

The Political Knowledge and Political Participation of Young Canadians and Americans

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INTRODUCTION

For the last decade I have been working on developing indicators for comparing levels of political knowledge in mature democracies and linking these to political participation. Not only do better informed individuals vote more, but the positive relationship of political knowledge with voting is reproduced at the aggregate level: countries higher in civic literacy have higher turnout (Milner 2002). As turnout and other forms of conventional democratic participation have declined, especially acutely in Canada, in recent years, this relationship becomes critical. The political knowledge dimension has been central in several recent IRPP papers, addressing institutions linked to voting turnout, first electoral systems (Milner 2004), and then fixed voting dates (Milner 2005a).

In this latter paper, the turnout deficit addressed was, in particular, that among new voters, a deficit that had been confirmed by data from the Canadian Election Study (Gidengil et al. 2003). Another paper that year (Milner 2005) argued that the low level of political knowledge among young Canadians compared to their peers in high-civic literacy countries, was the key factor. But its conclusions, and thus recommendations for action, could only be tentative due to the inadequacy of existing survey data comparing political knowledge, and it concluded with an urgent call to fill that void. This paper begins to take up that task with new data from an initial application of a set of political knowledge questions designed to be used cross-nationally.

I: The Current Context

It is a “no-brainer” to claim that more politically knowledgeable people are more likely to vote and otherwise participate in politics. Moreover, when we compare countries’ average levels of political knowledge, or, better still, the proportion of their citizens with the minimum levels of political knowledge needed to make effective political choices, we find good evidence that the positive relationship between political participation and political knowledge holds at the aggregate as well as the individual level (Milner 2002).

Researching political knowledge comparatively is difficult – and is therefore seldom carried out. Though political knowledge questions have come to be included in recent surveys, the tendency has been to disregard the comparative dimension.¹ However, if political knowledge is an important determinant of political participation, we need to be

¹ The CSES (Comparative Study of Electoral Systems) expects participating teams carrying on the national election surveys to include in their surveys at least three political knowledge questions, but does not specify their specific content.

able to test the effects on political knowledge of various policy and institutional choices, which entails use of aggregate indicators. This applies especially to young people. We know that youth political participation levels have declined in recent decades in almost all western democracies (see Milner 2005, Table 1, but the degree varies considerably not only across time but also across nations (Milner 2005, Ersson and Milner 2007). Hence the phenomenon is both generational and a consequence of national institutions (Franklin 2004) and policy choices. To disentangle these, the first step is to survey young people in two or more comparable societies using a common set of political knowledge questions.

We take up this challenge in this study with a survey taken in the United States and Canada, both of which have acutely experienced significantly fewer young people voting than those in earlier generations. In recent elections in both countries, as in the UK, only around 40 percent of those 18 to 25 exercise their right to vote in national elections.²

The 2000 Canadian Election Study reported that “most of the decline in turnout [from 75 percent in 1988 to 61 percent 2000] is attributable to the fact that post baby boomers have gradually been replacing pre-baby boomers” (Blais et al 2002:49). A study carried out by Elections Canada based on a sample of 95,000 voters drawn from electoral districts in every province and territory found that 38.7 percent of those identified as first-time electors turned out,³ compared to the estimate of 22.4 percent for the same group in 2000 by Pammett and LeDuc (2003: 20),⁴ the increase due at least in part to the extra efforts made to register and mobilize this group in the intervening years (see below). Assuming that young voters accounted for at least their share of the 5 percent turnout rise in 2006,⁵ we can place young Canadians at par with young Americans whose percentage turnout rate of 18-24 year old voters rose from 36 in 2000 to 47 in 2004.⁶

Since we know from survey data (e.g. Dalton 2004) that young citizens are also less likely to see voting as a civic duty, the fact that the young are less informed about politics today has a greater influence on the decision to vote or not vote.⁷ In the US, a recent

² *Electoral Insight*, February 2005 Elections Canada.

³ Reported in *Electoral Insight*, February 2005 Elections Canada.

⁴ This seems low. One possible reason is that, as in all survey-based studies, the rate of voter turnout was over-reported, the researchers used statistical corrections on the rate of turnout for the different age groups. It may very well be, however, that young people, given the low sense of civic duty to vote (see below), do not over-report.

⁵ We should have a better idea soon since Elections Canada is conducting a similar study of the 2006 election.

⁶ The rise is remarkable (in 1996 the percentage was 35 percent) since it was at least partially linked to the war - an issue especially salient to young people, being central to the campaign - will be difficult to sustain. (“The Youth Vote 2004.” (CIRCLE – The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement – Fact Sheet July 2005. http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_Youth_Voting_72-04.pdf) and similar to the UK, which managed to bring only 40 percent of 18 to 25 year-olds to the polls (Phelps 2004).

⁷ This applies most of all to those with marginal levels of political knowledge as illustrated by the remarkable generational difference in the UK, where 63 percent of those who claimed they were ‘not at all interested in news about the election’ cast a vote nevertheless; but among the 18 –24 year-olds this was the case for only 16 percent (Electoral Commission, 2002:29). In Canada, Howe (2003) compared groups by age and education in 2000 and 1956. In 1956, the difference in reported turnout level between the groups at

compilation of existing data by Wattenberg (2007) paints a rather dismal generational portrait. Since the 1970s, young Americans have undergone a decline in newspaper reading, TV news watching, political knowledge, a sense of civic duty to vote and, of course, turnout. Similar Canadian tendencies using CES data are reported by Archer and Wesley (2006).⁸

Not everyone shares this pessimistic view, especially in the United States. Some observers take a subjective perspective, in effect taking the young respondent's definition, by treating reported voluntary activity as civic engagement. Dalton (2006) suggests that critics have missed the "good news" about the engaged citizenship of young Americans, in the form of "repertoires" of attitudes associated, for example, with "forming one's opinion," "supporting the worse off," "understanding others," and "being active in voluntary associations." The problem with using such attitudes as indicators is that they costlessly invite respondents to place themselves in a positive light. The same is true of treating reported involvement in a voluntary or service organization as political participation. Indeed, its voluntary nature is dubious given the fact that in many American schools and colleges, such activity is obligatory (Milner 2005), and that, beyond this, there are powerful institutionalized incentives in operation. A recent study of young people in four US high schools found "a single theme about the meaning of civic engagement [that] appeared repeatedly: 'resume padding'.... Young people of all class strata, races, and ethnic backgrounds told us that they needed "something" to put on their resumes..." (Friedland, and Morimoto 2006:32).⁹

These methodological drawbacks become critical in comparative analysis. Since such incentives are weaker in Canada and, especially, Europe, this must be taken into account in any comparative use of this indicator - just as students of voter turnout take compulsory voting into account. Indeed, institutional factors apply even to explicitly political forms of voluntary activities on American campuses, since a good part of such activities is directed at students registering themselves and getting other students to vote (see AASCU 2006), efforts superfluous in most comparable democracies including Canada.

the lower and upper ends of the knowledge scale was 17 percentage points; moreover, for the youngest age group (21-29 years), the difference was lower – only 12 points. In the 2000 election study, the overall gap in turnout between the knowledgeable and ignorant had risen to thirty-two points; but now the relationship to age was reversed. The 43 point gap that separated the least and most knowledgeable respondents 18 to 29 declined with increasing age to 13 percent among those 50 and older.

⁸ Rubensson and his CES colleague (2004), in their explanation of the generational turnout gap, find that once political information and interest are controlled for, there is no statistically significant difference in turnout between young and older.

⁹ This explains in good part the fact that twice as many of the 57 percent of grade 12 students who reported doing volunteer scored satisfactory or better (34 to 16) than the 43 percent who did not in the (difficult) NAEP test of proficiency in civics (NCES 1999:101).

For these reasons, our study comparing young people in the US and Canada treats involvement in voluntary associations not as an indicator of political participation but as one possible predictor of it (independent rather than dependent variable). As we shall see, this approach allows us to compare the effectiveness of such engagement in inducing informed political participation in the United States with English Canada and Quebec where the degree of emphasis on such engagement is lower. Instead, the key indicator here is political knowledge, an objective measure unaffected by institutionalized incentives. (Having a greater incentive to give a “correct” answer doesn’t help you if you don’t have the knowledge.) This approach is quite original. While Canadian studies of youth political participation have been much influenced by American findings and priorities, few replicate the actual survey questions and sampling methodology or include political knowledge as a key dimension, and none use a battery of common political knowledge questions.

Effectively, all that we know from the literature comes from the 2002 National Geographic-Roper Global Geographic Literacy Survey which assessed the knowledge of political geography of 3,250 young adults in 10 countries. In it, Canada-US differences pale against those between North America and Europe. (Out of a possible score of 56, young Americans on average answered 23 questions correctly with young Canadians at 27. Sweden led (with 40) and Germany and Italy followed (with 38). The data allow us to infer that the knowledge differences are linked to European political institutions and policy choices and help account for higher levels of turnout (Milner 2002; Ersson and Milner 2007), but do not help us in identifying and explaining US Canada differences.

