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Political Participation Among Canadians: Are Young People Disengaging? Public Report (8) 2023-03-30

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Political Participation Among Canadians

Are Young People Disengaging?

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Report 2023.03.30

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2023-04-13

This report was prepared for the Consortium for Electoral Democracy (C-Dem) using the 2021 Democracy Check-Up Survey (Harell, Stephenson, Rubenson and Loewen, 2022). The views expressed in this report are solely those of the author.

About the data

This report is based on the data collected by the Democracy Check-Up 2021 survey (Harell, Allison, Laura B. Stephenson, Daniel Rubenson and Peter John Loewen). The data can be found at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/C-Dem> (to be released to the public in October 2022). The sample frame for the survey was Canadians born before or in 2002. This means that the 18 year old sample is restricted to those born between January and May. All analyses present weighted results to be reflective of the population on age, gender, region, and language.

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Overview

Since the 1990s, voting rates for federal elections have been on the decline, until 2011, when there was an uptick in turnout. The 2011 and 2015 elections saw a rebound in voting rates, and most significantly among young Canadians (aged 18-24), who had the highest increase in turnout among any age group. Recently, however, this trend has reversed. 2019 and 2021 saw decreases in turnout (down by 1.3% for 2019 and 4.4% for 2021), and voting rates among Canadians aged 18-24 fell faster than the national average, down 3.2% in 2019 and 7.2% in 2021.¹

Participation in politics is vital for a vibrant democracy. Using the 2021 Democracy Check-Up, this report seeks to understand who is participating and how. This report has a special focus on differences in political participation between age groups.

When it comes to getting their voices heard, Canadians are more likely to protest or use civic organizations to push for community and societal change rather than formal avenues of partisan politics. This is even more so for young people in Canada who are less likely than their older counterparts to engage with political parties or candidates directly.

Outside of engaging directly with parties or candidates however, young Canadians tend to participate politically at similar or higher rates than the rest of the population in nearly all of the ways measured. Younger people lead the pack in signing petitions, boycotting or “buycotting” products for political reasons, protesting, volunteering for charitable organizations, and using social media for discussing politics and political issues. Donating money to charitable organizations is the one act that young people lag behind their peers on.

Why such differences? Generational gaps mean that young people act and think differently as a group (to a certain extent) compared to their older counterparts. To investigate this further, we considered news consumption, education, trust in institutions and experts, and feelings of personal efficacy.

Young people watch little news, and use social media often. They are more likely to have a college degree (or be on their way to one). They have more confidence in courts and the federal government, and trust experts more than older people do. However, young people also feel that government and politics are too complicated for them to understand what’s going on at higher rates than old people do.

Older Canadians watch a lot of news, and are less active on social media. They report higher rates of political interest than young people, and have more confidence in police, the media, and provincial elections. Old people have less trust in experts than young people do.

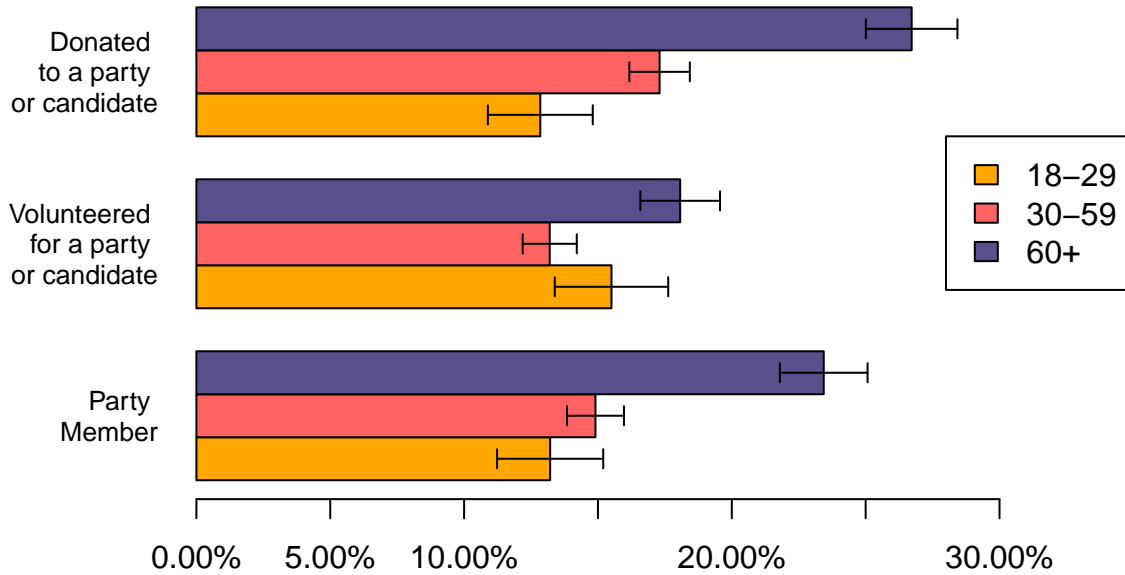
That being said, young and old people appear to feel that the government cares about them at similar rates, and age doesn’t appear to make a difference in how Canadians view career politicians.

