POLITICAL & CIVIC INVOLVEMENT
OF YOUTH
This report was developed from a literature review of academic scholarship and grey literature related to youth civic and political involvement as part of a project at the Centre for Public Involvement.

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/// EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The disengagement of young people from civic and political arenas has the attention of many academics and policymakers in Canada and internationally. While there appears to be a common belief that youth are disengaged from political and civic activities in their communities, studies into such involvement contradict this belief and illustrate nuances in the ways in which youth seek to become involved. Consequently, the research rejects the idea that there is an overall apathy among youth, especially in issues that matter to young people. In fact, in some cases, we see youth even more involved than their older Canadian counterparts.

This report is a summary of the academic and grey literature related to youth involvement in political and civic life. Additionally, discussions with professionals working in other municipal jurisdictions and civic organizations across Canada were held to gather data about best practices in youth involvement and the case studies provided throughout this report reflect some of those discussions.

SOME KEY FINDINGS IN THIS REPORT ARE:

• Much of the literature rejected the idea that Canadian youth are “turned off” of civic and public engagement to rather suggest that there is a trend of being “tuned out”.

• Youth participation in formal political institutions such as voting appears to be declining in Canada and internationally. Recent scholarship indicated that this decline is related to generational factors and that age is the best predictor of voting behaviour.

• Studies indicated that even though youth recognize the importance of voting as a civic duty, their sense of obligation to engage with formalized activities such as voting is low. Reasons for this lowered sense of obligation include lack of belief that voting will make a difference, disinterest with the issues discussed during elections, and the exclusion of youth from political campaigns.

• There are many campaigns and efforts to increase both youth registration and participation in voting, though findings from research are not conclusive about the outcomes of such efforts.

• More attention needs to be given to demographic groups that are often excluded from traditional approaches to increasing youth involvement, such as Aboriginal youth, young women, and newcomer populations. Additionally, the impact of level of education on youth involvement bears attention.
• While youth show lower interest in formalized membership in political parties, they often are more involved than older Canadians in other non-voting political activities, such as campaigns and activities related to boycotting, buycotting, protesting and petition signing.

• Volunteer rates among Canadians are highest in the age 15 to 24 demographic. The youngest demographic of Canadians prefer to volunteer in coaching, refereeing and fundraising as activities.

The significance of the connection between civic and political involvement is beginning to become better understood among both practitioners and policymakers. For example, young adults who reported volunteering in the year prior to an election were much more likely to be involved in at least one political activity (voting or non-voting). However, more research is needed to better grasp the linkage between these two areas.

Recommendations from the literature are broad but provide both practical and achievable means of improving youth involvement.

1. Develop an inventory of agencies and programs focused on youth political and civic engagement. Focus on building relationships with community-based initiatives to focus on the needs of youth. Furthermore, host a symposium that connects municipal leaders, scholars and practitioners who are concerned about youth involvement.

2. Look at the shift to new individualized and private forms of engagement as being an important message from youth.

3. Avoid “one size fits all” framework so that considerations are made for a broad range of youth.

4. Investigate the roles of civics education and service learning. Also, political socialization through family and peer groups warrants attention.

5. Investigate the link between civic and political involvement.

6. Encourage government to critically examine how their own practices reach out to youth.

7. Probe motivations for voting and not voting with the potential for identifying appropriate incentives for voting.

8. Emphasize information and communication technologies as means of political expression, activism and youth engagement.
While the notion that youth appear not interested in engagement may be common among popular discourses, this broad claim is not entirely accurate. However, the ways in which they become involved have challenged the functioning, and, some would argue, the legitimacy of traditional institutional means of seeking participation, involvement and engagement from the public. Recognizing the authentic involvement of youth in communities across Canada requires acknowledging the ways in which youth want to partake as citizens. Doing so suggests the need to embrace youth as both co-creators and partners in renewing civic and democratic spaces.

The responsibility for fostering the importance of youth involvement cannot be left to one organization or institutional alone. Rather, such practice needs to be facilitated through discussion and debate in schools, in communities, in civic organizations and at home. However, there is a need for institutions, both governmental and community-based, to examine their own approaches in order to question how effective they are at reaching out to youth and acknowledging the strengths that young citizens bring to public discourses and policy spheres. The growing shifts in youth involvement suggest that youth are indeed speaking about the ways that they want to be involved. The question is, who is listening?
/// INTRODUCTION

The disengagement of young people from civic and political arenas has the attention of many academics and policymakers, in Canada and internationally. While many countries report a decline in the levels of youth involvement, there are reasons to look at the trends emerging around this concern, what is being done to target youth’s involvement in civic and political activities, and future steps required if we are to see improvements in overall voting turnouts and participation in political activities and civic organizations.

The scholarship and grey literature emerging from studies of youth engagement challenged some commonly held beliefs. Much of the literature rejected the idea that Canadian youth are “turned off” of civic and public engagement to rather suggest that there is a trend of being “tuned out”. Also, there appear to be nuanced patterns among the behaviour of youth, across the globe, so that in some cases, we see youth much more active than their older Canadian counterparts, contradicting the idea that youth are absent from Canadian public spaces. Furthermore, the connection between civic and political involvement is beginning to become better understood among both practitioners and policymakers. More research is needed to better grasp the linkage between these two areas.

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of literature addressing these phenomena and to discuss what public institutions might learn from what we know about young Canadians and their involvement in political and civic life.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

This report emerged as part of a larger project aimed at developing a civic engagement strategy for youth in Edmonton. The Centre for Public Involvement and the City of Edmonton’s Next Gen collaborated to a literature review and report on youth political and civic engagement. This literature review has been developed into this report and will inform the current work of Next Gen in their development of a civic engagement strategy for youth.

This work is situated within other initiatives in the municipality. The City of Edmonton recently adopted a new Corporate Approach to Public Engagement. This framework recognizes connections between the various ways the City brings people, community organizations, business and government together to build our communities and participate in civic government. It aims to enhance the City’s relationship with citizens to encourage greater participation in civic life.

City administration is implementing a new corporate governance structure to coordinate, prioritize, enhance and measure the delivery of engagement activities across the corporation. These includes activities to support community development, involve citizens in decision-making processes, gather ongoing feedback and share information about the city’s various programs and activities.
FORMAT OF THIS REPORT

This report is a synthesis of the current academic scholarship and grey literature relating to civic and political involvement of youth. Much of the work for this report focused on summarizing reports, research studies drawing upon Canadian electoral and survey data, and suggested best practices by municipal and other levels of government and civic organizations. Additionally, the author discussed current practices related to youth involvement with several civic and community-based organizations across Canada.

This report begins by distinguishing the differences and connections between political and civic involvement, as well as relaying the importance of Canadian youth being involved in the political and civic arenas of their communities. Next, a thorough review of political involvement, both as voting and non-voting activities, is provided. Then, the studies into civic involvement are reviewed, leading to an examination of the connections made from the research between civic and political participation. Additionally, considerations for the gaps in what we know about youth involvement are elaborated, followed by an extensive discussion of recommendations for policy, research and practice emerging academic and grey literature in the field. Finally, after the conclusion, case studies of different approaches to youth involvement are offered as snapshots of interesting and unique practices.

DEFINING POLITICAL AND CIVIC INVOLVEMENT

In this report, the word involvement is used to refer to both political and civic activities, in order to align with the work being done institutionally at the Centre for Public Involvement and the City of Edmonton. While the term involvement is conceptually broad, it is used primarily in this report to allow for diverse understandings of the sorts and types of activities related to being involved in political and civic arenas. Therefore, in this literature review, when terminology such as engagement, activity, and participation are used, there is no conceptual distinction suggested between these terms and the notion of involvement.

The concepts of political and civic involvement are often referenced in the literature without clear definitions of how the terms relate to distinct, though sometimes overlapping, bodies of institutional meaning and societal relation. Such distinction is important, though, in order to ensure that policies and program aimed at ameliorating participation levels are appropriately measured and planned.

There are clear distinctions between political and civic involvement. Political involvement relates to behaviours “that directly relate to political institutions and the work of political institutions” (Boulianne, 2008, p. 5). Such behaviours include traditional activities such as voting, participating in a campaign or political group, donating money to such causes, and other forms of political expression, including wearing a button, talking about politics with acquaintances and family members and contacting the media or politicians in order to express opinions on political matters. Simply put, political participation is the “formal arena of politics: political parties, elections, interest groups, social movements, protest behaviour” (O’Neill, 2007, p. 2).

Footnotes:
i For purposes of readability, a system of footnotes and endnotes are used throughout the text. It should be noted that most of the report contains summary and synthesis of other studies. No new data has been collected regarding voting behaviour, patterns and trends. However, the author discussed current practices related to youth involvement with several civic and community-based organizations across Canada and those discussions have informed some of the report writing.

ii There is much disagreement in the field about differences in the conceptualizations between notions such as engagement, involvement, behaviour and activity. For instance, O’Neill (2007) distinguishes engagement from participation on the basis that engagement involves the psychological aspects of participation, such as beliefs and attitudes in addition to traditional notions of participation as action.
Civic involvement exists outside of formalized political structures and includes volunteering, working with others to solve a community problem or serving in local organization. While civic participation is thought of in broad terms to include individuals or groups taking part in community contexts with an aim of bringing out a social good and in social organization, not all civic participation is equal in terms of its impact on individual and social benefits. While individual engagement contributes towards enhanced skills, knowledge and network connections (which in turn, might lead to more participation), these differ from the sorts of social benefits gathered through other forms of participation, such as the development of social capital.

/// THE IMPORTANCE OF CANADIAN YOUTH IN POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN DEMOCRACY

The discourses surrounding the importance of voting in civic and political life are often steeped in democratic traditions of citizen participation in some level of decision-making processes. Indeed, voting is often seen as the most important traditional form of participation in a democracy. Yet, other scholars theorize the importance of an engaged citizenry for the effective functioning of democratic practices and processes. Any discussion of political and civic involvement requires recognition of the ideals of a democratic tradition informing research.