This is where this study can fill an important gap. Since we ask respondents in both countries the same key questions indirectly and directly related to informed political participation, we are able to compare the political knowledge of young Canadians and Americans, controlling for relevant factors such as generation, age, gender, and language. In this way we are able to identify the factors associated with informed political participation and where these differ among Americans and Canadians, younger and older. From this we should be able to more effectively pose the question of what is to be done taking into account the contextual differences of young Americans and Canadians.

II: Data and Method

The data analyzed in this paper is derived from two surveys conducted in 2006, one in the United States and the other in Canada, in which there were roughly 60 common questions. The first, in May 2006, was undertaken by CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at the University of Maryland). In its Civic and Political Health Survey, CIRCLE sought to replicate and update a previous youth survey (Keeter et al 2002). The earlier survey posed three political knowledge questions. For this round, five questions were added (from among those I proposed to them) designed also to be usable in Canada and corresponding as closely as possible to the five that had been used in several countries in the 2nd round of

the European Social Survey (ESS) in 2004.¹⁰ The resulting questionnaires allowed for 8 possible correct political knowledge answers for US respondents, and 10 for Canadians, seven of which are common for all North Americans (See Appendix I). It is this combined score out of seven that serves as our main indicator of political knowledge. Appendix I lists the questions. The remaining 50 odd questions are related to possible sources or consequences of political knowledge.

The Civic and Political Health Survey carried out telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1765 people aged 15 and older living in the continental United States from April 27 to June 11, 2006, of which 1209 were under 25.¹¹ (The number surveyed was actually higher but I do not include the data from the survey of over-samples of African-Americans, Latinos and Asian-Americans aged 15 to 25 carried on via the web. No such effort was undertaken in Canada, both because there is no comparable population, and also because there is reason to suspect that Internet survey respondents act differently.¹²) The Canadian survey was conducted by telephone using similar methodology in September 2006 with 877 respondents 25 and under and 477 aged 26 plus. (See the provincial breakdown in Appendix II). Just over one third (451) of the interviews were conducted in French (only in Quebec).¹³

We begin by comparing young people in Canada and the US with each other and with those over 25 years in age in each country. While the Canadian data is here presented for the first time, CIRCLE published an initial analysis of the US data. In their October 2006 report, the authors assert that “Young Americans are involved in many forms of political and civic activity. For example, 26% say they vote regularly;¹⁴ ... 36% have volunteered

¹⁰ The countries are Finland, France, Spain and Ireland; the questions were also used in the ESS pretest in England and Poland.

¹¹ The margin of error for the total youth sample (n=1,658) is ± 2.5 percentage points. The sample was drawn using standard *list-assisted random digit dialling* (RDD) methodology. Data collection was done via telephone by Braun Research, Inc. The telephone interviewing over-sampled 15-to-25-year-olds by setting a maximum quota for respondents 26 and older. After that quota was filled, all remaining interviews were conducted with 15-to-25-year-olds. Interviews were conducted with 15 year olds only after getting parental consent.

¹² This is because they drawn from a list of persons who have expressed initial interest in participating in surveys. Moreover, the methodology used to create Internet samples in Canada is even more problematic than that used by Knowledge Networks which carries on Internet surveys in the US. In Canada, respondents to Internet surveys are drawn from a list of email addresses of people who in another context had indicated an interest in participating in them. Given the method, we should not be surprised when, for example, the results of a survey conducted in January 2006 by D-Code, "an organization that aims to engage youth in the political process," are used by D-Code founder, Robert Barnard, to debunk "the myth that [the 15-34 year olds] are disengaged, by stressing the large number of his respondents who reported sending emails about a cause or signing an online petition" (<http://www.d-code.com/pdfs/YouthVoterDNA.pdf>.)

¹³ The Canadian survey was conducted by Pollara inc. out of its Bathurst, New Brunswick facility. The margin of error for the youth sample(\pm)3.3%

¹⁴ In a fact sheet released in late January 2007, CIRCLE found that the youth voter turnout in the 2006 mid-term election rate increased to 24 percent, up two points over 2002.

within the last year; and 30% have boycotted a product....” When asking why some otherwise involved young people do not vote, they suggest that part of the answer lies in cynicism, “a plurality says that the government is ‘almost always wasteful and inefficient’ ... a big drop in confidence since 2002” (Lopez et al, 2006: 3-4).

But young Americans voted more in 2006 than in 2002 and, indeed, in elections since 1992 according to CIRCLE.¹⁵ The key explanation lies elsewhere. The level of political knowledge revealed in the survey suggests simply that they do not vote because they do not have the information needed to cast an informed choice - despite 72 percent of respondents (this includes those surveyed by Internet) claiming to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs at least some of the time.

The figures tell a different story. Political knowledge is poor, especially among young people. As we can see in Table 1, out of a possible score of 7, the means of correct answers are 2.12 for young Americans and 2.89 for those 26 plus. The Canadian scores are a little better, but only for the young: 2.57 mean correct answers, compared to 2.93 for the 26 plus. (See Chart 1 for a visual depiction of this reality).

The results of the responses to the specific questions show that the most glaring contrast is on international matters: 55% of young Americans are unable to name one permanent member country of the UN Security Council (i.e. including the US), compared to 30% in Canada. But there is no lack of political ignorance on domestic matters. Fifty-six% of young Americans are unable to identify citizens as the category of people having the right to vote (compared to 43% in Canada.) Equally unnerving is the inability of young Americans to name even one cabinet secretary (77 %) and to identify the party that is more conservative (60%). (Canadian numbers are similarly low on these questions but circumstances made them harder to answer. The Canadian government had been in power only 8 months when the survey was conducted. Hence there were no equivalents of Donald Rumsfeld and Condolizza Rice in public prominence. Moreover, since the new governing party is the Conservative party, the formulation that had to be used ended up being more difficult for Canadians, i.e. which party is more to the right? In addition, ideological differences between the two main parties are far more a matter of public record in the US than in Canada.)

This latter figure is especially revealing. Since no word is used more frequently and consistently to characterize the Republican Party than the word conservative, the question serves as a useful proxy indicator of minimal political literacy. Something like 60 percent of young Americans, and half of those over 25 are effectively off the political map. The correspondence with turnout percentages is surely no coincidence.¹⁶ In these figures lies

¹⁵ http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_Exit_Polls.pdf

¹⁶ To place this number in comparative perspective, Swedish political scientists describe as an indicator of the low political knowledge of Swedes, the fact that a similar number (48 percent) were able to state the number of parties in the governing coalition in an open-ended question, and that by far the most common wrong answer was seven, i.e. they mistook presence in parliament for membership in the government (Oscarsson 2004).

a good part of the explanation for the fact that among respondents 3 eligible young Canadians claimed to have voted in the 2006 federal election for every 2 eligible young Americans who reported to have voted in the 2004 presidential election.¹⁷

Compared to actual turnout figures, voters were overrepresented in our sample, especially among the young Canadians.¹⁸ This is to be expected, given the relative difficulty of reaching non-voters and getting them to respond to questionnaires. Hence, if anything, the level of political knowledge of the sample is higher than that of the population represented.

TABLE 1
Political Knowledge average (sum of 7 questions)

COUNTRY	AGEGROUP	GENDER	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
US	15 To 25	Male	2.35	598	1.756
		Female	1.87	532	1.587
	26 +	Male	3.34	292	2.092
		Female	2.50	343	1.750
Canada	15 To 25	Male	2.91	424	1.749
		Female	2.26	453	1.652
	26 +	Male	3.45	211	2.105
		Female	2.46	236	1.648

As the literature leads us to expect (e.g. Gronlund 2003), Table 1 shows that better educated older males are the most politically knowledgeable – to which we add Canadians. (Language, which applies only to Canadians, and is treated as a separate variable below.) As far as gender is concerned, while the males are politically more knowledgeable than the females in both age groups and countries (see Thomas and Young 2006), the difference is lower among those under 25, especially in Canada. This is not, we should add, because young women are more knowledgeable than their elders, but because young men are significantly less knowledgeable than theirs.

III: Political Participation and the Sources of Political knowledge

In Parts 3 and 4 we investigate these differences. Given the richness of the data a consistent approach toward testing the relationships between indicators is taken. The

¹⁷ The percentages are 74 and 52 – though we know that such claims are typically higher than actual voting figures.

¹⁸ The Canadian Chief Electoral Officer has commissioned a study youth turnout in the 2006 election. The data should be available later this spring. It will replicate a 2004 study of a random sample of polling divisions in every province and territory for the 2004 election which estimated actual turnout among under 25 year-olds at 37% (see Milner 2005).

standard dependent (predicted) variable is political knowledge, i.e. the mean of correct answers between 0 and 7, and the analysis explores various predictors (“independent” variables). In a few cases, where appropriate, reported voting frequency (from never to always) also serves as dependent variable.

