

**An attitudinal explanation of low youth voter turnout in the 2004 Canadian federal election**

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## **Introduction**

Since the 1988 Canadian federal election voter turnout has declined, notably among potential younger voters. Though turnout among this group has always been relatively low, the recent drop can be considered paradoxical because it has taken place despite the development of major trends which should have increased electoral participation. Notably, the educational levels of this demographic are the highest of any electoral cohort, political information is now more accessible and detailed than during previous elections, and finally, this decline has occurred amidst the onslaught of many programs and initiatives intended to encourage the participation of young people. Given that turnout continues to drop despite recent trends that have been theoretically and empirically established to increase electoral participation, the decline in youth voting needs to be explained. This trend in electoral detachment raises questions concerning the rationales behind non-voting, whether this decline is a temporary phenomenon or of lasting significance, and prompts theorizing solutions and/or remedies that hold promise to improve the lackluster political engagement of young people.

This paper seeks to contribute to the broader debate about the electoral disengagement of young people by examining whether political attitudes wield a significant effect on the voting behaviour of Canadian youth. Through statistical analysis, this study argues that young Canadians' attitudes toward civic duty, political interest, political parties and party leaders all exerted a meaningful influence on their level of electoral participation in the 2004 federal election. Based on this analysis, it is likely that these four variables have predictive value for assessing young people's decision to vote.

There are four sections in this paper. First, four prominent approaches to studying voting behaviour are briefly outlined based on their explanatory value and relevance to this study. Within this portion, a succinct review of the literature focusing on the voting behaviour of young Canadians is presented. Second, the methodology used to test the influence of the selected attitudinal variables is explained. Third, a critical discussion of the results and statistical analysis is presented. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion concerning questions for further research that may shed light on the problem of youth voting decline.

## **Models of Voting and Electoral Participation Literature**

Though many approaches and models are used to study voting behaviour, this paper examines four of the more popular frameworks given their relevance for this particular study. Specifically, the socioeconomic, socio-psychological, mobilization, and rational choice models are explored briefly and their application in the context of the voting behaviour of Canadian youth evaluated. It is difficult to explain human behaviour with a rigid model that focuses on one set of variables and electoral behaviour is no exception. Given the complicated nature of the decline in youth voting, none of the models can wholly account for the changes that are occurring or have complete explanatory value for the analysis presented in this paper.

### *Socioeconomic Model*

The Sociological model/ Socioeconomic model (SES) first theorized by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet and McPhee (Berelson et al., 1948 and 1954) and more fully developed by Verba and Nie (1972) posits that participation is determined by an individual's socioeconomic characteristics and civic orientations. Thus, factors such as age, education, income, gender, race, and so on, apply a 'sociological pressure' to the electoral decisions of individual voters, and by that fact, have a powerful effect on political behaviour (Kanji and Archer, 2002:161; Leighley, 1995:181). The SES model is germane to this study given its recognition of age and education as sociological cues

that influence an individual's decision to vote.<sup>1</sup> Education is important because many studies have theoretically and empirically established a meaningful correlation between education and the act of voting (see Nevitte et al., 2000:52; Campbell et al., 1967; Verba and Nie, 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980:Chapters 2 and 5). Notably, the more educated an individual is, the more likely s/he is to have the cognitive skills and political information necessary to reduce the costs associated with voting and cast a meaningful ballot. Furthermore, the notion of age as a sociological pressure naturally supports the assertion that voting habits develop as individuals grow into adulthood and informs the debate on whether the electoral disengagement of young people is attributable to life-cycle or generational effects.

As individuals age they engage in activities that increase their perceived stake in the political process, namely acquiring full-time employment, marrying, purchasing a home, and so on, and by that fact, increase their likelihood of voting. Referred to as 'the adult-role hypothesis' by Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) and as the 'life-cycle' effect by more contemporary literature (see particularly Blais et al., 2004 and Pammett and Leduc, 2003) these frameworks argue that the probability of voting can be measured by age and that voting rates increase with life-cycle change (Blais et al., 2004:223; Leighley, 1995:184; Nevitte et al., 2000:62; O'Neill, 2003:15; Pammett and Leduc, 2003:3-5; Rubenson et al., 2004a:410; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980:57-60).<sup>2</sup> While this principle is relatively well-established in the literature, debate persists concerning the degree of influence age has on the decision to vote, and whether the age effect in a Canadian context is largely attributable to life-cycle or generational change.

