

Youth Primaries Focus Group Project:  
A Discussion of the Impact of Retail Politics on Youth Voter Turnout in Canada

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The age of brokerage politics in Canada is officially dead (Carty 2013). Parties are no longer consensus building organizations, reaching out for the approval of all Canadians (LeDuc et al. 2010, 33). Both strategists and pollsters now author chapters explaining how modern campaigns employ tactics to maximize limited resources and woo soft supporters (Flanagan 2010, Turcotte 2012). This shift is a result of a worldwide political marketing revolution where voters are seen as consumers, and platforms are constructed to appeal to and mobilize very specific segments of the market, or the electorate in this case (Savigny 2008). Campaigns are now well-oiled machines, replete with negative attack ads and vote suppression manoeuvres. Political war rooms dole out goodies to specific voting blocks to gain favour in crucial ridings, and national platforms are often blurry and less critical. The role and importance of leaders as hallmark of the party brand has grown exponentially over time, replacing ideological positioning (Carty 2013:19). These tactics work to mobilize those targeted and undeniably help win elections, but they also send a clear message to those not included, (Lilleker 2005). Young folks can rarely tip the balance in any given contest. In some contexts, appealing to youth could even be seen as very risky, as catering to a potentially volatile segment of the population may serve to alienate or turn off more stable (older) people who otherwise can be reliably counted on to vote. As a consequence youth are largely ignored, and there is no overarching vision to reach out to them. In turn, young people largely ignore politics.

However, it would be a mistake to write off the benefit of engaging youth entirely. Encouraging young people to vote could positively impact election outcomes, as witnessed during the two most recent American elections. Barack Obama occupies the White House in part as a result of conscious efforts to appeal to those under the age of 35. When elections are won by a small fraction of votes, motivating youth to vote for your party can also be highly advantageous. This trend towards reaching out to this otherwise untapped market is not only successful in the United States, however. Other cases are beginning to emerge in Canada as well. Naheed Nenshi, the current mayor of Calgary, Alberta came from nowhere to increase turnout in a municipal election and win. He achieved this success in part by connecting and engaging with young people over Twitter. Similarly, Pauline Marois, the current Premier of Quebec persuaded Léo Bureau-Blouin, the lead organizer of the Maple Spring protests, to join her team, signalling a sincere commitment to youth, and it paid off. Parties that ignore the youth cohort increasingly do so at their peril. Learning how to engage young people is essential.

Voter engagement is declining in most democratic countries as a consequence of youth withdrawal, causing some to question if in fact voting is for young people (Wattenberg 2008). With respect to electoral politics and party engagement, youth seem to be virtually “tuned out” (Gidengil et al 2003). In the 2000 federal election in Canada a staggering 75% of 18 to 34 year olds chose to remain home on election night (LeDuc and Pammett, 2003). This lack of enthusiasm has decreased aggregate turnout rates, leaving them to rest around the 60% mark nationally (Elections Canada 2011). As with new developments in political marketing, this decline is not confined to Canada, but part of a consistent trend that emerged simultaneously in the majority of developed democracies.

## Kids these days

Youth behaviour is full of contradiction and difficult to understand. On the surface, attitudes toward politics are not all that different between older and younger voters, nor do youth seem significantly more negative; yet this generation of youth votes less than any other (Gidengil et al 2003). Likewise, political and electoral structures have changed very little, and attitudes do not appear to have shifted dramatically in recent years, but voter turnout has fallen. Commitment to democratic values is higher than ever, yet obligation to electoral politics is also waning (Pharr and Putnam 2000:7). Critically, norms of civic participation have eroded for this generation, but youth have not entirely disengaged. They are more likely than their older counterparts to boycott goods for political reasons or; sign a petition and literally take to the streets, signalling greater commitment to political action and mobilization rather than abject apathy (Nevitte 1996, Mike Painter-Main forthcoming). There has always been some degree of variance between generations, with young people voting less than their older counterparts; however, this particular generation of young people votes less than any other generation of young people. This suggests that something else is causing kids these days to behave differently.

Although the current theories contribute to our understanding of non-youth voting, they do not clarify the *recent* decline in voting among young people more specifically. Perhaps it comes as no surprise then that policy prescriptions based on this research are largely ineffective, as they attribute the decline in turnout almost exclusively to flaws in youth character and focus on making youth *better people*, without understanding the reason for the change in their attitudes or behaviour. Attempts to persuade young voters of their duty to vote, and the resulting “vote mobs” and engagement programs are no doubt important. Attempting to inculcate a more positive understanding of the role of a citizen is never a bad thing, but it is difficult to shift existing norms since values by their nature are resistant to change. Youth no longer see voting as a necessary public good (LeDuc, Pammett and Bastedo 2008). Part of the difference in voter motivation between generations is undoubtedly that young people are less interested and feel less responsible or committed than their older counterparts, but only in politics would a decline in passion and commitment be blamed exclusively on shifting norms. Taking this position is akin to McDonald’s scolding young people for wanting healthier foods, or the Gap blaming young people if their jeans no longer fit. Blaming youth without attempting to better understand what is driving this change in norms is limiting. Instead, if politics is now a product and youth are merely consumers, we need to better appreciate how the political context is affecting youth norms.

