

Willing to participate: Political engagement of young adults

by Anne Milan

Young adults are often viewed as uninterested in political activity. Is it true that they are more disillusioned by traditional methods of participation than other age groups, as shown by the proportion who cast ballots in the municipal, provincial or federal elections? Do young adults engage in politics through activities outside of the ballot box? Or do those who vote also engage in non-voting political behaviour?

Using the 2003 General Social Survey (GSS), this article outlines the extent of political engagement among young adults aged 22 to 29,¹ as measured by traditional (voting) and alternative (non-voting) political participation. It then examines some of the links between young adults' selected characteristics and their political behaviours such as voting, signing petitions, boycotting certain products, attending public meetings or participating in demonstrations.

Young adults less likely to vote than older adults

In a democracy, electoral voting is generally seen as the classic or traditional type of participation in the political process. Indeed, many adults do exercise their right to vote, although voter turnout at federal elections has decreased over the last 20 years.² Despite the fact that 77% of the voting-age population voted in at least one of the last elections prior to the survey in 2003, there were large

GST What you should know about this study

This study draws from the 2003 General Social Survey (GSS), which interviewed nearly 25,000 individuals aged 15 and over, living in the 10 provinces in private households. It focuses on individuals aged 22 to 29, resulting in a sample of roughly 3,000 people representing about 3.4 million Canadians in this age group. This particular age group was chosen in order to include those individuals who were aged 18 or over in 2000, the year of the most recent federal election prior to the survey date.

To conduct its analysis, the study developed a non-voting or alternative political involvement scale ranging from 0 to 8, based on whether the respondent had, in the past 12 months, searched for information on a political issue; volunteered for a political party; expressed his/her views on an issue by contacting a newspaper or a politician; signed a petition; boycotted a product or chosen a product for ethical reasons; attended a public meeting; spoken out at a public meeting; participated in a demonstration or march.

A score of 0 indicates no non-voting political participation, while a score of 8 reflects participation on all possible indicators.

Two statistical models were developed to examine the impact of specific characteristics on young people's political engagement. The first model identifies selected factors associated with non-voting alternative political participation; the second model determines the influence of the same factors on voting behaviour. These factors include age, youth involvement in community activities, group affiliation, sex, place of birth, religious attendance, volunteering, sense of belonging to community, region, educational level, main activity, household income, and (for the first model on non-voting political engagement) voting behaviour.

differences in voting participation by age. According to GSS data, only 59% of those in their twenties voted, compared with 71% of 30- to 44-year-olds and 85% or more of individuals

aged 45 and over. As with the older age groups, young adults were less likely to vote in local than in federal and provincial elections.

	Political participation (%)					
	Age group					
	Total	15 to 21	22 to 29	30 to 44	45 to 64	65 or older
Follow news and current affairs daily	68*	35*	51	66*	81*	89*
Voting behaviour						
Voted in at least one election	77*	---	59	71*	85*	89*
last federal	74*	---	52	68*	83*	89*
last provincial	73*	---	50	66*	82*	88*
last municipal or local	60*	---	35	52*	70*	79*
Non-voting political behaviour						
At least one non-voting political behaviour	54*	59	58	57	56	39*
searched for information on a political issue	26*	36	32	26*	25*	17*
signed a petition	28*	27*	31	31	29	16*
boycotted a product or chose a product for ethical reasons	20*	16*	25	25	21*	8*
attended a public meeting	22*	17	16	23*	25*	20*
expressed his/her views on an issue by contacting a newspaper or a politician	13*	8	9	13*	16*	12*
participated in a demonstration or march	6*	12*	8	6	6*	2*
spoke out at a public meeting	8*	4	5	9*	10*	7*
volunteered for a political party	3	2	3	2	4*	4

--- Not applicable

* Statistically significant difference from 22- to 29-year-olds ($p < 0.05$).

Note: Voting rates will differ from those of Elections Canada, which calculates voter participation rates based on number of eligible voters.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

Why don't young people vote?

There are several possible reasons why young adults are not as likely to go to the polls as their older counterparts. According to some researchers, compared to previous generations, young adults are simply tuned out of the political process,³ lacking the ability, the motivation or both to get involved. In some ways, the sheer volume of available information coming from the Internet and television, as well as other media, can be overwhelming when trying to find a starting point for becoming informed.⁴ Consequently, young adults may be less aware of the relevance of elections, and feel removed from the idea that decisions made by politicians affect them directly.⁵

One Canadian researcher has argued that young adults today feel marginalized from mainstream political discourse.⁶ She contends that youth account for a declining share of the voting-age population, a situation that limits their political clout. At the same time, government has reduced or limited its support for issues that interest young adults, such as postsecondary education, equality and human rights.

