Expressive Engagement, Political Knowledge and Youth Turnout. Canada in Comparative Perspective

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Introduction

This paper returns to the subject of a recent paper (Milner 2005) which argued that declining voter turnout in Canada was related to a wider phenomenon I termed, "political drop-outs." Since then we have seen further signs that the phenomenon is indeed a universal one, countries otherwise different as Chile and Israel exhibit the same tendencies.[1] After first summarizing what we know about the phenomenon, we set out the key elements of a theoretical framework for developing a deeper and more comprehensive understanding about the problem and the measures to address it

Turnout in Canada is just under 65 percent, having fallen from 75 percent in 1988. Indeed, by a fair calculation, in 2004, when the US held its last election, Canadian turnout was actually lower than that of its neighbour to the South.[2] Moreover, it has become evident that the key factor in the decline has been abstention among young people. Though people tend to vote more as they get older, the current decline largely reflects a generational phenomenon, since, if we compare by age groups, the largest – indeed the only significant – decline since the latter 1980s has been among the under-30s (Gidengil et al. 2003). While the turnout among potential first-time voters appears to improve from the shockingly low level of 22.4 percent in 2000 to 38.7 percent in 2004, the overall trend remains highly worrisome.[3] The 38.7 figure still places young

[1] Drawn from conversations in April 2006 with Michal Shamir, of the Israeli Election Study team, and Chilean political scientist Jorge Heine.

[2] If the official 2004 Canadian rate of 60.9 percent of registered voters were to be converted into the percentage of potential voters (the measure used in the US) it would be about 53 percent, which puts it well below the unusually high US 2004 turnout rate of roughly 60 percent. Of course the US election that year was extremely polarized and a cliff-hanger; but the 2004 Canadian election – unlike the previous one – was also too close to call at least until the last few days.

[3] It will only be in the fall 2006 that we will have the results of a youth voting study carried out by Elections Canada for the elections early this year. For 2004, based on a sample of 95,000 voters drawn from electoral districts in every province and territory, the study found that 38.7 percent of those identified as first-time electors turned out (reported in *Electoral Insight*, February 2005), compared to the estimate of 22.4 percent for the same group in 2000 by Pammett and LeDuc (2003: 20). Since the latter conclusion is based on a survey of voters and non-voters, subject to a much larger margin of error, we cannot definitively state that 16 percent more voted in 2004, but clearly there was an increase due at least in part to the extra efforts made to register and mobilize this group in the intervening years. Apparently, given the further overall turnout decline from 2000 to 2004, the increased participation of first-time voter proved too small to offset the replacement of the older higher-voting cohorts by cohorts who arrived on the political scene in the 1990s.

Canadians below young Americans,[4] just below youth in Britain (Phelps 2004),[5] and below their peers in nearly all comparable countries (see Table 1). Still, while especially acute in Canada, the UK and the US, non-voting by young people is an international phenomenon, even some traditionally high turnout countries, for example Finland and Norway,[6] have not been spared.[7] In addition, while turnout figures are the most dramatic and, I argue, relevant, other standard indicators of political participation, including party and interest group membership, point in the same direction (Stolle and Cruz 2005).

In previous comparative work (Milner 2002), I investigated the relationship between levels of political knowledge (civic literacy) and electoral turnout. Here I apply both the analytical framework and conclusions of this work, as well as more recent findings, to the problem of declining youth turnout. I am not alone among scholars investigating this phenomenon, but this very attention has created a situation where the insufficient attention paid to the political knowledge dimension has led to an inadequate understanding of the phenomenon. Failure to take this dimension into account amounts to confusing informed citizens choosing not to vote with potential voters failing to vote due to their lacking the minimal information needed to distinguish among the choices. It is this latter phenomenon that I am concerned with, and, I am persuaded, failure to distinguish these "political drop-outs" from those who do not vote for other reasons, has severely hampered progress in addressing it.

Political drop-outs are of special concern because they apparently constitute a growing group among young people in established democracies. They are less attentive to and thus less informed about available choices than were young people in earlier generations. Since it is otherwise difficult to distinguish them from those sufficiently informed to

[4] The turnout rate of 18-24 year old voters rose from 36.6 percent in 2000 to 42.3 percent in 2004 - the 5.8 percentage points corresponding to the overall rise from about 54 to 60 percent. Judging by the increased support among young people for the Democratic candidate, that increase is attributable to the intense mobilization efforts – especially in the 15 "swing states. The fact that many of these newly mobilized young citizens were surely disillusioned by the result (CIRCLE – The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement – Update, November 9, 2004), means that it remains to be seen whether it signals an upward trend, or will prove to be a blip. One indication that the latter is the case is the finding in a study conducted in the month before the election that voter registration rose only in the battleground states (McDonald, 2004).

[5] In the 2001 UK election, overall turnout sank to a post-war low of just 59 percent, with only 39 percent of young people casting a vote (Electoral Commission – UK 2001).

[6] In Finland non-voting has increased most markedly among the young: the turnout gap between those 19 to 24 years of age and the overall average rose to 17 percentage points in 1999 (Martikainen, 2000). For Norway, Bjorklund (2000) finds particular effects of age upon turnout in local elections, the level at which there has been an especially worrying decline. In 1999, only 31 percent of those born after 1975 voted, a number rising steadily by age cohort to 72 percent for those born between 1930 and 1945. Denmark remains the clearest exception, as evidenced in the IEA Civic Education Study of 16-18 year olds reported on by Amna et al (2005: 17).

[7] In 1999, an International IDEA report examining political participation among young people in 15 Western European countries, found that while they have usually tended to vote less than their elders, by the early 1990s the turnout gap between citizens 18 to 29 and those over 30 had grown to 12 percent.

deliberately choose to substitute traditional means of political participation for non-conventional forms of political engagement, we need to use political knowledge as proxy.

With the inclusion of political knowledge questions not yet being standard practice in surveys concerned with political participation, one regularly comes across reports that treat young people who are inattentive and abstain from participation in conventional politics as if they were doing so out of an understanding of its limitations.[8] The reality, as the 2004 Canadian Election Study (CES) shows, is otherwise.

> "Evidence of particularly strong disaffection with government and politics on the part of young Canadians is … hard to find…. People aged 18 to 29 are the least likely to think that all federal political parties are basically the same, that there isn't really a choice (33 percent). They are also the least likely to believe that the government does not care much what people like them think (53 percent), and they are actually the most likely to say that they are at least fairly satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada (63 percent)…. Young and old … care about some of the same issues, but the under-30s are much less able to name a political party that would be best at dealing with their number one concern. This finding is not attributable to the fact that many of them see little to choose among the contenders; people in this age group are actually the least likely to think that there is not really a choice…. Most young people opposed increased spending on defense, yet only 40 percent knew which party was promising to increase military spending by two billion dollars a year. Similarly, a majority of young people opposed scrapping the gun registry, but fewer than one in three knew which party was proposing to do this (Gidengil et al, 2005: 8-9).[9]

Nor is it new forms of political engagement such as political consumerism among young people that have replaced conventional political participation. Stolle, who has written encouragingly about these new forms (Stolle and Hooghe 2005), recently used data from the European Social survey to test "whether these new forms of engagement truly substitute for the declining engagement in traditional political and social activities." She found the opposite to be the case, concluding that "there is a gap between those youth

[8] There is a great interest, one can almost say an industry, in Canada and elsewhere, in promoting youth participation. Unfortunately, whether due to vested interests or wishful thinking, the reports and studies produced are frequently unhelpful. Surveys typically give the respondents a choice of claiming interest in politics and allowing politicians to be blamed for their not acting on it; they also tend to exclude likely drop-outs from the sample. This selectivity is even more evident in various "qualitative studies," for example reports on gatherings of young people brought together for the purpose of stimulating their involvement, which, to the surprise of no one familiar with the Hawthorne effect, discover that young people are genuinely interested.

