

BRIEF FROM THE INSTITUT DU NOUVEAU MONDE

SUBMITTED TO THE
SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

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L'Institut du Nouveau Monde (INM) is the authority on public participation in Quebec. Founded in 2003, the INM is a non-partisan organization whose mission is to increase citizen participation in democratic life. Its primary fields of expertise are civic participation, participatory democracy, social licence, inclusive governance, and social innovation and entrepreneurship. Each summer over the past 13 years the INM has been organizing a citizenship school for 15–35-year-olds. In 2010 this initiative was cited as one of the top three civic education practices in Canada by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, and it is recognized by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

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Voter turnout has been plummeting for 40 years. The main driver of this decline is low young voter turnout. In 40 years, voter turnout among 18–34-year-olds dropped 40%, except for the 2015 general election. Low young voter turnout is a tragedy and weakens our democracy. Young people who do not vote after they reach 18 are likely to never vote later on. By not voting, young people give up their say over who governs them and the resulting government policies. This could be called generational political suicide!

The key factors in voter turnout among 18–34-year-olds is how they view voting as a duty, how interested they are in politics and how informed they are. We believe it is important to come up with a comprehensive strategy, in partnership with all stakeholders, to develop civic literacy, helping young people develop civic literacy very early on and give them a better understanding of their democratic system. The INM is therefore proposing the introduction of a civic rite of passage for young people.

The civic rite of passage is based on five bold reforms:

1. a compulsory civics course in Grade 9
2. voting at 16
3. voluntary civic service for 16–24-year-olds
4. compulsory voting with the option of casting a blank ballot
5. a semi-proportional voting system

This strategy calls for major reforms. It is based on a renewed vision of democracy in which electoral participation is not only desired but expected and encouraged, and in which voting is not just a right but also a duty. Restoring youth participation in democratic life should be a national priority.

Reforming our voting system by introducing a proportional aspect is the fifth proposal for encouraging higher voter turnout. This does not mean introducing a purely proportional system, but rather a mixed voting system combining the advantages of the first-past-the-post and proportional systems as a way to limit the disadvantages of each.

Foreword

At the invitation of the House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform, the Institut du Nouveau Monde (INM) submits a brief on low voter turnout among 18–34-year-olds in general elections and five reforms to reverse this trend.

Institut du Nouveau Monde

The INM is an independent, non-partisan organization active mainly in Quebec whose mission is to increase citizen participation in democratic life. The INM is active on issues surrounding justice and social inclusion, respect for democratic values and sustainable development principles, in a spirit of openness and innovation. Founded in 2003, the INM has become the authority on civic engagement. Its expertise is recognized and sought throughout Quebec and beyond. In 2005 the INM was presented with the Quebec government's Claire Bonenfant Award for promoting democratic values and civic education. Each summer over the past 13 years the INM has been organizing a citizenship school for 15–35-year-olds. In 2010 this initiative was cited as one of the top three civic education practices in Canada by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, and it is recognized by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. The INM chairs dialogues between experts and the public, such as its Rendez-vous stratégiques, annually publishes *L'état du Québec*, promotes and supports social entrepreneurship and social innovation, and delivers a number of programs to inform, encourage discussion and engage the public not only as part of its own initiatives but also on behalf of public and private sector clients. In 2010, 2011 and 2012, the INM co-hosted the world assemblies of CIVICUS – World Alliance for Citizen Participation – in Montreal.