Findings from capacity scholars reveal that evaluations of electoral context and political leaders are important. Indeed, not only does the salience of the main issues in any given election increase turnout, (Franklin 2002, 2004), but satisfaction with what political leaders stand for specifically increases the likelihood of voting among young people (Bastedo 2012). Comparing the youth with their older counterparts, the data show that the psychology underlying voting motivation is quite different for those over 35. Older voters are not influenced by their sense of satisfaction with symbolic representation or values congruence. In fact, symbolic representation is not a statistically significant predictor of voting among older people. Instead, satisfaction with interest representation is more significant for older voters than symbolic representation. This pattern differs from the motivation of those under 35, whose voting behaviour is influenced greatly by the connection or symbolic affinity with political leadership, but not affected by the

degree of satisfaction with interest representation. In other words, when it comes time to decide to vote, older voters are moved by the capacity of leaders to represent their interests—to ply them with benefits—whereas younger voters, whose needs are largely ignored, are motivated by what those same leaders symbolize or *stand for*. In both cases, evaluations of representative capacity affect voting motivation, but the value placed on representative capacity is different. It makes sense that older voters are motivated to vote for candidates who cater best to their interests, which follows consumer logic. After all, they are the primary targets of political strategists. It also makes sense that young people are less likely to be motivated in this context, as they are not wooed at election time, and they instead rely on values shortcuts. However, here too a full understanding of what might interest young people and what this new generation expects from political leaders, or why leaders don't stand for youth, remains elusive and speculative at this point.

### **Youth Primaries Focus Group Project**

Sitting down and listening to young people from these communities can be invaluable in learning about political disengagement, or in this case, understanding why young people are less interested in politics and feel that leaders' values are in opposition to their own. Survey research cannot adequately get at these questions, as these questions are not found on existing surveys and youth from communities that are historically less interested or likely to engage are rarely included. Young people who are not interested enough in politics to cast a vote are also less likely to answer the phone when a pollster calls. This is where focus groups can prove to be a powerful tool for theory generation, and aid in future survey design.

However, one or two focus groups are not sufficient. To investigate more deeply, twenty focus groups with young people across the country were conducted between June 2012 and May 2013 (see Appendix 1 for details). Sponsored by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, *The Youth Primaries Focus Group Project* was designed to mirror the American primary system, where candidates travel across the country to engage with everyday Americans to talk politics. In this case, with the help of André Turcotte, I traveled across Canada—from British Columbia to Newfoundland—speaking to young Canadians from less-advantaged communities identified in the literature to be less likely to engage politically or be interested in politics. It was important to ensure that there was a diverse range of young participants from each region of the country, as well as a broad range of differing communities of young people (for instance, those with less than high school education, those with a college education, those with lower socio-economic status, Aboriginal youth, etc.) in order to explore what differences or commonalities existed among the various groups of young people.

Much like the *American Primary system* the large number of groups included in the *Youth Primaries Focus Group Project* allows us to transfer knowledge; explore ideas and capture voice that has previously been elusive. We were also able to compare and contrast groups, thereby refining and building theory. However, this project is not representative of all less engaged youth communities, or the youth population as a whole, and therefore we must be careful not to push too far.

Participants were recruited with support from individuals and organizations that cater to less-advantaged communities less likely to be interested in politics, but we did not control for level of engagement or interest. We wanted groups to be reflective and young people to feel at ease. Accordingly, we went to them. The youth were drawn from several different provinces, and focus groups were held in community centers and schools, where young people felt comfortable and were accustomed to speaking. In order to compare a range of young people, we also conducted five focus groups with young people who are historically more likely to be interested in politics—namely university educated and civic activist groups. There were 152 participants in total from Scarborough, Montreal, Yellowknife, Fort Smith, Calgary, St. John's, Saskatoon, Quebec City, Vancouver, and Ottawa. Ages ranged from 15 to 28, with the majority of groups comprised of young people over the age of 18.