[9] "Young people rated their interest in politics at only 4.5 on a 0 to 10 scale (where zero indicated no interest at all), compared with 7.5 for those in their sixties and up" (Gidengil et al., 2003: 11; see also Rubensson et al, 2004). A Statistics Canada study of a large sample of Canadians found that only 35 percent of 15 to 21 year olds report following news and current affairs daily, compared to 68 percent overall (Milan, 2005:3).

who are broadly engaged in a myriad of both new and traditional channels and those youth who are not engaged at all" (Stolle and Cruz, 2005:96-7).[10]

In systematically posing political knowledge questions, the CES has thus done an important service for those concerned about political participation decline in Canada. Unfortunately, national electoral surveys in other countries have generally not followed suit. Though data is being accumulated as a result of the proliferation of surveys related to political participation in response to declining youth turnout, the most prominent publicly or foundation financed studies seeking to explain declining youth political participation in the US (e.g., Keeter et al., 2002), the UK (e.g., Electoral Commission: UK. 2002) and Canada (e.g., Pammett and Leduc, 2003), still tend not to ask questions of political knowledge.

For its part, the CES, despite having more political knowledge questions than most of its counterparts elsewhere, largely limits the knowledge questions to matters related to the election itself. Consequently, we cannot use the data to concretely compare the political knowledge of young Canadians with their peers elsewhere. Hence we lack the comparative data needed to understand the phenomenon of political drop-outs that would be provided by a standard set of political knowledge questions included in international surveys. My own research (Milner 2002), which set out what we do know about comparative political knowledge, is still reasonably current, but it does not look at young people per se. Here I begin to integrate this analysis into what we do know about youth political knowledge and participation.

1. Political Knowledge and Voting Turnout among Young People

We begin with civic duty. It is clear that plummeting voter turnout is linked to a decline in the sense of obligation to vote. The 2004 Canadian Election Survey team reported that "75 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that 'It is every citizen's duty to vote in federal elections,' and 32 per cent said that they'd feel very guilty if they didn't vote in a federal election…. however, [for] young Canadians … only 55 per cent strongly agreed with the statement about duty, and only 18 per cent said that not voting would make them feel very guilty."[11] An American survey of 3,246 adults, 15 years and older found that only 38 (as opposed to 50 percent to two thirds for the other generations) percent of 15-

[10] This counters the claim of Ronald Inglehart who sees the replacement of traditional forms of democratic political participation by new, unconventional forms. Yet the data supporting this is shaky. Inglehart claims that the World Values Survey (WVS) figures confirm his 1977 prediction of "rising rates of elite challenging behaviour among Western publics… that these newer forms of participation have become increasingly widespread" (Inglehart and Catterberg, 2002:3-4). The problem is that there is a strong generational factor built into the WVS formulation – i.e. asking respondents if they *ever* took part in such activities. Rising positive responses in succeeding waves reflect largely if not exclusively the fact that boomers, more of whom took part in such an activity at least once, count for more as previous generations, more of whom never took part in such an activity, die off.

[11] Gidengil, Elizabeth et al., "Why Johnny Won't Vote," *Op cit.*

25 year-olds say that citizenship entails special obligations, while 58 percent say simply being a good person is enough (Andolina et al., 2002).[12]

Civic duty and political knowledge are linked. Far more people in earlier generations with marginal levels of political knowledge voted out of a sense of civic duty than is the case with young people today. This is illustrated by the remarkable generational difference in the UK, where 63 percent of those who claimed they were 'not at all interested in news about the election' cast a vote nevertheless; but among the 18 –24 year-olds this was the case for only 16 percent (Electoral Commission, 2002:29). A similar phenomenon has been observed in Canada. Howe (2002) compared data from 1956 Gallup polls testing political knowledge with those from the political knowledge items in the 2000 Canadian Election Study.[13] Age differences turn out to be significantly more important in 2000, especially among those with no more than a high-school education. The problem is compounded since the young are less informed about politics today than they were 45 years ago.[14]

In the absence of a sense of civic duty to vote, young people are less inclined to seek the information needed to vote meaningfully, while the decline in civic duty makes turning out to vote increasingly dependent on an adequate level of political knowledge. We can expect, thus, that for young people not casting a vote can easily become a habit that in turn diminishes the already limited interest in politics – a classic vicious circle. Given that restoring a sense of civic duty is like putting the Genie back into the bottle, addressing the decline in turnout will unavoidably entail addressing the deficit in political knowledge.

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[12] A survey of 1,500 Americans between the ages of 15 and 25 commissioned by the Council for Excellence in Government's Center for Democracy and Citizenship and the Partnership for Trust in Government, in cooperation with Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) found that just 20 percent of young people described voting as a responsibility, and only 9 percent as a duty. The phenomenon is by no means limited to North America. For Norway, Bjorklund signals a "dwindling support for voting as a form of civic virtue…. The difference between cohorts is pronounced. It is in the youngest cohort that most often sticks to the [voting as] self-interest alternative" (Bjorklund, 2000: 19).

[13] The 1956 Gallop surveys showed respondents a list of 10 prominent political figures, of which two were Canadian, and asked them to identify the country and position of each, as well as a list of Canada's ten provincial premiers and asked them to identify their province. The 2000 CES included an unprecedented number of knowledge items: the names of the leaders of the Liberals, PC, Alliance and NDP, the name of the federal finance minister, and the name of one's provincial premier.

[14] In 1956, the difference in reported turnout level between the groups at the lower and upper ends of the knowledge scale was 17 percentage points; moreover, for the youngest age group (21-29 years), the difference was actually lower – only 12 points. In the 2000 election study, the overall gap in turnout between the knowledgeable and ignorant had risen to thirty-two points; but now the relationship to age was reversed. The 43 point gap that separates the least and most knowledgeable respondents 18 to 29 declines with increasing age to 13 percent among those 50 and older. "Nowadays…it is only older Canadians who will vote simply out of duty," he concludes, "younger Canadians think differently; without some knowledge to make the voting decision comprehensible and meaningful, they prefer to abstain…. They know less about politics and … their impoverished knowledge is more likely to affect whether or not they vote" (Howe, 2003: 81).

