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Student Vote 2004

Apathy? Or conscious choice?

By Amanda Taccone
Student Vote 2004 Youthbeat
June 21, 2004



Amanda Taccone

It has been widely reported that young people don't vote because they're apathetic, but on closer inspection it turns out this may not be the problem.

What if most young people do care, and are choosing not to vote because they believe that the current system is failing to represent their views? They vote for the winner on Canadian Idol, they vote for the next music video they want to see on television, but they don't vote to pick a Prime Minister. Maybe the message they're sending, and that people have failed to hear, is that they have no confidence in the current system.

Shelley Smith is a consultant at D-code, a research strategy and innovation company focused on youth, as well as the co-author of the study Citizen Re: Generation, Understanding Active Citizen Engagement Among Canada's Information Age Generations. She believes there's a lot more to low youth voter turnout than apathy.

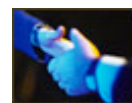
"It's very sort of, patronizing, telling [young people] to get it together, be mature, grow up and vote, without looking at the fact that there might be reasons that young people aren't voting, that there may be a bigger thing going on here, that it may be systemic, and that it's not just about this particular young group of Canadians."

Which isn't to say that some young people don't care, or simply feel they are too busy to be bothered with political matters. A March 2003 Elections Canada survey

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of non-voters found that 22.6% of 18-24 year-olds who don't vote say it's because they're too busy with work, school or family. But this number just doesn't compare to those in the same age bracket who cited lack of interest, which included feeling their vote was meaningless (38.5%) or negativity (27.3%) as reasons for not voting.

Ilona Dougherty is the national director of Apathy is Boring, an initiative that is trying to get youth to vote, and trying to change the way the political system works.

Dougherty, at 23 years old, is one of those elusive voters being sought, but she says that while apathy is certainly a factor among youth, it's not the primary reason behind low voter turnout.

"What I've heard a lot of is that there's a lot of young people making a really conscious choice not to vote. So they understand the issues, and they know what their options are, and they feel as though their best option is not to participate in the system and is to rather participate in democracy in different kinds of ways, like being involved in their community, protests, non-governmental organizations, that kind of work...I think there is some voter apathy, some people who don't care, but I think the vast majority of people my age do care, they just feel as though they need to make a choice, and they need to take a stand, and not voting is how they're doing that."

Smith points to statistics that show that young people are passionate about issues and do get involved, just in different ways. The Citizen Re: Generation study indicates that of 15-34 year-olds, 71% made charitable donations and 26% volunteered their time. She says that there is evidence that their lack of involvement in the electoral process isn't that they don't care, it's that they don't know enough and don't see the people who are looking for votes caring about them and their issues.

"I think that the lack of participatory structure within the electoral system is a really big problem. It's not so much that they don't care, they may care a lot, they just don't see voting as the most effective way to get involved in the issues they care about. It's not a very inclusive process."

Dougherty agrees that the politics as usual, doesn't work. But she also says young people are looking for more honesty from politicians, "A lot of young people are a lot more media savvy now, they understand, they can see through the sound bites, they can see through the hype, they can see when it's style and not substance, and I think that some of the old tricks that politicians are used to using aren't working on young people right now."

If, in fact, it's the way we elect a government that is turning off young voters, the question becomes, "What will it take to once again get them involved in the process?" There are at least half a dozen groups aimed specifically at getting young people to vote, and both Elections Canada and the political parties are taking steps to encourage young voters.

Dougherty is cynical about the effectiveness of these

groups, including her own. She says the effort needs to be more than just a push at election time, and there needs to be a focus on education, changing the system and changing the politicians, not just convincing people to vote.

"More than anything there definitely needs to be a change in attitude, in the way politicians act and the way they get their message out...I'm not interested in politicians who are only interested in winning, I'm interested in politicians who have something to say to me."

Smith likens the situation to a party. She says if the same select group of people keep coming to the party, and you want different people to come, the problem may be with those throwing the party. It may be time for the political powers that be to stop selling young people short.

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