far more ideologically consistent throughout time under proportional representation. The histories of the Conservative Party and Liberal Party of Canada provide sufficient evidence of the volatility that exists within majoritarian political parties. Because the function of those parties is to broker ideological and regional interests, so that they are capable of forming a majority government, they are prone to wild ideological swings over time. An excellent example would be the change from George Drew to John Diefenbaker as leader of the Progressive Conservative Party.\textsuperscript{51} Conversely, under proportional representation systems, parties:

\begin{quote}
\textldots provide potential voters with a political map that is relatively clearly drawn and stable across time and space. They make it easier for the potential voter to identify with a given political party and to use that identification as a guide in dealing with complex issues and actors over time at various levels of political activity.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{50} Gidengil et al., "Turned Off Or Tuned Out? Youth Participation in Politics," 13.
\textsuperscript{52} Milner, "Are Young Canadians Becoming Political Dropouts? A Comparative Perspective," 9.
The comparative research, which is reproduced in the figure below, is startling in its affirmation of this hypothesis. The Y-axis represents the degree of political knowledge correlated with education. As is evident (and ignoring Belgium, which has a compulsory voting system), it is substantially lower in PR countries than in SMP countries such as Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. The role of the party system is thus sufficient to de-link the strong correlation between education and political knowledge that is so prevalent in the Canadian. This is particularly heartening because lack of education in Canada is itself strongly correlated with poverty and other marginalizing effects. By introducing an element of PR into the Canadian electoral system, we would therefore be able to facilitate not only an overall gain in political knowledge, but also some degree of political knowledge increase among the demographics least likely to obtain it elsewhere.

The correlation between PR systems and absolute levels of political knowledge is further reinforced by a comparative study of Canada and the Netherlands undertaken by Paul Howe.

Quite unlike Canada, in Holland, political knowledge is not a substantial determinant of voting

53 Ibid.
even though the same generational patterns apply and in roughly the same proportion. The only difference between the countries is the base level of political knowledge. Evidently, that level in the Netherlands is so high as to alleviate the problems present in Canada and elsewhere as a result of the widening generational divide in political knowledge, and Howe suspects that proportional representation may play a key factor.54

I should stress, as does Milner, that these effects will only become pronounced over the long term, once a country’s party system and society at large fully adapts to the differing incentives presented by a PR system. Scotland and New Zealand (both new to the PR electoral system) have yet to experience the type of phenomena that have been documented in long term PR countries such as Germany and Sweden.55

There are other positive consequences to introducing a proportional representation element into the Canadian electoral system. Milner suggests that the increased number of electoral parties would imbue the process with more uncertainty, and thus make the electoral race much closer in outcome. This suggestion is only half borne out by empirical evidence. With regard to the how the closeness of a race affects political participation, Blais states “the verdict is crystal clear… closeness has been seen to increase turnout in 27 of the 32 studies…”56

Though in the same study, Blais found that the effect is very small – a mere one or two percentile points – Milner’s hypothesis may be correct in the long term. Franklin argues in his exhaustive study of voter turnout since 1945 that the formative electoral experiences have powerful and long term effects on voting behaviour.57 In this sense, consistently uncertain and exciting elections, though they may produce only marginally positive effects during their own campaigns, would

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54 Howe, "Political Knowledge and Electoral Participation in the Netherlands: Comparisons with the Canadian Case,"
57 Franklin, Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945, 57
result in a long term increase in youth voter participation, as youth’s formative years are marked by valid reasons to be interested in political knowledge.\textsuperscript{58} This phenomenon may also help to explain the drastically lower youth turnout figures in the 2000 and 2004 elections – because the 1990s was marked by a single party being the only viable choice to govern, subsequent elections were harmed as a result of the poor formative environment in the 1990s.

Before moving on to the other possible solutions, I should provide two caveats for electoral reform. Milner insists that, though PR systems lay the theoretical groundwork for increased political knowledge and increased political participation, it is their integration with other reforms, particularly education, that will ensure they are effective. Therefore, to feel the full effect of instituting a PR system, the government would have to concurrently develop educational and media strategies which also encourage developing political knowledge and interest.