Participating in Partisan Politics

For the purposes of this survey, partisan participation was measured through party membership at the federal, provincial, and in some provinces, municipal level, as well as rates of monetary donations and volunteering for political parties or candidates.

Only 13% of Canadians aged 18-29 reported being a part of a political party in the past 12 months. This number is low when contrasted with 23% of people aged 60 or older. Young people fall behind even more when it comes to donating money to a party or candidate, with only 12.8% having done the act in the past year compared to 26.7% of over-60-year-olds. The gap narrows somewhat when it comes to donating time instead of money: 15.5% of young Canadians and 18% of those over 60 report having volunteered for a political party or candidate in the past 12 months. Interestingly, this number is lower for those aged 30-59, at 13.2%.

Participation in Party Politics



Percent who have done the act more than one time in the past year

Other Participation

Beyond traditional engagement with partisan politics, the Democracy Checkup asked Canadians about other ways they act politically. Respondents were much more likely to have engaged in the following methods of political participation than in the acts directly tied to a party or candidate discussed above. Young Canadians are nearly always more likely to have participated politically in the following ways than older Canadians.

Protest/Boycott/Petition

Among Canadians aged 18-29, 30% attended a rally, protest, or demonstration in the past year, compared to 20% and 15% of Canadians aged 30-59 and 60+, respectively. This is pattern is consistent, although less dramatic, for signing petitions and participating in political boycotts or “boycotts.” 58.6% and 72.8% of young people have participated in boycotts and signed petitions, respectively. For older Canadians (60+), the numbers are 52.6% (boycotts) and 65.9% (petitions).

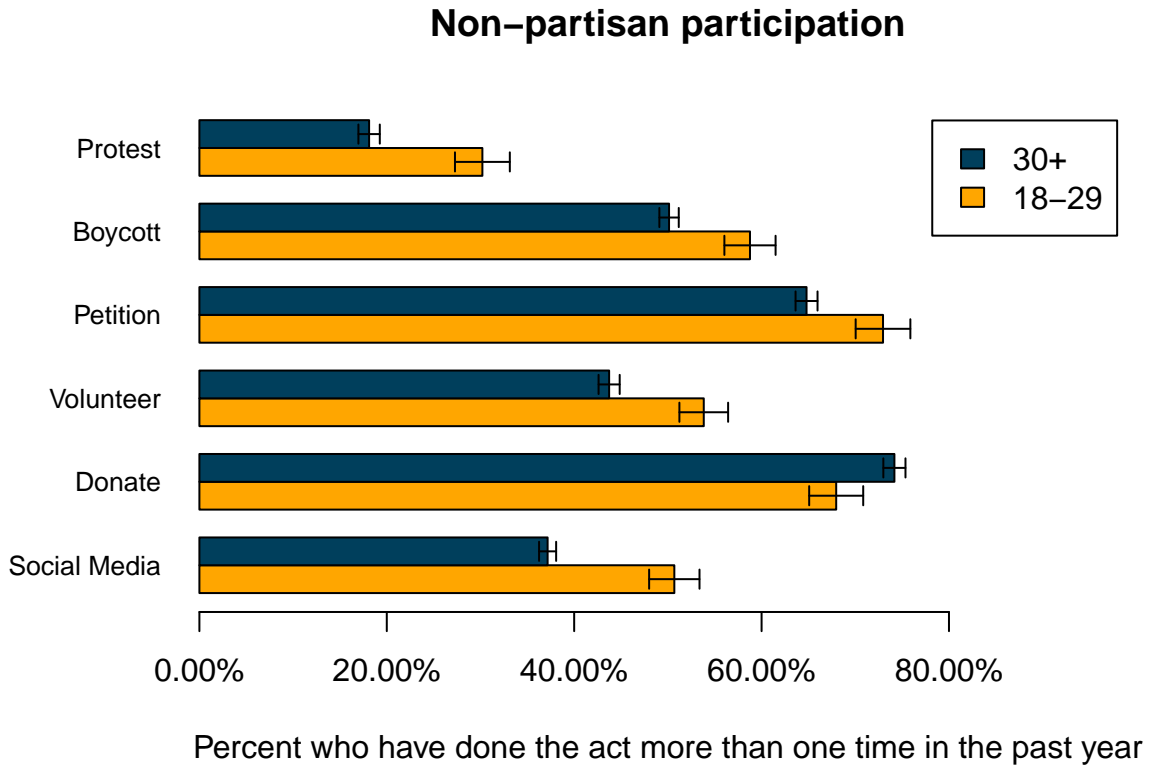
Volunteering and Donating to Charitable Organizations