The focus groups from communities less likely to be interested were organized as follows:

- 2 groups: At risk youth (i.e., receiving social services support)
- 1 group: Young women at risk
- 2 groups: Lower income youth involved with a community group
- 2 groups: Young people in high school
- 1 group: Community college students
- 3 groups: Aboriginal young people—both urban and rural, Métis and First Nations
- 1 group: New Canadians
- 1 group: Lower socio-economic status (SES) English-speaking young people in Quebec
- 2 groups: Lower SES French-speaking young people in Quebec

The focus groups from communities more likely to participate were organized as follows:

- 2 groups: Political Science association members/students
- 2 groups: Community activists
- 1 group: University Students – not in political science

As this project was intended to be a knowledge transfer conversation, in the first half of each focus group, participants were asked to describe their impressions of previous research on political participation (See Appendix 2 for full discussion guide). They were told about how other groups of young people felt about politics, and asked if they shared those same feelings. Specifically, they were asked if they feel that they were *outsiders* with respect to politics, and why or why not they felt the way they did. We were less concerned with the question of why young people don't vote and more interested in understanding how young people who are less likely to engage politically felt about politics and political leaders more specifically. They were also asked whether they had an issue or problem they cared about, if they had ever tried to do something to address it, and what happened as a result of that engagement: was it easy to access information, to access those in power, and was the interaction positive? Finally, they were asked if those feelings extended beyond politics to other areas of their lives. This section was designed to probe feelings of efficacy as well as to test previous research findings that indicated that those less likely to participate had lower levels of efficacy that may pervade behaviour and problem solving in other areas of their lives.

The second half of the discussion shifted focus from descriptions of politics and political leaders as they now exist, and moved to descriptions of what political leaders and politics would look like in their ideal state. Unlike the first exercise, participants provided an account of the qualities they would like to see in political leaders, and then, in turn, they described the way they would like to see politics work. The members of the groups that were less likely to participate were also asked if there were leaders that exemplified the ideal qualities, to describe something positive about political affairs and if there was some way to make it easier for them to get involved. This section was aimed at understanding important shortfalls in expectation.

The analysis begins with a review of between group similarities. This starting point is essential as it serves to confirm existing literature, as well as establish which variables are unlikely to cause the recent difference in behaviour. From there we will review the points of divergence both within, and then, between groups to appreciate the range of opinion among communities less likely to be interested and controls, again comparing that variance with existing literature to reveal new patterns for investigation. Isolating these differences allows us to better understand how or what may contribute to most recent declines in youth turnout.

### **Between group similarities: We are unimportant to ‘them’**

Not too surprisingly, when describing how they felt about politicians, less interested and control groups alike had a very negative view of politics; one in which youth are unimportant.

Politicians were consistently referred to as “they” or “them” regardless of whether the group was in Fort Smith, Calgary, or Ottawa, signalling a sense of otherness felt among young people. Youth were also consistently skeptical of political motives, and doubted the sincerity of the political conversation. Many of those less engaged felt that when it comes to political discussion, “They are talking, *at* you.” Or, “They say they are listening, but they are really looking for ammunition on the other guy.” And, as one participant in the at risk group from St. John’s expressed, “They pretend we’re [*sic*] concerned, but it’s really, “I don’t care”... We don’t really feel heard.” The feeling of being patronized was also shared in the control groups by those more likely to be politically involved or interested. As one woman from Vancouver put it, “They sat and listened to me, but they weren’t really interested. I felt patronized—yes, patronized by them.”

These negative feelings of course were to be expected, as the literature shows that engaged and disengaged harbour very similar dim views of politicians, (Bastedo et al. forthcoming) and as a consequence, these negative views do not necessarily predict voting (Ruderman forthcoming).

Likewise, albeit not found in previous literature and somewhat unexpectedly, youth share a consistent understanding of power relations and their place in politics. That place is in the margins. Here again, all groups shared the belief that as individuals they are unimportant to politicians or in political affairs. This understanding is evidenced across the country with comments such as, “Any single person doesn’t count. Politicians only care about groups.” Or, very similarly from a young woman from Vancouver, “You don’t count on your own, if it’s just you, but when there are a bunch of you, then, then they will listen.”

The young people we spoke with also shared the understanding that as a cohort, youth do not matter, but this does not extend to other areas of their lives. When pushed in the conversation they explain, “It’s not like Starbucks, where I hold the power. I have the money. They [politicians] don’t need me...I don’t matter to them.” Young people also have a solid grasp of why politicians are less interested in young people more specifically. As a high school student in Yellowknife expressed, “They know that we [youth] don’t vote and...no one reaches out because of that...” This relationship cuts both ways, as captured by a young Aboriginal woman from Saskatoon: “Young people don’t vote and they [politicians] don’t care.” The sentiment that emerges is strikingly similar to comments expressed by non-voters in Britain, describing why they chose not to vote for the Labour party.