The generational argument, by contrast, argues that the trend of electoral disengagement is attributable to long-term social change. One argument, advanced by Robert Putnam (2000), posits that the political attitudes and behaviour of young people are different from previous generations because of their lack of participation in voluntary associations, and thus declining social capital<sup>3</sup> (as cited in Howe, 2007:3-4). Alternatively, Ronald Inglehart (1990) and others (see particularly Nevitte, 1996) attribute the generational difference to a significant shift in value change from materialist to post-materialist values. Specifically, the formative experiences prior to adulthood that shape an individual's social values are significantly different for this generation of young people and are characterized by less social, economic and physical threats to security. Given this, younger people conceive of civic responsibility differently and do not recognize the importance of voting for renewing and preserving democracy (Howe, 2007:4).

Contemporary contributions argue that both life-cycle and generational effects exert an important influence on the voting behaviour of young people, however there seems to be a trend of broad support for the generational argument (see particularly Wattenburg, 2007). Specifically, in their 2004 study Blais et al.'s findings "unequivocally confirm the presence of strong life-cycle effects" (227). Similarly, Nevitte et al. (2000:62) attribute turnout decline from the 1988 to 1997 elections to strong life-cycle effects, noting only modest generational influence. By contrast, other findings place the blame on generational change (Haid, 2003:32; Howe, 2003:20; O'Neill, 2003:16; Pammett and Leduc, 2003:4 and others). Blais et al.'s 2004 study of CES data from 1968 to 2000 acknowledges that an important life-cycle effect exists, but cites generational change as primarily responsible for the disparity in turnout (234). Also, a later analysis by Nevitte et al. (see

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of sociological cues has guided empirical research on voting and served as a framework for who participates and who does not.

<sup>2</sup> Empirical testing of this model is performed by comparing the participation rates across demographic groups and controlling for income, sex, and education (Leighley, 1995:183).

<sup>3</sup> Social capital is defined by Howe (2007), citing Putnam, as: "'connections among individuals,' and more specifically as 'social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them'" (3).

Rubenson et al., 2004a:417) argues that “The low turnout in Canada’s 2000 federal election and the decline in turnout since the late 1980’s can in large part be explained by generational effects.”<sup>4</sup> Although this study is unable to assess whether low turnout in the 2004 election was the result of life-cycle effects given its scope and design, the results offer support for the generational thesis.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Socio-Psychological Model*

The Socio-Psychological model (SPM) has important implications for party identification and thus the political party’s portion of this research. The framework asserts that no single sociological determinant is sufficient to explain political behaviour and argues that proximate and psychological influences are the most powerful predictors of voting behaviour (Campbell et al., 1967:7; Kanji and Archer, 2002:163; Prewitt and Nie, 1971:480).<sup>6</sup> The SPM takes party identification as its central variable, assuming that party loyalty develops early in life (can often be passed on from one generation to the next) and remains relatively stable over time. Notably, party identification is responsible for filtering the most proximate factors influencing an individual’s decision to vote, namely attitudes toward issues/policies, party leaders/candidates and political parties. The SPM is germane to this research given its emphasis on attitudes toward parties and party leaders, but applying this model to the Canadian case is problematic because young Canadians exhibit weak and volatile partisan ties (Blais et al., 2002:115; Kanji and Archer, 2002:163).

Contemporary research indicates that voters in Canada, particularly young people, have unstable party identification and high reported levels of anti-party sentiment. Clarke et al.’s *Absent Mandate* (1996) for example, argues that the brokerage framework federal parties adhere to makes it difficult for voters to distinguish between policies, fostering pliable ties between voters and parties and creating the basis for an apathetic electorate. Bélanger (2004) and Gidengil et al. (2002) confirm antipartyism among youth. Although the literature illustrates strong anti-party feelings, the extent to which anti-party sentiment influences turnout remains inconclusive in a Canadian context. This study supports the hypothesis that attitudes toward political parties and party leaders have an important influence on the act of voting, but rejects the persistence of strong partisan loyalty. In fact, the results presented here support conclusions that young people are increasingly dissatisfied with parties and generally express anti-party feelings.