Since the dependent variable is interval rather than dichotomous (either-or), the most appropriate statistical measure of that relationship is multiple linear regression. Apart from the traditional statistical measure of that relationship, the beta coefficient, the tables provide the T score, the most commonly used expression of that relationship. The higher the T score (positive or negative¹⁹), the greater the confidence of statistical significance (a Sig. level of below .01 means that we can be 99 percent confident that the relationship between the independent and dependent variable is not the product of chance.) Moreover, rather than treating each association independently those we expect to be linked have been set out in multivariate form in the tables. This allows to include in the same tables the major “structural” independent variables: gender, country (US/Canada), age group, education completed and language (French/English). To simplify the process, they are set up as “dummy” either/or variables. This is automatic in the case of gender and, here, in the case of country and language. But it is also applied to education completed (completed high school or less = 1, more = 2) and age group (15-25 = 1, 26 plus = 2).²⁰ For reasons that are evident, in some tables the data is split and recalculated along such structural lines, most frequently by country or age group.

The first table in this section sets out the results when we test whether political knowledge correlates not only with voting but also other forms of political engagement. Here political knowledge is the independent variable, while the various types of conventional and unconventional forms of participation surveyed are dependent variables in a multiple linear regression. As shown in Table 2,²¹ there is a clear association between political knowledge and the various forms of conventional and unconventional political participation (as well as with three of the four structural variables categories: it is weaker with age group).²²

¹⁹ The sign is merely a function of the order of responses to the question, e.g. always vote to never vote, 4 to 1, or 1 to 4 and my choices here were constrained by the need to be comparable to the US survey.

²⁰ This choice is in part a result of the nature of the data. In the case of education completed, the specific categories are not identical in the two countries. In the case of age, as noted, the sample size is much larger among the 15-25 category, so any other categorization requires applying complex weighting formulas.

²¹ The figure in the table excludes those too young to vote. To get at them we examine a related question which gets at the voting intentions (likelihood of voting: always to never) of those too young to vote in the last election. Though the relationship is not statistically significant per se, given the low number in this category, the significance level of .164 is worth noting, especially when compared with the absence of a relationship between intention to vote and to go further in school (Sig = .729).

²² This confirms a finding by Stolle who used data from the European Social survey to test “whether these new forms of engagement truly substitute for the declining engagement in traditional political and social activities, [concluding that] “there is a gap between those youth who are broadly engaged in a myriad of both new and traditional channels and those youth who are not engaged at all” (Stolle and Cruz 2005: 96-7).

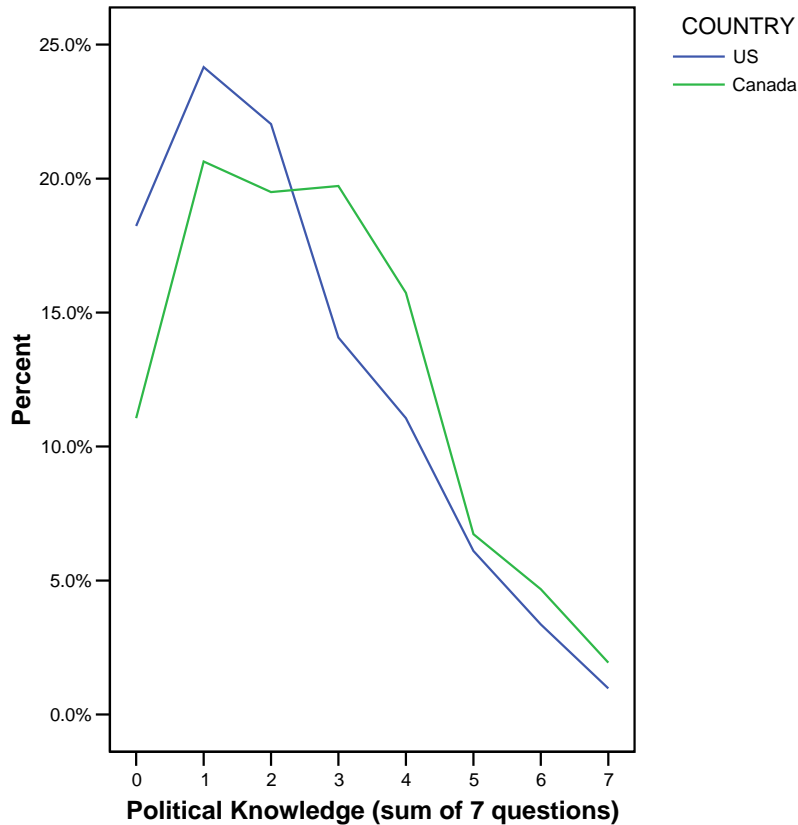
TABLE 2: Political Knowledge and Political Participation

R ² = .314	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
Mean of Political knowledge (seven questions)	Beta		
(Constant)		13.536	.000
EDUCATION COMPLETED	.240	11.679	.000
GENDER	-.196	-10.314	.000
COUNTRY	.069	3.304	.001
AGEGROUP	.033	1.635	.102
Voted in the last federal election	.069	3.304	.001
Vote in elections: always to never.	-.165	-5.788	.000
Talk to people about who to vote for	-.109	-5.293	.000
Campaign button, poster...	-.013	-.630	.528
Contacted a newspaper or magazine to express opinion	-.064	-3.108	.002
Called a radio or TV talk show to express political opinion	.011	.573	.567
Taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration.	-.042	-2.093	.037
Signed an email petition about a social or political issue...	-.044	-2.105	.035
Signed a written petition about	-.117	-5.285	.000
Not bought something on a matter of principle	-.059	-2.838	.005

Dependent Variable: Political Knowledge (sum of 7 questions)

In sum, more informed people participate more. This does not mean that there is a simple causal relationship between being more informed and taking part in political activities. Since those participating in the different manners set out in Table 2 are in a position to gain political knowledge in the process, causality can go both ways. But this does not apply to the basic or minimal knowledge (political literacy) needed to participate meaningfully in the first place, which normally originates outside the various activities associated with political participation. We can see in the bulge on the left hand side of Chart I that a great many young North Americans lack such minimal political knowledge. Hence we look especially at those activities and influences on political knowledge outside the political sphere.

CHART 1: Distribution of mean of correct answers: 15-25 year olds



A useful insight into the sources of political knowledge outside the activities associated with the various forms of political participation is provided by a recent Australian study.²³ The authors listed twelve possible sources in the young person’s environment and asked “where do you get your information about voting in elections?” with the respondents selecting among “none”, “little”, “some” and “most” for each source. The family received the highest score, followed closely by TV, newspapers, teachers and radio. However, when the authors looked at the correlation between the amount of information from each source and student intention to vote when 18 “even if voting were not compulsory,” newspaper readership proved most influential followed closely by information from parents, with the rest well back.

3A: Media use:

The regression data in Table 3 shows that most but not all forms of media use significantly affect political knowledge. To further explore their relationship, I ran the regression for those media use variables found to be significant in Table 3, split by country, age group, and then gender. The relevant numbers are reproduced in Table 3A. The media related activity with the strongest correlations with political knowledge,

²³ Edwards et al (2005) on two occasions a year apart interviewed 476 students between 15 and 18 years of age from 55 representative schools.

irrespective of age, country or gender, turns out to be reading news on the Internet.²⁴ Newspaper reading is significant throughout, though somewhat more weakly among Americans, while it is among Americans, younger respondents, and males that TV watching hours has a meaningful (negative) effect on political knowledge. Conversely, it is only among the young – who watch it less - that TV news watching has a (fairly weak) positive effect.

TABLE 3: Media use and political participation

R2 = .217	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	Beta		
(Constant)		2.817	.005
AGEGROUP	.089	5.092	.000
GENDER	-.178	-10.937	.000
COUNTRY	.117	7.115	.000
EDUCATION COMPLETED	.277	16.098	.000
On how many of the past 7 days did you			
- read a newspaper	.103	5.984	.000
- watch the national news on television	.020	1.193	.233
- listen to the news on radio	-.001	-.042	.966
- read news on the Internet.	.186	11.062	.000
Hours per day spent watching TV	-.033	-2.002	.045

Dependent Variable: Political Knowledge (sum of 7 questions)

TABLE 3A: Media use and political participation

	Age-group	T	Sig.	Country	T	Sig.	Gender	T	Sig.
Over the past 7 days how many - did you read a newspaper - watch the national news on TV. - read news on the Internet. Hours per day watching TV	15-25			US			Male		
		3.881	.000		2.115	.035		7.171	.000
		1.969	.049		1.325	.185		1.740	.082
		11.168	.000		9.501	.000		11.249	.000
	26 +			Canada			Female		
- read a newspaper		6.538	.000		2.793	.005		4.426	.000
- watch the national news on TV.		-1.330	.184		.837	.403		1.681	.093
- read news on the Internet.		9.499	.000		6.603	.000		7.656	.000
Hours per day watching TV		-1.122	.262		-.879	.380		-1.529	.127

Dependent Variable: Political Knowledge (sum of 7 questions)

²⁴ A 2005 Canadian survey found that 65% of Internet users reported accessing news sites at least once a week, the most frequently mentioned sites being MSN, Yahoo, and Radio-Canada/CBC (The Canadian Internet Project: <http://www.cipic.ca/en/intro.htm>).