When it comes to volunteering and donating money to charitable organizations, we can see a parallel trend with donating and volunteering to political parties. Young people volunteer at higher rates than older people, but are more reluctant to donate money than others. However, the rates of donation are still higher than volunteering: 53.7% of young people have volunteered for a charitable organization in the past year, but 67.9% have donated money. For older people (60+), the numbers are 45.2% for volunteering and 79.6%

for donating. Interestingly, the 30 to 59 age group volunteers the least - for both charitable organisations (42.7%) and political parties (13.1%).

Social Media

Youth are also much more active online politically than other age groups. When asked if they had used social media to discuss politics or political issues in the last 12 months, 50.6% of 18-29 year-olds, 40.5% of 30-59 year-olds, and 31.4% of over 60 year-olds had. This also reflects where people of different ages get their political information.

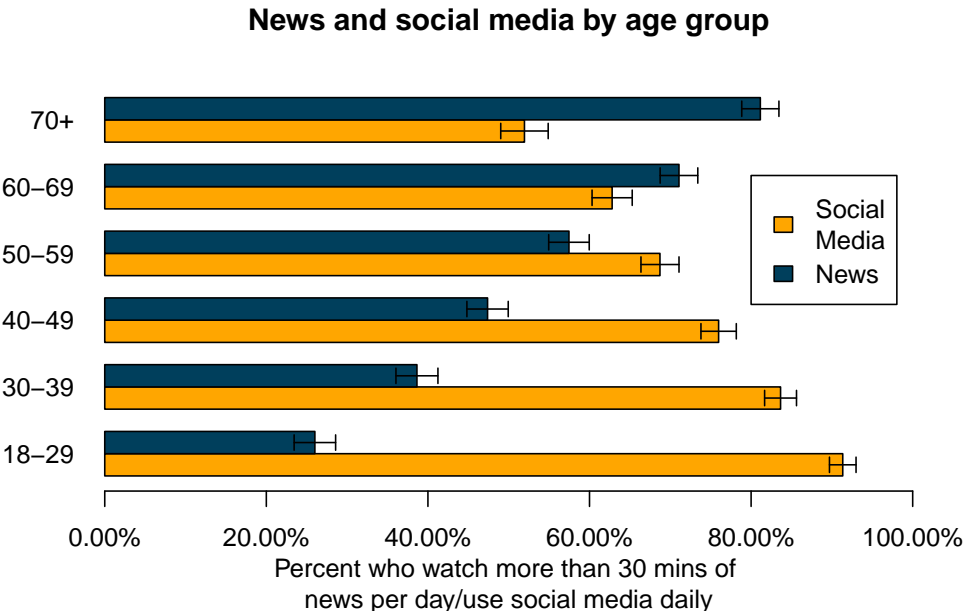


Group Differences

To begin to understand the differences in participation between younger and older Canadians, we examine where the groups differ in various aspects. We focus on specific precursors of political participation that might systematically vary by age group: media consumption, education, political interest, confidence in institutions and populism and cynicism.

Media Consumption

In terms of media consumption, our survey shows a clear correlation between age and the type of media consumed. Younger people are much more likely to use social media frequently, with 91% of respondents aged 18-29 reporting using social media on a daily basis, compared to just 52% of those 70 years old or older. The opposite trend appears when it comes to watching news. Among those 70+, 81% watch, listen, or read the news for more than 30 minutes per day, while the number sits at 26% for Canadians aged 18-29.