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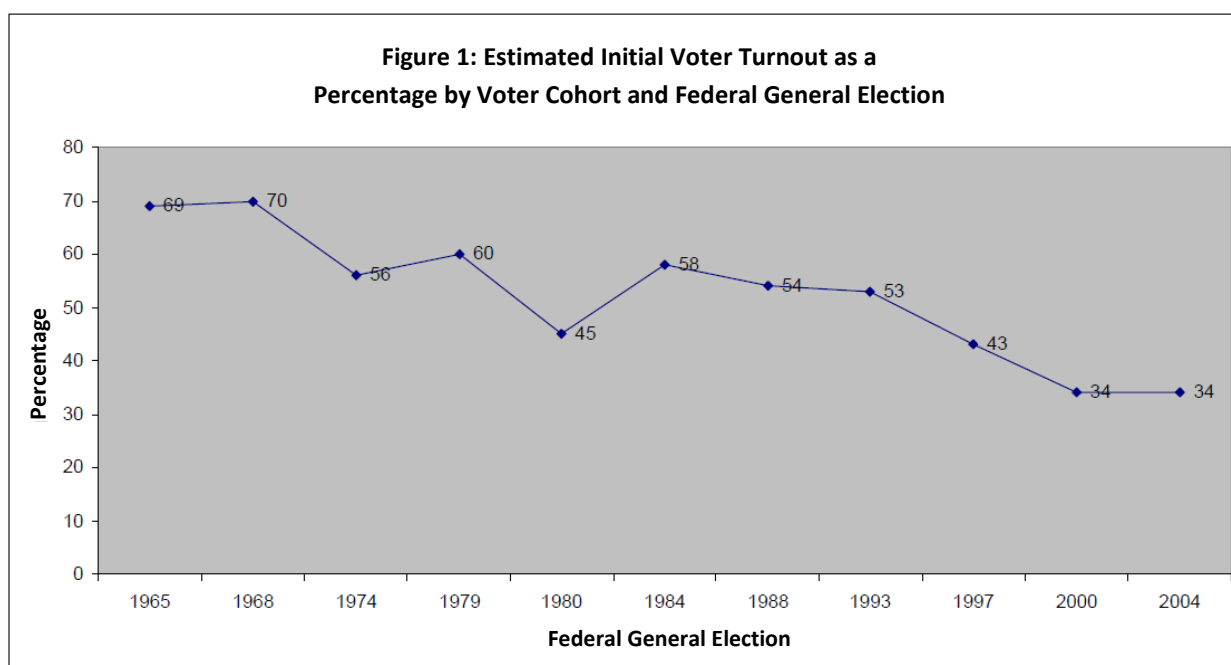
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1. Summary literature review

As shown in the following graph, there has been a sharp decline in voter turnout among young Canadians. While there has always been smaller turnout by 18–34-year-old voters, the 1980s saw the start of an alarming trend: a steady, significant decline in turnout among first-time voters, that new cohort of young Canadians eligible to vote for the first time. Turnout among these voters went from 70% in the 1960s to 50% in the 1980s, 40% in the 1990s and just over 30% in 2004—plunging 40% in 40 years. However, there was an increase in turnout among voters 18–34-years-old in the most recent general elections, with over 40% in 2011 and 60% in 2015. The significantly higher voter turnout in the 2015 general election should be studied extensively to understand why young voters took a sudden interest in an election campaign. However, the fact remains that voter turnout among 18–34-year-olds hovers at around 60%, still below what is legitimately expected in a democracy, particularly because turnout among first-time voters is a critical determinant of future voter turnout; Canadians who do not vote the first time they are eligible to do so are at greater risk of never voting at all.



Source: Blais and Loewen (2011), *Youth Electoral Engagement in Canada*, p. 13.

The literature consulted, particularly Elections Canada studies, provides information on the key determinants of youth voter turnout (and lack of it), which we present below, although some would say it is crucial that we gain further insight into the phenomenon by conducting a Canada-wide survey as well as quantitative and qualitative studies of each election.

That said, all available data point in the same direction: one of the most promising approaches to truly reversing the decline in young voter turnout is to increase initial voter turnout.

This is why the INM supports developing a comprehensive strategy for reversing this trend. It should be aimed primarily at 16–21-year-olds, those young people about to reach voting age or vote for the first time. This is also why secondary and post-secondary civic education programs and initiatives are a key component of our proposed strategy. Before we present it, we will first summarize the key findings from the literature.

Factors influencing young voter turnout

Current knowledge on voter turnout among 18–34-year olds appears to show that while certain socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, education and birthplace, have some influence over the decision to vote, there are three particularly influential political factors:

- perceiving voting as a duty
- taking an interest in politics
- being informed

The key factors cited by young people as keeping them from voting are not the direct opposites of those motivating them to go to the polls. The two main reasons for 18–34-year-olds not voting are a lack of interest in politics and a lack of time. The third reason for not voting depends on the age range: 18–24-year-olds blame problems with registering to vote, while 25–34-year-olds blame cynicism. This last reason for not voting seems to emerge later on than the other factors analyzed.

A comparison of these reasons for voting (or not) with those given by older cohorts of voters reveals similarities but also differences.

Like their elders, young people vote mainly out of a sense of civic duty. However, the reasons for not voting vary by age group: 35–54-year-olds give reasons related mainly to cynicism, such as not connecting with any of the election issues or not liking or having confidence in the candidates or political parties. As for voters aged 55 and over, they cite personal reasons such as being outside the riding or having health problems. It is interesting to note that cynicism is increasingly given as a reason for not voting the older the voter. It seems that as voters age, they are more likely to become cynical about politics.