The second is that the effects of these reforms are not of a type that they may only be accomplished through electoral reform. Reform aims at the same goal accomplished by the other solutions proposed in the fourth section. Finally, many of the effects of electoral reform are general in application, and though their most drastic affect would likely be on youth, they are not targeted specifically at youth. This has both positive and negative results. On the one hand, overall turnout is likely to increase if a reform is general in application; on the other hand, these electoral reforms might not have as drastic an effect solely on youth as may be desired.

3.2 Lowering the Voting Age to 16

The most common response to this proposal is that it would be wholly ineffective. If 18 year old youth are not interested in voting, why would they be when they are two years less mature? This attitude is reflected in 16 and 17 year olds themselves, more than 50% of whom feel extending the franchise is unnecessary.\(^{59}\) This is an erroneous objection, however, because as has been demonstrated above, it is not alienation keeping youth from voting, but rather it is a lack of knowledge causing youth to “drop-out” of the system. The legitimacy of lowering the voting age to 16 stems from the abovementioned idea, asserted by Franklin, that future voting patterns are in large part affected by forces of habit and inertia, themselves being affected by the formative voting experiences.\(^{60}\)

With the elimination of the fifth year of high school from the Ontario curriculum, a large portion of the population begins their 18\(^{th}\) year in university or college. This environment is not conducive to forming positive voting habits for two reasons. Firstly, the problem is with the youth themselves; they are in a new environment, filled with new pressures and responsibilities. They are in the first phases of withdrawing from their parental home life. They are the most mobile segment of society, both during and immediately following post-secondary education, making registration difficult.\(^{61}\) This is far more disruptive and distracting than in the middle years of high school experienced by 16 year old youth. The high school experience may be a place ideally suited to the start of voting, particularly if the educational reforms proposed in the final section are implemented.

\(^{59}\) Hudon and Fournier, "How Old is Old enough to Vote? Youth Participation in Society," 37.
\(^{60}\) Franklin, "Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945," 57.
The second problem is more institutional. Despite the efforts being made by Elections Canada to make voting easy for students on campuses, troubles remain. The atmosphere itself is not conducive to voting, because of the established culture of voter apathy among the population. Further, being contacted in person by a campaign worker uniformly increases one’s likelihood to vote.62 Youth were the least likely of all people to be contacted. Though I could not find any studies into why this occurred, two rational explanations are, first that many youth still live with their parents, and are thus ignored by canvassers, and second, that because so many university and college students temporarily live away from home, but do not change their permanent address, that campaign staff are not able to accurately contact them.

The notion of lowering the voting age does not yet have wide popular support, though 20 MPs did support, in 2005, a private members bill to have the voting age lowered to 16.63 Hudon and Fournier find, however, that historically, changes to the voting age have been made within Parliament or the legislatures, with limited public debate.64

Section 4: Education Reforms

This section will be devoted to a reform that, though essential in raising overall youth electoral participation, nevertheless falls outside the mandate of the Citizens’ Assembly. It is of crucial importance for two reasons. Firstly, it provides much needed support for both of the reforms suggested above. The reforms suggested cannot each be implemented in an atomic manner, but rather feed off of one another to boost overall political knowledge and interest among youth. Second, these educational reforms provide the Assembly with a means of recommending a solution to a problem they are faced with, i.e. falling youth voter participation,

63 Hudon and Fournier, "How Old is Old enough to Vote? Youth Participation in Society," 37.
64 Ibid.
even if they are not prepared to take the steps necessary to overhaul the electoral system in a way most conducive to that end.

Clearly the greatest potential for improvement of the political knowledge deficit of new generations of youth lies in the education system. In this regard, the provinces, such as Ontario, are better suited at a wholehearted reform of the government’s approach to youth because they have the constitutional capacity to change the educational approach in conjunction with (or independent of) the electoral system.

Though it lies beyond the scope of this essay, one of the most important thing the education system could do to encourage political knowledge and electoral participation would be to stem the tide of high school dropouts. This is obviously an extremely complex subject, but the extremely close correlation between education level and political knowledge should be remembered. This is even more true at the lower end the scales; i.e. that there is the closest correlation between low levels of education and correspondingly low levels of political knowledge.65 So any overall reduction in school dropout levels will likely coincide with an overall increase in political knowledge.