Cross-national comparisons can help us take up this challenge. My recent work (Milner 2002) identifies the northern European and especially Scandinavian countries as high civic-literacy countries, that is, countries where the proportion of citizens sufficiently informed to vote meaningfully is relatively high. In contrast, the English-speaking countries tend to fall into the low civic-literacy category. While that research does not look specifically at young citizens, subsequent cross-national research has begun to address this question. A useful contribution is provided by Grönlund (2003), who assembles the responses to the three political knowledge questions in recent election surveys in 23 countries participating in the CSES (Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems). He finds that at all levels of education, 18 to 35 year-olds are significantly less knowledgeable on political matters.[15]

Grönlund confirms what has been shown by many single-country studies.[16] Yet the difference appears especially acute in North America today. The Times Mirror Center (1990) analyzed survey results from the 1940s through the 1970s revealing that previous generations of young Americans knew as much as, if not more, than their elders. This is no longer the case. For example, Parker and Deane, (1997) report that only 26 percent of young people answered campaign-related questions correctly, compared with 38 percent of those 30-49 and 42 percent over those 50 and over. On national politics, young people averaged 32 percent correct answers, compared to 44 percent of those 30-49, and 48 percent of those 50 and older.[17] In Canada, in a 1990 survey carried out for the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 56 percent of 18 to 29 year-olds were able to answer correctly at most one of three political knowledge questions compared to 40 percent for the sample as a whole. A 2000 survey, as reported by Howe, showed the younger group to be falling further behind: fully 67 percent of 18 to 29 year-olds correctly answered no more than one out of three[18] compared to 46 percent for the sample as a whole (Howe 2001). Even greater disparities were reported by the authors of the 2004 Canadian Election Study.[19]

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[15] Holding education constant, Grönlund finds that for those with less than completed secondary education, the average score on the three or more CSES political knowledge questions was .40 for the 18-35 year-olds, compared to just under .50 for the 34-55 year olds, and .53 for those 55 and over. For those with secondary or vocational school completed, the disparity was essentially the same, (with the youngest groups' score rising to .53). Only when we get to those who completed university is the disparity reduced – by roughly half – with the youngest group averaging .65 right answers (Grönlund 2003).

[16] For example, Chiche and Haegel (2002: 280) show that 18-29 year old French men and women are over 10 percent less politically knowledgeable than those above 30."

[17] Similarly, in response to three questions posed by the NASS Millennium Project, 79 percent of respondents were able to give the name of the Vice-President, 67 percent could name their governor, and, on the third, only 37 percent knew the length of term for a member of the House of Representatives.

[18] In 1990, they were asked: who is the Prime Minister? Who is the Liberal leader? Who is the NDP leader? In 2000, their task was to identify the prime minister, finance minister and official opposition party.

[19] "Even in the campaign's final days, only 60 per cent of respondents in their 20s could name Paul Martin as Liberal Party leader…. During the first 10 days of the campaign, a mere 38 per cent knew this basic fact. Gilles Duceppe fared little better, despite the fact that the Bloc Québécois has traditionally held more appeal for young voters: Only 64 per cent of young Quebeckers interviewed in the final 10 days of the campaign could come up with his name. Across Canada, in the campaign's last days, only 47 per cent of

The only international survey that allows us to place the political knowledge of young North Americans in comparative context is the 2003 National Geographic-Roper Global Geographic Literacy Survey[20] which assessed 3,250 young adults in nine countries. Apart from questions asking the respondents to identify countries on a world map, there were a series of questions testing knowledge related to international politics.[21] As we can see in Table 2, out of 56 total questions that were asked across the ten countries surveyed, young Americans on average answered 23 questions correctly (just above the last-place Mexicans), with young people in Canada (27) and Great Britain (28) faring almost as poorly. Sweden (with 40) and Germany (38) led, followed by Italy (38), France (34) and Japan (31).

Of course, this is but one survey. Yet its results correspond reasonably closely to those we would expect from levels of overall civic literacy (Milner 2002). Moreover, they also correspond, as hypothesized, to levels of turnout. As we can see in Table 1, of the countries participating in the National Geographic-Roper survey, young Swedish respondents report having voted at 81.4 percent, the Germans 72.8 percent, and the Italians 76.4 percent, compared to 41 percent for the UK. Clearly, though, the phenomenon is a complex one, and not limited to North America, we can say that low and declining electoral turnout in North America reflects low and declining levels of political knowledge especially among the young. Hence, when it comes to the young, we look primarily to education for measures to address the deficit in knowledge and attentiveness. But education takes place in a wider institutional context that affects levels of political knowledge to which we first need to turn. We begin with electoral institutions.

2. Electoral Institutions

The results of the National Geographic-Roper survey suggest a relationship between electoral institutions and the civic literacy of young people. Among the nine countries (excluding Mexico), young people in the three countries with FPTP electoral systems, the United States, Canada and Great Britain, scored lowest, while the two PR countries, Sweden and Germany, scored highest. In-between were those with mixed systems, Italy

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young Canadians could name Stephen Harper as leader of the Conservative Party. Just 34 per cent got the name of NDP Leader Jack Layton right (and only 50 per cent of young Canadians could name their provincial premier)"Gidengil, Elizabeth et al., "Why Johnny Won't Vote, *op. cit.*

[20] I exclude the results of the Civic Education Study which tested nearly 90,000 14-year-old students in 28 countries and 50,000 17-19 year olds in 16 countries (Torney-Purta et al. 2001), on political knowledge, skills and attitudes. Not only was Canada not included, but the questions are problematic since rather than testing political knowledge as such, they test understanding of the logic of democracy and the functioning of its institutions.

[21] Examples of such questions include: "The Taliban and al Qaeda movements were both based in which country?" "Which of the following organizations endorses the euro as the common currency for its members?" "which two countries have had a longstanding conflict over the region of Kashmir?"

and Japan, as well as France with its second ballot system. This is not surprising given research showing higher turnout under PR, but not stressed in that research is the link to political knowledge. Simply put, since parties under PR seek to mobilize all potential supporters, and not just those in winnable districts, and fundamental to mobilizing support is the task of informing potential voters, other things being equal, more voters receive information from more political parties under PR than under majoritarian systems, and therefore, others things being equal, voters are likely to be better informed under PR than under FPTP.[22] Moreover, because PR systems are more conducive to the formation and durability of ideologically coherent parties that contest elections at more than one level, they make it easier for the potential voter to identify with a political party and to use that identification as a guide through the complexities of issues and actors over time at various levels of political activity. This suggests that PR fosters political participation especially at the lower end of the education and income ladders where information is at a premium,[23] a hypothesis confirmed in a recent paper by the author.[24]

A parallel analysis is offered by Franklin (2004) which incorporates the generational dimension. Using electoral turnout data from 1945 from the 22 democracies that have held free elections continuously since that time, Franklin argues that turnout differences are related to differences in the character of elections, a main factor of which being the proportionality of the electoral system.[25] Changes in the character of elections, he shows, largely account for the average 7 percent turnout drop in the past 30 years in the 22 countries studied – in large part through affecting the habits of young (non)voters.

Why the young? Because of inertia. "Were it not for inertia, turnout would vary radically from election to election as all cohorts reacted to the very different character that successive elections can have.…. Those members of the electorate least affected by inertia [are] members of new electoral cohorts" (Franklin 2004: 57), i.e. young people. Since voting is to an important degree habitual, turnout decline will accelerate as newly

[22] See, for example, Lijphart 1997.

[23] This goes against conventional thinking which assumes that voting under FPTP is a simpler proposition since it is typically a choice between 'keeping the bums in, or kicking them out.' But such conventional thinking views voters one dimensionally. Parties under PR are not subject to the volatility of FPTP, which blows up their strength when they do well, and shrivels it when they do poorly, and thereby discourages them from risking operating at levels – national, regional, and local – other than the one at which they are best organized.

[24] Milner and Grönlund (2006), using CSES data, examined the dispersion of political knowledge among educational categories by calculating the comparative variation from the mean of the political knowledge score by the group with the lowest education. The results showed average dispersion proves to be lower under PR, supporting our hypothesis that it reduces the cost of the political knowledge needed to make an informed vote for those for whom the cost is highest, i.e. those lacking in educational resources.