Yet it seems that young adults share at least some of the same political interests as older Canadians. A 2005 study found that, following the last election, 18- to 29-year-olds ranked health care as the issue that was most important to them personally.⁷ In fact, all respondents,

regardless of age, rated health care as the primary concern, although proportionally more older Canadians did so. Furthermore, the study found that levels of political alienation were similar for younger and older adults.

Some researchers have referred to young people as “engaged sceptics”—interested in political issues, but wary of politicians.⁸ In other words, they are committed to the tenets of democracy, but tend to be more interested in participative political behaviour and issues which are immediately pertinent to their lives. Young people’s feeling of disconnect from conventional political parties may partially account for their negative view of traditional politics and for their interest in alternative forms of political behaviour.⁹

Most adults under 65 engage in at least one non-voting political activity

While young adults are less likely to vote than those over 30, this is not true of their political behaviour on other fronts. In the year preceding the survey, nearly three in five (58%) 22- to 29-year-olds engaged in at least one non-voting political activity, virtually the same proportion as that of 30- to 64-year-olds (56%). In contrast, only two in five (39%) Canadians aged 65 or over took part in any alternative political behaviour, although this age group was the most likely to vote.

Because participating in a non-voting or alternative activity “can be a valuable source of political education, [which develops] politically relevant knowledge, awareness, understanding and skills,”¹⁰ young people’s involvement in alternative political behaviour is central to assessing their level of political interest.

According to the 2003 GSS, the most common non-voting political behaviours young adults engaged in during the year were searching for information on a political issue (32%) and signing a petition (31%).

One-quarter of young adults boycotted—or chose—a product for ethical reasons, while over one-sixth attended a public meeting. About 1 in 10 expressed their views on an issue by contacting a newspaper or a politician, or participating in a demonstration or protest march. A very small proportion (3%) had worked as a volunteer for a political party.

Overall, young adults in their twenties were much more likely than seniors to seek to inform themselves about a political issue, to sign a petition, to boycott (or purchase) products for ethical reasons or to participate in demonstrations or marches. However, they were significantly less likely than older adults to attend and speak up in public meetings and to express their views to the media or politicians.

Community involvement connected to political engagement

It appears that individuals' level of involvement in various community-oriented activities may contribute to greater civic-mindedness. Whether it's belonging to a sports team, book club, volunteer group or religious association, groups can meet the personal needs of participants as well as connect them to the wider society. Indeed, the proportion of young adults engaged in non-voting political activity was nearly twice as high among those involved with three or more organizations as among their peers with no group affiliation (81% versus 43%). Similarly, 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 behaviour as adults.

Perhaps because volunteering also reflects a sense of civic responsibility and a desire to help others, young adults who volunteered in the year prior to the survey were much more likely to be involved in at least one political activity (voting or non-voting) than those who did not volunteer (71% compared with 52%).

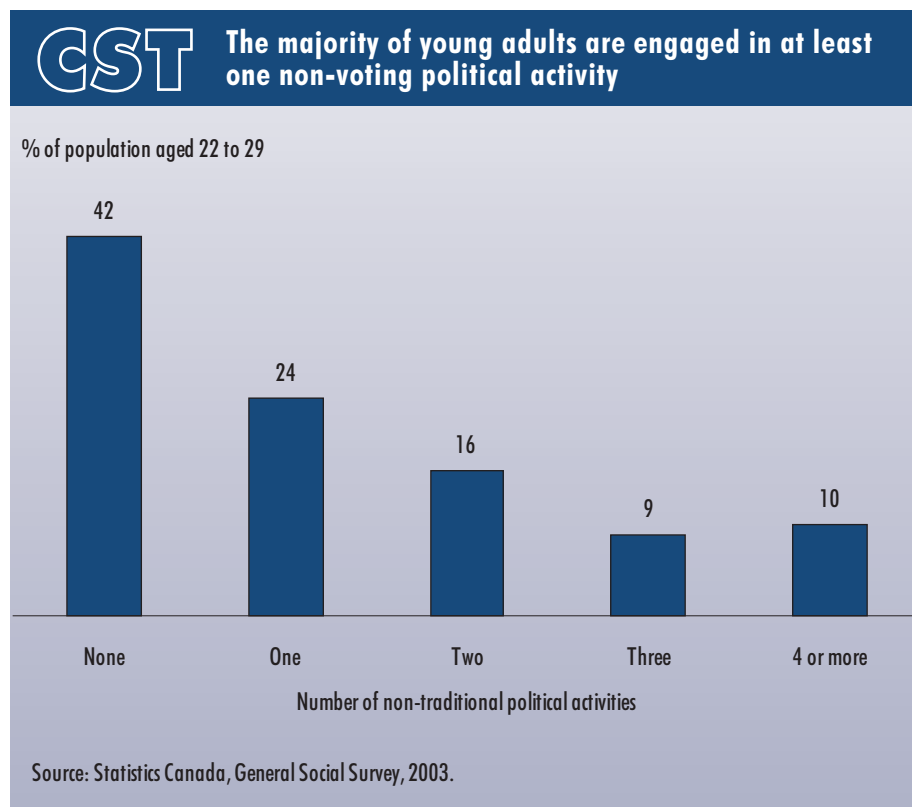
Statistical regression models were developed to identify the factors that influence a person's level of political engagement.¹¹ The results of these models show that, even after controlling for all other variables, volunteering or being affiliated with a group were both strongly associated with non-voting 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.