#### *Mobilization Model*

A mobilization framework focuses on explaining participation based on the contextual cues and opportunity structure of an individual’s environment. This model recognizes that encouragement (by parties or organizations) increases an individual’s propensity to vote and that individuals develop “more positive attitudes toward politics when their involvement is solicited” (Leighley, 1995:188-9). Verba and Nie (1972) illustrate that membership in voluntary associations has a positive effect on turnout, and in a more comprehensive analysis of the US, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) conclude that nearly half of the turnout decline since the 1960s and the lull in party related activities can be explained by mobilizational factors.

Pammett and Leduc (2003) confirm the effect of mobilization by noting a significant relationship between party contact and voter turnout. Blais et al. express similar findings in their 2002 study, substantiating that younger voters are less likely to be contacted by a political party and are therefore less likely to vote. Further, the shift in registration approaches from enumeration to a National Register of Electors is an apt example of how failing to mobilize voters can lower turnout (Black, 2003). The impact of mobilization is particularly important for younger voters

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<sup>4</sup> Another study by Rubenson et al., (2004b) empirically establishes strong generational effects.

<sup>5</sup> This claim is proved throughout the results and analysis portion of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Instead of looking solely at election statistics, this framework broadened its explanatory power by examining the motivational elements that affect voting.

because they exhibit weaker senses of civic duty, lower levels of political interest, lesser probabilities of identifying with a political party, and because of the general negativity many of them report toward political objects. Given this, it is important to examine whether young people feel political organizations, particularly federal parties and their leaders, are fulfilling their mobilization function.

#### *Rational Choice Model*

Finally, Downs's (1957) rational choice (RC) approach argues that citizens act rationally in politics and that behaviour is determined by attitudes, beliefs and values. A rational voter assesses the expected benefit of all possible outcomes and then, based on personal preference, selects the outcome that has the greatest utility (Aldrich, 1993:247). That is, a rational voter will choose to vote for the party that provides "the best benefits overall" (Kanji and Archer, 2002:166).<sup>7</sup> Although the assumption of rationality can be considered problematic since some voters may perceive voting to be irrational, many voting studies assume principles of RC in their work.

Notably, Blais et al. (2002) examine the 'long-term forces' of the RC model by testing the party loyalty of Canadians and evaluating whether or not campaigns matter. They also investigate the "no race" hypothesis, finding that when individuals perceive there to be no 'real' electoral contest they are more likely to abstain. Further, some of the primary reasons cited as culpable for reduced rates of turnout among youth directly relate to the opportunity cost associated with voting. Survey respondents claiming they did not have time to vote, did not know where to vote, and/or did not have adequate information in to vote, among others, reason that the cost of voting outweighs the benefits associated with it. Of course, responses such as these can be explained by rationality or could potentially be indicative of a deeper democratic malaise.

Examining the major approaches to studying voting behaviour shows their value in exploring and analyzing the impact of these attitudinal variables on the voter turnout of Canadians aged 18 to 24 in the 2004 federal election. It also hints that political attitudes are useful explanatory variables through which to explore the electoral disengagement of young Canadians.

#### **Methodology**

Though many studies explore the problem of youth non-voting by examining the electoral behaviour of Canadians aged 18 to 29, the population of this research comprises the 18 to 24 demographic. This population was selected because this group of young Canadians constitute a new cultural generation (generation Y), and because this portion of Canadians had the lowest rate of turnout in both the 2000 and 2004 federal elections.<sup>8</sup>

The analysis of this study comes from the 2004 Canadian Elections Study (CES) data set and the researcher's own survey.<sup>9</sup> The CES data is germane to this research because it includes questions that serve as accurate measures of civic duty, political interest, party attitudes and party leader attitudes. The CES survey was conducted cross-sectionally by telephone between May 23, 2005 and June 26, 2005 and produced an initial sample of 4,323 cases.<sup>10</sup> The initial response rate was 53 per cent (see Blais et al., 2005:5). To filter out Canadians born prior to 1980 the cases were

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<sup>7</sup> Please note this is a very brief treatment of the rational choice model and there are many amendments to the model that are not explored here.