3B: Voluntary group participation

The CIRCLE Study (see Lopez et al, 2006) poses a large number of questions about involvement in voluntary associations of various kinds. As noted, our interest is in its relationship to political forms of participation, especially voting, as well as to political knowledge. Hence only a small number of these questions are included in the Canadian survey. The most general asked: “have you ever spent time participating in any community service or volunteer activity, or haven't you had time.” As Table 4 shows, the relationship between such involvement and both voting and political knowledge for those over 25, is significant among the under 25 year olds only for the Americans.²⁵ In Table 4a, we look specifically at those still at school. The above result is even more pronounced when the indicator is the number of groups in which the students participate. Moreover, in response to the key third question²⁶ i.e. whether any of these groups involve student government or social or political issues, this is clearly the case in relation to political knowledge but only in the US, while the number of groups only weakly affects likelihood to vote, and, again, only in the US.

Table 4: Effect of voluntary group participation

Question: Have you ever spent time participating in a community service or volunteer activity?

Age Group	Country	Dependent variable	T	Sig.	Dependent Variable	t	Sig.
		Vote Regularly			Political Knowledge (7 questions)		
15- 25	US		5.538	.000		-7.018	.000
	Canada		2.257	.024		-2.166	.031
26 +	US		7.307	.000		-6.420	.000
	Canada		3.373	.001		-3.397	.001

TABLE 4A: Group participation in school: (15-25 year olds)

	Dependent Variable:	t	Sig.	Dependent Variable:	t	Sig.
COUNTRY	Political Knowledge (sum of 7 questions)			Vote regularly		
US	(Constant)	8.353	.000		8.101	.000
	About how many organized groups or clubs are you currently participating in?	1.326	.186		-1.955	.052
	Do any of these groups include student government or organizations concerned with social or political issues?	-3.547	.000		-.988	.324
Canada	(Constant)	4.521	.000		7.896	.000
	About how many organized groups or859	.392		-1.075	.285
	Do any of these groups include	-.834	.406		-1.691	.094

²⁵ Tossutti (2004) examines existing data concluding that there is little evidence that voluntarism leads to political engagement for young Canadians.

²⁶ See von Erlach, 2006.

One important difference between the two countries is thus emerging: participation in voluntary groups seems to be more important in producing informed young voters or prospective voters in the US than in Canada. But given the relatively few informed young voters in the US, it is clearly not very effective.

3C: Political Knowledge and Education

Having entered the school, we should next bring education itself into the analysis of factors associated with political knowledge. To return to our Australian example, Edwards et al's (2005) respondents placed teachers fourth among the sources of information about voting in elections; teachers then dropped them to 9th place (out of 12) when the correlation between the amount of information from each source and student intention to vote was measured. This is not to suggest that education is unimportant; indeed we shall emphasize a particular approach to civic education in addressing the current situation in the last part of the paper. But in the absence of such measures we should not be surprised that education per se has relatively little effect on informed political participation.

Regrettably, the CIRCLE survey asked far more questions about what goes on outside the classroom than inside it. One question asked whether classes required the respondent to keep up with politics or government, either by reading the newspaper, watching TV, or going onto the Internet. As Table 5 shows, its effect on political knowledge and, especially, voting is weak, particularly in Canada. On the other hand, responses to the questions of how often, in classes that dealt with history, government, social studies, or related subjects, teachers encouraged the class to discuss political and social issues in which people have different opinions, significantly correlate with political knowledge in both countries and also with intention to vote in the US.²⁷ While the role of parents and media is more powerful overall in affecting the informed political participation of young people, civic education is the prime instrument available to democratic societies for affecting, especially when it comes to the potential political drop-outs from information-poor backgrounds. Hence it is unfortunate that we have so little clear empirical data on the effects of civic education. Irrespective of other recommendations for action, a priority must be to include more and more detailed civic education related questions in future surveys - especially questions that will allow researchers to pinpoint the effects of such courses on students lacking resources outside the school. We shall return to this.

²⁷ Campbell (2005: 15) summarizes US data: "A school environment which promotes thoughtful, respectful discussion of political and social issues equips students for active citizenship by developing their proficiency in civics. As well, it leads them to the expectation that they will be informed voters in adulthood."

Table 5: Effect of civic education classes on students

Country	Dependent Variable:	t	Sig.	Dependent variable:	t	Sig.
	Political Knowledge (sum of 7 questions)			Vote regularly		
US	(Constant)	5.510	.000		9.999	.000
	Do any of your classes require you to keep up with politics or government, either by reading the newspaper, watching TV...?	-2.150	.032		-1.175	.241
	In classes that deal with history, government, social studies, or related subjects, how often do teachers encourage class to discuss political and social issues in which people have different opinions?	3.640	.000		-2.761	.006
Canada	(Constant)	8.421	.000		6.006	.000
	Do any of your classes require you to keep ...	-1.462	.144		.290	.772
	In classes that deal with history, government	3.855	.000		-1.188	.236

3D: Attitudes toward Politics

A number of other questions explored pertinent attitudes toward certain aspects of politics. As might be expected, a smaller proportion of Americans than Canadians, and older versus younger respondents, believe government should do more to solve problems rather than that government does too many things better left to businesses and individuals. When it came to whether politics is a way for the powerful to keep power to themselves or a way for the less powerful to compete on equal footing, respondents chose the cynical alternative 5 to 4, the only exception being Canadians 15 to 25 with a slight majority rejecting the cynical view. Interestingly, it is only among young Americans that the more cynical are also the more politically informed. As a general rule, those that take the more conservative position, i.e. more skeptical of the positive effects of government action, display a higher average level of political knowledge.

TABLE 6: Attitudes toward politics and government

	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	Beta		
(Constant)		7.706	.000
COUNTRY	.172	5.571	.000
GENDER	-.197	-6.426	.000
AGEGROUP	.169	5.423	.000
My Responsibility To Get Involved	-.116	-3.795	.000
Government should do more to solve problems	.070	2.261	.024
Politics is way for powerful to keep power	.062	2.017	.044
Difference which party controls government	-.123	-4.022	.000

Dependent Variable: Political Knowledge (sum of 7 questions)

As expected, answering yes to the question “it matters which party wins” significantly and positively correlates to political knowledge for both age groups in both countries (the

sign is negative due to the numbering of the possible answers).²⁸ But, digging more deeply, on the related question of party identification (which is not included in the table since the formulation is quite different in the two countries) we can see an important difference. In Canada, all categories, young and older, male and female, French and English-speaking who identify with a political party are more knowledgeable.²⁹ This is not quite the case in the US, with “independents” (at .246) averaging the same levels of political knowledge as Republicans (.245), though almost half a point lower than Democrats.

Summing up what we have seen: while the overall disparity between young Canadians and Americans is not great, nevertheless, compared to young Americans, young Canadians’ somewhat higher levels of informed political participation are related more to traditional factors like newspaper reading and party identification than voluntary group involvement, while in the US, participation in voluntary groups matters more.

IV: Language and Political Knowledge in Canada

The Canadian study, as is often the case, somewhat oversampled the francophone Quebecers in order to allow for statistically meaningful comparisons between them and English-speaking Canadians. (Note thus that language here corresponds to region since all the francophone - and none of the Anglophone - respondents are from Quebec.) As we shall see, the linguistic dimension is especially salient if we wish to further explore the distinction suggested in the concluding paragraph of the previous section.

Table 7 presents mean correct answers among Canadian respondents divided by age group, gender and language. (Note that since the language dimension is limited to Canada, we are able to base the score out of 10 possible rights answers. I add a separate column for data based on seven questions to show that the three additional questions do not alter the overall relationships.) Surprisingly, while for those over 25, political knowledge is higher among English speakers, both men and women; this is reversed when we get to the 15 to 25. Not only are young French-speaking Quebecers, male and female, more politically informed than their English Canadian peers, but, unlike both them and their American peers, the Francophones are more informed than their elders. (Before going further we should note that given the limited number of respondents in this category [N = 289 for those aged 15-25; and 146 for the 26+], the margin of error is too large to allow for a definitive conclusions here. Yet the differences are large enough to be highly suggestive.) In addition, young Francophones are more likely to state that they regularly vote or – if too young - will do so than not only young Americans, but also young English Canadians.³⁰ This is additionally surprising since the knowledge questions are oriented toward national (Canadian) politics and institutions.

²⁸ Only when we introduce gender does the relationship weaken, but only in the US and, in particular, for those over 25.

²⁹ This is one reason why, here and elsewhere I argue in favour of adopting proportional systems of elections. There is a good logical and empirical basis (see Milner 2004a) for asserting that PR fosters party identification.

³⁰ The combined figure for young Francophones is 69 percent, for young English Canadians is 62 percent.

A part of the explanation for the generational inversion for Francophones lies in improvements in education and functional literacy. While French speakers' average score was well below that of English speaking Canadians (264.1 vs. 278.8) in ability to comprehend written texts in the International Adult Literacy Study (IALS) carried out in the early 1990s, the gap dropped to 5 points when the test was repeated 10 years later, with the bulk of the change due to the youngest group. Indeed, those aged 15 to 25 had not just reduced the gap but actually surpassed their English-speaking counterparts (292.7 to 290) (Bernèche and Perron 2005).