[25] "Turnout [is] higher in competitive elections and lower in elections where competition between parties … is less" (Franklin 2004 57). Franklin also includes in his model a series of features which facilitate voting, the extent of the franchise, whether absentee ballots are permitted, whether an election is held on a working day or at the weekend, as well as a number of features related to the stakes of the election: including how much time has elapsed since the previous election, the closeness of the race, the size of the electorate, as well as party polarization and party discipline.

eligible-to-vote cohorts, set in their non-voting ways, replace older cohorts with developed voting habits. Hence it is the habits engendered in young people during their first opportunities to vote that best explain the fluctuations and apparent secular decline in voter turnout.

International IDEA data on differences in youth voting confirm this relationship. It shows that in countries using PR systems among 15 Western European countries in the early 1990s, the average youth (18-29) turnout rate is almost 12 percentage points higher than in non-PR countries. IDEA's interpretation, which stressed the electoral system's facilitating access to representation in parliament for small parties that could appeal to young people (IDEA 1999: 30) takes for granted that young people have sufficient knowledge to identify the choices added by the presence of these parties in the political arena, something we cannot do in Canada today. Thus we cannot count on electoral reform, in and of itself, to bring political dropouts to the polls, except through its effect on political knowledge. We shall return to this matter below, in addressing Franklin's analysis of the factors affecting youth voting. We should note for now that the effect on turnout of adopting a PR electoral system will only be perceptible over time.[26]

3. Social Class

While age is the factor most clearly associated with turnout decline, lurking behind it is the reality of social class. A clue as to its workings is provided in Howe's finding that the effect of age in Canada is significantly more important today than in the 1950s, especially among young males with no more than a high-school education: those under 30 average 30 percent lower levels of political knowledge than those over 50 with high-school education or less (Howe, 2003). Similarly, an analysis of the 2000 CES data found that one third of the turnout gap between young adults and older Canadian citizens is closed if socio-demographic factors are controlled (Rubensson et al, 2004). The link between

[26] This can explain the fact that higher participation by first time voters in 2004 did not stem turnout decline in Canada. Increased competitiveness in 2004 over 2000 seems to have attracted more first-time voters, but had little effect on those who developed habits of abstaining in the three preceding uncompetitive elections. Overall, the effect of changing Canada's electoral system, now a practical possibility in several provinces (Milner 2004), can be expected to only marginally improve turnout, specifically by allowing into the legislatures smaller parties - in particular the Green Party. Given that the young in Canada are if anything more "mainstream" in their political attitudes than their elders, (O'Neill 2001), PR would thus bring only a small number of young supporters of excluded parties to the polls. Nevertheless, apart from giving smaller parties an opportunity to win seats, PR adds an element of uncertainty to overall outcomes even where one party dominates. It removes the disincentives that FPTP places upon parties and voters in uncompetitive districts. The combined effect, even if marginal, is likely to be strongest in Canada given the comparatively large numbers of safe seats due to regional voting patterns. As far as the US is concerned, the issue is moot given the effective impossibility of meaningfully changing the electoral system. But there is no possible doubt that the virtual disappearance of competitive congressional districts due to widespread gerrymandering and the decline in the number of states that are competitive in presidential and senatorial elections has resulted in a steady decline in turnout in years where congressional elections are not accompanied by presidential ones.

social class and political attentiveness and participation is long established in the US.[27] What appears to be new is the strong generational character of the effects of class. In the past, there were periods in the United States characterized by "life experiences … dampening the biases in patterns of political participation attributable to socioeconomic status" (Strate *et al*, 1989: 456).[28]

The labour market in contemporary societies has effectively excluded from secure employment a large number of young people, especially young men, lacking the necessary levels of literacy and numeracy. In effect, they fail to act as political citizens (vote, or pay any attention to politics)[29] because they are excluded from social citizenship. They lack what their counterparts in the 1950s and 60s had – namely, the economic and educational wherewithal to be full citizens, secure in their capacity to support their families and communities. Though this is a phenomenon that transcends national borders, countries least affected are those which have developed the institutional and policy adjustment mechanisms to overcome entrenched inequality. This is reflected in the data from the European Social Survey in Table 1. While average reported overall turnout of 80.3 percent dropped to a worrisome 52.7 percent for those under 25, the least affected absolutely, and in comparison to older citizens, are the young Danes, Swedes and Dutch.[30] A recent American study, which analyzed the relationship between aggregate voter turnout and per capita welfare expenditure of the 50 US states found that welfare spending positively affects aggregate voter turnout rates, with welfare expenditure per capita boosting turnout of low-income, but not high-income citizens (Lee 2006).

Milner and Grönlund (2006) show political knowledge to be more dependent on level of education in countries where income is more unequally distributed. Clearly, the cost to be paid by societies that do not meet the challenge of declining turnout will be paid especially by those least able to pay it in the form of policy choices: in a democratic society, "*les absents ont toujours tort*." When considering the various institutional and policy choices designed to address the democratic deficit among young people, we shall thus need to keep social class very much in mind - specifically the fact that those with home and external environments poor in political information are those who most stand to gain from civic education (see Whiteley, 2005).

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[27] In 2000, the voting rate of persons below the poverty line was estimated at about 25 percent, compared to 65 percent for those above it (Leighley and Nagler, 2000:1). In 1996-97 the turnout ratio between those who had completed university and those who hadn't finished high school was 7 to 5 in Canada and better than 9 to 4 in the United States (Martinez 2000: 219).

[28] Specifically, during the high mobilization period in the United States in the 1960s and 70s, political participation increased from age 18 to 65 only marginally for the best educated, but significantly (from 20 to over 50 percent) among the least well educated (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980).

[29] A useful analysis of this group's abstention from voting can be found in Lyons and Sinnott (2003).

[30] An interesting comparison between Canada and the Netherlands by Howe (2006) found that while there is a political knowledge gap between young and old in the latter as in the former, its effect on turnout is notably less. Howe suggests that this is due to the fact the least informed Dutch are still more an informed than their Canadian counterparts.

4. The Media

An obvious candidate for affecting political knowledge is media use. Table 2 sets out data on reported regular newspaper reading for the population as a whole and for young people in countries comparable to Canada. In my work on civic literacy I find a positive relationship between newspaper circulation and political knowledge. Looking at Table 3, Canada, like the US and the UK, is close to the bottom when it comes to daily newspaper readership of young people. And when the European results in Table 3 are compared with those on reported voting of newly eligible voters in Table 1, we find a positive relationship. With the exception of Switzerland (an invariable outlier on voter turnout), countries where most young people regularly read newspapers are those where they also vote.

As I have shown in my previous work, television, especially commercial television, viewing does not boost civic literacy. An avenue to be explored in this regard is the new electronic media favoured by young people. The electronic path appears to be more readily open to high literacy societies like the Nordic countries which have traditionally lead the way in newspaper consumption.[31] But it is far from obvious how to get young North Americans to use it to acquire political information. One recent American study found that moderate Internet use correlated more strongly with various forms of political participation than low Internet use – but also high Internet use (Reeher, 2005).[32] Mindich (2005) reports on a 2002 Roper Poll, which showed that only 11 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds seek news online.