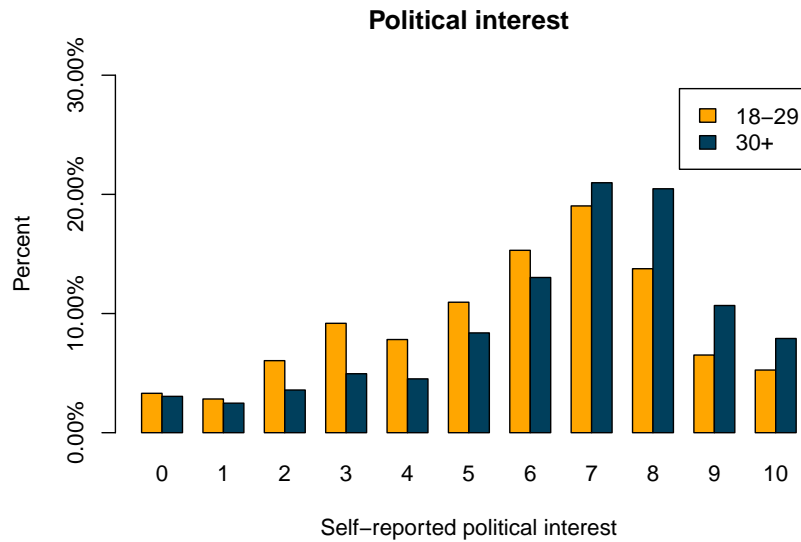


Education

Younger respondents tend to be more educated than their older peers. 58% of young Canadians either have a university degree or are currently full time students. In the case of those over the age of 60, 48% of respondents reported having graduated university.

Political Interest

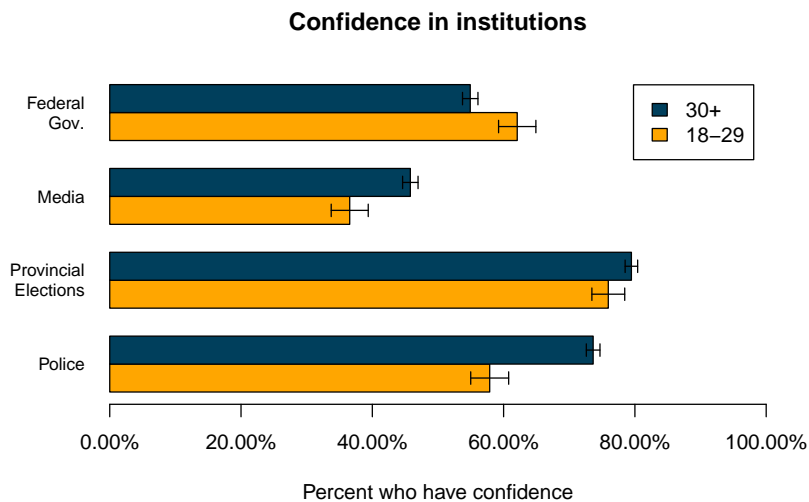
Older people self-report higher rates of political interest. Respondents were asked to rank how interested they are in politics generally, with 0 being no interest at all and 10 being a great deal of interest. On average, those aged 18-29 sit just above the midpoint at 5.7, 95% CI [5.6, 5.9] and those 30 and up sit at 6.5, 95% CI [6.4, 6.5]. This is only reinforced by comparing the distribution of both groups, as the graph below shows, many more older Canadians will rank their political interest as very high than younger Canadians, and the opposite is true for political interest slightly below the center of the scale.



Confidence in Institutions

Respondents were asked how much confidence they had in the following institutions, either a great deal, quite a lot, not very much, or none at all. For the graph below, a great deal and quite a lot were taken to show confidence, and not very much and none at all were combined into no confidence.