Civics education is a necessary but not a sufficient element of preventing youth disengagement. Rather, a certain type of civics class must be implemented in order to be effective. Milner points to civics classes in both Germany and the Netherlands which have no appreciable effect on political knowledge or interest.66 There is strong evidence to support the fact that civics education has poor impact when taught to adolescent students, but much stronger impact if it is taught in the final two years. Milner asserts that the one of the primary differences between the ineffective Ontario civics curriculum and the effective Swedish curriculum is that

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65 Blais et al., "Where does Turnout Decline Come from?" 117.
the latter is taught in the last two years of high school, when the students are 17 and 18 years old (Swedish students are one year older than their Ontario counter-parts). The older age of the students is effective for two independent reasons: firstly, they are closer to the voting age than Ontarian students in Grade 10, and are thus more likely to take a genuine interest in the course. Secondly it is because Sweden has a radically lower dropout rate, so that courses offered in the very last years of high school would reach a much larger audience in Sweden than in Canada.

Milner suggests combining lowering the voting age with an early and rigorous civics curriculum. Indeed, without the rigorous civics curriculum, there may be little point in lowering the voting age. If one were to implementing these two recommendations together there would be three separate benefits. First, the course could be taught for the two years directly preceding entry into the electorate (when the students are 15 and 16), so that genuine interest could be fostered as Milner supposes is the case in Sweden. Second, it would be taught before students were legally able to withdraw from school, so as to try to loosen the strong link between school dropouts and political dropouts. Finally, it would be far easier to establish solid voting habits suggested by Franklin if most students’ first election took place in the comfortable environment of the middle high school years, and was combined with coursework that gave a positive incentive to students to engage themselves in the process.

As for the specific content of these civics courses, research suggests that the most effective way to engage the class and to foster political knowledge is to have actual party and government spokespersons offer their positions on partisan matters. This may seem quite outlandish, but Milner has conducted extensive research on this area, and agrees that this is the
single most effective way to conduct the civics class. One study even showed that the more politically partisan the classes were, the more political knowledge and interest was fostered.67

**Conclusion**

The trends identified in section two ought to raise the alarm for government action. Both of the criteria I developed which would support government intervention have been met: a threat to citizen participation and evident systemic barriers. Ontario, and indeed Canada, is in danger of a serious erosion of the electorate. Moreover, the tangential effects of low political interest, though not examined in this essay, surely detract from the character and strength of our democracy. The primary purpose behind many of our government institutions is to provide transparency and public scrutiny to the exercise of power. If an increasingly dwindling number of people are even interested in scrutinizing the government, there is potential for widespread abuse of the public trust.

But more importantly, the trends must be dealt with for the problems they forthrightly present. An entire section of the electorate is not making their voice heard. The fact that it is nominally consensual that they drop out of the political system should not reduce concern that it is a blow to the legitimacy of our government. It is time that Canadians reconceived of the franchise in a similar manner as they reconceived of the right to private property following the inception of the welfare state. The current system of universal access to the franchise is a good one, and comparatively, it is even enviable. Nevertheless, if we were to shift from a paradigm of the universal franchise to a “full participation” paradigm, our democracy would benefit. The House of Commons would have the force of the entire electorate behind its decisions (even if the

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government might not enjoy total support), and the process by which we would accomplish that participation, i.e. by developing political knowledge, is independently worthy.

The erosion of strict party- and religious-based political convictions is a healthy development for Canadian democracy. It engenders more intelligent thought and debate of the issues surrounding election campaigns. It has unfortunately also necessitated an increase in political knowledge which the Canadian youth have not met, and are thus consequently dropping out of the system. This is an important time for democracy in Canada because we can shape the relevant institutions so that political knowledge is fostered and widely developed within the population. Waiting too long may allow other institutions to take the traditional place of religious and party affiliations, and we would lose a chance to raise the level of the national debate from one defined by sectarian and group interests to one defined by an intelligent dialogue between government and the citizenry.
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