<sup>8</sup> The data for youth turnout in the 2006 election has not yet been released and/or calculated.

<sup>9</sup> Given that the dependent variable (the self-reported vote) produced nominal data only nonparametric tests of significance and association can be used. Chi-square is used to assess whether the relationship between variables is significant and Cramer's V is used to measure the degree of association between variables.

<sup>10</sup> The sample was randomized by using random digit dialing and the birthday selection method. The interviewer requests to speak to the person in the household with the most recent birthday.

stratified, producing a final sample of 337. Only those questions that probed attitudes toward the independent variables were selected for analysis.<sup>11</sup>

The other portion of this study comes from a survey developed by the researcher to gain complementary descriptive insight as to why a majority of young Canadians did not vote in the 2004 federal election.<sup>12</sup> Some questions are adapted directly from the CES study to help explain the statistical results, whereas others are selected based on guidelines from previous Elections Canada studies, particularly Leduc and Pammett's (2003) *Explaining Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters* and surveys employed by Statistics Canada.<sup>13</sup> Questions focus on probing respondents' feelings toward civic duty, party attitudes, and gauging opinions on non-voting.<sup>14</sup>

Participants of this survey include 50 University of Guelph students (aged 18 to 24) enrolled in the summer Distance Education section of Canadian Government.<sup>15</sup> The voluntary survey was made available to students between July 15, 2005 and July 22, 2005 and no time limit was enforced. Since the goal of the survey was to obtain unprejudiced responses students were asked not to use the course text or any other supplementary materials when completing the survey. Given that the selection process was not random and was limited to students enrolled in the course, the sample is not representative of Canadian youth and therefore no statistical analysis can be preformed using the data set.<sup>16</sup>

## **Results and Analysis**

### *Reported Reasons for Non-voting*

To gain insight into the rationales behind non-voting Table 1 presents the reasons University of Guelph students provided for not voting in the 2004 election.<sup>17</sup> A lack of political information or interest received the highest frequency of responses (35.1 per cent) followed by responses that can be categorized as 'personal' reasoning, grouping together those who reported they 'forgot to vote', were 'too busy' to vote or had 'no time' to vote (24.7 per cent). Third, respondents cited that 'voting does not make a difference' and a lack of meaningful choices as explanations for their abstention (13 per cent). Responses suggest that these youth perceive electoral participation to be relatively meaningless and indicate feelings of estrangement. Taken together, they reflect disaffection with federal electoral politics.

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<sup>11</sup> Please refer to Appendix 2 for exact wording of questions selected from the CES survey.

<sup>12</sup> All qualitative responses were analyzed using grounded theory.

<sup>13</sup> Fifteen of the twenty-nine questions included on the survey come from the 2004 Canadian Elections Study (CES) Post-Electoral Questionnaire. Eleven are taken directly from the questionnaire, while several others (four) have either been adapted or updated to better reflect the nature of the survey.

<sup>14</sup> Please refer to Appendix 1 for the relevant questions from the qualitative survey. Appendix 3 contains the entire survey instrument.

<sup>15</sup> This is a second year political science class that provides a detailed overview of the structure, function and performance of Canada's political institutions. 62 per cent of the sample reported voting in the 2004 Canadian federal election; 38 per cent reported not voting. This ratio is notably higher than the general population.

<sup>16</sup> This sample included youth who possess above average levels of political interest, civic duty, a reasonable understanding of Canadian politics than the majority of the generation Y cohort. For example, the mean score for political interest is 6.66 out of a possible 10 (10 representing very strong interest, 0 no interest at all) and the median is 7.00. This outcome is notably higher than the results of other studies that measure the political interest of the Canadian youth population as a whole. In particular, Blais et al.'s 2002 account of the 2000 federal election finds that the average interest rating of those born after 1945 is 4.4. Furthermore, when the same calculations are computed for the generation Y cohort using the CES data set, results reveal a mean score of 4.3, and a median of 5.0, confirming that the students in this sample possess above average levels of political interest.