A belief in the necessity of an involved citizenry is often used as a launching point into the importance of youth in political and civic life. To begin with, youth represent the future of the democratic entity and so their engagement is particularly of interest to the success of the political system in Canada. From a political perspective, the continuous disengagement of youth from voting suggests a risk of a “democratic deficit”: whereby an increased disengagement of the overall population from politics and public affairs is possible. Civic engagement is “the very expression of a society’s stability and of its looking to the future, that is to say its survival” (Ménard, 2010, p. 5). It is important to foster and provoke in young people both the reasons and means to acquire the basic civic skills that will empower them to become engaged citizens.

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1 Archer & Wesley (2006) provide a thorough review this “democratic deficit”.
Political and civic involvement of Youth

Even though youth are very much engaged in other forms of political participation, they are considerably less engaged in formal political activities, such as voting. (See Chart 1). The most recent data on Canadian young adults’ participation at the polls was collected regarding the 2011 federal election by Election Canada. Later, in 2012, Statistics Canada sponsored a report by Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté to analyze these data to estimate the likeliness of groups to vote based on age, sex, education, family status, immigration status and employment-related variables, when other variables were held consistent.

Chart 1: Voting rates by age in percentages in the Canadian federal election 2011

The decline of youth voting concerns academics and policymakers for a few reasons: 1) a fear that the lack of voters will mean those who do not vote might not have their views, needs and perspectives represented in public policy processes; and 2) related to the first reason, is a more specific concern that, indeed, those with less-education, who are less wealthy and are young are not engaged at the polls. Consequently, decision-making processes may very well proceed without adequate consideration of these populations’ input. Obviously, such reasons require a commitment to a democratic ideal whereby public policy processes involve a perspective in which citizens have a right and responsibility to participate in political life and decision-making.
AGE: THE BEST PREDICTOR OF VOTING

To date, research suggests that the best predictor of voter turnout is age.\(^{10}\) Is the decline in youth voting a result of generational or life cycle affects? That is, as Blais et al. (2004) asked, “Are younger citizens presently less likely to vote because they happen to be young – the implication being that their propensity to vote will increase as they get older – or because they belong to a generation that is less willing to vote – the implication being that their participation rate will always be lower than that previous generations?” (p. 221). Using data collected through nine elections by Canada Election Studies (CES) between 1968 to 2000, Blais et al. (2004) discovered a seven point drop in the total voter turnout between elections held before 1990, where voter turnout was 74%, and after 1990, where voter turnout was 67%. A thorough review of the election data shows that a significant fraction of the drop can be accounted for by generational replacement, meaning that the current younger generation is more absent from the polls than previous cohorts of youth.

The data also indicated that life cycle does matter somewhat\(^{11}\). Throughout the life cycle, the propensity to vote changes as follows:

- increases by 8 to 11 points from age 20 to 30
- increases 4 to 5 points from age 30 to 40
- increases 2-3 points from age 40 to 50
- stays stable from age 50 to 70
- declines about 3-4 points from age 70 to 80.

So that overall, the propensity to vote increases by approximately 15 points from age 20 to 50, a substantial effect. However, these effects are unrelated to the recent drop in turnout rate, which can be better explained by looking at generational differences.

At the same age, turnout is 2 to 3 points lower among baby-boomers than among pre-baby-boomers, a very substantial 10 points lower among Generation X than among baby-boomers, and another huge 10 points lower among the most recent generation than among Generation X. All in all, age being held constant, the propensity to vote decreases by more than 20 points from the oldest to the most recent cohort. (Blais et al., 2004, p. 225)

Furthermore, the gradual replacement of pre-baby boomer voters by post-baby boomer voters is having an effect on the overall drop in turnout rate of voters.\(^{12}\) This means that generational replacement is the most significant factor in voter turnout dropping rates: as the pre-baby boomer population ages and is replaced by a younger generation who increasingly demonstrate a pattern of low voter turnout at the polls, the overall effect is a generational gap, whereby overall voter turnout rates continually drop.
In sum, the propensity to vote is a minimum of 20 points lower among recent cohorts of voters compared to pre-baby-boomer voters.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, the replacement of the younger cohort of voters “accounts for most of the turn-out gap between pre- and post-1990 elections” (Blais et al., 2004, p. 227).\textsuperscript{1}

Similar trends for participating in local elections drops for both younger and older generations as compared to federal and provincial elections.\textsuperscript{11} There was a significant drop in percentage of voting activity for those aged 22-29 group in local elections. Participation for this age group in the last federal election was reported at 52%, last provincial election at 50% and last municipal election at 35%. These data suggested a 15% drop between provincial and municipal elections. While the data did not report on the reasons as to the differences between participation based on level of voting, the drop of 15% is significant and warrants further consideration.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Age Group} & 15-21 & 22-29 & 30-44 & 45-64 & 65+ \tabularnewline
\hline
\textbf{Voting Behaviour} & & & & & \\
\hline
\textbf{In last federal} & 52 & 68 & 83 & 89 & \\
\hline
\textbf{In last provincial} & 50 & 66 & 82 & 88 & \\
\hline
\textbf{In last municipal or local} & 35 & 52 & 70 & 79 & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Political participation in voting in Canadian federal election 2003}
\end{table}


\textsuperscript{i} Such findings are consistent with similar studies carried out in the US, see Lyons & Alexander (2000); Miller & Shanks (1990)

\textsuperscript{ii} Using the 2003 General Social Survey (GSS), Milan reviewed the political engagement of youth aged 22 to 29 in Canada.
/// THE EDUCATION-YOUTH NEXUS: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES EDUCATION MAKE?

While statistical data indicate that the better-educated are more likely to vote in almost every country, the problem is to identify why education has such a significant impact on voter turnout. Recent data from the 2011 Canadian federal election show that the overall voting rate among those with a university degree was 78%, compared with 60% or lower of people with a high-school education or less.14

However, the recent voter turnout data indicated a striking relation between age and education that has not been investigated in the past. Among youth aged 25 to 34, there was a marked difference of 42% between those with less than a high-school education and those with a university degree. These trends continue until the age of 55 where they taper off. Clearly, education does make a difference in turnout.

Yet, given rising rates of education in Canada, particularly among the younger populations, the increasing decline of voter turnout seems puzzling. Blais et al. (2004) offered an answer to this seemingly contradictory situation: while the better-educated among the older generations and post-baby-boomers continue to vote, of those born in the 1970's, the lesser-educated have decreased their voting behaviours, so that now only one out of three or four votes. This means that the increase in education has prevented the overall turnout from decreasing, but generally, the less-educated in all generations have a much lower propensity to vote. Yet, the generational effects are still powerful as the most recent demographics of better-educated citizens vote less than their predecessors.15 In this regard, the recommendations are clear: unless levels of formal education continue to rise, overall turnout will decline at an even more dramatic rate.

WHY IS VOTER TURNOUT LOWER AMONG THE YOUNGEST CANADIANS?

The notion of whether or not youth are “tuned out” or “turned off” of voting has captured the attention of scholars working in the area of civic and political engagement. According to some Canadian scholars, the situation of the declining vote in Canadian and international contexts is largely effected by the fact that today’s young population who are eligible to vote are simply not interested in formal politics, parties and elections.ii Such perspective is shared by acclaimed American public engagement scholar Putnam (2000), who in his famous book, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community, concurred on the similar conditions in American culture. Putnam attributed the decline of youth’s involvement to a dual problem of a general decline of social connections and the rise of individualism in American society. For Putnam, a weakening of social capital resulted in an overall less engaged society. While the evidence of such causality is still debated, there is a clear interest in pursuing the question, what contributes to youth’s disengagement, that is, being “tuned out”, from political life?

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ii Blais and colleagues (Blais et al, 2002; Gidengil et al, 2004) are noted throughout the Canadian literature as seminal scholars in the field who raised this dichotomy of disinterest (tuned out) and cynicism (turned off) as a point of query.
Two changes in Canadian society have contributed towards the shift in voting among younger populations. First, young people are less committed to the ideal that voting is more than a right and is, consequently, a civic duty. Second, young people tend to pay less attention to politics, contributing to a belief that this population places less value on politics in general. Recently, Keith Archer and Jared Wesley (2006), tackled the question about why youth are disinterested in contemporary politics and elections and examined six possible explanations for youth’s “tuning out”.

**Family-centred socialization.** While shifts in the structure of family life have been well documented, the degree to which people in different age groups report engaging in political discussions at home is often considered one possible factor related to the decline of youth voter turnout. Younger people are less likely to engage in political discussions in the home by about seven to 10 percentage points, than older age groups. However, voter turnout was 30 to 60 percent higher for the oldest age group, suggesting that shifts in family-centred socialization can only account for a small portion of the overall difference between youth and older voters.

**Political interest and attentiveness.** Interest in politics and in elections differs between age groups. Using a variety of measures and indicators, Archer and Wesley (2006) proposed the data suggested that 33.2 % of the youngest age group illustrated an interest in elections, while 62.6 % of the oldest group expressed a similar interest. For political interest, 50.9 % of the oldest group were interested and 25.3 % among the youngest group. While it appears there is a relation between age and interest in politics and elections, Archer and Wesley emphasized the need to query why this disinterest is so strong.

**Participation in group activities.** While the assertion is often made that youth are not involved in community and group activities, the data does not support this argument in the Canadian context. Rather, as Archer and Wesley (2006) illustrated, there are distinct patterns in the types of group memberships related to age. While certain groups attract particular age groups, such as business and professional associations that draw middle age groups or religious groups appeal to older age groups, youth are particularly attracted to sports groups. Additionally, ethnic groups attract membership from across the age group range. Consequently, age has a moderate effect, in that the oldest and youngest age groups are both slightly less likely to participate in group activities.

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i See Blais, (2002) for more information. Such hypotheses were confirmed by Blais et al. (2004) in their examination of Canada Election Studies (CES) between 1968 to 2000. The scholars adhered to this correlation in stating that the CES data showed that “the most recent cohort has a weaker sense of duty and pays less attention to politics…suggest[ing] that the lower turnout among the most recent cohorts reflects a larger cultural change in the level of attention that people pay (and the importance they attach to politics and in their propensity to think that voting is a moral obligation)” (p. 229).

ii While the authors confirmed the evidence of voter decline in the electoral data as collected through administrative and poll surveys, Archer & Wesley (2006) used secondary analysis of data collected through the 2004 Canadian Elections Study to interrogate the impact of voter’s age on a number of determinants of voting.

iii Archer & Wesley (2006) cited other scholars who have argued a correlation between those who are interested in politics and elections and those who report participating in related activities (see, for example, Johnston et al., 2009; Blais et al., 2002).
Resources. Scholars have pointed out the tensions that exist between non-voters expressions of not having the right information to make voting decisions or their fear of making the wrong choice and the overwhelming amount of information that exists in various forms of media, such as television, newspaper and Internet. Canadians continually demonstrate significantly low levels of political knowledge: overall knowledge levels for the youngest age group was 3.0 points out of twelve, with the scores slightly increasing to 5.9 for the oldest age group, with an average total of 5.2. While the scores are fairly low across the age range, the youngest age group illustrated the lowest scores suggesting they might be the least well-equipped to engage effectively in political processes.