Interestingly, engaging in community-oriented activities as a child or teenager was positively associated with non-voting political behaviour, but not with voting. On the other hand, a strong sense of belonging to the community as a young adult resulted in higher odds of voting, but did not influence non-voting political participation.

Nearly 7 in 10 university-educated young adults participate in non-voting political behaviour

The models reveal a positive relationship between educational level and political engagement, even when controlling for other factors. Some 32% of young adults with less than a high school education engaged in at least one non-voting activity, compared with 69% of those with a university degree. Higher levels of education were also associated with higher odds of voting.

The effect of household income on political participation is mixed: 22- to 29-year-olds with household



	Odds ratio		Odds ratio
Age ¹	1.03	Region	
Youth involvement ²	1.03	<i>Quebec</i>	1.00
Number of groups of which a member	1.11 ³	Atlantic	0.38*
		Ontario	0.30*
Sex		Prairies	0.32*
<i>Female</i>	1.00	British Columbia	0.36*
Male	1.08	Educational level	
Place of birth		<i>University degree</i>	1.00
<i>Foreign-born</i>	1.00	Less than high school	0.25*
Canadian-born	4.27*	High school graduate	0.48*
Religious observance		Some post-secondary	0.74
<i>Rarely/never</i>	1.00	Diploma or certificate	0.68*
Weekly	0.86	Main activity	
Sometimes	1.40*	<i>Other⁴</i>	1.00
Volunteer in past year		Labour force	1.10
<i>No</i>	1.00	Student	0.81
Yes	1.42*	Household income	
Sense of belonging to community		<i>\$60,000 or more</i>	1.00
<i>Very weak</i>	1.00	Less than \$20,000	0.51*
Very strong	1.74*	\$20,000 to \$29,999	0.74
Somewhat strong	1.30	\$30,000 to \$39,999	0.75
Somewhat weak	1.26	\$40,000 to \$49,999	1.00
		\$50,000 to \$59,999	0.66*

Note: This table presents the odds that a respondent voted in the last election prior to the survey, relative to the odds of a benchmark group when all other variables in the analysis are held constant. Benchmark group is shown in italics.

* Statistically significant difference from benchmark group (p < 0.05).

1. For each additional year, the odds of voting increase by 3%.
2. For each additional activity during youth, the odds of voting increase by 3%.
3. For each additional group, the odds of voting increase by 11%, which is statistically significant (p < 0.05).
4. "Other" includes activities such as homemaking, retirement, volunteer work or illness.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

incomes under \$20,000 engaged in more non-voting behaviours than did those with household incomes of \$60,000 or more. On the other hand, young adults in low-income households had almost 50% lower odds of voting than those in high-income households, even when other factors (including student status) were taken into account.

Young adults most likely to vote in Quebec

Across the country, there are differences in the extent of political engagement. The share of young people who turned out to vote was highest in Quebec (74%), followed by the Atlantic provinces (64%), the

Prairies (56%), Ontario (53%), and British Columbia (49%), a relationship which continued after controlling for other factors.

A 2003 review of youth participation in Quebec suggests that activities beyond voting, such as pressure groups and demonstrations on issues ranging from education to anti-globalization, are also an important component of their political involvement.¹² According to the GSS, young adults in the Atlantic provinces engaged in fewer alternative political activities than their Quebec counterparts. However, the differences between other regions and Quebec were not statistically significant.

Canadian-born more politically engaged than immigrants

Some 66% of young Canadian-born adults cast a ballot in the last election prior to the survey, compared with only 29% of foreign-born youth. Of course, because Canadian citizenship is a prerequisite for voting, it is possible that not all of the foreign-born respondents to the GSS were eligible to vote. However, there would be no such restrictions on the ability to engage in non-voting political behaviour. Yet, the Canadian-born were still more likely to engage in at least one non-voting form of political behaviour: 61% compared with 44% of foreign-born. The strong relationship between place of birth and political

GST Frequency of following news and current affairs

Patterns of following news and current affairs tend to reflect other types of political participation. According to the 2003 General Social Survey, 51% of young adults in their twenties followed news and current affairs on a daily basis. An additional 31% apprised themselves several times a week, and 8% did so several times a month. This is far lower than the rates for other adults, particularly seniors, 89% of whom follow news and current affairs daily (perhaps reflecting their greater interest, more free time, or both).