One possible explanatory factor is the effect of politicization due to the division in Quebec over the national question. On the one hand, it does not seem to fit the fact that unlike those under 25, Quebecers 25 to 60, who were, if anything, more politicized, are less politically knowledgeable than their English Canadian peers. Moreover, we do not see evidence of the significant attitudinal differences that one would expect from a more politicized population. In relation to political cynicism we find only a slightly greater likelihood for Québécois than English Canadian young people to see politics as a means for the less powerless to compete compared to a means of the powerful keeping power for themselves (123 to 109 vs. 224 to 216). Conversely, however, this difference becomes highly salient when applied to the question whether they always do or intend to vote. Of the 123 young uncynical young Quebecers, 96 said the (would) always vote, while of the 224 corresponding young anglophone Canadians, only 67 responded in the same way.

Table 7: Political knowledge (sum of 10 questions)

Age Group	Gender	Language	Mean	N	Mean of sum of 7 questions	Standard Deviation
15-25	Male	Eng	3.91	285		2.257
		Fr/Qc	4.75	139		2.344
		Total	4.18	424		2.317
	Female	Eng	3.22	303		2.153
		Fr/Qc	3.50	150		2.042
		Total	3.31	453		2.119
	Total	Eng	3.55	588	2.43	2.229
		Fr/Qc	4.10	289	2.85	2.276
		Total	3.73	877	2.57	2.258
26 +	Male	Eng	5.03	142		2.788
		Fr/Qc	4.65	69		2.700
		Total	4.91	211		2.759
	Female	Eng	3.50	159		2.068
		Fr/Qc	3.19	77		2.090
		Total	3.40	236		2.076
	Total	Eng	4.22	301	3.00	2.548
		Fr/Qc	3.88	146	2.78	2.498
		Total	4.11	447	2.93	2.534

On most other attitudinal and most behavioural indicators, there is nothing that significantly distinguishes young Francophones from their Anglophone compatriots. But there is one recurring difference. Our sample of young Quebecers distinguish themselves in their attentiveness to the political world around them. As we can see in Chart 2 below, when asked the extent to which they follow what’s going on in politics, 10 percent more Francophones respond “most of the time.” And when we investigate how they do so, Table 8 shows that young French Canadians report following the news in the media – especially television, but not on the Internet – on significantly more days than their English Canadian peers. Indeed, it is they who account for the positive overall effect of TV news watching on political knowledge among young people. Conversely, on the negative side, when it comes to participating in a community service or volunteer activity, table 9 elaborates on Table 4’s revelation that the positive relationship of such activity with both voting and political knowledge is weakest for young Canadians. When we split by language, it turns out that it is the young francophone Canadians that largely account for this difference.

CHART 2

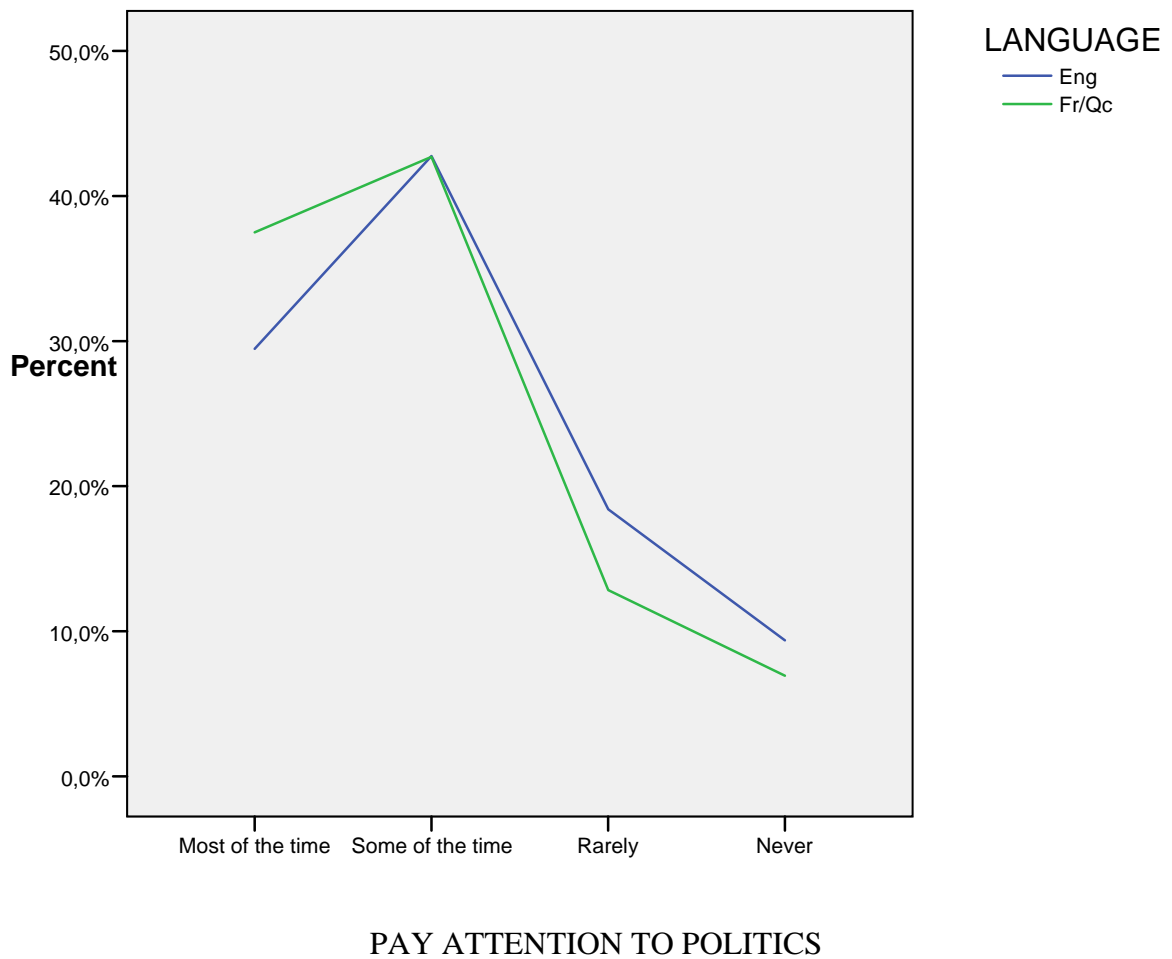


TABLE 8: Media Use and Language

Language		Read a newspaper over past 7 days	Watch the national news on television.	Listen to the radio news	Read news on the Internet.
Eng	Mean	3.06	3.22	2.96	2.39
	N	587	587	586	581
	Std. Deviation	2.590	2.561	2.820	2.590
Fr/Qc	Mean	3.17	4.82	2.86	1.49
	N	288	288	287	286
	Std. Deviation	2.634	2.452	2.756	2.335

Table 9: Effect of voluntary group participation

Question: Have you ever spent time participating in a community service or volunteer activity?

Age group	Language	Dependent variable	T	Sig.	Dependent Variable	t	Sig.
		Regularly Vote			Political Knowledge (10 questions)		
15-25	ENG		1.837	.067		-2.212	.027
	FR		1.414	.159		-1.159	.248
26 +	ENG		2.885	.004		-4.037	.000
	FR		1.760	.081		-.273	.785

One other likely aspect of the explanation relates to party identification. We noted that in Canada for all categories those who identify with a political party are more knowledgeable, something not quite the case in the US. While young Quebecers are no different from young English Canadians in their level of such identification in our survey, we have good reason to expect, given the polarization over the issue of sovereignty, that, compared to young English Canadians, they are far more likely to identify with a party at the provincial level – an aspect not touched upon by the questionnaire.

V: SUMMING UP SO FAR

The above finding that an extraordinarily high proportion of young Quebecers who see politics as a means for the less powerful to compete rather than a means for the powerful to keep power for themselves also vote regularly should be set against the earlier finding that the most salient distinction between young Canadians and Americans is magnified when we look separately at young Quebecers, namely that of the effect of voluntary participation on both voting and political knowledge is weaker for Canadians 15 to 25 – and effectively non-existent for those in Quebec. We are here brought back to the earlier distinction made between political participation, associated with more traditional links to

the political process, i.e. political parties and government policies, versus civic engagement, associated with voluntary, non-partisan forms weakly related to government policies. If we associate continental Europe (see Ersson and Milner, 2007) with the former, and the United States with the latter, Canada can be said to lie in between with Quebec closer to Europe and English Canada closer to the US.

If this is so, it takes us beyond description to prescription when it comes to the approach to take toward youth democratic participation – though obviously this can only be very tentative at this point. Given the differences in levels of political knowledge among our youthful respondents, with young Quebeckers highest and Americans lowest, this study supports our suggestion that the European approach is more effective when it comes to fostering informed political participation and, specifically, boosting voter turnout. For Canada, thus, it would appear more promising to tilt in a European direction, one tied more to policy choices by governments and less to the voluntary choices of individuals.

The United States is a special case: there are institutional obstacles to taking such an approach that are largely absent in Canada. It is well known that, unlike in comparable countries, electoral boundaries in the US are drawn by partisan bodies giving incumbents an immense advantage and creating numerous uncompetitive legislative districts thus reducing incentives for parties to mobilize voters. But this is only one manifestation of a wider peculiarity of the American approach to the administration of elections. Elsewhere, electoral administration is non-partisan and – at least for national elections – centralized; rules apply equally throughout which guarantees certain standards and makes practical reform realistic. In the US, electoral administration – even for federal elections – is a prerogative of the States, and frequently inadequately sheltered from partisan manipulation. Efforts to reform institutions are sporadic and local in their impact. Moreover, the many specific actions undertaken in other countries by non-partisan electoral authorities to address declining youth participation, must, in the US, be left to voluntary associations.

