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Election 2008

Now who's apathetic?

Political parties fail young voters on their home turf

KSENIA PRINTS

Youth voters prefer to be contacted through Facebook and similar technological means, but Canadian political parties are just not listening.

A poll conducted for the Dominion Institute by Innovative Research Group on Sept. 24 showed that 83 per cent of youth polled picked Facebook as their preferred means of political communication, with the cell phone a close second at 81 per cent. The Internet in general was the choice of 35 per cent and television stood at 30 per cent.

“If you look at the usage of mainstream media among young people, it’s declining rapidly,” said Harold Simpkins, a marketing professor at Concordia University.

Despite the high numbers, only about one-in-ten youth polled reported being contacted by a political party through any new media means.

“We’re way behind the United States in terms of using online media,” Simpkins said. “If you’re a politician, I’d think you want to get more out there in the blogosphere... You’ve got to be where your market is.”

The Green party and the New Democratic Party both have extensive youth sections on their websites, with blogs and podcasts. The Conservative Party of Canada has a podcast and a Facebook page, while the Liberals are absent from the new media sphere, except on Facebook.

“Politicians are finding they need more innovative ways to reach out to

youth, but I don't feel that in Canada we're particularly innovative. There isn't one particular party that's good at this," said Ilona Dougherty, co-founder and executive directory of Apathy is Boring, an online organization engaging youth with politics.

Another Dominion Institute poll on Oct. 1 found that only half of those polled replied they will definitely vote this election. Only 44 per cent of youth voted in 2006.

"That would suggest to me they still haven't gotten it, how important these social networking sites can be," said Simpkins.

The only group of young voters showing positive signs of election fever is comprised of bloggers. Bloggers were 20 per cent more likely to vote than other youth, reported the Sept. 24 poll.

"There's much more information on the Net now and bloggers are more likely to notice it and blog about it... you tend to get more involved with what you're writing about," said Sagan Morrow, a 20-year-old Winnipeg blogger.

Morrow is planning on voting in the upcoming election.

"The Internet is less personal and sort of less threatening. You don't have to face a person or agree to anything," she said about preferring online political communication.

Morrow runs a health blog, livinghealthyintherealworld.blogspot.com. She started blogging in February.

For more information on youth voting, go to apathyisboring.com or sign up for the Dominion Institute's party text service at thedemocracyproject.ca.