Labour are only bothered about the business types who live around London in the big posh houses, they’ve forgotten who was leafleting for them in the 80s when they needed people. I’d have voted for the Liberal, she was interested in us on the council estates, she had no chance though. (Lilleker 2005, 18)

However, unlike non-voters in Britain, this sentiment is shared by both less interested communities and control groups alike. Across the board, youth have little confidence that they will be heard or included. They understand that as individuals or as a cohort they don’t matter, and politicians don’t care.

This understanding is powerful and probably shapes not only attitudes about politicians, but actions as well. Few mentioned voting, and fewer have ever contacted an elected official to voice a concern, or ask for help. Furthermore, young people who had experience engaging predominantly described those experiences negatively. When asked what happened as a consequence of asking for help the responses were again tellingly on script across groups, all highlighting a clear sense of futility in engaging:

“We never heard back.” (Aboriginal: St. John’s)

“They pretend to listen, but nothing changes.” (English speaking: Montreal)

“They ignored us.” (Aboriginal: Saskatoon).

When youth did get a reply, the response did not solve the problem. As one English speaking participant in Montreal explained, “They sent back a letter to tell us why they wouldn’t do it.” Critically, the only group that shared what could be described as positive interactions were participants from the highly engaged political science group. This too confirms existing literature that warns of the hopelessness of those less engaged, as well as the importance of successful interactions between the public and public officials (Bastedo et al forthcoming).

As a consequence, when asked how they could express themselves politically to make a difference they described protest behaviour and volunteering in their communities rather than traditional political engagement, such as joining a political party. The youth communities we spoke to explained that being heard requires mobilizing—not voting in elections, or calling on your Member of Parliament. “They [their MP] will only pay attention if there is [*sic*] a lot of us.” explained a young woman from Vancouver. The recurring sentiment, *even from control groups*, was that if you want change, you are more likely to succeed by employing alternative channels.

In short, the young people we spoke with have absorbed the message that “we are unimportant to them” and they have gleaned this message in part from modern political campaign practices, which ignore young people, as well as everyday problem solving interactions with government and Members of Parliament. Therefore, sending a different, more inclusive signal during campaigns could help address and alleviate this concern. However, as these feelings are shared across interested and control groups alike this may not in fact raise turnout rates directly. Nevertheless, if political parties sent a different message to young people, it could attract youth that are engaged as well as some who are at the margins. It may also reduce the desire on the part of young people to take to the streets.

### **Within Group Difference: A Range of Interest and Knowledge**

This is not to say that a large number of focus group participants are actively mobilizing, or necessarily taking to the streets. More accurately, there was a range of both engagement and knowledge within any given group.

For the most part youth in the disadvantaged groups we spoke with are more accurately described as “tuned out” (Gidengil et al. 2003). However, it is important to note that within each conversation there was considerable variance in attention. Some young people voted and some abstained. Some were active in their communities, others took to the streets. One young man from the New Canadian group in Vancouver was adamant that he and his friends were not apathetic—they cared, and were involved in their own ways. Nevertheless, while many have participated in some form of protest, volunteerism, and signing petitions, a large proportion of participants admitted that they did nothing at all. Moreover, they wouldn’t know what to do or who to contact if they did want to take action or change something. This is where another difference within the groups emerged.

Where those in the control groups were relatively confident of their knowledge of politics, there was no such consensus among those less likely to engage. However, as with participation, it would be unfair to characterize focus group members as ignorant or completely uninformed. There were generally one or two participants in any given group that were well versed, recounting the front pages of the morning newspaper, or extolling the virtues of proportional representation, for example. However most of the groups also had a few members who knew almost nothing, having difficulty naming the Prime Minister, or Premier. They knew even less about how political structures work, and showed little awareness of larger issues of the day. One young man from Saskatoon confessed that he wasn’t even sure what *politics* was—shrugging his shoulders he said that he knew virtually nothing about politics. The majority of young people fell somewhere in between however, demonstrating cursory awareness, but little command or confidence, suggesting possible interest but a steep learning curve for many. Knowledge of politics was clearly a barrier and concern for most participants.

However, when asked what they would need to know, the young people we spoke to were much less concerned about the study of political structures per se. Nor was there a desire to know who is who, or engage in public policy making. In fact policy making was eschewed by most of the young people we spoke with—particularly among the less-advantaged. Instead they were most concerned with their ability to make an informed decision when choosing a



representative. This came up again and again to differing degrees in the communities that were less likely to be involved, even among some of whom had a great deal of political acumen within these groups. Almost all focus group participants, (again with the exception of one political science group), expressed concern over having sufficient knowledge to make *the right* choice come election-day. Youth we spoke with had difficulty determining what each party stands for, and how to make an informed voting decision, and those who were more sophisticated raised some very hard normative questions. For example, “Should the choice be based on the local candidate, or, the party leader?” or, “How can you tell which guy is telling the truth?”, “What do you do when one party has something you like, but so does another—a different thing—how do you choose?” and finally, “How can I meet my local candidates?” were all examples of recurring questions that surfaced when discussing elections. This lack of confidence was most pronounced however among those in communities that were less likely to be engaged who were unsure where to start.

