

SOCIAL ISSUES



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WANTED: Young voters

By Jennifer Burden
 burd0018@algonquincollege.com

On Oct. 14, Jo-ele Albert will cast a ballot for the very first time in a federal election. Unlike so many young people, Albert, 18, believes it is important to vote in order to see change happen. "If you don't vote, you can't really complain," she said. "You don't have a voice."

Albert, a first-year television broadcasting student at Algonquin, is in the minority in terms of young people voting.

A 2007 Canadian Policy Research Networks report written for Elections Canada by Brenda O'Neill, titled, *Indifferent or Just Different? The Political and Civic Engagement of Young People in Canada*, stated that, "youth vote at an alarmingly lower rate than all other age groups."

In the 2004 federal election, the estimated turnout rate for 18 to 24-year-olds was 37 per cent, whereas the overall turnout rate for the election was 60.9 per cent.

Voter turnout increased as the age brackets got higher, culminating at an estimated 75 per cent turnout among 58 to 67-year-olds.

Although the youth voting rate has improved since the early 90s, it is still cause for concern.

Marlene Rivier, the New Democratic Party candidate for Ottawa-West Nepean, is deeply concerned about how low the numbers are for young people voting.

"Youth are our future leaders and I think it is very important for them to be involved," said Rivier.

She also noted the importance of getting voters interested in politics even before they are old enough to vote.

"We need to start talking about politics at very young ages," she said. "We should not be saying as some campaigns may, 'well they can't vote so why talk to them.' We need to be talking to them. We need to contribute to their awareness and to their evolution as political beings by being there to answer their questions. It's not about us telling youth stuff. We need to be listening."

It is also important to start voting at a young age because humans are creatures of habit.

"If you don't vote when you're 18, you're likely to never vote. It's a habit," said Ilona Dougherty, co-founder of Apathy is Boring, a Montreal-based project that uses art, media and technology to create active citizenry and educate youth about democracy.

"When these young people grow up they won't all of a sudden start voting," she said.

At 23, Dougherty, along with artists, Paul Shore, 30, and Mackenzie Duncan, 20, founded Apathy is Boring to attract youth who normally wouldn't vote. Dougherty said she felt as if the voting campaigns at the time were preaching to the already converted and missing the point.

"What is different about what we do is we work year round," she said.

By not working just around election time, Apathy is Boring has a bigger network, bigger resources, and can reach more young people.

Not all the blame can be placed on the shoulders of apathetic youth though. What can the politicians do?

"They've got to be honest," said Dougherty. "They have to be transparent. Go to where young people are."

First time voter, Albert, would also like to see politicians try harder to attract the youth vote.

"Try and reach out to youth more. Come to schools and speak to students," she said. "Address issues that would affect the younger voter."

What it all comes down to is having the voice of young people heard. Getting youth to vote isn't only about removing an embarrassing blemish from election statistics.

"The youth are about ideas," said Rivier. "They're willing to entertain doing things differently and making real changes and we need them in the political process."



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