Based on the literature, the key factors in voter turnout among 18–34-year-olds is how they view voting as a duty, how interested they are in politics and how informed they are.

2. Five bold reforms

To increase young voter turnout, the INM supports reforming the current electoral system while also coming up with a comprehensive strategy to develop civic literacy among young people.

The INM proposes a bold strategy beginning with instituting a “civic rite of passage” in late adolescence.

This strategy, informed by INM-led consultations, calls for major reforms. It is based on a renewed vision of democracy in which electoral participation is not only desired but expected and encouraged, and in which voting is not just a right but also a duty and a responsibility.

The civic rite of passage is based on five substantial reforms:

1. a compulsory civics course in Grade 9
2. voting at 16
3. voluntary civic service for 16–24-year-olds
4. compulsory voting with the option of casting a blank ballot
5. a semi-proportional voting system

We know that there is not unanimous support for these reforms. However, they are supported by the research. We believe that the roadmap presented below is sound. However, if these ideas are not considered, we invite critics to come up with alternatives that can achieve the same results. Anything less is unacceptable.

1. A compulsory civics course in Grade 9

Civic education is the surest way to get young people interested in politics. One of the main reasons young people do not vote is that they do not understand how politics affect them personally. A compulsory civics course should be given in Grade 9, while school is still compulsory, so that it is universally taught. As well, mock voting should be available to all students for each election.

2. Voting at 16

Lowering the voting age to 16 is then warranted. Young people will have just received civics education, preparing them to vote in an informed manner. They are motivated and supported. It is at this time that we propose introducing the civic rite of passage. While they are still in school, all 16-year-olds would vote together for the first time in a supportive institutional setting (at school). There should be a ceremony celebrating their eligibility to vote, similar to a citizenship ceremony for new Canadians.

3. Voluntary civic service for 16–24-year-olds

It has been shown that engagement and participation encourage further engagement and participation. Civic engagement also leads to voter turnout. One way to encourage youth engagement and participation once they leave high school is to give them the option to serve their community through voluntary civic service.

4. Compulsory voting with the option of casting a blank ballot

To emphasize the fact that voting is not only a right but also a duty, we believe that consideration should be given to compulsory voting. Compulsory voting is the policy of about 30 countries, including countries similar to ours such as Australia and Belgium. Compulsory voting should allow for voluntary abstentions through what is called casting a blank ballot, allowing a voter to register a rejection of all the

parties if none of them is appealing. Compulsory voting would also force all the parties to appeal not only to their base but to all voters, including young people.

5. A semi-proportional voting system

Research shows that one reason young people do not vote is that they feel their vote does not matter if they support a third party or if they support a major party that has little chance of winning in their riding. Introducing a new voting system that includes a proportional aspect would give voters the sense that their vote matters. This would address one objection to compulsory voting.

Youth voting is critical for the future

The decline in voter turnout seen since the 1980s is due mainly to the disaffection of young voters. It has been shown time and again that the first experience of voting is critical to future voting behaviour; young people who reach voting age and do not vote at the first opportunity are less likely to vote in the future.

Our studies have shown that the top reason young voters give for turning up at the polls is the sense of duty. Also, the key reason young people give for not voting is their lack of knowledge about politics.

These reasons were what led the INM to consider a bold strategy to encourage young voter turnout and consequently overall voter turnout since these young voters eventually grow older.

What is more, we believe that in a democracy, the right to vote should not be trivialized. The legitimacy of our political system rests squarely in the very act of voting.

We have undertaken several initiatives, particularly over the past three years, to explore the issue further. At the request of the Chief Electoral Officer of Quebec, in 2011 we conducted an exploratory study and came up with a strategy to increase young voter turnout. This study included a literature review and a consultation involving 200 former participants of INM summer schools—civic schools that over the past 10 years have reached 5,000 young people aged 15 to 35. One workshop attended by about 50 young people and the chief electoral officers of Quebec and Canada confirmed the findings of the 2011 study.

During the 2012 provincial election, the INM ran the “2 millions de X” (2 million X’s) campaign to encourage 2 million voters under 35 to vote. The campaign had a web component (three videos featuring well-known public figures) and a component involving campaign debates with local candidates (25 debates in 25 CEGEPs in eight administrative regions attended by 5,000 young people). In 2013 a similar campaign, “6 millions de X,” took place during the municipal elections to encourage general voter turnout in Quebec, including young voters.