Young people have more confidence in the federal government than older Canadians, whereas older people have more confidence in police and the media than young people do. These three institutions had the greatest difference in rates of confidence between young Canadians and older Canadians; there is a 15.8 percentage point difference on the police, 9.2 percentage point difference on the media, and a 7.2 percentage point difference on the federal government. There was also a small, yet statistically significant, difference in confidence in provincial elections, with older people being 3.5 percentage points more likely to trust provincial elections than young Canadians.¹

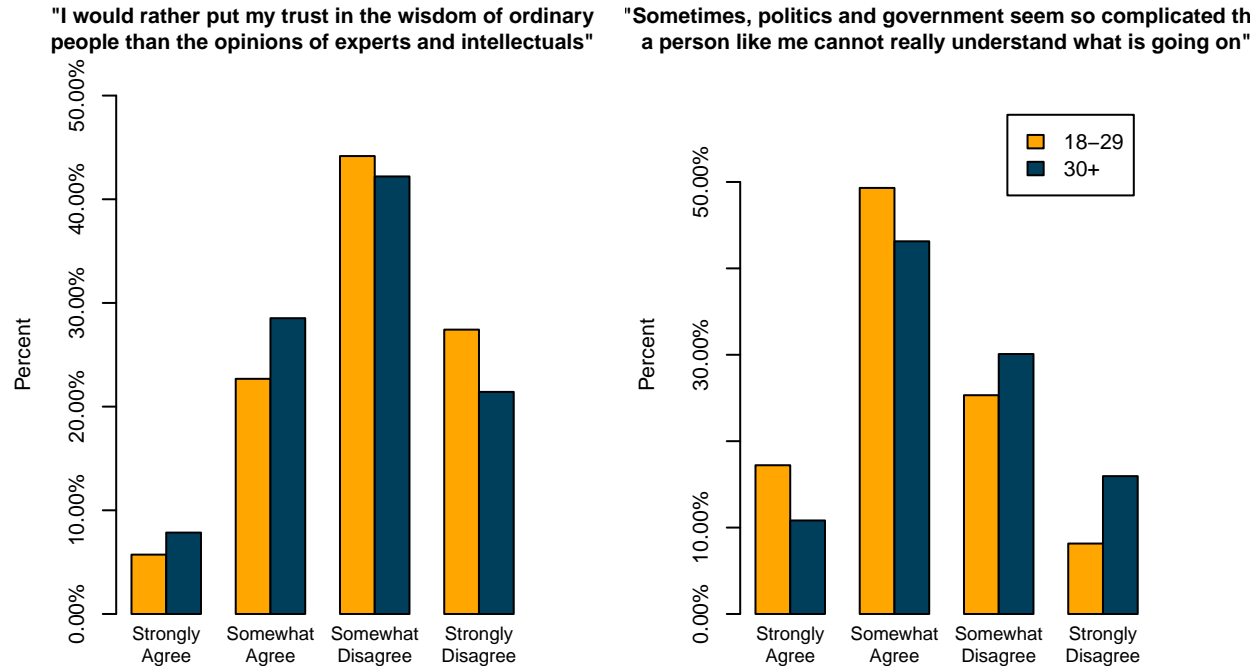


¹Differences between age groups in confidence in the courts, provincial government, and federal elections were not statistically significant.

Populism and Cynicism

Populism and cynicism are distinct attitudes towards government that could indicate why people would participate or tune out of politics. Participants were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with statements meant to measure attitudes of populism or cynicism.²

Older Canadians have less trust in the opinions of experts than younger Canadians. Young people are more likely to feel that government and politics are too complicated for them to understand what's going on, old people less so.



Conclusions

The first large take-away from the Democracy Check-Up 2021 survey is that young Canadians do participate politically at significant rates, but very little of this participation occurs through traditional political parties. Canadians broadly, and younger ones more specifically, are more likely to participate politically through other avenues, notably through petitions, consumer activism (boycotts and buycotts), donating and volunteering to charitable organizations, and by speaking out on social media. Older Canadians are more likely to work with political parties and donate money to get their voices heard.

When comparing the two groups, young people watch, read, and listen to traditional news outlets less (and report having less confidence in the media) than their older counterparts. Younger Canadians also spend more time on social media. They also tend to be more educated, and more trusting of experts, although they report lower levels of political interest and are more likely to find politics too complicated to understand.

This report shows that contrary to popular belief, young people are engaging politically in Canada in a number of important ways. However, political parties have not been able to successfully appeal to young

²For two questions meant to measure populism and cynicism (one about attitudes towards career politicians and the other on respondents' feelings of how much the government cares about them) the differences between young people and older people were not statistically significant, and therefore are not discussed.

Canadians. As political parties remain the main vehicle for electoral competition, this makes the lack on youth engagement an issue for the current and future health of electoral politics in Canada.

References

1. Canada. Elections Canada. *Youth Voting Trends in Canada*. 2022. <https://electionsanddemocracy.ca/canadas-elections/youth-voting-trends>