<sup>17</sup> The question was open-ended allowing respondents to wholly explain their non-voting. This led to responses that incorporate more than one reported reason for non-voting; for example, lack of interest and away on vacation. This is why the frequency of responses exceeds the number of participants.

**Table 1: Reported reasons for not voting**

Reported reason for not voting	Frequency	Percent
Other (not coded elsewhere)	7	9.1
Didn't know who to vote for/what the issues were/no interest	27	35.1
No time/working/busy/forgot to vote	19	24.7
Physical limitations/illness	1	1.3
Did not know where to vote/not registered	4	5.2
Vote does not make a difference/politicians the same	10	13
Away/vacation on election day	4	5.2
Don't know	5	6.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Guelph Survey**

For additional insight concerning the increasing political disaffection of young people respondents were asked if they feel there is “something about this generation of young Canadians that makes them less likely to vote than younger voters of generations past” (see Figure 1 for responses). A majority of respondents attribute non-voting to low levels of political interest (72 per cent), lack of information, understanding and/or knowledge (70 per cent), and feelings of apathy and general distrust in politics (67 per cent).<sup>18</sup> Lack of integration into the political system (60 per cent) and a reduced sense of civic responsibility (58 per cent) are also commonly cited as important factors responsible for lower rates of turnout. Overall, these responses echo sentiments of disaffection and estrangement and raise questions as to why levels of political interest are low, why an affinity to civic duty is down and what is prompting feelings of separation from the political system. These results are particularly worrisome given that this sample is characterized by an above average level of political interest and sense of civic duty.

Taken together, the assorted responses presented in both these figures hint that the rationales for non-voting are varied and cannot solely be accounted for by one explanatory variable. It is interesting to note that no respondent indicated that there is nothing about this cohort of Canadian youth that makes them less likely to vote than previous generations. This suggests that participants feel there is something unique about this group of Canadians that might explain their increasing political disaffection, and supports the argument that the decrease in electoral participation is the result of a generational effect.

#### *Civic Duty*

An individual's civic duty is the perceived importance s/he attaches to the act of voting and/or “the feeling that participation is to be valued for its own sake” (Pammett and Leduc, 2003:38). Civic duty is also strongly related to political attentiveness and political interest given that individual's with stronger senses of civic duty are more likely to seek out the political information to cast a meaningful ballot, and by that very fact, more likely to develop an interest in political affairs. Attaching importance to the act of voting “is a powerful motivating factor when it comes to voting,” and thus is presented as a plausible explanation for the decreasing electoral participation of Canadian youth (Blais et al., 2002:58).

Literature examining the decline of voter turnout in Canada suggests that the generation Y cohort is characterized by a weaker sense of civic duty than previous generations (see particularly Nevitte et al., 2000 and Pammett and Leduc, 2003). For example, in their examination of the 2000 election, Blais et al. (2002:58) find that 18 per cent of young respondents expressed agreement

<sup>18</sup> Please note that respondents were able to offer multiple responses. This is why percentages do not amount to 100.

with the statement “If I did not vote, I would feel guilty [;]” compared with a response rate of 34 per cent from older respondents. This study supports that levels of civic duty are low among the cohort and that a correlation exists between young Canadian’s sense of civic obligation and their propensity to vote.

Specifically, levels of civic duty were assessed by asking respondents whether they feel low turnout is problematic (Q10a) and measured on a thermometer scale. Analyzing reported attitudes toward the importance of voting reveals a significant, moderate relationship between civic duty and the electoral behaviour of young Canadians in the 2004 election ( $\chi^2=34.231$ ; sig.=.000; CV=.390) (see INSERT Tables 2 and 3). Therefore, the more problematic respondents felt non-voting was, the more likely they were to vote (80.4 per cent), while those respondents who perceived non-voting as unproblematic reported a lower rate of turnout (17.4 per cent). This confirms that respondents who possess a stronger sense of civic duty are more likely to vote, whereas those who have lower reported levels of civic duty are less likely to engage in electoral participation. It also suggests that civic duty may have predictive power in determining a young person’s propensity to vote.