Mobilization. The issue of knowledge mobilization shifts responsibility away from youth toward those at the center of the political sphere, including political parties, politicians, leaders and strategists. Contact between candidates and the electorate had a drastic increase in the 2004 election, with over two-thirds of voters being contacted either in person or on the phone, the highest numbers since the 1970s. However, the demographic of those being contacted offers some interesting insights:

- In the 2004 Canadian federal election, over three in four Canadians over the age of 26 were contacted by phone yet only 61.9% of youth 25 and under were contacted.
- Further discrepancies exist when pamphlet data is included, given that only 44.9% of young Canadians received such information, while the same attention was given to two-thirds of Canadians between 26 and 45, and three quarters of Canadians aged 46 and over.
- Overall, 73.1% of young Canadians reported receiving little or no contact from parties or candidates.

Archer and Wesley (2006) suggested that Canadian leaders themselves have failed to involve young voters in their campaign mobilization strategies. Others also warn of a trend among contemporary campaigns to shift away from traditional grassroots aimed at the overall population. This trend towards more political alienation works against youth, as “the recipe these days goes something like this: target supporters only; never go after ‘unlikelies’; devote maximum time and concentration of resources to a minimum” (Dukakis, 2001, p. 4 – 8, as cited in Archer & Wesley, 2006, p. 10). Because of their previous low voter turnout, youth are generally ignored by political party strategies, despite the fact that parties have more access to funds, technological tools and media than ever before.

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i Archer & Wesley (2006) raised a contested issue related to the political knowledge that Canadians possess, citing the work of Milner (2002) who argued a strong political knowledge is a necessary component for engaging in the political process.

ii Archer & Wesley (2006) made this comparison using 2004 Canadian Election Study data.

**Affection/Experience.** The idea that youth might be cynical and pessimistic about the state of democracy, public officials and political processes is one that is often offered as a possible reason for their low turnout rates at the polls. However, support for this theory is not clear in the data. Youth levels of cynicism do not exceed other age groups. Furthermore, Canadian youth have positive attitudes towards the economy and their own personal finances. Therefore, cynicism and pessimism do not account for the lower youth voter turnout. In fact, while Canadians under the age of 33 voted the least, they reported the most satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Canada: 64.2% of those aged 18 to 25 and 65.6% of those aged 26 to 33 reporting being either fairly or very satisfied. This percentage declines to just over half when considering the responses of older Canadians.

Yet, there remains a contradiction that needs to be explained. Archer and Wesley (2006) summarized the problem:

> While youth tend to be the least engaged in politics, members of the oldest cohort are precisely the opposite. Post-retirement Canadians are the most knowledgeable and most interested, yet the least efficacious and most cynical; and still they turn-out to vote most often. How can this be? (p. 11)

The answer lies in the absences of the belief in civic duty and sense of civic obligation in today's youth.

**Civic duty and obligation.** Over nine in ten Canadians expressed the belief that voting is every citizen’s duty and 75% indicated that they would feel guilty for not voting. While the correlation is strong among the overall population, the situation changes when youth opinions are considered in isolation. Over half of Canadian youth thought it was important to vote. As for obligation, more than 44.6% of young Canadians would feel no guilt if they stayed home from elections, compared to 25% of baby-boomers and 16.3% of post-retirees. (See Table 2.)

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i. While over half of older respondents indicated that a downturn in their personal finances was due to problems with the national economy, only 44.0% of youth indicated so. Additionally 84.4% and 78.9% of younger Canadians reported believing that there are similar or improving economic conditions for themselves and for the national economy.

ii. See Archer & Wesley (2006) for a more thorough explanation of these factors.

### Belief in Civic Duty BY Age

It is every citizen’s duty to vote in federal elections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>18-25</th>
<th>26-33</th>
<th>26-33</th>
<th>26-33</th>
<th>65 +</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>86.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somewhat agree</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somewhat disagree</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strongly disagree</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>1061</td>
<td>1513</td>
<td>767</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cell figures represent column percentages.

\[ p < .001; \text{gamma} = -.351 \]

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Table 2: Belief in Civic Duty by Age

### Sense of Obligation to Vote BY Age

If you didn’t vote in a federal election, would you feel guilty?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>18-25</th>
<th>26-33</th>
<th>34-45</th>
<th>46-65</th>
<th>65+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>very guilty</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somewhat guilty</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not guilty at all</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>1032</td>
<td>1485</td>
<td>754</td>
<td>4097</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cell figures represent column percentages.

\( p<.001; \text{gamma} = -.260 \)

Table 3: Sense of Obligation to Vote by Age

Consequently, Archer and Wesley (2006) suggested that without a strong sense of duty or obligation, all voters regardless of age would be less likely to engage in political processes. **However, by avoiding a emotional guilt and fulfilling a democratic duty, younger aged citizens opt out of the vote.** While some scholars attribute this behaviour to laziness or apathy, Archer and Wesley argued that this generation of citizens, unlike their predecessors, has lived with a democratic security such as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that guarantees their right to vote and participate in the public domain. Such context may contribute to the way in which younger Canadians understand their right to vote as a democratic entitlement rather than a privilege that must be asserted. While such correlation is still be tested through stronger empirical research, these scholars are firm in their assertion that the consequences of adopting this view has serious implications for how the problem of low youth voter turnout is addressed.

More qualitative approaches to the problem may reveal a deeper level of analysis in understanding further the reasons that young people give about not voting.¹ Studies involving interviews with youth suggested that youth seek meaningful and immediate impact in order to make a noticeable difference in society, and voting often does not offer such a salient opportunity.² While young people have been criticized for their lower levels of knowledge of the political system, the sheer vastness of available information through various media such television, Internet and social media can be overwhelming for those initiating their involvement.³ Consequently, young people feel isolated from the decisions made by politicians.⁴ Furthermore, decreased funding by governments from issues that interest young people, such as environmental programs, postsecondary education, equality and human rights has disinterested young people in the Canadian political electoral processes.

¹ Chareka & Sears (2006) drew on a decidedly more qualitative approach to the question of why youth appear disengaged and offered a slightly different perspective than that offered by Archer and Wesley (2006). These scholars interviewed two groups of twenty young people in Canada: recent African immigrants and native-born Canadians, to query their understandings of voting as a political duty in democratic society. While their findings concur with those of Blais et al. (2004) that many youth understood voting as a key element of democratic citizenship, Chareka & Sears posited that the youth interviewed in their study also saw voting as a duty. However, what the detailed interviews provided was an insight into the perspective that the sense of duty was not significant enough to produce the practice of voting among this population. An interesting point to note related to the activity level of the participants: all of the Canadian and African-born youth participating in the study were involved in some non-formal forms of civic activity (see Chareka, 2005). Also, the participants scored highly on their knowledge of the political system and understandings of voting and its role and history in a democratic society. Such intersections led Chareka & Sears to agree with Carpini (2003), who stated, “youth are very much concerned with public life and contribute to it. But they believe politics is not the most effective way for them to do it” (p. 5).

² In the twenty participant interviews carried out by Chareka & Sears (2006), nine of the participants indicated that they have or intend to vote and 11 participants indicated that they have not ever voted nor intend to vote in the future. Such numbers indicated an ambivalence towards voting. Other reasons for not participating in active voting were the themes of ineffective representatives with little political power to effect change, a perceived lack of differentiated parties whereby the youth felt that there was very little difference among the choices of candidates, and corrupt politicians.

³ Milan (2005) questioned why young people do not vote. Her succinct analysis drew upon the 2003 General Social Survey data and the work of others in the fields, such as O’Neill (2004), who raised this point.

⁴ See Bishop & Low (2004). Additionally, Milan pointed to scholars whose work suggests that this isolation from the voting-population further marginalizes contemporary youth from political discourses, resulting further in their feelings that the political sphere has little to do with them (O’Neill, 2004).
Quick Facts: Voting Trends Among Particular Populations

• **Youth voter turnout is strongest in Quebec.** Young adults are most likely to vote in Quebec (74%), followed by the Atlantic Provinces (64%), Prairies (56%), Ontario (53%) and British Columbia (49%).

• **Albertans have among the lowest engagement in electoral politics.** Recent data shows that 50% of Albertans aged 18 to 24 and 61% of those aged 25 to 34 voted in the 2008 election. Compared to a range of between 72% and 88% of older voters, the engagement of youth at the polls was significantly lower. At the federal election level, the participation of Albertans is lower than in the other parts of the country. In fact, “Albertan disengagement from electoral politics could worsen in the coming decades” (Archer & Wesley, 2006, p. 12).

• **Aboriginal youth are acutely aware of the influence of colonial relations on their participation in public decision-making arenas.** The turnout of Aboriginal youth aged 18-24 was 28% in the 2001 British Columbia provincial election (percentage based on all eligible voters). In the 2005 provincial election, this number rose slightly to 35%. Like many young Canadians, studies show that Aboriginal youth demonstrate a lack of trust of and belief in the relevance of the Canadian electoral system. Also, similar to other Canadian youth, Aboriginal youth share a belief value of voting in order to make change and get your voice heard. Yet, the Aboriginal youth who were interviewed were acutely aware of the impact of colonial relations on the Aboriginal communities’ capacities for engaging in public dialogue and decision-making. The youth felt strongly that such relations perpetuate the lack of agency of Aboriginal people, and youth in particular, to engage with Canadian politics. Such beliefs indicate a sort of political knowledge that is not effectively captured in other surveys.

• **Canadian born are more likely to vote.** Historically, participation in non-voting political activity was reported higher among young Canadian-born citizens, as compared to foreign born youth: 61% compared to 41% respectively. However, more recent election data suggested the rates improved with time in Canada: overall voting rates for recent immigrants (less than 10 years) were 51%, 66% for more established immigrants and 67% for Canadian born.