The results also showed that young men were more likely to follow current affairs daily than were young women (56% compared to 46%). Voting in any type of election—municipal, provincial, or federal—was also associated with a greater likelihood of following current affairs. For example, 56% of those who had cast a ballot followed current affairs on a daily basis, compared to 45% of those who had not voted. Similarly, 57% of young adults who had engaged in a non-voting political activity followed news every day, compared to 44% of those with no such behaviour. Residents of Quebec followed the news most closely of all regions (59% did so daily), particularly compared to the Atlantic provinces (42%). Young adults who had less than a high school education were less inclined to follow the news daily (45% compared to 57% of those with a university degree).

engagement remained even when other factors, such as education, income, and province of residence, were taken into account.

Voting and non-voting behaviour go hand in hand

Although voting is a more traditional method of political behaviour than activities such as boycotting a product or signing a petition, there is a connection between these political activities. Two-thirds (66%) of young adults who voted had also engaged in at least one form of non-voting behaviour, compared to less than half (46%) of those who had not voted. This relationship held in the statistical model, even when other factors were taken into account.

In other words, young adults who went to the polls were also more apt to be politically engaged in other ways. However, it is also important to note that many individuals who did not cast a ballot still acted

in a political manner, even when they themselves might not have necessarily recognized that they were behaving politically. For example, a 2004 study of 20- to 29-year-olds found that they were fairly active in their communities, although they did not always identify their behaviour as volunteering.¹³ Many people express interest in issues and activities that could be seen as political, such as the environment or the community, but they do not always view their involvement as political engagement.

Summary

The political engagement of adults in their twenties is a complex issue. Young adults are politically involved, but in a different manner than older Canadians. Specifically, adults in their twenties voted less than any other age group; however, their rate of participation in non-voting political activities was comparable to that of

adults aged 30 to 64, and exceeded that of seniors, who have the highest voter participation rates of all age groups. Results of statistical models developed to isolate significant factors associated with engagement in the political process identified the following factors to be strongly associated with both voting and non-voting political behaviour: educational level, group involvement, and activities which promote civic-mindedness and public service, such as volunteering. Finally, young adults who voted were more likely to engage in non-voting political behaviour, but not casting a ballot did not preclude them from participating in non-voting activities.



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1. This particular age group is examined in order to include those who were aged 18 in 2000, the date of the most recent federal election prior to the 2003 GSS.
2. Elections Canada website. Voter turnout at federal elections and referendums, 1867-2000. www.elections.ca (accessed May 25, 2005).
3. O'Neill, B. December 2004. "Youth participation – What we know, and what we don't know." *Canadian Democracy: Bringing Youth back into the Political Process*. Centre for Research and Information on Canada. p. 2-5; Centre for Research and Information on Canada. 2001. *Voter Participation in Canada: Is Canadian Democracy in Crisis?* Montréal: Centre for Research and Information on Canada; Gidengil, E., A. Blais, J. Everitt, P. Fournier and P. Nevitte. January 2005. "Missing the message: Young adults and the election issues." *Electoral Insight: 2004 General Election 7*, 1: 6-11.
4. See, for example, O'Neill. 2004.
5. Bishop, G. and R. Low. December 2004. "Exploring young Canadians' attitudes towards government, politics and community." *Canadian Democracy: Bringing Youth back into the Political Process*. Centre for Research and Information on Canada. p. 6-8.

6. Adsett, M. 2003. "Changes in political era and demographic weight as explanations of youth "disenfranchisement" in federal elections in Canada, 1965-2000." *Journal of Youth Studies* 6, 3: 247-264.
7. Gidengil et al. 2005.
8. Henn, M., M. Weinstein and D. Wring. 2002. "A generation apart? Youth and political participation in Britain." *British Journal of Politics and Intergenerational Relations* 4, 2: 167-192.
9. *ibid.*
10. Roker, D., K. Player and J. Coleman. 1999. "Young people's voluntary and campaigning activities as sources of political education." *Oxford Review of Education* 25, 1 and 2: 195.
11. It should be noted that the correlates for engaging in either voting or non-voting behaviour were similar across age groups.
12. Gauthier, M. 2003. "The inadequacy of concepts: The rise of youth interest in civic participation in Quebec." *Journal of Youth Studies* 6, 3:265-276.
13. Bishop and Low. December 2004. p. 7.

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