While voluntary associations can play a useful complementary role in this area, coordinated leadership can only come, as it does elsewhere, from the electoral authorities (Milner 2007). Fortunately, thus, Canada is not constrained to follow the American approach of emphasizing involvement in voluntary associations, an approach we have seen to be not especially effective at inducing informed political participation. More generally, one lesson from this study is that we should be wary of efforts to downplay conventional forms and institutions of political participation related to parties and issues, and the knowledge associated with choices among them. The choice is, ultimately, one of accepting and encouraging the self-definition of young people who do not have the information on which to cast an informed vote defining as engaged citizens, or targeting them with specific measures in an attempt to make them able to participate politically in an effective manner.

If we adopt this second line of thinking we are brought, inevitably, to the question of civic education. This is not the place to investigate the question in depth (see Milner 2005; 2007); we rather limit ourselves to what emerges from the results of the survey that may be relevant to civic education. And here the first lesson from our findings is not to

expect too much: there is no one-to-one correspondence between the amount of civic education offered and the degree of informed participation. If anything, there is less civic education offered in Quebec than in the rest of Canada (Milner 2007), and certainly no more in English Canada than in the US.

As far as Quebec is concerned, a parallel study conducted by the author (Milner, Leowen and Hicks, 2007) showed that 18-20 year old young Francophones are more politically informed than their non-francophone counterparts despite having undergone the same education. This fits in with the above-made suggestion that the youth culture of French Quebec is more politicized.

The wider conclusion to be drawn from these distinctions is that civic education needs to be targeted in its content and dissemination strategy. In the case of Quebec this would mean special attention to programs for English-language high schools and junior colleges. More generally, the targeting needs to be tied to class – to designing and disseminating civic education to bring political knowledge to individuals and groups low in the requisite home and community resources³¹, supplemented by government programs in education, media support, political party financing, information dissemination etc. Young people for whom home support and social connectedness is weak are frequently potential dropouts, and civic education course needs to be offered at a time when they are still in school but close to voting age,³² and in a form most likely to appeal to them. One analogy is drivers' education – the value of which is apparent to young persons. When young people reach a certain age, it becomes practical to learn the rules of the road; the same applies to the knowledge and skills relevant to voting and other forms of political participation when reaching the age of citizenship and voting.

Of course, the priority, when it comes to civic education, must be to learn a great deal more about what works and doesn't. This entails first taking a step backward and find out just what is happening in the first place. We currently lack even minimal systematic comparative data on such basic aspects of civic education as the hours of weekly teaching time that goes to it; whether it is offered as a specific course or included in other courses; the extent to which it is conducted inside or outside the classroom; whether it is compulsory and required for graduation; how it is tested; the extent to which it emphasizes political institutions, national history, civic participation, or democratic principles; the importance given to voluntary community service; and the qualifications of teachers.³³

³¹ Twice as many of the 77 percent of students who reported daily or once or twice weekly discussion of school studies with parents scored satisfactory or better (32 to 16) than the 23 percent who never or hardly ever has such discussion in the (difficult) NAEP test of proficiency in civics (NCES 1999: 100).

³² I have thus argued (Milner 2005) for lowering the voting age in combination with compulsory civic education courses at an age when casting a first vote is looming in the young person's horizon.

³³ Comparative data on civic education is being assembled by a team coordinated by the author based at IDEA International in Stockholm. The database is compiled out of the responses to questionnaires completed by knowledgeable individuals in 25 to 30 democratic countries. The questionnaires focus on these characteristics primarily at the secondary level.

What we do know is primarily based on American studies which suggest that civic education in the US is markedly skewed toward constitutional history and voluntary community participation (see Milner 2005). Few studies, moreover, single out civic education's effects on those who need it most, i.e., students low in resources outside the school.³⁴

Clearly, then, the first step is clearly to clarify our approach to the subject: is our research agenda based on an essentially subjective approach in which engaged citizen participation is defined as - as the young respondent to Mindich (2005) put it - "that which engages me"? Or is it to be the one advocated here, one which gives priority to an approach focused on informed political participation, investigating policy measures and institutional reforms that foster civic literacy and youth turnout? The former path is psychically rewarding for both the observer and observed, and fits nicely into the dominant electronic expression of the youth culture. The problem is that, unlike the latter, it cannot be expected to reduce the deficit in what we have traditionally taken to be democracy.

VI: Social Networks, Political Knowledge and Political Participation

Before considering possible policy responses, a final dimension needs to be explored. The Australian data cited earlier drew attention to parents as a source of political information. According to Franklin (2005), the longer a person lives in the same neighbourhood the better the chance that politically motivated individuals will have had to become acquainted with the potential new voter, and, in the case of young people, the greater the likelihood they are still living in the parental home and thus benefiting from an appropriate support group. Using US voting turnout data since 1972, Franklin finds that young adults who had lived all their lives in the same neighbourhood were 21 percent more likely to vote than those who had recently moved there, suggesting that: "the anonymous individual indeed has less reason to vote, unless he or she has already acquired the habit of voting... [but] a person whose name is known, within a supportive network of family and friends (or acquaintances) expressively engaged with one-another on the subject of their vote intentions, needs a very good excuse for not voting (Franklin 2005: 23-28).³⁵

The data from the two surveys here reported on do not bolster Franklin's contention. No significant relationship was found between young people's length of residence in the community and voting (vote regularly, or intend to vote regularly), and political knowledge, or even with whether they had been contacted by someone to work for or contribute money to a candidate. This rather crude measure does not necessarily undercut

³⁴ One related study looking at the effects of mock elections on Hispanic students in Colorado in 2002 and low-SES students across the three sites in 2004 found that these "provide an added boost for minority and low-income students (McDevitt and Kioussis, 2006: 2-3).

³⁵ In a similar vein, a Statistics Canada study suggests a similar phenomenon in Canada. "A strong sense of belonging to the community as a young adult resulted in higher odds of voting" - Milan 2005:4).

his main contention concerning the effects of living in the parental home when reaching the age of voting. But it does make us look again at this crucial aspect.

In his larger work Franklin ties this dimension to voting age. He notes that since voting is in good part a matter of habit, the costs of learning to vote are higher if one's first election falls during the period when one is only starting to establish the social networks that will frame future choices including political ones. Since those aged 18 to 20 are typically in the process of withdrawing from their home and traditional school environment without fully settling into another, and thus especially preoccupied with things other than politics and public affairs, they are more likely to develop the habit of non-voting. And he marshals quite convincing data to show that this is indeed the case.³⁶ Since returning the voting age to 21 is politically unfeasible, Franklin concludes that reducing it to 16 or 15, when young people are still in high school "appears to be the only feasible reform that might undo some of the damage that was done when the voting age was lowered in most countries during the late twentieth century" (Franklin 2004: 214).

VII: What is to be Done: Civic Education in Institutional Context

We thus begin our discussion of policy responses to the low level of youth turnout and political knowledge with the idea of lowering the voting age - with Canada as our primary focus. From our vantage point, the primary advantage of lowering the voting age would be that more young potential voters would still be in school and, thus, in a position to attend civics classes and be involved in allied activities. This is not to dispute Franklin's description of the period in a young person's life after leaving the parental home as unsettled. However, in the context of an information world comprised of Internet based subcultures consisting of chat rooms, blogs and the like, the picture of adolescents getting information from family discussions of the news over supper or chewing over the developments reported on in the morning paper at breakfast has somewhat paled. Moreover, not all young people are the same. We know that the most likely political drop-outs are also the most likely school drop-outs. And this is a group where the family does not have the resources to fit into the kind of network Franklin describes, or, from our vantage point, to be a source of political information. The crucial aspect of the lowering the voting age is thus that the group most affected by this measure, i.e. those in danger of dropping out of school between the ages of 16 and 18, are far more likely still to be at school at the first opportunity to vote.³⁷ I have thus argued (Milner 2005) for

³⁶ Franklin provides evidence of a secular decline in turnout after the minimum age was reduced, typically to 18, in the 1960s and 70s in different countries. Lowering the voting age left a "footprint" in the electorate of lower turnout that expanded with the (younger) coming of age of each new cohort – a process reflected by declining turnout in every country that did so. A certain number became non-voters who would have not have become so had their first opportunity to vote been later, when they were in a better position to develop the habit.