• **Marital status makes a difference.** Among those who claimed to be too busy to vote during the latest Canadian federal election, the highest percentage was among non-voters aged 25 to 34 and slightly less among the 35 to 44 year old groups. Having children made a person less likely to vote in this election: 36% of single parents of children under age five voted compared to couples with children of the same age who voted at a rate of 60%.

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i Milan (2005), based upon the 2003 General Social Survey data
ii Leger Marketing (2008), based on survey data collected by after the Alberta provincial election in 2008 by randomly polling Albertans
iii Archer & Wesley (2006), based on 2004 Canadian Election Study data
iv Alfred, Pitawanakwat and Price (2007), from the University of Victoria, were commissioned by the Canadian Policy Research Networks to look at why Aboriginal youth participation in political activities was low and to examine these young people’s attitudes and perceptions of the political processes. Their study involved qualitative methods of in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted with Aboriginal youth across Canada.
v Milan (2005), based on 2003 General Services Survey
NON-VOTING POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

Canadians are generally well involved in non-voting political activities. Indeed, overall, most Canadian adults engage in at least one non-voting political activity.\(^{21}\)

HOW ARE CANADIAN YOUTH INVOLVED IN NON-VOTING POLITICAL ACTIVITIES?

Milan (2005) highlighted the prominent view of young people as “engaged sceptics”, being committed to the notion of democracy, but less interested in formal participation and rather choosing to engage with activities that bring more immediate relevancy to their lives.\(^{i}\) Keown (2007) identified four common categories for Canadians’ non-voting political activity: searching for political information, volunteering for a political party, joining a political party, and writing to media or political figures to express political views. Younger adults in the 19 to 24 age group were 1.2 times more likely to participate in non-voting political activity than those aged 45 to 64. Also, those aged 25 to 44 are the least likely to participate, with their likelihood being 1.3 times lower than the aforementioned group.

The most common political behaviours for youth were searching for information on a political issue (32%) and signing a petition (31%).\(^{ii}\) Furthermore, a quarter of Canadian young adults boycotted or buycotted (choosing to purchase a product for ethical commitments), one-sixth attended a public meeting, one in ten contacted newspapers or politicians in order to express their political views and a similar number of young Canadians attended a demonstration or march. Only three percent reported volunteering for a political party.

Among these statistics, we see that youth are very much engaged in political activity, but, as many scholars proposed, they choose very informal forms of participation. Age played a significant role in the participation of youth in many domains, particularly in the areas of non-traditional political activity.\(^{22}\) In many ways, in fact, they are much more engaged than older Canadians. Comparing young adults to older adults in their senior years, youth aged 22 to 29 were much more likely to participate in political activities by finding information related to a political issue that interested them, to sign a petition, to both boycott and buycott, and participate in demonstrations and marches. However, youth are less likely to participate in speaking up at public meetings and sharing their ideas or political views to media and politicians (see Table 4).

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\(^{i}\) Henn, Weinstein & Wring (2002)

**Political Participation (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>15-21</th>
<th>22-29</th>
<th>30-44</th>
<th>45-64</th>
<th>65 +</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-voting Political Behaviour</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one non-voting political behaviour</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>39*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searched for information on political issue</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26*</td>
<td>25*</td>
<td>17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed a petition</td>
<td>27*</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boycotted or boycotted a project</td>
<td>16*</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21*</td>
<td>8*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended a public meeting</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23*</td>
<td>25*</td>
<td>20*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed view by contacting newspaper or politician</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13*</td>
<td>16*</td>
<td>12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in demonstration or march</td>
<td>12*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6*</td>
<td>2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoke out at public meeting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9*</td>
<td>10*</td>
<td>7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteered for political party</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4*</td>
<td>4*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* statistically significant different from 22 to 29 year olds (p<0.05)

**Table 4.** Political participation in non-voting activities among Canadians, 2003

**Source:** Statistics Canada, General Social Survey 2003 as cited in Milan (2005)
While membership of young Canadians in interest groups was much lower than their older counterparts, the rate by which they were disengaged was not as drastic as it was for political membership. The youngest group surveyed indicated that 9% of them were members of a political interest group, the rate decreases gradually so that the highest rate of participation among the oldest group was only 19%.\(^i\) (See Chart 2.)

There is an emerging trend whereby rates of participation for youth involvement are much higher in non-traditional areas such as boycotting, buycotting, protesting, and petition signing.\(^ii\) Such presence indicates that critiques of the decline of youth in political spaces is not completely accurate, and may in fact reflect a narrow understanding of engagement.

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Civic participation exists outside of formalized political structures and includes volunteering, working with others to solve a community problem or serving in local organization.\(^23\) Yet, not all civic participation is equal in terms of its impact on individual and social benefits.\(^24\) While individual engagement contributes towards enhanced skills, knowledge and network connections (which in turn might lead to more participation), as well as social benefits such as the development of social capital. Indeed, the research into civic involvement focuses on the benefits for both individual and community, and even for the institutions that serve civil society.\(^25\)

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\(^i\) In a review of the research on Canadians conducted by the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) 2000, O’Neill (2007) highlighted that only 2% of Canadians aged 18 – 27 were active members in a political party, compared to 33% of those over the age of 57. She suggested that such data concurred with the work of Cross and Young (2004) into political party membership in Canada, who found that 6% of political party membership in under the age of 30 and that the average party member age is 59 years, what they refer to as the “greying of political parties” (Cross & Young, 2004, p. 432 as cited in O’Neill, 2007, p. 9).

\(^ii\) O’Neill (2007) reviewed data from both the Canada General Social Survey (2003) and the IRRP study (2000).
As with some non-voting political activities, young Canadians illustrate higher levels of involvement than their older counterparts. When asked about their involvement in volunteering in the past year, 45% of Canadians overall reported doing so. However, 55% of those aged 15 to 24 reported such activity. Among the youngest of this cohort, those aged 15 to 19 showed a higher rate of involvement at 65%, compared to 43% for those aged 20 to 24. This youngest cohort also exhibited different behaviours in that they volunteered mostly in education and research in social services organizations, they preferred coaching, refereeing and fundraising as activities, and cited different reasons for volunteering, such as improving job opportunities, mimicking friends’ activities or exploring their strengths.

The involvement of the youngest groups in volunteer programs is often attributed to requirements at high school for mandatory community service. However, the trends for volunteering do not continue past such mandatory programs as youth progress through life cycles. Though the rates of volunteering among youth are higher than their older Canadian counterparts, their activity declines as they complete their schooling.

Chart 3. Volunteering and participation rates by age group in 2004

/// CONNECTING CIVIC AND POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

The connections between youth involvement in civic and political arenas has been studied through quantitative research focused on determining if those active in one field illustrate a propensity to engage in the other. The research indicates that, indeed, youth who are engaged in civic activities are also likely to participate in voting and other political activities. Yet, the reasons why this connections exist have been theorized without much empirical evidence.

One source of theorizing comes from the American context in the work of Harvard University scholar Robert Putnam, who argued that the declining memberships in local community associations in America are a key factor into the loss of opportunities for citizens to engage around political issues. According to Putnam, such loss is felt even more acutely at the level of American youth. While such in-depth study has not been conducted into Canadian youth, the connection between political and civic activities are supported in the Canadian context through analyses of survey data collected through a few national agencies, such as Statistics Canada.

In the Canadian context, young adults reported being involved with three or more organizations were nearly twice as engaged in non-voting political activity as those with no group affiliation, with participation rates at 81% versus 43%. Also, the younger people were engaged, the more likely they were to participate, as “individuals who, as children or young adults, took part in a number of community activities were considerably more likely than others to be engaged in alternative political behaviours as adults” (Milan, 2005, p. 4).

Volunteering may reflect a sense of civic responsibility that extends into the political arena. Young adults who reported volunteering in the year prior were much more likely to be involved in at least one political activity (voting or non-voting), at a rate of 71%, than those who did not volunteer (at 52%). Both volunteering and participation were strongly associated with non-voting political participation.

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Even after controlling for all other variables, volunteering or being affiliated with a group were both strongly associated with non-voting political participation. Furthermore, the more groups a person belonged to, the more non-voting activities they took part in. Similarly, if people were volunteers or involved with multiple groups, the odds that they voted increased substantially. (Milan, 2005, p. 4)

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i Milan (2005), from the 2003 General Studies Survey
And the trend is evident in reverse as well: 66% of young Canadians who voted had also reported engaging in at least one form of non-voting activity, compared to less than half (46%) of those who had not voted. As Milan (2005) stated, “young adults who went to the polls were also more apt to be politically engaged in other ways” (p. 6).

The connection between civic engagement, broadly speaking, and political knowledge is made by other scholars. Milner (2001) firmly believed that strong connections between political knowledge, civic engagement and a healthy democracy must be viewed by those in public positions.

Knowing that youth may be more enticed to practice political participation if they are involved in civic activities suggests that focusing attention on this area is important for the improving the rates of youth involvement and is essential for the healthy functioning of democracy.31

/// GAPS IN WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

- **Details from youth about their declining involvement.** While we do know that there is a significant downturn in the voting trends among younger populations, the detailed reasons for this decline have not been thoroughly studied from the perspective of youth themselves, particularly in the Canadian population and in the context of municipal jurisdictions. Large-scale surveys do not provide this type of data and cannot provide the details about the reasons why people become involved.32

- **The impact of specific civic education programs.** We do not know the extent to which specific individual programs aimed at engaging youth, particularly through civic education programs, are effective at actually doing so. We know these programs are attractive to youth, and those such as Student Vote 2004 are attractive to teachers. Yet, to what extent are they impacting trends and behaviours towards citizen engagement among young people?

- **How to best formulate policy to best encourage youth involvement.** O’Neill (2006) suggested the latest commission of research into the causes of declining levels of voter turnout among youth by Canada’s chief electoral office shows promise for how to formulate policy on this problem: “conduct research on the question at hand, involve voices of the
community itself in the discussion, allow both to inform the prescription for how change” (p. 25). Often programs receive very little research attention, and policies are evaluated quantitatively for their efforts at including youth, but provide little details about the kind of youth who are engaged and which populations of youth may be continually alienated.