Mindich's book is based on intensive interviews of 58 young Americans aged 11 to 36. Only seven were able to identify all three nations designated by President Bush as part of the "axis of evil." Less than half could name both of their state's U.S. senators. Yet these were generally capable young people; their political ignorance stemming from media consumption habits[33] underlying which is a profound change of attitude toward media

[31] A recent study comparing youth political participation in Scandinavia and Europe using data from the recent European Social Survey (ESS) found that though "the Nordic respondents [of all age groups] stand out in agreeing that it is important for a good citizen to vote in elections… the youngest group of Scandinavians ... unlike middle-aged and older Scandinavians … are no longer significantly more likely to watch TV news and current affairs and read newspapers than their non-Nordic peers. [But they stand out] in the use of the Internet and email" (Ersson and Milner, forthcoming).

[32] Results like these also make me skeptical of e-democracy, i.e. use of the new information technologies to bring people to the (electronic) ballot box. The main effect of postal voting, for example, appears to be to facilitate voting for those who normally vote (Karp and Banducci, 2001). If E-democracy has any effect on turnout, it is likely to be of the same nature and thus incapable of bringing into the electoral arena those otherwise excluded.

[33] He cites figures showing that in 2003 19 percent of 23- to 27-year-old Americans read a newspaper every day (compared to 47 percent in 2002), that nightly TV newscasts attract only 17 percent of the under-30s, the average CNN viewer is over 60.

derived information.[34] The 2003 finale of "American Idol," notes Mindich, provoked more passion among young Americans than did the 2000 presidential race.

> At Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, I sat with a group of a dozen or so students and discussed their news habits. I was impressed by their intelligence, thoughtfulness, and ability to examine their relationship with the news and entertainment media. These traits came in handy when they tried to describe why they tuned out from the news to concentrate on entertainment. News is stressful, said one. Another argued that it is not the level of stress but the engagement that mattered. Even though video games can be stressful, he said, 'I'd rather play video games than read a newspaper because… it engages you more.'…. With Friends, one student said, there is a 'sense of emotional investment and…instant gratification.' Against this is the 'detachment of "campaign finance reform…CNN…[and] Peter Jennings.' Given the choice between the two paradigms, said another, you are going to choose entertainment because "it's instantly gratifying and…resolved immediately.'

Is it possible to counter these tendencies, to bring young people into what Mindich describes as a community where news is discussed and valued. If media use is simply a matter of consumer choice, then they are effectively irreversible. While this is largely true of adults – though newspaper subsidies seem to have some impact here (Milner 2002, chapter 7) – it does not apply to young people still in school, whose habits are still being formed. A simple strategy of bringing newspapers, and political party websites, into the civic education classes could have an important effect here.

5. Education

Where knowledge is concerned, an obvious sphere of policy intervention is that of education. I have shown (Milner 2002) that widespread use of various forms of adult education, directed especially at those who have with comparatively low levels of educational attainment, distinguish the high civic-literacy countries, Sweden in particular.[35] When it comes to young people, the focus is evidently on courses taken during their years of schooling. Unlike in the past,[36] much attention is being paid to civic education, since it is generally coming to be recognized as an indispensable element of

[34] Journalism's march towards detachment and objectivity has come up against a generation that fails to understand the importance of being politically informed, which judges journalism on its entertainment value.

[35] A useful summary of how Sweden succeeds can be found in Veeman et al (undated). Finkel (2002) finds a positive effect of adult civic education on political participation in South Africa and the Dominican Republic.

[36] The general situation was not long ago described by Dekker and Portengen (2000: 467) as follows: "social studies is a low status area of the school curriculum in many countries. Politics is only one of the subjects in social studies and receives attention for only a small part of the few school hours reserved for the subject. Many social studies teachers do not give priority to political topics [and] have limited political knowledge themselves."

any strategy for dealing with youth political disengagement. Indeed, the problem tends to be on the opposite side, the failure to distinguish among the various forms of civic education in terms of their actual effect on political participation. All civic education is not equal: the reality is that we do not know enough about the effects of civic education, and what we do know tells us that much of it does not have an appreciable lasting effect on political participation. For example, a recent study found practically no positive effects on later voting from exposure to various forms of civics related courses being offered in American high schools (Lopez 2004).

Much depends on specific factors, such as the age of the students, and the content, methodology and context of the courses given. Much of it, it would appear, is targeted at adolescents in the early teens. Yet there is good reason to believe that adolescence is a stage in life not especially conducive to the kind of learning provided in civics courses.[37] There is some American and especially Swedish evidence,[38] that civics courses taken in late adolescence enhance the political knowledge of students.[39] Still, we do not know to what extent the information acquired in such courses is retained into adulthood and affects political participation.[40]

[37] Civics courses taken one hour per week from grade 7 or 8 by practically all German students (Händle et al, 1999) seem to have little effect on the adolescents, while in the Dutch case, there was a correlation only for the less than 10 percent of students (Hahn, 1998: 15) who took the civics course (called "society") as a part of their formal program leading to the final examination (Dekker, 1999) suggests that its effects are likely to prove short-lived. On Australia, Hugh MacKay concludes, "typically, teenagers find little to interest or inspire them in the political process, and they often report that politics is the most boring subject discussed at home" (quoted in Civics Expert Group, 1994:182).

[38] Westholm, Lindquist and Niemi (1989) found that upper secondary students taking civics courses were more likely to retain knowledge about international organizations (11 percent more) and international events (6 percent more) when retested two years later than those in a control group. In the IDEA study the turnout level gap between 18 to 29 year old Swedes and all others (4.3 percent) was especially low (IDEA 1999). See also Niemi and Junn (1998).

[39] A recent case in point is a poll of 14- to 18-year olds reported on in the National Post conducted during the 2006 Canadian federal election. conducted A clear majority (69 percent) felt civics education helped them follow politics and make informed decisions, and 87 percent of teens who had taken a civics class could do so versus only half of those that had not done so. "Regardless of whether they liked their civics classes or not, the teens we surveyed who had studied government and politics were 10 percent to 15 percent more likely to indicate that they would vote should they be given the opportunity. Teens who had the benefit of formal civics education were also twice as likely to suggest a specific political party they would vote for, as opposed to indicating 'none of the above'." See Rudyard Griffiths and Greg Lyle, " Why Young People Don't Vote" National Post, December 13th, 2006. See *www.thedemocracyproject.ca* study of younger voters.

[40] One thing to be kept in mind is that Swedish secondary students are older (only 2 percent leave school at the end of compulsory schooling at age 16 - Skolverket, 1998) and drop-outs far fewer than in Canada,[40] so that, given to 17 and 18 year olds, the civics courses address a significantly larger fraction of the cohort than would be the case in the United States and Canada.

When it comes to civics courses currently offered, we do not yet have good systematic data about their content and duration as well as the age of the students.[41] But specific cases do point in a certain direction. The fact that the relatively modest turnout decline in Sweden over the past thirty years is not synonymous with a declining interest in politics (Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004) is not unrelated to the civics courses provided at or near the age of 18 when young people are in a position shortly to put the information into concrete application as new voters. Moreover, these courses give an important place to the positions taken by the different parties on relevant local, regional and national issues, by regularly inviting their spokespersons in these areas into the classroom[42] – the opposite of the American insistence on keeping politics out of the classroom.[43]

The American approach is typically, to the virtual exclusion of politics, to stress the nation's history and constitution in the civics classroom and encourages community-based volunteer activities outside it. We have good reason to doubt whether such volunteer activities positively affect attentiveness to or interest in politics. [44] A recent

[41] In the US, 41 states' statutes specifically provide for the teaching of social studies, which can include government, civics and/or citizenship. As far as Canada is concerned, several provinces have been taking steps to move further in this area as a response to the situation described here – though we still lag behind unitary states like Sweden and France where the level of government concerned with citizenship is also responsible for education. Ontario has a relatively new civics curriculum that places emphasis on participatory learning, but it still appears to be left up to the local school boards to implement. My own province of Quebec, despite its identity as a "distinct society," is passive in its approach, attempting to incorporate citizenship into the conceptualization of high-school history, while the junior college or CEGEP – where 16-18 year-olds still in school are found – is a wasteland as far as civic education is concerned.