Many blamed their lack of understanding on the lack of accessibility in political discourse, explaining that, “They talk above us,” and, “I don’t understand what they are talking about.” Perhaps most alarmingly, others felt that politicians made issues difficult to understand on purpose. “They talk up there so we don’t understand.” Some suggested that they should be taught more about politics in school, as this lack of knowledge reinforced their feelings of being outsiders. In the end, they prefer to tune the conversation and election out, learning little or nothing from the debate.

There has been considerable flux in the party system in Canada over the past 20 years, and that flux has made it increasingly difficult for less sophisticated voters to be aware of what each party stands for (Bittner 2013). It only makes sense that less advantaged young people struggle as well—perhaps even more. Lack of knowledge and the connection to voting and engagement is nothing new. Knowledge has long been associated with non-voting (See Howe 2010 for a comprehensive review of the political knowledge literature). We know that young people today fare poorly on political knowledge tests (Milner 2011), and when information costs rise, participation decreases (Downs 1957).

The “Vote Compass” website has been extremely popular, likely in no small part due to the difficulty an increasing number of Canadians have in determining what the parties stand for in relation to their concerns (Vote Compass 2012). Also, programs such as those run by national non-profit “Student Vote” that help high school students navigate party platforms and make a choice are likely to address this concern.

The construction of platforms that are accessible, easier to understand, and less *fuzzy* could also go a long way in alleviating some of the difficulty in making a choice, underlining yet another problem with modern campaigns. This would increase young people’s ability to gain confidence and reduce information costs associated with non-voting (Downs 1957). However, providing accessible communications alone are not a panacea.

Youth also play a role, and admittedly a number are not very interested in learning, and in many cases are simply tuned out. It is doubtful that these young people will ever engage, but there are also an equal number that show some level of engagement and knowledge. Youth are not a homogenous group.

## **Between Group Difference: Politics is Personal**

It is not that young people we spoke to from communities less likely to be interested are happy or satisfied with the status quo. When prompted, youth raised a host of political concerns. This is where considerable *between* group differences surfaced, not only geographically, but also amid the control groups and the within groups from communities less likely to be interested.

When asked what concerned them, the control groups raised national issues that affect *all* of Canada, such as international trade, democratic reform, or commodity pricing for example. Conversely, the predominant concern among young people from communities less likely to be interested was different. For instance, local treaty rights emerged for Aboriginals in Saskatoon, St. John's and Fort Smith, but the mayor's response to homelessness was a concern for both groups in Calgary. Housing prices surfaced in discussion in Yellowknife and St. John's but not elsewhere, and police harassment was important only in Scarborough. The list of concerns ranged quite a bit within groups too. The reliability of public transit, local employment, and the cost of food were mentioned by several in another group in St. John's, but were not an issue for the rest of the groups. And finally school quality was a predominant concern for both English and French speaking participants in Montreal, but it was not an issue elsewhere.

These concerns all share one thing in common—they are personal, and local or provincial in nature. Only jobs, marijuana, and the oil pipeline could be considered federal, and they were not consistently mentioned across all groups, or shared within groups. This observation challenges lifecycle theory, which maintains that youth are less concerned or affected by politics until later in life because politics does not touch their lives. Instead, the conversation suggests that youth from communities that are less likely to be interested are affected, but their issues are personal and as a consequence, unique to each community. That is why the concerns change from group to group, and even within any given group. This finding is also somewhat in keeping with Naurin's (2011) assertion that layman evaluate political outcomes that affect them and are concrete, rather than execution of policies or government intent.

Differentials in issue importance between older and younger cohorts have been suggested in the past (Turcotte 2003). However there is certainly no consensus in the literature (Gidengil et al. 2003). Moreover, they have never directly been tied to interest in politics (Howe 2010). Furthermore, the previous work did not suggest that issues affecting less-interested youth were personal in nature. Therefore we are unable to generalize more broadly from the focus groups or confirm from existing literature whether it is the personal nature of issues that marks a difference between older and younger cohorts. This discovery is altogether new.

However, rudimentary data analysis using the 2013 Manning Centre Barometer data (See Appendix 3 for survey details and question wording) supports this finding, suggesting that not only are youth more likely than their older counterparts to see their issues as personal, but this also influences interest in politics as well. The main concern of roughly 70% of young people under 30 years of age is personal in its nature, rather than national. Whereas the main concern of 42% of those over 30 is personal, leaving 58% of those over 30 concerned about an issue that is national in its scope, and this between-group difference is moderate, producing a Phi of .212 which is beyond chance (data not shown).