• **The accuracy of polling.** The accuracy of data collected through survey polls to ascertain the reasons why people did not vote is often questioned, based on the basic argument that it is difficult to verify that people answer truthfully about their voting behaviour. Archer & Wesley have highlighted the inconsistencies that appear in various studies comparing the “tuned out” and “turned off” dichotomy as it relates to youth voting. Such inconsistencies suggest deeper interrogation of this relationship needs to be undertaken for any argument to stand firm.

• **The effectiveness of political campaigns and electoral programs.** While data suggested that youth embody a different ideal towards civic duty and obligation, there are few studies that aim to find out how this difference can be engaged by political campaigns and electoral programs.

• **Focus on youth.** While research is being conducted into improving overall citizen participation, more focus is needed for youth, particularly related to the extent that changes in the way this demographic group relates to politics and civic involvement may work to redefine models of political activity. Consequently, more research is needed to understand the significance of the shifts evident in young people’s dispositions and knowledge about the political sphere.

• **Understanding the impact of technology.** Technology such as cell phones, internet, and social media websites permeate the lives of young people. Boulianne (2009) conducted a large meta-analysis of studies to measure the impact of such technology on youth involvement in political and civic areas, concluding that technology does make a difference, though a marginal one. Furthermore, some scholars suggested the use of internet for grassroots organizing may be satisfying for youth but may also further alienate them from the bureaucratic nature of politics and more research is needed to understand this relationship. The extent to which online voting, blogging and other forms of technological engagement may entice young people to both pay attention to and increase their political knowledge still requires more study.

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**i** See Archer & Wesley (2006) for more information on the limitations of survey research. For example, given that some surveys are collected either in advance of election polls to ask people’s intentions, the extent to which people can truthfully know that they will be ill or unavailable to vote could be questioned. Also, when surveys are collected after the election, the timing is sensitive in order to ensure that respondents can accurately recall the reason they did not vote.

**ii** For example, one study by Pammett & LeDuc (2003) confirmed the notion that youth were tuned out, but equally so were those in the 55 to 64 year age group. Later, the 2004 Canadian Election Study indicated a much stronger correlation between age and disinterest, with youth being much more likely to cite lack of interest, as in tuned out, and older respondents to indicate their dissatisfaction and negativity towards politics, as in turned off.
A CRITICAL LOOK AT ENGAGEMENT PRACTICE, POLICY AND RESEARCH

Milan noted the work of Bishop and Low (2004) who found that young people did not always identify their volunteerism as politically involved: “a 2004 study found that 20 to 29 year olds were fairly active in their communities, although they did not always identify behaviour as volunteering” (Milan, 2005, p. 6). In a related vein, Llewellyn, Cook and Molina (2010) found in researching civic education programs in Ontario schools that learning was focused on procedural knowledge and compliant codes of behaviour that fail to involve students in “collective action for systemic understandings of political issues” (p. 800). Furthermore, teachers themselves often reflected that they avoided politicizing lessons, even in civics education courses, suggesting that political engagement is not a priority for schools. The researchers suggested that a renewed focus on social justice at the center of student learning so that schools are able to educate students to be able to analyze power relations, consider the ambiguities of political issues and embrace opportunities for social change. Indeed, such calls involve focusing civics education specifically on youth being very active in community and politics, so that they see themselves not as apolitical actors but rather empowered agents of change.

The tensions between the individual and the collective in a democratic society were also reflected in the American study by Adolina et al. (2002). When youth were asked to discuss their involvement, they often talked about individually motivated activities, such as driving a friend to work or making an effort during their work to talk to older people who might be lonely. While such activities may be “good”, such activities fail to meet the commitment to make positive changes in society that are commonly evoked with civic engagement. Yet, when structured in terms of democracy, the answers by respondents were different, recognizing a more politically engaged understanding of involvement that fosters benefits beyond the individual level.

While trends for individualized engagement sought by youth in Canada and other western societies is well-documented, the ways in which the dominance of neoliberalism has impacted youth’s participation in the public sphere requires more recognition and better examination through rigorous study. Neoliberal policies are pervasive in many public policy domains in Canada and the extent of ideological influence on youth engagement is not well theorized in the engagement and involvement literature.

Schools are often cited as an important site for delivering civics education programming and scholars have pointed out their significant role in socializing newcomers to Canadian democratic ideals (Claes, Hooghe & Stolle, 2009; Ménard, 2010). Yet, calls for such approaches must be cautioned for promoting dominant cultures without providing educative experiences whereby all citizens’ cultural expectations and knowledges are valued as equal and worthy of consideration. Claes, Hooghe and Stolle showed the tensions that exist in multi-cultural societies in promoting civics education where the cultural background of youth differs from a dominant core cultural group. Civics education that focuses solely on instrumentalist ideals of how to participate miss opportunities for considering more holistic considerations of what kinds of society are created by particular forms of engagement.
There can be no doubt that when youth are engaged around an issue, their mobilization into action can be powerful. Two obvious recent examples in the Canadian context are the student movements in Quebec to rally against tuition increases and the large numbers of young people gathered at Occupy sites in cities across the country. While the political motivations of the youth have been dismissed as misguided by some media reports, both of these examples provide a striking example of how youth are engaging in ways that seem to navigate around formalized political institutional responses. Indeed, these youth were very engaged. The ways in which municipal and other governmental leaders take notice and account for this form of involvement remains to be seen and studied in academic circles, but certainly those paying attention to the voices of youth must ask how this desire to participate in public deliberation might translate into other forms of public involvement.
// RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

In the past decade, the growing concern towards youth civic and political engagement has resulted in many committees, studies, and policy recommendations. While much of this concern stemmed from nationally-based organizations and institutions concerned with the political involvement of youth as a necessity in healthy democratic societies, the recommendations apply to all levels of government and organizations. The following recommendations proceed from the wealth of literature reflecting the concern of politicians, researchers, community-based organizations and scholars committed to extending what we know and practice in youth civic and political engagement.

1. DEVELOP AN INVENTORY OF AGENCIES AND PROGRAMS FOCUSED ON YOUTH POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

Overwhelmingly, the dominant message among recommendations for engaging youth is the popular education adage: know what is already being done and set out from there. That is, start where you are and build upon existing frameworks that have invested in a strong foundation. In order to do so, it is important to build an understanding of what is already being done in the community around youth engagement.

Developing an inventory that maps out what is already being done in Edmonton is a recommended place to start. Consider bringing together a committee of individuals who are in touch with what’s happening in the community, starting with community leagues, non-profit organizations, and civically funded programs. Allocating small funds for research into the work of these organizations would provide an efficient way to survey, categorize and map out places to begin building strong relationships.

2. DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES TO FOCUS ON THE NEEDS OF YOUTH.

Building upon the first recommendation, the idea of developing strong relationships with existing community-based initiatives is one way to build upon the needs of youth. Collaboration becomes the key aspect of this approach to expanding on the successful work being done by successful community groups.

Focus on building more civic-minded connections between the municipality and the non-profit sector. Identify a champion, such as a sub-committee of Next Gen, that is committed to working with and coordinating future collaborations with community-based organizations and whose main focus is to connect youth to civic-minded activities: civics education courses, promotion at election time, volunteer opportunities on civic committees, and the list could go on. This may require changing how we think about the roles of the community-based organizations and political systems. However, developing policies to assist both civic and community organizations can help with this shift. Investing in a municipal portfolio with a strategic framework for youth programs is an ideal place to start.

See the reference list for reports from various committees and research networks regarding these concerns.
3. LOOK AT THE SHIFT TO NEW INDIVIDUALIZED AND PRIVATE FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT AS BEING AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE FROM YOUTH.

The shifts to individualized, results-oriented political action, such as boycotting and buycotting, are among the prominent ways that youth currently engage. This means that policy decisions made by representative politics are less likely to reflect the values and desires of youth. Neoliberal thinking that promotes individualism, entrepreneurialism and competition has influenced the ways in which youth understand how to get involved. In order to tap into youth's political engagement, political institutions must find out more ways to speak to this sort of engagement.

On the flip side, collective forms of engagement seem to be on the rise, as evidenced by large participation of youth in recent opportunities of political engagement, such as the Occupy movement and the student protests in Quebec. While such examples of youth's involvement have been dismissed by much of the mainstream media, these examples illustrate how collective forms of becoming involved appeal to youth in issues that they care passionately about addressing. Tapping into the energy created by these examples is a key place to attract the youth who are engaged, albeit in ways that have are not traditionally understood by formalized institutions.

4. AVOID “ONE SIZE FITS ALL” FRAMEWORK SO THAT CONSIDERATIONS ARE MADE FOR A BROAD RANGE OF YOUTH.

The idea that a one-size fits all model of engagement will effectively attract a significant population of youth to become involved with political issues, voting and volunteering is definitely off the mark. Attention must be paid to groups with even lower rates, such as women, Aboriginal groups and immigrant populations. Initiate all responses to youth engagement with an understanding of the intersectionality of youth and other identities in shaping political and civic engagement. Those making policies and programs must check their assumptions that everyone has the same experiences as them. Unpack youth diversity to identify sub-groups, such as women, Aboriginal populations, immigrants, visible minorities, socio-economic differences, education levels, religious groups and social classes. Additionally, more research is needed to understand how the non-student population of youth seek to become involved.

Alfred, Pitawanakwat and Price (2007) reviewed the opinions of Aboriginal youth across Canada about the meaning of political participation in the Canadian political processes. From their research, they commented that it is not likely the reforms to the current system will be effective at addressing the gap in Aboriginal youth participation. Consequently, much more effort needs to be focused on how to effectively engage this growing population of Canadian young people.
5. INVESTIGATE THE ROLES OF CIVICS EDUCATION AND SERVICE LEARNING.

Civics education programs are often deemed the most effective way of addressing the deficiencies in political knowledge and understanding of the public responsibilities associated with citizenship in a democratic society. Yet, many believe that more effective civics education programs are needed and envision a positive role for municipalities in fostering such knowledge.

Accommodating the needs of educators is an important step. Engaging and supporting teachers through resources and tools to better understand the functioning and political organization of the city is important. Many municipalities are building upon current practices, such as school tours, to expand to regularly scheduled conversations between the mayor and city councillors with younger, school-aged youth, as a critical step to developing their involvement later in life. Doing so cultivates partnerships with community and political institutions, enhancing opportunities for youth to become involved in hands-on service learning where the municipality emerges as a leader for seeking youth’s participation in informing civic decision-making processes.