[42] An example is provided by a program instituted in the 1990s in civics classes in the upper secondary schools of the northern Swedish city of Umeå where I teach. In order to provide a bridge from the classroom to the channels of political organization and activity outside the school, and thus encourage political participation, representatives of the local units of political parties are invited to explain their programs and describe their actions. Another relevant example is how in advance of the 2003 monetary referendum spokespersons on both sides were systematically invited to civic classes to present their cases on adopting or not adopting the Euro.

[43] "Schools [in Wisconsin] feared being charged with being partisan. Having students deliver food baskets was safe; having student work to oust a politician who cut food-stamp programs was not" (Beem, 2005: 10). And they were right in their fears. The Corporation for National Service, major funder of service learning, explained its refusal to allow participants in the youth service program Americorps to attend the "Stand for Children" rally in Washington DC, as follows: "National Service has to be non-partisan … it should be about bringing communities together by getting things done. Strikes, demonstrations and *political activities* [my emphasis] can have the opposite effect" (Cited in Walker, 2000). Hence it comes as no surprise that a recent article comparing the score of U.S. 14 year-old students' on the IEA Civic Education Study to the mean of the 28 participation countries, the American students did worst on the question about the function of political parties. See Judith Torney-Purta and Carolyn Henry Barber, "Strengths and Weaknesses in U.S. Students' Knowledge and Skills: Analysis from the IEA Civic Education Study" http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_CivicKnowledge.pdf

[44] Typically, as college students complained to researchers in one recent study, "they had received much more encouragement and opportunities to get involved in service, but hardly any into politics." This was the conclusion of a week-end exchange sponsored by the Johnson Foundation between 20 representative Wisconsin college students and politicians. The author concludes that for students, "while there are ample

Statistics Canada study found that "engaging in community-oriented activities as a child or teen-ager … was not [associated] with voting" (Milan 2005:4). Indeed, there is mounting evidence that the great stress on youth volunteering that has characterized the American response to declining civic engagement has, if anything, depoliticized participants.[45]

My own approach (Milner 2005) is that civics should be compulsory in the year or two before the age of citizenship is attained and the students called upon to vote. Since a major goal is to foster the habit of being attentive to politics and public policy through the media, a crucial component of the course content should be that of providing information through input from and contact with the relevant political actors, regularly inviting the parties' specialists into the classroom both physically and electronically. Moreover, such education should transcend the classroom. One especially promising avenue among these various activities[46] lies in mock elections. Kids Voting USA, a non-profit, non-partisan voter education program in schools in 39 states helps teachers and students gather information about local, state and national elections and then cast their ballots in special booths on election day. The model has been imported to Canada with, overall, encouraging results.[47]

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and readily accessible opportunities for community service, they do not know how to find out who their assemblyman was, or how to get involved in a campaign, or even how to register to vote. …it was as if a light was supposed to go off when someone turned eighteen" (Beem, 2005: 10).

[45] Stroupe and Sabato (2004) compared classes that used the National Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI) curriculum and a control group of similar classes that did not. The study found that YLI programs have substantial, positive effects on students' level of political knowledge and, to a lesser degree, on their likelihood of future political participation.[45] Similarly, in the study cited earlier (Andolina et al, 2002), it was found that students who participate in open discussions in class and who learn to communicate their opinions through letter writing and debate are much more active than those who don't have these experiences. A North Carolina study found that "young people who reported having to stay current on political events showed higher levels of political knowledge … and interest in voting" (Henzey, 2003). One study found that service experiences did not change "the students' assessments of the value of elections" nor their "definitions of what civic responsibility is and should be" (Hunter and Brisbin, 2000:625). Campbell (2005) found that the degree to which political and social issues are discussed has a greater impact on civic proficiency than the frequency of social studies classes.

[46] A useful list of suggestions along these lines was advanced in the International IDEA Report. These included various efforts to register young citizens, mock elections, and specially-targeted artistic and cultural events. One recommendation was to make first-time voting a rite of passage, by sending, for example, congratulatory birthday cards explaining how and when to register for elections, or by adding an element of public spectacle through a "National Youth Voter Registration Day." In 2004 and 2006 Elections Canada was especially active in promoting youth voting along such lines – as its website shows: http://www.elections.ca/content_youth.asp?section=yth&document=index&lang=e&textonly=false. One page provides links to relevant youth organizations, such as "Rush the Vote" and Youth Vote 2004 (discussed below), which it supported in cooperation with the Dominion Institute. A useful set of quite broad recommendations along these lines was recently put forward by the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy. http://www.gnb.ca/0100/FinalReport-e.pdf. Chapter Five.

[47] In Ontario in the 2003 provincial election, the ballots of over 43 percent of high school students were collected and tabulated and the results presented live alongside the official adult vote on CBC television.

6. Institutional reforms to complement civic education: The Voting Age

An institutional framework based on proportional electoral systems is conducive to bringing politics into the classroom as it assures that parties have a legitimate and relatively stable political presence at each level. Changing the electoral system,[48] as well as adopting policies to fuel habits of (following public affairs by) by newspaper reading are complementary to measures promoting civic education inside and outside the classroom. One particular institutional reform Canada is moving toward should prove helpful. While minor, the effect of adopting fixed election dates should be positive since it would allow civics education courses, mock-elections and other actions encouraging youth voting to plan their programs well in advance. As far as civics courses are concerned, educators would know the dates of the upcoming federal and provincial elections (and thus the deadlines related to nominating candidates, adopting campaign platforms, etc.) so that they could better incorporate these elements - and line up knowledgeable resource persons - into the content of the courses (see Milner 2005a).[49]

The most important complementary reform to civic education is the voting age. Given high school drop-out rates, civics courses would need to be offered at age 16 if not 15 to reach the same proportion of young Canadians as they do to Swedes aged 17 and 18. But this is well before the voting age, and thus the point the acquired information and skills could be put into practice at the ballot box. The benefit of lowering the voting age would lie, especially, in civic education courses targeted at 15 and 16 year old about-to-be voters at risk of becoming school drop-outs, courses fostering political knowledge and participation among those who need it most.

On the whole, the students took the exercise seriously and used the exercise to inform themselves, with civics or history classes often taking the lead in engaging and informing the student body during the campaign. This was followed by Student Vote 2004 organized around the 2004 federal election. Unfortunately, the June 28 date was too late to allow for a simultaneous vote. Instead, each school selected an election day. Results were tabulated for 1168 schools from 267 ridings across Canada, with over 265,000 students casting a ballot, the numbers clearly kept down by the lateness and uncertainty of the election date. The fact that the voting date was fixed in advance has clearly facilitated the latest of the election simulations, namely Student Vote BC which took place in 350 schools in that province in spring 2005.