More importantly, as we see in Table 1 below, this between-group difference also predicts interest in politics, producing a modest Cramer’s V of .178 (p=.024) for those under 30, and a weaker Cramer’s V of .129 (p=.000) for older counterparts in crosstabulation. In other words, compared to those over 30, young people are statistically significantly more likely to have their main concern be personal in nature, and political interest is lower among those whose concerns are personal.

**Table 1: Crosstabulation of Interest by Main Concern, Controlled for Age**

	<b>YOUTH (30 OR LESS) N=298</b>		<b>OLDER (MORE THAN 30) N=1308</b>	
	<b>Personal Concern</b>	<b>National Concern</b>	<b>Personal Concern</b>	<b>National Concern</b>
<b>Very Interested</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>26%</b>
<b>Somewhat Interested</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>51%</b>
<b>Not very Interested</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>17%</b>
<b>Not at all Interested</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Total N</b>	<b>206 (69%)</b>	<b>92 (31%)</b>	<b>549 (42%)</b>	<b>759 (58%)</b>

**Cramer’s V =.178 p=.024    Cramer’s V=.129 p=.000**  
**Chi Square= 9.46 df=3    Chi Square=21.71 df=3**

Critically, not only are more young people likely to harbour more personal concerns, but the greatest generational difference occurs among those very interested, and those not at all interested. Only 8% of young people whose main concern is personal are very interested in politics, compared with 18% of young people whose main concern is national. This effect does not extend to their older counterparts. However, a whopping 41% of youth whose main concern is personal are somewhat interested, signalling a willingness to engage on the part of young people and an opportunity to connect for those interested in improving turnout, or seeking votes from those under 30. Nevertheless, engaging young people that are not concerned about an issue at the federal level does pose a challenge, and makes it hard for federal political leaders to connect.

### **They Don’t Stand for Me**

The disconnect felt between political leaders and youth in these communities was further underscored when we asked how their values differed from political leaders. This is where the second between group variance occurred. The communities of disadvantaged youth we spoke to

describe a sense of estrangement from political leaders that had less to do with being young, and more to do with life circumstances—their worldview was markedly different. As one woman explained in Saskatoon, “They don’t represent me.” This phrase was repeated and emerged in group after group in different forms, but the feeling was consistent as one young man explained: “They don’t stand for me.”

Drilling down, we heard comments such as, “Politicians don’t know what it’s like to be hungry. I mean *actually hungry*” from a young man in Calgary. Or very similarly, “Maybe they could take a bus...for a week even....to know what it’s like to wait...to be me.” In Fort Smith I heard, “They don’t know how I live...what it’s like...They’ve never even been here.” And, again, from an English speaking man in Montreal, “They make themselves so big... “Hi, I’m in charge!”...they act like, what’s your problem?”

And interestingly, when pushed, youth explained that politicians did not have to look like them or be young. They were not seeking descriptive likeness, *but understanding*. Justin Trudeau’s name emerged, but was quickly dismissed with; “He’s young, but he’s like all the rest.” Youth we spoke with explained that leaders did not have to be poor or disadvantaged or to necessarily come from their communities, but in order to stand for them leaders would need to respect their circumstance and appreciate the challenges they face on a day-to-day basis. Politicians would need to care about them. They felt this was absent.

As with issue importance, this sentiment emerged in groups that were less likely to be interested but did not emerge in the control groups of engaged young people. The engaged political science control groups we spoke with identified with political leaders and often were members of political parties as well. In contrast, these groups struggled to explain how their values were different from political leaders, as they shared the same worldview. This common sense of identity is to some degree understandable as their life circumstance is privileged. After all these young people are attending university and have expertise in political science.

This between group variance became clearer still when those groups less likely to engage or be interested outlined the characteristics of an ideal leader, and ironically they weren’t asking for much. “He should care about me” and “Reach out...come to me...see where I live. Care about me,” described one young woman from St. John’s. Another man from Montreal reiterated, “They need to come...face to face...*on my level*...set foot in these places...they [should] come to me...not just vote for me...I’ll tell you after.” Many described the ideal leader as listening rather than talking. “We don’t really feel heard. I really just want someone to listen.”