Start by choosing one or two key schools where youth have not practically volunteered to participate in the civic youth council and seek ways to pique students’ input into topics that interest them or that are deemed as important topics to make appealing to youth. Additionally, strengthen the relationship with faculties of education in providing citizenship education related to civic roles and mandates is one way to invest wisely in order to reach a larger population of teachers.

Create pathways and provide supports for Aboriginal youth education. Many programs already exist in the community that work to increase volunteer participation of Aboriginal youth. Seek out these programs in order to explore how civics education programs can be tailored to meet their needs.

6. INVESTIGATE THE LINKAGE OF CIVIC AND POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT.

There is a real opportunity for the City of Edmonton to become a leader in actively committing to better understanding the connections between civic and political involvement. While many municipalities are investing in reaching out to youth, there is very little evidence at the municipal level that such programs actually materialize into increased participation by youth in other forms of engagement. The lack of such evidence is even more striking when attention is given to political engagement.

Tailoring programs from the onset to ensure that measuring who participates, how participants became involved and the incidence of first-time participation is an important step to collecting data that can inform future planning.
7. HOST A SYMPOSIUM THAT CONNECTS MUNICIPAL LEADERS, SCHOLARS AND PRACTITIONERS WHO ARE CONCERNED ABOUT YOUTH INVOLVEMENT.

Showcase Edmonton’s leadership in this area by bringing together various experts and practitioners working with youth. Draw upon leaders in the community and academy, both individuals and organizations, who have are effective at engaging youth and researching the effectiveness of such programs. This is a real area for Edmonton to play a lead role in Canadian civic arenas.

8. GOVERNMENT NEEDS TO CRITICALLY EXAMINE HOW THEIR OWN PRACTICES REACH OUT TO YOUTH.

Formalized institutions and processes may not effectively ‘speak’ to the youngest citizens. O’Neill (2006) strongly supported the development of deliberative instruments of public policy processes for their attention to enriching both political knowledge and the overall human capital of citizens, both of which she suggested increase the probability of increased participation from all citizens.

Additionally, political parties and candidates need to reconsider their commitments to youth and involve them in the political discourse. The acknowledgement by political parties of a role for youth in political and civic spheres is an important step in doing this. Furthermore, governmental bodies need to further continue to explore connections between formal and informal participation, and research into this relationship is needed in order to better understand how institutions themselves can facilitate this linkage.

9. PROBE MOTIVATIONS FOR VOTING AND NOT VOTING WITH THE POTENTIAL FOR IDENTIFYING APPROPRIATE INCENTIVES FOR VOTING.

Youth are often excluded from many political campaigns for various reasons: they were not viewed as key strategic voters in the past, they are deemed as uninterested and a waste of campaign efforts, they lack experience in the political process, or they are regarded as lacking the political knowledge to properly engage in the first place. Given that voting behaviour of youth is grounded in different set of democratic values, Archer and Wesley (2006) critiqued programs narrowly focused on education campaigns to instil or invoke the importance of fulfilling citizen civic duties and obligations for having little effect on youth voters. Rather, they suggested, “messages that may be more effective in encouraging youth turnout involve a sense of group identity, of equating the vote with the expression of voice, and of making a difference on policy matters” (p. 14).

Election issues focus on matters that do not resonate with the issues that youth are interested in, and consequently, in order to engage this population, campaigns that make space for issues such as postsecondary education, environmental issues and human rights may better connect youth to electoral activities.37

At election time, assert candidates’ commitments to reach out to youth. Bring forums to venues where youth already engage: community centres, universities, festivals, summer programs. More progressively, begin this work before election time so that the momentum can be built upon once campaign time begins.
Many municipalities have expanded their communications to include attention to social media. Yet, in many ways, youth themselves are already experts in using this communication to express their own political views and to mobilize participation in critical ways.

Civic groups have much to learn from youth by looking at what youth have to say through social media tools. Focusing attention and recognizing how youth engage with civic issues on social media is one means of validating the current participation of youth. Additionally, studying the impact of ICT on civic learning and engagement is another place for Edmonton to take a key lead in better understanding youth engagement.

The important role of families as the primary agent of political socialization is often noted in the literature exploring ways to engage youth. Appropriately, there is a call for all levels of government to recognize various family units as key actors in political and civic socialization, including civics and citizenship education. Steps to support families in their role to help raise civic literacy among young people is important.
While the notion that youth appear not interested in engagement may be common among popular discourses, this broad claim is not entirely accurate. Indeed, there are several examples across the civic and political spheres whereby youth not only participate in activities, but also where they take the lead to initiate engagement. There appear to be nuanced patterns among the behaviour of youth, across the globe, so that in some cases, we see youth much more active than their older Canadian counterparts, contradicting the idea that youth are absent from Canadian public spaces. However, the ways in which they become involved have challenged the functioning, and, some would argue, the legitimacy of traditional institutional means of seeking participation, involvement and engagement from the public. Recognizing the authentic involvement of youth happening in communities across Canada requires acknowledging the ways in which youth want to partake as citizens. Doing so suggests the need to embrace youth as both co-creators and partners in renewing civic and democratic spaces.

The connection between civic and political involvement is beginning to become better understood among both practitioners and policymakers. Yet, more research is needed to better grasp the linkage between these two areas. The need to both practice and research strategies for youth engagement ought to be thought of as connected so that there is better understanding among policymakers, practitioners and researchers about the nature of this relationship.

The responsibility for fostering the importance of youth involvement cannot be left to one organization or institutional alone. Rather, such practice needs to be facilitated through discussion and debate in schools, in communities, in civic organizations and at home. However, there is a need for institutions, both governmental and community-based, to examine their own approaches to question how effective they are at reaching out to youth and acknowledging the strengths that young citizens bring to public discourses and policy spheres. The growing shifts in youth involvement suggest that youth are speaking. The question is, who is listening?
Since the mantra of a population of disengaged youth has captured the attention of many civic institutions, several jurisdictions and organizations have developed documents proposing best practices and strategies for involving youth.

i. A synthesis report developed from several workshops, roundtables and research papers related to youth involvement in Canada was published by the Canadian Policy Research Networks in 2007. *Lost in translation: Mis(understanding) youth engagement* (MacKinnon, M., Pitre, S., & Watling, J., 2007) detailed much of the literature and research on youth’s participation in civic and political sphere. Also, there were several recommendations for policy, practice and research outlines at the end of the document. The report was clear that there must be better attempts to envision youth as co-creators in political and civic spheres. In conclusion, the authors stated, “Youth are not disconnected from politics: it is political institutions, practice and culture that are disconnected from youth” (p. vii). This synthesis report is a must for anyone practicing in the field of youth involvement in Canada.

ii. *Youth voice: Ushering in a new era for Chicago* was developed by the Mikva Challenge City Youth Commission to advise ways for the city of Chicago to make better use of youth expertise and leadership. The commission involved twenty youth leaders from different high schools, colleges and universities throughout the city. Specific strategies for youth governance and city departments were provided throughout the report, including recommendations for transit and police departments. The need for an authentic but institutionalized approach to seeking youth involvement was stressed was essential for positive change in the city.

iii. The National League of Cities from the US has developed a comprehensive, practical document for municipalities to use when developing their own programs for youth engagement. *Authentic youth civic engagement: A guide for municipal leaders* (National League of Cities, 2010) elaborated a vision for young people to be involved in municipal spaces, whereby youth are seen as valuable, prepared and partners in municipal government. This framework was specific in prescribing four critical elements required in successful initiatives: the setting, the structure, the strategy, and support. Each element is extensively elaborated throughout the document, with directives aimed at improving practice. While the document referred to the American municipal structures, the convenience of a step-by-step approach provided in this framework may be useful to inform approaches to reaching out to youth in Canadian cities, as well.
iv. During election time, the municipality of the City of Victoria took an approach aimed at creating tools to engage the population to become involved in the 13 municipal elections taking place at the same time. One means of doing this was to set-up information booths at two university campuses in order to provide practical information about how to register for voting, identify the appropriate riding and the details needed for voting. In order to bring information to the younger voters, the city also took advantage of advertising in free community newspapers that are frequently located at the socializing venues that appeal to young people.

v. The high voter turnout in the most recent municipal election in Calgary in 2010 attracted the attention of many concerned with young voter turnouts. With a rise of 20% of voter turnout in that election over the previous election, a total of 53% of eligible voters marked their ballots at polling stations in Calgary's municipal election that year. The importance of the youth vote in bringing more people to the polls and a sense of increased interaction with youth from candidates are given much of the credit for high voter turnout. More attention was given to social media as a means to communicate key issues of the election with eligible youth voters. For example, the city's app released to encourage people to vote received over 4,000 subscribers, as compared to the disappointing 1,000 downloads received from a similar Vancouver app. As well, the election captured the attention of post-secondary students, as student unions worked to get election information out to students on issues that pertained to them, such as transportation, housing and parking. Even those students who did not meet age requirements for voting were given the chance to become informed, debate the issues and participate in mock elections. Indeed, many blogs and online forums targeting youth below the voting age aimed to bring civics education directly to school-aged children. All in all, the overall sentiment is that the surge in voter turnout in Calgary resulted from grassroots attempts at connecting with the citizen population, predominantly in ways that attracted younger voters to both the election issues and the polls.

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i For a review of the election, see http://blogs.calgaryherald.com/2012/03/27/all-grown-up-the-importance-of-the-youth-vote.
ii For more information on the blog, see http://thetvee.ca/Blogs/TheHook/Municipal-Politics/2011/11/18/Vancouver-Election-App.
iv See Youth Are Awesome (http://www.youthareawesome.com/youth-should-vote) and Youth Central (http://youthcentral.com/special-projects-and-programs).
vi. **Café Politique**, a series of monthly gatherings convened by a partnership between researchers at the University of Manitoba and the Manitoba Institute for Policy Research (MIPR) during the 2011 Manitoba election, focused on **bringing citizens and experts together to talk about election engagement in public venues**, such as coffeehouses, schools, bookstores, shopping centres and restaurants through Manitoba. The Café Politique sessions were held for nine months leading up to the election, with discussion touching on a range of issues, such as the political engagement of youth and other demographics with traditionally lower voter turnout rates and the rules and regulations of the provincial voting process. Additionally, a series of academic lectures by scholars from across various Canadian academic, political and journal spheres were held to prompt questions among the citizen conversations and challenge common-held thinking about politics in the province of Manitoba. The café sessions were part of the U2011 Series committed to not only increasing debate but also to “raise the level of knowledge and awareness of politics in Manitoba, so that more citizens may engage meaningfully in the democratic process.”