³⁷ A recent American study shows that these potential political dropouts can be affected simply by remaining longer in school. Milligan, Moretti, and Oreopoulos (2003) show the effect of extra years schooling induced through compulsory schooling laws increased the likelihood of becoming politically involved, finding a strong effect on voter turnout.

lowering the voting age in combination with compulsory civic education courses at an age when casting a first vote is looming in the young person's horizon. Given that public opinion is unenthusiastic about the idea, the initial step would best be a series of pilot projects, perhaps beginning with local elections.³⁸

There are a number of complementary institutional reforms that can play a role in bolstering youth political participation. Reforms that make elections more competitive motivate parties and candidates to make greater efforts to inform and mobilize potential voters. In the case of the United States, this entails as a priority depoliticizing the drawing of electoral boundaries and reducing the cost of elections so that incumbents do not have such a great advantage. For Canada, it entails making progress on initiatives under way toward adopting more proportional electoral systems and fixed voting dates (see Milner 2004a, 2005a). Such reforms should at least marginally boost turnout; but they would also enhance the effects of actions that must be at the core of any strategy specifically addressing young people. As we have seen in this survey, in the US and, only slightly less so, in Canada, a substantial proportion of young people arrive at voting age lacking the minimal knowledge needed to cast any kind of vote. The crucial challenge is thus to change this state of affairs both in directly imparting that knowledge and in inducing the habits of attentiveness and skills required for gaining that knowledge.

At the core of this strategy is civic education – though we must be careful not to place too heavy on already overloaded schools. And we know too little at this point to draw a clear link between civic education and political knowledge. Whiteley (2005) explains this as due to the complexity inherent in tying exposure to particular educational experiences to outcomes such as participation. Political education, he notes, can take place in various places and contexts in the school curriculum and is affected by classroom procedures and teaching style, the wider school climate, and factors outside the school entirely. Most importantly, the effect differs depending on the resources available to the student outside the school. It is for resource poor students that the school is the most important institutional resource.

The priority, when it comes to civic education, must be to learn a great deal more about what works and doesn't. To do so we must first take a step backward and find out just what is happening in the first place. We currently lack even minimal systematic comparative data on such basic aspects of civic education as the hours of weekly teaching time that goes to it; whether it is offered as a specific course or included in other courses; the extent to which it is conducted inside or outside the classroom; whether it is compulsory and required for graduation; how it is tested; the extent to which it emphasizes political institutions, national history, civic participation, or democratic principles; the importance given to voluntary community service; and the qualifications of teachers.³⁹

³⁸ Dates of municipal elections are fixed in advance and local political actors and issues can most easily be brought into the civics classroom.

³⁹ Comparative data on civic education is being assembled by a team coordinated by the author based at IDEA International in Stockholm. The database is compiled out of the responses to questionnaires

What we do know is primarily based on American studies which suggest that civic education in the US is skewed toward constitutional history and voluntary community participation (see Milner 2005). Furthermore, existing studies look at overall effects, seldom singling out civic education's effects on those who need it most, i.e., students low in resources outside the school.⁴⁰

If there is one message in my explorations of this problem here and earlier, it is this: The primary targets among young people should be those for whom home support and social connectedness is weak. In Figure 1 below, we visualize North American young citizens as divided into 4 groups. It is the group in rectangle 3, the potential political drop-outs, that should be the first priority – and it is effectively only when they are still in school that they can be reached. (The dropouts in rectangle 4 could be brought to the ballot box only through compulsory voting; but there is good reason to believe that this would have no real effect on their interest in or attentiveness to politics (Milner, Loewen and Hicks, 2007).

In Appendix 3, I set out, from a Canadian perspective, some tentative guidelines as to the approach that civic education policy should follow, linking these to complementary institutional changes such as fixed election dates (see Milner 2005a) and proportional systems of elections. PR elections give small parties with distinct principle-based positions, such as Greens or libertarians, a better chance of having democratically elected – and therefore legitimate – spokespersons to represent them in the classroom.⁴¹

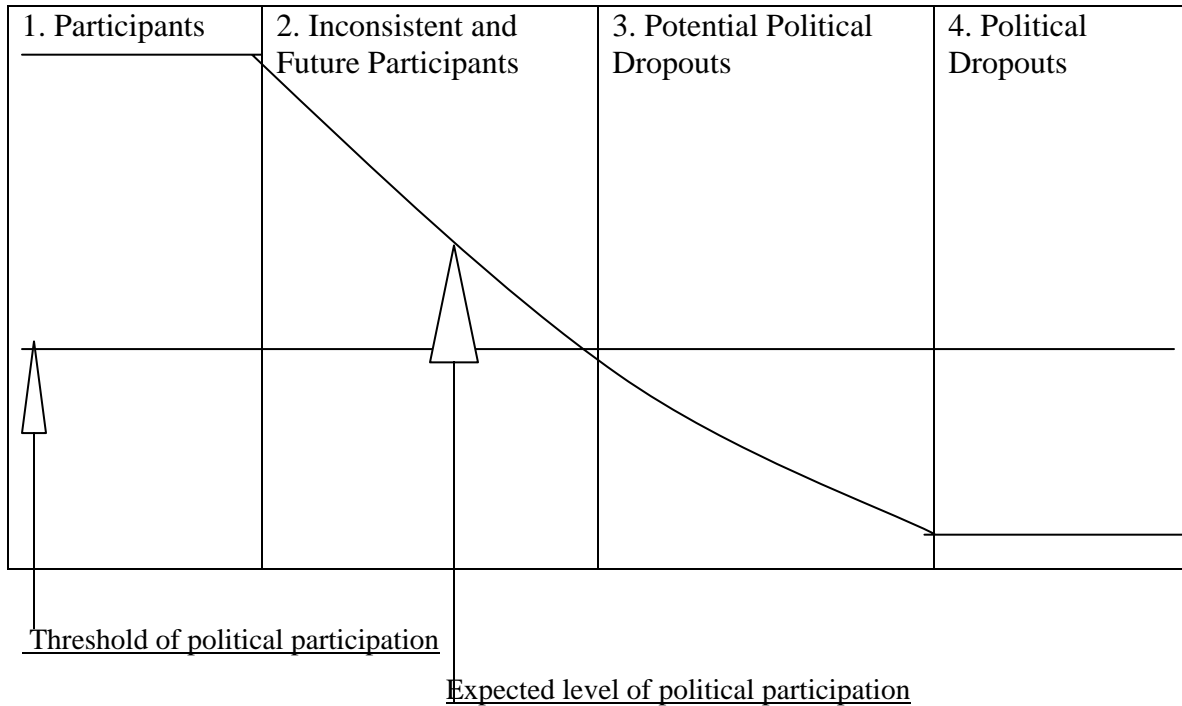
I conclude that, set in a proper context, compulsory civic education, though no guarantee of enhanced youth political participation, is an inescapable aspect of any strategy for doing so.

completed by knowledgeable individuals in 25 to 30 democratic countries. The questionnaires focus on these characteristics primarily at the secondary level.

⁴⁰ One related study looking at the effects of mock elections on Hispanic students in Colorado in 2002 and low-SES students across the three sites in 2004 found that these “provide an added boost for minority and low-income students (McDevitt and Kioussis, 2006: 2-3).

⁴¹ This representativeness, we should note, also tends to make the entire political system more legitimate in the eyes of the young people, and also promotes youth turnout (see IDEA 1999).

FIGURE 1: Mapping Youth Political Participation



This is not to imply that civic education takes place only in the classroom. A useful complement are mock elections that are being carried out high school students in the US, Canada, Sweden and Norway (and many other countries no doubt).⁴² McDevitt and Kiouisis (2006:3) recently assessed the effects over three years of Kids Voting USA,⁴³ finding that “while the curriculum did not affect voting in the third year, 2004, directly, it did animate the family as a setting for political discussion and media use, habits that eventually lead to voting. ... Parents got caught up in their children’s enthusiasm for politics. There is reason to believe that similar effects have been produced by parallel Canadian efforts⁴⁴ supported by Elections Canada.⁴⁵

⁴² The first, founded in 1988, was Kids Voting USA which now arranges for teachers in 39 states to help students gather information about candidates and issues, so that, on Election Day, they cast their ballots in special booths (the younger ones going to the polls with their parents). Experience in the program appears to enhance the attentiveness of the students to politics in the media and home, and brings parents to vote more often and become better informed about politics through interaction with their children (Golston, 1997).

⁴³ Students who were juniors or seniors in 2002 were interviewed in the fall/winter of 2002 and 2003, and again in 2004 when all were of voting age.

⁴⁴ In the October 2003 Ontario provincial election, the 2004 and 2006 federal election, and the 2005 BC provincial election - see Studentvote.ca.

⁴⁵ The Chief Electoral Officer reported (*Electoral Insight – July 2003* Elections Canada): “Community relations officers for youth identified neighbourhoods with high concentrations of students for special

A related initiative being explored is Internet voting which could be expected to positively affect youth turnout. But Internet voting is rare, so we have no data on its effects – including the effect it might have on efforts by young people to inform themselves. Indeed, those of us who reached maturity in a very different media environment may be at a real disadvantage here. (I, for one, cannot imagine how educated, intelligent young people can assert – as Mindich reports - ‘I’d rather play video games than read a newspaper because... it engages you more.’⁴⁶ Someone closer to this generation may be able to devise an approach close enough to video games to engage young people sufficiently.) Perhaps a source of inspiration is to be found in political comedy shows directed at young people, the Daily Show by John Stewart in particular, with its use of news clips and crisp, satirical interviewing technique.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

We have found youth turnout and political knowledge levels to be higher in Canada (especially for Francophones) than in the US, noting that the relationship between involvement in voluntary associations and both voting and political knowledge weakens for Canadians 15 to 25 – reaching to the point of insignificance for those in Quebec. This suggests that the American approach, which emphasizes involvement in such associations, may not be especially effective at inducing political participation. This becomes evident only when political knowledge is taken into consideration. The CIRCLE study, though less than most studies in the US, and like many others in Canada and Britain, downplays conventional forms and institutions of political participation related to parties and issues, and the knowledge associated with them. These studies, in the questions they pose and the conclusions they draw, tend to encourage young people who do not vote nor have the information on which to cast an informed vote to report - and think of - themselves as engaged citizens.