Jack Layton, Barack Obama, Danny Williams and Naheed Nenshi were among those mentioned as ideal leaders by those less likely to engage. This ideal was usually attributed to the leader’s unique ability to connect and be ‘one of them’. If the leader wasn’t from their community, they had spent time in the community visiting or engaging one on one. But also, and importantly, they were recognized as fighting *for* them in some way, and it usually had to do with promoting greater equality. Layton, Obama, Williams and Nenshi’s were not young, and on the surface share little in common. Nevertheless these ‘ideal’ leaders were described as listeners and ‘outsiders’ fighting the establishment for greater equality as well. Obama fought for U.S. health care; Layton and Nenshi fought for social justice and Williams fought against Ottawa to make Newfoundland a ‘have’ province. The issues were concrete, easy to understand and the leaders had track records in community building.

These character attributes are hard to quantify, and are not quite captured by the “politicians are out of touch” question that is a mainstay on surveys. But the consistency among and across groups provides a recipe for success that is worthy of further investigation for those that care about democracy, or winning elections.

## **Two New Solitudes: How Campaign Tactics Can Build a Bridge**

There are plenty of reasons for ignoring the unreliable—or even volatile—youth electorate. As we mentioned in the introduction, campaign budgets are tight, and youth on their own can rarely turn the tide in any crucial ridings. Politicians can often win without them, and it is hard work to forge a connection. However, ignoring youth also has its share of risk. Those who pay attention to young people are increasingly being rewarded at the ballot box. There is no single way to remedy the problem of waning youth turnout, but the results indicate the problem could be addressed through shifts in campaign tactics. A return to brokerage style politics that sends a message of inclusiveness, in plain language, bringing issues close to home, with candidates visiting and listening have been powerful, and could be powerful in the future.

In a very real sense the data from the *Youth Primaries Focus Group Project* suggest the emergence of two solitudes, however, this time it is not French and English, but engaged and disengaged. Engaged groups’ views about politics may not be entirely positive, but they share a worldview with their leaders and their interests are discussed and catered to; they are wooed during elections and expect their needs to be met. They are treated like important consumers in the political world, and in turn they remain interested and politically involved.

Youth from communities less likely to be interested or engaged share many of the same negative feelings about political affairs as those who are more engaged, but feelings of disappointment are compounded as they have absorbed the message that they are unimportant. The spiral of disengagement appears to be entrenched now (LeDuc and Pammett 2011). Moreover, they know very little about politics and find the language inaccessible and the prospect of making a choice daunting. For young people, issues are concrete, affecting them personally, but rarely are they part of the political discussion. Youth don’t matter and perhaps most critically, they do not feel that leaders represent them. They are a world apart, waiting in the cold for the bus and experiencing real hunger. It is unlikely that political insiders know what it is like to live in that world.

Bridging the two solitudes created by modern campaign tactics is easier said than done. It is not sufficient to be young, or just to come out. The data show that campaigns that have been successful at engaging youth are often led by unique individuals that are seen as outsiders to the established rule. Leaders are not talking over young people, but engaging with them—face to face, or on Twitter. They are fighting *for* something, and it is clearly articulated. It is hard to replicate that kind of connection or mimic that style of leadership, as well intentioned as any strategy may be. It is also difficult to make issues that are abstract at the federal level into something personal and concrete. Reaching out is not easy, democracy rarely is.

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## **Appendix 1: Research Methodology and Group Construction**

This paper incorporates data from twenty focus groups (N=152 participants) ranging in size from four to twenty eight participants. The groups were conducted in Scarborough, Montreal, Yellowknife, Fort Smith, Calgary, St. John's, Quebec City, Vancouver and Ottawa between July and May 2013.

All focus group participants provided informed consent, which ensures that their identities remain confidential, as well as assurance that they were not required to answer or respond to any questions they were not comfortable talking about. Some participants received pecuniary compensation upon completion of the focus group; focus group meetings were a maximum of two hours in length. Groups were recruited with the assistance of local community organizations and individuals that work with young people. These organizations contacted potential participants, but did not control for level of interest or engagement with politics, but those who were less interested were encouraged to participate, to ensure a range of perspectives. No one who was interested was excluded from participation. A semi-structured format was used to gain insight into respondents' feelings about politics and political leaders more specifically (see discussion guide in Appendix 2 for details). André Turcotte facilitated the groups in Quebec and Heather Bastedo facilitated all the remaining focus groups.