[48] PR elections are conducive to fostering political attentiveness since they give small parties with distinct principle-based positions on different issues and that carry some measure of popular support, such as Greens, a better chance of having democratically elected – and therefore legitimate – spokespersons to represent them. This representativeness can also make the entire political system more legitimate in the eyes of the young people, while the partisanship fostered in a PR environment, compared to the volatility, ideological incoherence and thus weak party-identification under majoritarian systems, can be expected to have a positive indirect effect. We know that parental partisanship remains a key factor boosting the political participation of young people (Plutzer 2002), especially those still under their parents' roof.

[49] The fact that the voting date was fixed in advance has clearly facilitated the latest of the election simulations, namely Student Vote BC which took place in 350 schools in that province in spring 2005.

Reducing the voting age is the main, and very controversial, change advocated by Franklin. Franklin begins from the fact that voting is in good part a matter of habit. As shown by Plutzer (2002), the costs of learning to vote are higher if one's first election falls during the period of early adulthood during which time one is only starting to establish the social networks that will frame future choices including political ones. Those aged 18 to 20 are typically in a period of transition, in the process of withdrawing from their home and traditional school environment without fully settling into another, especially preoccupied with things other than politics and public affairs and hence more likely to develop the habit of non-voting.

Franklin provides evidence of a secular decline in turnout after the minimum age was reduced, typically to 18, in the 1960s and 70s in different countries, which he links to socialization into non-voting behavior. A certain number became non-voters who would have not have become so had their first opportunity to vote been later, when they were in a better position to develop the habit. The costs of learning to vote, as he puts it, are thusconsiderably raised if a person's first election falls during the period immediately after leaving high school, since the four years that follow are fraught with the problems of early adulthood. Lowering the voting age left a "footprint" in the electorate of lower turnout that expanded with the (younger) coming of age of each new cohort – a process reflected by declining turnout in every country that did so.

Given that returning the voting age to 21 is politically unfeasible, Franklin concludes that reducing it to 16 or 15, when the young people are still in high school "appears to be the only feasible reform that might undo some of the damage that was done when the voting age was lowered in most countries during the late twentieth century" (Franklin 2004: 214). If Franklin is right, then, lowering the voting age is not just a matter of having more young people able to vote for the first time still in school and thus available for compulsory civics classes oriented toward the skills and knowledge needed to cast and informed vote – as I have argued. To see to what extent the two approaches are complementary, we need first to look more deeply at the assumptions underlying Franklin's work.

7. Expressive Engagement, Political Knowledge, and Becoming Voters

I thus conclude this paper on a rather theoretical note. A political-knowledge based approach, as offered here, and one linked to the character of elections as proposed by Franklin both draw our attention to the choices of young people in the crucial years as they attain voting age and the policies affecting those chocies. Franklin focuses on "inertia" due to the role of habit in political participation. My emphasis is on the political knowledge and the habits of attentiveness to the sources of such knowledge acquired during this period. To explain and develop strategies for countering the political dropout phenomenon, it would surely be useful and potentially productive to try to combine these two approaches. In what follows I make an initial stab at doing so – setting out paths I expect to follow in ongoing work.

We begin with the theoretical underpinnings of Franklin's approach. Franklin takes issue with the standard commentators who see declining turnout always as indications of citizen disengagement. "The focus for explaining why people vote is centered on the individual and things that happen to the individual rather than (as in earlier research) on the election and things about the election. In the light of this focus, it is not surprising that commentators should take low or declining turnout to be a reflection on the capacity and motivation of individual citizens" (Franklin 2003: 3). He finds such deficient analysis to stem from faulty reasoning based on the wide acceptance of the rational choice approach to explaining political behavior. Such an approach ignores the dimension of benefits to voters from a specific electoral outcome. "If individuals are confident that their preferred coalition *can* win but are unsure about its actual margin of victory, this maximizes the probability that their own vote will be critical - not just in terms of its own singular addition to the total number of votes cast by coalition members, but also as an inducement to other members of the coalition to vote" (Franklin 2004: 51). But individuals differ in their position from which to evaluate benefits.

> The calculus of voting is quite different for socially connected people. If each vote has a motivating impact on other members of a group, then each vote effectively counts more than once. People in social networks would also incur costs of nonvoting because other members of their group care whether they vote or not. By contrast, for those not involved in social networks, their vote is only worth one single vote, and, furthermore, they incur no social costs from freeloading.… So, the benefits of voting and the costs of nonvoting are higher for socially connected people (Franklin 2004: 48).

Franklin's alternative approach, termed "expressive engagement" is developed in a recent paper, which argues that the crucial role in getting out the vote is played by individuals who make an effort to advertise their intention of supporting a particular party or candidate in part in the hopes of motivating others to do the same. Hence the key group in getting out the vote is made up of the potential voter's personal friends and acquaintances, and it is the new voter's social linkages which lower the costs of voting for new voters (Franklin 2005:7).

One empirical test of this approach, he asserts, is the effect of the length of time respondents have lived in the same neighborhood, which constitutes a measure of the opportunity that politically motivated individuals will have had to become acquainted with the potential new voter. This variable is especially salient for members of new cohorts as an indicator of whether they were living in the parental home and benefited from an appropriate home neighborhood support group rather than new in their communities and likely thus to lack the support network that reduces the costs and increases the benefits of voting. Using US voting turnout data since 1972, Franklin finds that length of residence in the neighborhood indeed has a significant positive effect (second only to that of education in overall importance), and especially on young adults (three times the effect than for the electorate as a whole). "Young adults who had lived all their lives in the same neighborhood [were] 21 percent more likely to vote than those who had recently moved there." (A Statistics Canada study confirms this to be true of

Canadians. “A strong sense of belonging to the community as a young adult resulted in higher odds of voting” - Milan 2005:4).

The American data marshaled by Franklin, which traces reported turnout by individuals since the year the voting age was lowered, also confirms his above noted claim about voting age. This, he concludes, “corroborates the role ascribed to length of residence. Like length of residence, younger initiation into electoral politics gains its theoretical importance by indicating the extent to which individuals could have been exposed to the motivating and cost-cutting effects of expressive engagement.” Long-time residents have had the opportunity “to become enmeshed in social structures that expose them to expressive engagement on the part of acquaintances and friends – an engagement that in turn guides their party choice and adds value to their vote ….; length of residence is a precondition that makes it easier for friends and acquaintances to shepherd young adults into the habit of voting” (Franklin 2005: 23-4).

> For others to know who you are is apparently crucial if, as a new member of the electorate, you are going to make the transition to habitual voting.… The anonymous individual indeed has less reason to vote, unless he or she has already acquired the habit of voting. But the findings of this paper strongly suggest that a person whose name is known, within a supportive network of family and friends (or acquaintances) expressively engaged with one-another on the subject of their vote intentions, needs a very good excuse for not voting Franklin 2005: 28).

Looking at the data, Franklin adds that, “of course, the effect of education is even greater and (for those who do obtain a college degree) accounts for even higher turnout, suggesting an alternative route to at least moderately high turnout. But the findings imply that the very highest probabilities of voting require both education and the opportunities for mobilization that length of residence makes possible” (Franklin 2005: 27). He ends the paper on an interrogatory note calling for additional questions in the US National elections survey to “help to determine whether learning to vote is ever a self-motivated matter, rather than just a response to the mobilizing efforts of others.”