**Student Vote 2004** featured a comprehensive lesson plan package with resources aimed at teaching about the Canadian political spectrum and involving local candidates in classroom activities and learning. The packages were available to both elementary and secondary teachers, regardless of their subject specialization, and included both constituency maps and display posters from Elections Canada. Sharon Cook, from the University of Ottawa, set out to examine how teachers who used this program felt about its utility and effectiveness in teaching civic education and political knowledge about the Canadian electoral system. Among her findings were the following trends:

- The majority of teachers indicated that their interest in participating in the Student Vote 2004 project was to “involve students in an important democratic function” (p. 18), but interestingly, to also improve the teachers’ own knowledge and understanding of the Canadian electoral system.

- The grades 7 to 12 teachers were most involved with the program, as elementary teachers reported that the material was above their students’ comprehension levels. Also, when the program was used in a school, involvement often permeated beyond one classroom, so that activities such as shadow voting were planned for the whole school population.

- Little evidence was collected by the teachers about the effectiveness of the program to effect students’ learning or their continued engagement in political and civic activities.

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i After contacting via email all the 850 Canadian teachers who enrolled in the program, 112 educators completed a pre-parallel election questionnaire. Subsequently, of the 42 educators who continued to participate in the study, ten were selected as a representative sample to participate in telephone interviews. See Cook (2004) for more details about the study.
This report by Cook is a rare example of published scholarly research aimed at investigating approaches to engage school-aged youth. Though limited in their scope and generalizability, findings of her work illuminated the importance of carrying out such studies, as the participants in the study helped provide insight as to why such programs appeal to teachers and, by some extension, to young people in general. In particular, one finding that bears significant attention is the notion that teachers themselves, many of them novice teachers who we might assume are within the aged 26 to 33 category used in many studies in youth voter turnout, are interested in learning about electoral processes and sought this package as a means to educate themselves as well as their students. Such findings suggest another position counter to the argument that youth are disengaged, as this one professional group sought opportunity to learn more about how political processes work in Canadian federal elections.

Both in Canada and internationally, some jurisdictions have focused specifically on voter registration as a goal, particularly targeting those with historically low turnout rates with the expectation that such campaigns will result in voter turnout increase. Such campaigns have rarely been successful. Yet, other programs have contained a specific focus on political education and knowledge, with the expectation to influence choice through the democratic process, highlighting phrases such as “Make your voice count”. In some instances, provisional registration has been used to enrol voters early in their life cycle, so that by the time they reach the age of majority and are eligible to vote, the fact that they are already registered may provide incentive for them to enact this right.

Campaigns, such as those used in Australia, have focused specifically on college and university students, and even high school systems whereby the electoral authority agrees to compensate the school for allowing the authority to register students and possibly engage in a civic or political education campaign within the curriculum of the school. Other school-based initiatives include those pioneered by Elections Canada, such as Cable in the Classroom, aimed at engaging youth to plan their own public service announcements promoting their peer involvement in political processes. In any case, Canadian scholar Keith Archer (2003) suggested those practices aimed at registering voters through school, college or university ought best to focus on doing so outside of partisan affiliated clubs, so as to avoid potential conflicts. Online registration is emerging in electoral offices internationally and such programs have worked well in the UK and Australia. Additionally, some jurisdictions use birthday cards sent by electoral authorities to alert potential voters of their eligibility to vote. Such mail-out notices provide the means for the authority to become aware of the number of voters who become eligible each year, as well as facilitating the registration process as birthday cards are accompanied with political education material as well as directions on how to complete their registration. A common practice used in New Zealand is the registration of new voters by electoral officials at large events aimed at mobilizing youth around political and social causes. Such practices have been used in Canada, as well.

Keith Archer has highlighted some best practices in Canada and internationally. For more details, see Archer, K. (2003).
Recently, some initiatives have been started by young Canadians who were concerned about the lack of political engagement by their peers. Get Your Vote On (GYVO), a more locally situated program in British Columbia (BC), focuses specifically on voter registration, information on pertinent issues in the election, and encouragement for young people to vote. GYVO describes itself as an energetic group of young people who are committed to “doing the seemingly impossible” by showcasing the fun, interesting and worth doing aspects of going out to the polls to exercise their right to vote. The group posts information about provincial and federal election candidates in BC ridings, as well as information about municipal elections in Vancouver. Basic information under the heading of “Voting 101” includes postings about election candidates, the issues being raised in political campaigns by candidates and also by the public, the workings of the electoral system for each level of politics, and information about the parties involved in campaigns. Started in 2004, the movement boasts great success in BC through the use of modern social media tools and public relations events that draw significant crowds of young voters. The movement illustrates its success on its website by detailing its effectiveness at voter enrolment. For example, in 2005, the BC Provincial Election GYVO registered over 20,000 first time voters using street outreach, voter ‘hubs’, concerts and other events across BC, which the group claims resulted in the first increase in youth voter turnout in the province since the 1970s. Similarly, GYVO was active in the 2011 municipal election in Vancouver for which overall voter turnout was the highest in nine years.

Some of their specific strategies rely on a significant volunteer base to carry out innovative and unique programs:

- **bike2ballots program**, where tandem bike riders will pick up voters to take them to the polls;

- **VOTObooth events**, a booth which captures photographs of young people sharing their passion for issues that draw them to the polls; and

- **candidate speed dating**, held at popular pubs and restaurants where political candidates visit potential voters at their booths and tables in the establishment and then engage in debates about particular issues, where young voters can ask questions.

GYVO is run by volunteers and relies on citizens to interact virtually through the website in a blog-style to add information about issues and political campaigns. A significant portion of their efforts is focused specifically on educating those who do not vote as to why engaging at the polls is an important aspect of a democratic society.

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More information on this campaign can be found at: [http://www.getyourvoteon.ca](http://www.getyourvoteon.ca).
Apathy is Boring is a volunteer organization with a mission of using art and technology to educate youth about democracy. It targets democratically disengaged 18-35 year old Canadians, elected officials and employers seeking advice for better youth engagement strategies. Started in 2004, Apathy is Boring works across Canada to engage youth not only in voting but also in becoming more active in their communities. Its goal is to motivate youth to become active decision-makers in democratic processes throughout local, provincial and national political spheres and to connect youth through sustainable dialogue with elected officials and candidates. The Apathy is Boring website lists four main programs:

1. **Volunteers attend various concerts and events across Canada** to encourage the youth in attendance to become involved in their communities, to survey youth opinions and beliefs about democratic practices, and to create opportunities for dialogue with elected officials.

2. The organization hosts many **workshops to provide tools and resources** to both engage youth in decision-making and to educate those in political decision-making positions about how to better engage youth in their organizations.

3. The Apathy is Boring **website** is a large platform filled with voter information for a wide range of elections, “how-to’s” related to both voting and getting involved with democratic processes and support for the ideal of democracy as a societal foundation.

4. During electoral periods, the Apathy is Boring program plans **several reach-out opportunities with election information** for youth in order that they can seek to make informed decisions at the polls.

Apathy is Boring has received much attention in the media. An example of this was the public service announcement played in movie theatres during the 2006 Canadian federal election and through MuchMusic Television for the 2008 federal election. The non-partisan group has enrolled the help of many famous and high profile Canadians such as Hedley, K’naan and Jully Black to co-produce concerts and events that draw young Canadians. Additionally, they have worked to raise awareness around political issues and have been involved in conducting research through Elections Canada regarding the impact of changing voter requirements for First Nations and Northern Canadians.

The examples of organizations with programs specifically targeting youth to become engaged in political activities are very numerous, yet little research has been conducted to measure the effectiveness of such efforts. However, one example that offers insight for policy recommendations is **British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform** held in the province in 2005i. While O’Neill (2007) recognized that suggested electoral reform proposed by the assembly was defeated in a province-wide referendum, she suggested the exercise demonstrated two important aspects of citizen engagement: 1) it demonstrated both the capacity and willingness for citizens throughout the province to meet regularly (for a whole year) in a process of collaborative decision-making; and 2) it illustrated how governments can attempt to deal

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i  For more information on Apathy is Boring, check their website: [www.apathyisboring.com](http://www.apathyisboring.com).

ii  Brenda O’Neill has highlighted the importance of this event on the public policy process in her report for the Canadian Policy Research Network. For more information, see O’Neill, B. (2007).
with citizen cynicism and distrust by facilitating and trusting the capacity of citizens to participate in decision-making processes. While this example did not specifically address youth, there may be consideration by governments for how such processes attract young people in a deliberative process, rather than simply checking a voter’s box at election time.

While the mantra of a population “disengaged and apathetic youth” rings throughout the frustration of many civic offices throughout Canada, unprecedented large numbers of youth have turned out at recent gatherings in cities across the globe to challenge the notion that youth lack the desire to become actively involved with political issues. In the fall and winter of 2011-2012, the Occupy Movement originated in Liberty Square in Manhattan’s Financial District in New York City and spread to thousands of local gatherings in over 1500 cities globally, including cities across Canada such as Edmonton, Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax, Lethbridge, Victoria and Saskatoon. The movement originated with a concern for “fighting back against the corrosive power of major banks and multinational companies over the democratic process, and the role of Wall Street in creating an economic collapse that has caused the greatest recession in generations.” While the initial momentum started in protest against economic recession and the role of financial institutions in shrinking the opportunities for meaningful public participation in democratic decision-making, Occupy movements emerged to address a plethora of public policy issues and fields: agriculture, education, health care, civic liberty, and the list goes on…While each Occupy movement attracted a variety of people, the particularly high representation of young people was captured by the media. Over 25% of participants at OWS identified as students. The Occupy events continue at present and coverage of events can be seen throughout various non-mainstream media venues.