The first group from Scarborough included 5 participants recruited by the UforChange, an organization dedicated to integrating arts and culture to improve everyday lives. The second and third groups included sixteen English and French speaking youth from Montreal. These groups were recruited with the assistance of Institut du Nouveau Monde. The groups were conducted separately with English speaking participants in one group and French in the other. The fourth group included six young people from school in Sir John Franklin High School in Yellowknife. This was followed by the fifth group—including 28 students from Ecole St. Patrick High school, also in Yellowknife. The seventh group, including thirteen First Nations and Metis participants, was conducted at Aurora College in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. The eighth group also took place in Fort Smith, at Paul W. Kaeser High School, including eight participants. From there, the project moved to St. John's where two groups were conducted one group, including five LGBT participants recruited with the help of the Love of Learning organization, and another with eight at risk young people with help from the Choices for Youth organization. Moving on from St John's, two groups were conducted in Calgary—one which included eight participants organized with the assistance of the McMan Youth and Family Association. And the other including eight young women, recruited with the assistance of the Youth Central organization. The next stop was the Core Neighbourhood Youth Co-Op in Saskatoon, where six Aboriginal youth participated. The project then visited Quebec city—talking to eight French speaking youth with the support of Vincent Deslauriers. From there we returned to St. John's to speak to six young people from the Aboriginal community and eight Political Science Association members at Memorial University. We then moved to Vancouver where we conducted two groups (13 participants in total) with elite challenging activists, organized by the Check Your Head organization, and one other group of six new Canadians recruited by the Vancouver School Board. The project was wrapped up with the final two groups taking place with 16 participants (8 political science and 8 non-political science) from Carleton University.

## Appendix 2: Discussion Guide

Discussion guide: Part 1

Introduction: (10 minutes)

Going around the table, please tell us your first name and background (e.g., occupation, age, interests, country of origin, an issue that you care about).

Part 1: The Outsider: Results of the Previous study (30 minutes)

a) Did we get it right?

- We will start by sharing the results of our previous study and get your feedback about what we found out
- 1st off, would you describe yourself as a political outsider?
- Previous participants expressed frustration in their own ability to get things done in politics. They say that this is the reason that they are less involved. Do you share this feeling? They felt that the system and politicians are not working for them. Would you agree?

b) Is it just politics?

- Is this frustration just when you deal with political issues, (getting help for your child in school) or do you feel this way about other areas of your life (paying your Rogers bill, getting your passport? Is problem solving hard?
- In comparison to other parts of your life are politics more or less difficult – why?
- Is there anything that can make things easier?

c) Using your voice

- Other folks we spoke to felt that they would not be listened to, and that's why they didn't participate. Do you agree?
- What do you think would happen to you if you did ask for something to change? What are you the most afraid of happening?
- Also, I'm going to push you on this – how would politicians know what you cared about if you don't speak up? Do you think that maybe because you don't speak up, your issues are not being talked about?

Part 2: Representation (30 minutes)

a) Representation quality

- And although we know you don't really like politics, let's pretend politics was good and start off by talking about what you kind of qualities you'd like to see in a politician.
- Tell me what you think would make a "good representative". What would or should the representative be doing?

b) Your representative

- Do you know who represents you in Ottawa? How close to your ideal is he or she?
- Why or why not?

c) Politics that you would want

- Now expanding this idea – can you tell me what kind of qualities you want to see in politics more widely? Can you tell what it looks like when politics or politicians are getting it right?
- Is there something specific that can be improved that would make you want to engage politically?
- 

Part 3: Talking Politics (20 minutes)

a) What is a Political issue

Can you tell me what comes to mind when I say that something is political?

What makes it political? Where do you get your political information?

b) Talking politics

Can you give me a show of hands? Do you ever have arguments with your friends about issues that might be political? Tell me about the arguments? Do you ever win?

What would you change in this country if you could?

## Appendix 3: Manning Centre Survey

### Survey Details

André Turcotte conducted the poll. A total of 1,524 on-line interviews were conducted for the survey between February 1<sup>st</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013. The margin of error for a representative sample of this size is 3.1 percentage points within a 95% confidence interval. However, the margin of error is greater when looking at sub-segments of the population. Results reported in this work have a maximum margin of error of 4.9 percentage points within a 95% confidence interval. Detailed findings can be found on the Manning Centre website <http://manningcentre.ca/>.

### Question wording

Three variables were used for this project; age, main concern and interest in politics.

[Question wording goes here]

### Recoding

Age: Age was recoded into a dichotomous variable with ages 18 to 30 included as ‘youth’, and all other as ‘older voters’.

Main Concern: Main concern was recoded into a dichotomous variable as well.

**Personal issues** are as follows: personal issues/growth/future/life, money/income/paying bills/afford home, personal health/problems/seniors care, unemployment/jobs/finding a job, cost of living/rising costs/groceries/rising costs, high gas/energy/prices, education/cost of education/funding, family issues/income/family life.

**National issues** are as follows: Gov’t policy, Harper majority, gov’t spending, greed/profit, failing society, crime\*, retirement\*, finances/national debt, gov’t accountability, politics, taxes, poverty, health care, terrorism, economy, immigration, climate change, natural disaster.

Notably: both crime and retirement fall between national and personal concerns and were coded in both national and crime categories, resulting in no change to the outcome. But as both have a federal dimension; they were placed in national issues.