An alternate approach is associated with high civic literacy countries in Europe and regards political knowledge as the basis of meaningful political participation. It stresses measures that raise the level of political knowledge by making the environment of young people information rich, targeting especially those lacking the resources to gain access to it on their own. It looks to government programs in education, media support, political

registration drives, assisted in locating polls in places easily accessible to youth, and informed the community and youth leaders about registration and voting..”

⁴⁶ Cited in a book review of Mindich (2005) by Margot Harrison in Seven Days <http://academics.smcvt.edu/dmindich/Seven%20Days%20Tuned.htm>.

⁴⁷ In a survey during the 2000 and 2004 elections, Cao (2005) found that significantly more young than older Americans were likely to report that they learned about the campaigns from political comedy shows, an assertion confirmed by a test of political knowledge. In its 2004 election survey, the Annenberg Centre at the University of Pennsylvania reported that the political knowledge level of Daily Show viewers was 16 percent higher than non viewers. http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004_03_late-night-knowledge-2_9-21_pr.pdf.

party financing, information dissemination etc. in contrast to the former approach which targets voluntary group activities and insists on non-partisanship. To oversimplify, the approach is one of placing priority on getting political knowledge to those who lack it.

We have suggested some of the policy directions Canada should take. But the first step is clearly to clarify our approach to the very subject: is our research agenda based on an essentially subjective approach in which engaged citizen participation is defined as – in the words of Mindich’s respondent – “that which engages me”? Or is it to be one which gives priority to an approach focused on informed political participation, investigating policy measures and institutional reforms that foster civic literacy and youth turnout?

The former path is psychically rewarding for both the observer and observed, and fits nicely into the dominant electronic youth culture. The only problem is that, unlike the latter, it does not reduce the deficit in what we still take to be democracy.

APPENDIX I: POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS

(US and Canada)

- As far as you know, does the federal government spend more on Social Security [old aid pensions] or on foreign aid?
- Would you say that one of the [major] parties is more conservative [more to the right] than the other on the national level? IF yes: Which party is more to the right?
- Which of the following best describes who is entitled to vote in federal elections?
 - 1 Residents
 - 2 Taxpayers
 - 3 Legal residents
 - 4 Citizens
 - 8 Don't know
 - 9 Refused
- Please name two members of the Presidents [Federal] Cabinet and identify the department they represent [are in charge of]:
- Five countries have permanent seats on the Security Council of the United Nations. Which of these countries can you name?

(Canada only)

- What is the maximum number of years between Canadian elections?
 - 1 3 years
 - 2 4 years
 - 3 5 years
 - 4 6 years
 - 5 other number of years

- Can you tell me which party has the SECOND largest number of seats in the House of Commons?
 - 1 The Conservatives
 - 2 The Liberals
 - 3 The Bloc Quebecois
 - 4 The NDP

- Obviously, a person on a low income will pay less total money in income tax than someone on a high income. But do you think that a person on a low income pays
 - 1 a bigger *proportion* of their earnings in income tax than someone on a high income
 - 2 the same *proportion*
 - 3 or a smaller *proportion* of their earnings in income tax

(US only)

- How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a Presidential veto?

APPENDIX II

REGIONAL BREAKDOWN: Canadian Sample

	Frequency
Newfoundland	21
Nova Scotia	41
New Brunswick	28
Prince Edward Island	6
Quebec	451
Ontario	420
Manitoba	46
Saskatchewan	40
Alberta	110
British Columbia	156
Yukon	2
Northwest Territories	2
Nunavut	1
Total	1324

APPENDIX III

Some Tentative Guidelines for Civic Education.

TARGET: The primary targets among young people are those for whom home support and social connectedness is weak.⁴⁸ These are frequently the potential dropouts and the course needs to be offered at a time when they are still in school but close to voting age.

STANCE: The courses should be presented as practical, not moralistic. The best analogy is drivers' education – the value of which is apparent to young persons. When young people reach a certain age, it becomes practical to learn the rules of the road; the same applies to the age of citizenship and voting. (The connection is being made in the other direction in Ontario, which is bringing in legislation to allow only those in full time education to have drivers' licenses between 16 and 18.)

OVERALL APPROACH: The stress is to be on knowledge and skills relevant to voting and other forms of political participation, as well as inducing the habits of attentiveness to the sources of information and skills required for acquiring it. This is different from the mainstream American approach, which plays down (partisan) politics, stressing American history and the US constitution in the civics classroom and community-based volunteer activities outside it. Numerous studies suggest that this reduces effectiveness in terms of generating political interest and involvement.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Twice as many of the 77 percent of students who reported daily or once or twice weekly discussion of school studies with parents scored satisfactory or better (32 to 16) than the 23 percent who never or hardly ever has such discussion in the (difficult) NAEP test of proficiency in civics (NCES 1999: 100).

⁴⁹ See Stroupe and Sabato (2004; see also Beem 2005; Hunter and Brisbin 2000; Andolina et al 2002; Henzey, 2003.

CONTENT: There is no one-size-fits-all formula. It is largely a matter of learning from, adapting and refining what works in comparable civic education offerings courses when it comes to meeting the combined objectives of imparting the required knowledge and inducing the habits of attentiveness. As we await the needed systematic data, we can accomplish much by looking at best practices elsewhere, exchanging course material via the Internet, etc.⁵⁰

As we learn more about what forms of civic education work in what contexts, we will be better placed to advocate and adopt more specific measures. We do know (see Milner 2005) that many potential young voters are “turned off” by what they judge as the apparent inauthenticity of politicians put on the defensive by an adversarial and ratings-driven media. Hence, if it were to become standard for elected politicians to visit civic education classes, large numbers of young people could be exposed to another, potentially more authentic, side of those seeking their votes.⁵¹ This means countering the unwillingness in the US and, less so, elsewhere to allow partisan politics into the classroom (thus making it more important and more natural for the teacher to strive for impartially).⁵²

Of course, visitors to the classroom can and should also be virtual, given the dispositions of young people. The surveys show that media use is still strongly linked to political knowledge. When it comes to young people, especially those from information-poor households, the role of the school in fostering habits of newspaper reading is fundamental. Nevertheless we should not expect too much. Our data shows that using the Internet as a source of news is now more strongly correlated with political knowledge than reading newspapers - a trend that is

⁵⁰ A Canadian example of such potentially useful material is from Ontario’s course Profile for Civics in Grade 10 classrooms. This course explores what it means to be an informed, participating citizen in a democratic society. It is broken down into three units, respectively 15, 25 and 15 hours, entitled Democracy: Issues and Ideas; The Canadian Context; Global Perspectives. Another useful formulation is expressed in the questions incorporated into the schema for the recently revised GED (General Education Diploma) examination used throughout the United States and in parts of Canada. The five organizing questions are: 1) what are civic life, politics, and government? 2) What are the foundations of the American political system? 3) How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy? 4) What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs? And 5) What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy?

⁵¹ Beem (2005) usefully sets out the lessons learned from a well-designed fact-to-face encounter between American students and politician about how break through barriers and break down stereotypes.

⁵² “Schools [in Wisconsin] feared being charged with being partisan. Having students deliver food baskets was safe; having student work to oust a politician who cut food-stamp programs was not” (Beem, 2005: 10). And they were right in their fears. The Corporation for National Service, major funder of service learning, explained its refusal to allow participants in the youth service program Americorps to attend the “Stand for Children” rally in Washington DC, as follows: “National Service has to be non-partisan ... it should be about bringing communities together by getting things done. Strikes, demonstrations and *political activities* [my emphasis] can have the opposite effect” (Cited in Walker, 2000). This has had the expected effects on political knowledge: American 14 year olds, compared to peers in 27 countries, did worst on the question about the function of political parties. See Torney-Purta and Barber (2004).

certain to continue. Hence emphasis must be placed on bringing in appropriate electronic political information, with a view toward developing habits of attentiveness to - and the ability to pick up signals about - the political world. We are learning more about the kinds of electronic sources of information that are most promising, how news websites without being overloaded with high tech gadgetry can be made more attractive and informative to young people (Sherr 2005), about the effectiveness of specially created materials such as e-books.⁵³ Web based material, moreover, has the added advantage that it can be incorporated into modules of civics education courses irrespective of location.

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⁵³ An example is found in a multimedia "e-book" about the 2002 California gubernatorial election. Compiled on a CD, the e-book presented an exhaustive and easily searchable database about each of the two major candidates (Democrat Gray Davis and his Republican opponent Bill Simon) including televised advertisements, interviews with broadcast news sources, excerpts from the party platforms, and the audio of their one public debate (Iyengar and Jackman 2004).

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