More recently, the outpouring of youth in the streets of Quebec has attracted attention across Canada and the globe. Originally gathering to protest the provincially mandated 75% increase to tuition at post-secondary institutions, the daily evening gatherings marched through the streets of Montreal to both demonstrate their discontent with the increase and to raise public awareness of how such increases threatened access for many to higher education opportunities. While the debate on public spending for education showcased diverse perspectives across the political spectrum, the large mobilization showed that, indeed, youth are interested in participating in the political sphere.

In speaking about the ability of the student unions to mobilize over 250,000 people around this issue, one student union leader noted that the inherent political focus of student unions in Quebec is an important aspect of such mobilization, stating that the student groups operate by principles of democracy whereby large numbers of students are engaged in decision-making through the operation of the General Assembly. General Assembly is a practice shared by both the Occupy Movements and the recent Quebec student unions and stems from democratic-based decision-making initiated in early Ancient Athens. Based on consensus building, the General Assembly is designed to allow greater input about issues from a larger base of people, rather than traditional forms of representative participation such as voting. The consensus process often involves facilitators and working groups to divide decision-making through deliberation among interested individuals.

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Engaging young people in civic and political life sometimes happens via means that attract young people through their other interests, something that arts activist and co-director of Alberta Aboriginal Arts Christine Sokaymoh’ Frederick knows well. Seeing the arts as an ideal place to enact change, Frederick has several years of experience working with Aboriginal youth and is committed to developing educational programs for youth that ignite their awareness of culture and belonging through the arts. The goal of such programs is clear: education becomes the key to developing leadership skills needed for engaging civically and in community. Yet, the obstacle of facilitating the transition of engagement beyond involvement in a specific program towards building the confidence and commitment from youth to seek other opportunities to become involved in the community is a common challenge when programs near completion. Christine was faced with this dilemma when the funding for a program aimed at building leadership skills in Aboriginal youth through art programming ended in the spring 2012. Determined to see the young Aboriginal artists extend their skills beyond the program and into the community, Christine reached out to the Works Festival to seek opportunities for the youth to present their own work. Her efforts met with great success, as the youth were able to take a center-stage role in showcasing their work and hosting impromptu conversations with festival-goers about their work, art in general, culture and history. Seeing the youth take up their own ways of getting involved in the festival was a moment of success. In talking about her experiences of engaging Aboriginal youth involvement, Christine reiterated the belief that we must seek to understand how youth are involved in multiple ways, rather than seeking to make them fit into the restricted moulds often determined for youth. Her plan to reach out to Aboriginal youth is clear: 1) discover the ways that they are already involved and talk to people who play meaningful roles in the lives of youth, often their families; 2) critically look at the real access that youth have to public events and opportunities to redress the ways that they may be marginalized, excluded and uninvited; and 3) build programs that focus on education. For Christine, the arts provide a meaningful way to build the passion and skills for Aboriginal youth to engage in the political and civic arenas around them.

Next Up is a program aimed at helping emerging young leaders aged 18 - 35 develop their skills in order to engage hands-on with civic and political issues in their communities. The program began in British Columbia and has expanded into cities in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Each location has its own advisory committee, consisting of 12 to 14 leaders from local organizations that work directly with youth, and a coordinator tasked with the responsibility to plan each year’s schedule of sessions. The program is intense – with seven months of sessions scheduled for three hours during four weekday evenings and one full-day Saturday per month.

The leadership training focuses on popular education approaches to teaching young people skills that prepare them take up key leadership roles in the community, equipping them with knowledge needed to be actively engaged in community decision-making, such as how to structure a debate on an issue, use social media to generate awareness of issues and events, launch and manage a campaign, and work with media to deliver press releases. While other programs for youth are geared towards developing entrepreneurial and networking skills, Next Up focuses on teaching the skills required to become civically and politically active and tackles issues from various topics and disciplines including political economy, power structures, gender, social justice, and environmental sustainability, to combine both theory and hands-on work.

i For more information about Alberta Aboriginal Arts, see http://www.albertaaboriginalarts.com.
The sessions are taught by local leaders from the non-profit, business and public sectors with a commitment to bringing about social change. What sets Next Up apart from other youth leadership programs is the way it situates leadership as inherently being both a political and active trait, meaning that, in its pedagogy and its practice, the focus is building and being a part of the community in order to engage politically to bring about social change.

**Edmonton’s Next Gen** is an initiative started in 2005 that aims to provide opportunities for Edmontonians aged 18 to 40 to become involved in community activities and events. A task force convened by two city councillors to host public consultations about what young people wanted to see in Edmonton’s art and culture, business, sports, recreation, education and employment arenas resulted in Next Gen emerging as a key initiative to support youth in the city. The current Next Gen Executive Committee is comprised of 16 members, with representatives from the community and from key city portfolios, as well as two city councillors and a coordinator. Next Gen also consists of several working groups run through volunteer participation to organize social events and opportunities for young Edmonton residents to share their feedback, opinions and ideas. This information is shared with the Edmonton City Council to influence decision-making processes on issues relevant to the city of Edmonton. Several key initiatives have been achieved through the work of Next Gen: the establishment of Wireless Edmonton, the development of the Edmonton Community Challenge, and input on several city plans such as *The Art of Living, Cultural Plan for the City of Edmonton, The Way We Live, The Blue Bin Program, and the City Centre Redevelopment Project*. Additionally, the popular Pecha Kucha nights are throughout the year to showcase the diverse interests and talents of Edmontonians aged 18-40.

**The City of Edmonton Youth Council (CEYC)** is a long-standing exciting initiative that aims to provide opportunities for young people to advise City Council and administration on issues and projects that concern youth. The CEYC General Assembly, with approximately 35 young people aged 13 to 23, meets monthly to review and give feedback to city policies as they are developed, to plan events and activities for youth in Edmonton, and to develop their own initiatives targeting social issues that interest young people.

In 2011, the CEYC Transportation *Transit Ninjas* planned a successful LRT Dance Party for young Edmontonians, to both promote the use of public transportation and to raise money for the City of Edmonton’s “Donate-a-Ride” Program. Equipped with a disco ball and DJ, the train cars were decorated with separate themes to entice dancers to move about and meet new youth. The dance party brought together young people from across Edmonton to promote public transportation as a sustainable and viable means of getting around the city.

In 2008, the CEYC focused their attention on homelessness through their *Heart 2 Art* project, aimed at raising awareness of the growing need for programs assisting families and individuals in Edmonton who struggle with homelessness. With support from several corporate and business partners, the council received over 840 submissions for an art competition culminating with an elaborate gala held at city hall. Over $140,000 was raised to support Boyle Street Community Services that provide drop-in and outreach support to youth, adults and families in need in Edmonton.

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For more information on Pechu Kucha nights see the Edmonton’s Next Gen website: [http://www.edmontonnextgen.ca](http://www.edmontonnextgen.ca)
The City of Toronto has a commitment to bringing information to its city residents as soon as decisions and agendas are happening. A blog is used to provide up-to-date preliminary decision information from the City Clerk’s Office to the public about council meeting minutes. Motions from council sessions are posted live to agenda items on the city council website and revisions are added as they are made during meetings. Additionally, the Toronto City Clerk Twitter feed posts the agendas and decisions of both the council and its committees live. With over 12,000 followers, the tweets reach many residents in live time. The TO Civic Engagement Twitter feed conveys instant messages about public consultation and civic engagement opportunities in the city.

In 2009, the City of Toronto held a Civics 101 program for participants to learn about how the city government makes decisions, which individuals and portfolios are involved in such processes, and how city residents can get involved in civic life and decision-making. From over 900 applications from residents to participate, 175 participants were randomly selected to attend six sessions from September to December 2009. The city developed a website that shares what participants learned at these sessions: the information and documents used during sessions, videos of the presentation and other session events, links to background material, and outcomes of learning exercises planned for each session. Additionally, the Toronto Civics 101 blog highlights participants’ experiences and perspectives about the sessions and offers opportunities for those who partake in the online format to share their own learning from participation.

The City of Victoria has invested its efforts in engaging the youth demographic in political and civic activities in the municipality. Known for having a significant retirement-aged resident population, city officials were prompted to address the younger residents when recent census data showed an increasing demographic of 18-39 year olds living in the municipality and technology as one of the largest industries in the area. Additionally, research into this group of residents revealed that there were a considerable proportion of students living in Victoria who had come from across the island and province, some of whom had chosen to continue their residence in the city past their studies. With this information, the city knew it had to change some of its approaches to public engagement in order to reach this demographic. Building upon its recent public engagement strategy, Engaging Foundations for Success, city engaged in a review of its current practices to find out what they were already doing and adopted a holistic approach that could permeate ongoing work to improve civic engagement.

Investing in social media as a means of engaging the youth demographic, via popular platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, proved to be an effective use of time and resources. The city website was revamped to be more interactive and to highlight information that would both attract and educate the youth about civic issues and programs. Commentaries from social media are currently used to provide feedback to the city council and staff about the needs of city residents.

Also, there has been a commitment to take consultation into the community. Public information and consultation evenings are no longer predominantly housed at city hall. Rather, city staff and councilors attend sessions located at venues where residents engage in everyday life, for example at coffee houses throughout the city. Additionally, city staff and council attend sessions in the high schools and universities to share information about civic issues and to solicit feedback from young people about their concerns and needs as city residents. Attendance from the mayor has piqued the interest of young students to learn more about how the municipal government operates. The focus of these community-based sessions is talking to residents to garner information about issues that matter to them. Feedback is then taken to city council and staff to inform future planning and decision-making.
Key to tracking the effectiveness of this approach has been a commitment to gather demographic data at these sessions to determine if feedback is being received from residents who feel they have not been previously consulted on civic issues. Such data has been crucial to knowing that this approach is attracting involvement from a variety of city residents.

Initiated from the belief that getting youth involved requires piquing their interest at a young age, the council regularly communicates with high school-aged students in the municipality. The mayor and city councilors regularly visit classrooms in the municipality in order to talk to the younger members of the youth demographic about issues that are important to them. Additionally, the council works with the municipality's communications department to come up with fresh ideas and strategies so that the meetings with students provide an excellent opportunity to educate the youth about upcoming civic events, as well as the regular operations and functions of the municipal government that can often be either uninteresting or unknown to this younger population.


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/// ENDNOTES

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29. Menard (2010)
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