As part of the INM’s major focus on democracy and civic engagement (“Rendez-vous stratégique de l’INM sur la démocratie et la participation citoyenne”), we organized a panel on voter turnout at provincial and federal elections featuring 20 electoral experts and practitioners in Quebec and Canada.

The ideas outlined in this brief were discussed during the panel, although they did not receive unanimous support. More work is planned to explore each of them in greater detail.

A “civic rite of passage” in high school

Creating a civic rite of passage inevitably involves having society buy into the desired set of values, and this requires support from a recognized public institution. Currently, when young people reach the voting age of 18, there is no institution able to easily reach these new voters. This is why lowering the voting age to 16 makes perfect sense. At this age school attendance is still compulsory, which makes high school the ideal institution for preparing students for their role as future voters and for marking their “rite of passage.”

The first thing to promote when developing future voters is undeniably civic education. Studies consistently show that in addition to a sense of duty, young people vote if they are interested in and informed about politics. These are the second and third reasons why they vote.¹ However, not everyone agrees on the best approach for teaching civic education in high school—a cross-curricular approach or a dedicated compulsory course? According to Henry Milner (2010 and 2004), the second approach may be better.

Milner’s comparative studies show that voter turnout is larger in countries with a high average degree of political literacy. They also show that a dedicated compulsory civics course can make a difference. Norway and Sweden are excellent examples of this. General voter turnout in both countries is 85%, with young voter turnout at over 75%. It was not always this high, however.

A few years ago both countries adopted public policies based in part on introducing compulsory high school civics courses. Field trips, mock parliaments and voting, studying political parties and their platforms, meetings with politicians and candidates and role plays are just some of the features of Swedish and Norwegian civics curricula.²

For the time being, Quebec has opted for the cross-curriculum approach to civics education, leaving it up to the teaching team as a whole without actually evaluating its effectiveness. As well, the senior high school history curriculum includes a focus on civics.³ Yet there is far from unanimous support for this approach. Some argue that teaching history and civics is incompatible,⁴ while others say that history

¹ François Gélineau and Ronan Teyssier, “Le déclin de la participation électorale au Québec, 1995-2008,” *Cahiers de recherche électorale et parlementaire*, Issue 6 – August 2012, 53 pp.; R. A. Malatest and Associates Ltd., *National Youth Survey*, Report, Elections Canada, September 2011, 54 pp.; André Blais and Peter Loewen, *Youth Electoral Engagement in Canada*, Elections Canada, January 2011, 26 pp.; Henry Milner, *The Internet Generation: Engaged Citizens or Political Dropouts*, Tufts University Press, 2010, 294 pp.; Henry Milner, *La compétence civique*, Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 2004, 388 pp.; Jon H. Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc, *Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-Voters*, Elections Canada, 2003, 79 pp.

² <http://www.democracy-democratie.ca/content.asp?section=res&dir=rsrch/icevt&document=icevt&lang=e>.

³ “Strengthens his/her exercise of citizenship through the study of history”

⁴ Government of Quebec, *Pour le renforcement de l’enseignement de l’histoire nationale au primaire et au secondaire : Document de consultation*, Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, November 2013, 23 pp.

teachers are not trained to deliver such instruction and that many teachers would not cover it at all because of a lack of time.

This makes it necessary to introduce a dedicated compulsory high school civics course. To those who would be tempted to reply that schools cannot solve all of society's problems, the answer is that the very foundation of our democracy and the cohesiveness of our society are at stake.

In addition to the dedicated compulsory course, which would take up just one school year, instilling the habit of voting in future voters means systematically providing all students with the opportunity to take part in a voting simulation each election.

Lowering the voting age to 16 and introducing civic service

Introducing a civic rite of passage inevitably means recognizing the moment that young people gain the right to vote. Lowering the voting age to 16 makes an initiative of this scale possible since the vast majority of new voters would still be in high school. Reaching voting age would coincide with taking or just having taken a course preparing young people to vote as informed citizens. They are guided along the way by qualified, dedicated teachers.

The classroom setting makes it possible to symbolically mark this event, attach great importance to it and make the students aware that this new right is not trivial in a democracy. If an election is held that year (municipal, provincial or federal, with fixed-date elections making it possible to arrange the calendar so that an election takes place each year), all 16-year-olds would vote together for the first time. Voting is more than a right; it is the most important duty and responsibility of each citizen.