I agree that we need to know more about what brings people to develop a habit of voting, but in my view the questions that should be at the top of our research agenda should be differently focused. Franklin sees the young adult’s “lack of anonymity” in the community and his or her educational attainment as complementary separate routes to becoming habitual voters. In my view, what they share is best understood with a framework of civic literacy. The crucial aspect is reducing the cost of information relevant to casting an informed vote. Such information has several dimensions: it is both explicit and tacit, a matter of both content and skills. While it can be acquired passively – i.e. through the mobilizing efforts of others, it typically includes an active aspect, i.e. attentiveness to relevant signals in the environment. The environment is not merely a social one, but also an intellectual one, specifically that created by the information media. Hence key are acquired habits of media attentiveness, such as turning on the TV news. The importance of education lies thus not only in transmitting information, but in instilling predispositions and habits.

In other words, (attaining the skills for and thus) developing the habit of paying attention to politics is a better description of the core process here being explored than developing the habit of voting. At its' simplest, it is a matter of learning to – and thus developing the habit of - picking up signals in the environment relevant to political participation. In this context, the finding that length of residence in the neighborhood has a much more significant effect on the turnout of young people than older citizens is explained by the fact that older citizens will have developed such a habit, which makes them less dependant on their availability for mobilization than is the case with younger citizens.

Turning to the question of reducing the voting age, we can agree with Franklin that, compared to the unsettled period upon leaving the parental home, the previous few years are likely to be characterized by a less anonymous environment and, hence, fuller exposure to the signals relevant to political participation. But, I would add, there is good reason to believe that these signals are weaker than they were in the past. The picture of a family together watching the TV news and discussing it over supper, or chewing over the latest developments reported in the morning paper over breakfast, is very much faded. Yet these are the activities in the home needed to provide the informational content and develop the basic skills for picking up the signals on one's own. This is why I argue that, to be effective, lowering the voting age should be complemented by compulsory civic education courses providing the relevant information and developing appropriate skills and dispositions for 15 and 16 year olds.[50]

The two approaches are also complementary as to the kinds of institutional reforms required to bolster political participation. Franklin emphasizes reforms enhancing electoral competitiveness, i.e. making votes count more equally toward the final outcome. (A study using CES 2000 data found that the turnout gap between young adults and older Canadians was reduced when perception of the competitiveness of the election (as well as when being contacted by a candidate or party during the campaign) was controlled for - Rubenson et al, 2004). For the United States this entails an emphasis on changing (the method of drawing) boundaries so that there are more competitive congressional districts, and changing party financing laws so that incumbents do not have such a great advantage. For countries like Canada, this would entail in particular moving toward a more proportional electoral system under which votes count more equally.

Such an approach is strengthened by, but not dependent on, Franklin's revised rational-choice approach based on individuals defining themselves as members of coalitions that stand to gain from particular electoral outcomes. We can arrive at essentially the same institutional reform proposals on the basis of an argument premised not on connectedness to a support network that reduces the costs and increases the benefits of voting, but on the skills of, and habits of attentiveness to, picking up signals in the environment related to casting an informed vote. More competitive elections motivate parties and those who would spread their messages to take the trouble to inform potential voters they might

[50] Kids Voting USA, in which, on Election Day, students cast their ballots in special booths, the younger ones going to the polls with their parents. Experience in the program brings parents to vote more often and become better informed about politics through interaction with their children (Golston, 1997).

otherwise ignore; conversely, the very perception of the closeness of the race is itself a reflection of a certain degree of political knowledge and political attentiveness.

Conclusion

Franklin's approach excludes the notion of a "generational culture," a cultural predisposition of a particular generation to be inattentive to politics irrespective of the institutional context. I am not prepared to do so - given what I see today. As noted at the outset, the phenomenon we are witnessing, not only in North America or the English speaking world, but in democratic countries as disparate as Israel, Norway and Chile, suggests there to be a generational component, and that this component is related to the informational environment in which recent generations have reached political maturity. If this is true, those of us who reached maturity in a very different media environment may simply be incapable of fully comprehending this phenomenon. I, for one, cannot imagine how educated, intelligent (young) people can assert – as Mindich reports - 'I'd rather play video games than read a newspaper because… it engages you more.'

Mindich believes it is still possible for this generation to be part of a community "where news is discussed and valued." If so, I see no more promising approach than one based on civic literacy, one that complements Franklin's stress on institutional reforms and changes in the voting age. Such an approach is directed at young people where they are in the social world and the virtual world of electronic communication, targeting especially those who lack the parental home support and social connectedness conducive to expressive engagement. It prioritizes civic education at a time when the students are soon to become potential voters. It invites virtual as well as physical representatives of the parties into the classroom. It brings in newspapers and other sources and outlets of written and electronic political information, with a view toward developing habits of attentiveness to - and the ability to pick up signals about - the political world.

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TABLE 1

REPORTED VOTING IN LAST ELECTION: YOUTH AND TOTAL

Country	Voted-1980s*	Voted-total
Sweden	81,4	86,96
Denmark	78,9	93,67
Italy	76,4	89,45
Netherlands	74,8	86,33
Austria	74,6	88,46
Germany	72,8	85,30
Greece	59,8	90,56
Finland	54,5	81,70
Belgium	53,5	85,23
Norway	50.0	83,66
Ireland	41,8	75,87
Portugal	41,3	72,49
UK	41.0	72,35
Spain	27,4	77,67
Switzerland	17,6	68,98

Based on data from the first round of the European Social Survey (http://ess.nsd.uib.no.)
*****Born 1980 or later, that is, first time voters (excluding those too young to vote in the last election)
I wish to thank Svante Ersson of Umeå University for these calculations.)

TABLE 2

YOUNG PEOPLE'S KNOWLEDGE OF POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY*

Overall Quiz Performance
Average Number of Correct Answers

	Number Correct (Possible 56)
Sweden	40
Germany	38
Italy	38
France	34
Japan	31
Great Britain	28
Canada	27
U.S.	23
Mexico	21

*The National Geographic-Roper Global Geographic Literacy Survey assessed the geographic knowledge of 3,250 young adults. In total, 2,916 interviews with 18- to 24-year-olds were conducted using an in-home, in-person methodology. All interviews were conducted using a representative sample of young adults. Interviews were conducted from mid-May to mid-July 2002.

TABLE 3

AGE STRUCTURE OF DAILY NEWSPAPER READERSHIP

COUNTRY	REACH (YOUTH)	YOUTH AGE	REACH (ALL ADULTS)	PAGE*
Norway	81.0	13-19	86.0	290
Sweden	77.0	15-24	88.0	340
Denmark	76.6	16-24	79.7	124
Finland	72.0	15-24	87.0	145
Austria	69.5	14-29	75.2	56
Australia	68.6	18-24	71.8	51
Switzerland	68.1	16-24	74.8	345
Netherlands	58.0	15-24	71.4	265
Germany	53.6	14-19	76.2	155
Greece	52.0	18-24	54.6	159
Belgium	50.7	15-24	47.4	68
Hungary	49.2	15-24	52.6	171
Canada	44.9	18-24	54.1	88
Luxemburg	43.8	15-24	65.0	233
Spain	41.7	16-24	39.7	330
Italy	40.2	18-24	39.3	196
United States	40.0	18-24	54.0	375
New Zealand	37.8	15-24	54.1	276
France	36.3	14-19	45.3	147
United Kingdom	35.7	15-24	32.8	324
Poland	28.3	16-24	31.8	292

*World Press Trends, 2004, World Association of Newspapers. Paris