Lastly, a rite of passage generally leads an individual from one stage of life to another. Since studies of the voting behaviour of young people make a direct correlation between civic engagement and voter turnout, it is important that civic engagement be encouraged, valued and nurtured.⁵ The civic rite of passage could end with an opportunity to participate in a voluntary civic service program. There is currently no such program in place. However, creating such a program has recently been proposed by the Quebec government.⁶ Federally, Katimavik is a program that most closely approximates a civic service program.

Civic service would be an experience lasting between six months and a year, providing young adults the opportunity to serve their communities while receiving some form of compensation. Such programs have been in place for years in England, the United States and France. One French study shows that former participants are more open, confident and engaged than other young people. For instance, the experience enhances the feeling that they can make a difference.⁷

⁵ Gélineau and Teyssier, 2012; Elections Canada, 2011; Blais and Loewen, 2011; Milner, 2010 and 2004; Pammett and LeDuc, 2003.

⁶ Government of Quebec, *Une génération aux multiples aspirations : Livre blanc sur la politique québécoise de la jeunesse*, Secrétariat à la jeunesse, p. 49.

⁷ TNS Sofres, *L'impact du Service Civique sur ceux qui l'ont fait : Note de synthèse*, Agence du Service Civique, February – March 2013, No 17RE57, 6 pp.

Because it helps strengthen the social fabric, foster youth engagement and remedy young people's sense of powerlessness, the INM strongly supported the government's proposal to create a civic service program, although it does recommend conducting a pre-planning study first to ensure that the program is closer to the Quebec model, reflects the Quebec context, other existing programs, etc.

What would this civic rite of passage look like? High schools would be responsible for overseeing it, facilitated by lowering the voting age to 16, and there would be a dedicated compulsory civics course in Grade 9, which includes running a "young voters" mock election for all students during each election. Schools would celebrate this new right to vote. All this would be followed by a voluntary civic service program.

Compulsory voting and a proportional voting system

This civic rite of passage would take on its full significance if voting became compulsory. Legislation would make it the standard. The new standard would be that voting is not just a right, but also the duty and responsibility of each citizen. Since it is a duty, a compulsory course on how to exercise this civic duty makes perfect sense. About 30 countries⁸ have adopted this approach, which is effective at reversing low voter turnout: observed participation in these countries' general elections is around 80%.⁹

Obviously, such a measure taken in isolation would not address all the problems with our system of democracy. It must be one part of an overall action plan.

In addition to instilling the idea that voting is a duty, one argument in support of this approach is that requiring all citizens to cast their ballot forces political parties to appeal to all voters, particularly those who traditionally do not vote, such as young people. According to an exploratory study by the INM, one reason young people stay away from the polls is that they believe the political parties do not take an interest in their concerns. As well, the literature shows that young people contacted by a political party or candidate during an election campaign are more likely to vote. By making voting compulsory, political parties are strongly encouraged to take an interest in all voters, not just their core voters, and therefore tailor their messages specifically to them and seek their votes.

Making voting compulsory must allow for the option of casting a blank ballot. This would allow citizens who do not wish to vote to maintain that option. Including this possibility on ballots would allow this option to be officially captured.

Reforming our voting system by introducing a proportional aspect is the fifth proposal for encouraging higher voter turnout. This does not mean introducing a purely proportional system, but rather a mixed voting system combining the advantages of the first-past-the-post and proportional systems as a way to limit the disadvantages of each.

⁸ Voting is compulsory in many countries and regions around the world: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, the Swiss canton of Schaffhausen, and Turkey, as well as in Costa Rica and Brazil.

⁹ <http://michelvenne.inm.qc.ca/?p=64>.

The following are the main arguments provided by the young people interviewed as part of our study in support of such a reform. The current voting method skews the results. First, for voters living in a safe riding for a particular party, ballots cast for another party are not taken into account. Second, voters in a hotly contested riding may be tempted to vote strategically instead of according to their conscience. Third, votes cast for a third party are simply not considered under the current system. And fourth, the composition of Parliament does not reflect the actual diversity of the electorate. For all these reasons, several young people interviewed believe that their vote does not make a difference, which greatly influences how motivated they are to go to the polls.

Making youth participation a national priority

Low young voter turnout is a real tragedy. The decline in general election turnout can be explained by the declining number of young voters. We believe this makes it imperative that the current system be reformed to ensure optimal turnout and genuine legitimacy. We also believe in the need for a comprehensive strategy, to be developed in partnership with all stakeholders, to foster the values of civic literacy very early on and to give young people a better understanding of their democratic system. Restoring youth participation in democratic life should be a national priority.