Overall, a majority of CES respondents view low youth turnout as problematic (69.2 per cent perceive decreased turnout among youth as either “a very serious problem” or “quite a serious problem”) (see Figure 2). Comparatively however, these percentages are lower than responses offered by older respondents in other studies (see Pammett and Leduc, 2003) supporting the claim that younger Canadians have a weaker sense of civic obligation. The results presented here are consistent with the findings of previous studies examining the effect of civic duty on the electoral behaviour of all Canadian voters (see Pammett and Leduc, 2003:38). Additionally, data support conclusions that declining youth voter turnout is the result of generational effects, particularly Blais et al.’s (2004) assertion that the generation Y cohort is less likely than previous generations to regard voting as a moral duty.

The responses from the qualitative sample are notably higher, as 80 per cent perceive low levels of civic duty among youth to be ‘a very serious problem’ (see Figure 3). Though it is expected that this percentage be higher than the CES data, it is worrisome that the remaining 20 per cent of respondents do not interpret weak civic duty to be problematic especially given their levels of political interest and education. This is consistent with responses that low civic duty among the cohort is expressive of broader disengagement (28.2 per cent) (see Table 4). Perhaps then, levels of political interest and education are overridden by a broader generational disconnect with the political process in Canada. The results of the other variables in this study indicate that young people’s disappointment with the political system (parties, party leaders and so on) is likely an important influence on the lack of importance they attach to voting.

**Table 4: Problems or non-problems of low civic duty reported by the qualitative sample**

Why is low civic duty problematic or not problematic?	Frequency	Per cent
Lack of representation	19	41.3
Health of democracy	12	26.1
Not a problem/good method of protest	1	2.2
Disengagement/do not care	13	28.2
Not a problem/young and busy	1	2.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Guelph Survey**

### *Political Interest*

Recent studies examining the political interest of young Canadians offer varied results, but confirm a general lack of curiosity. Pammett and Leduc (2003) find that 39 per cent of young people (aged 18 to 24) cite disinterest as their rationale for abstention. Gidengil et al. (2003:11) confirm the effect of disinterest by demonstrating that if younger Canadians were as interested and informed as older generations in the 2000 election, their rate of turnout would have been 14 points higher. That said, most literature examines the impact of interest on the electorate as a whole and only a smaller segment specifically explores the effect of disinterest on the turnout of young people (see for example Nevitte et al., 2000 and Blais et al., 2002).

To gauge the relationship between political interest and voting behaviour two sets of questions are examined: those that prompt respondents to rate their interest in the federal election and in politics more generally (QA5 and QA6), and those that ask how much attention respondents paid to news media (either television, radio or newspaper) concerning the federal election (QPB1, QPB2, and QPB3). Analyzed individually, general interest in politics and attention paid to news media about the election exhibit moderate correlations with the decision to vote, while interest in the federal election shows the strongest level of association (CV=.625) (see INSERT Tables 6 and 7). Notably, in terms of the news media, television indicates the strongest association (CV=.508) and radio the weakest (CV=.327). Aggregation of all interest data reveals a significant, strong relationship between levels of political interest and the voting behaviour of Canadian youth in the 2004 election (CV=.674; sig.=.000). In short, the data suggest that youth who report higher levels of political interest were more likely to vote in the 2004 election, whereas those who reported less interest voted at a lower rate.

These results are consistent with the findings of earlier studies. Particularly, the mean score of political interest among youth in the 2004 election is 4.3; similar to the interest rating of 4.4 Blais et al. (2002) calculated using the CES data from the 2000 election. Calculations also support Gidengil et al.'s analysis of the 2000 election. Since levels of political interest are significantly related to the voting behaviour of Canadian youth in both the 2000 and 2004 elections it is reasonable to infer that political interest is a reliable predictor of whether young Canadians will exercise their right to vote. This lack of curiosity prompts questions concerning the causes of low interest; especially since respondents of the qualitative study cited little political interest as the most important reason why young people do not vote (see again Figure 1). This study indicates that weak senses of civic duty and unfavourable attitudes toward parties and party leaders are closely related to low interest, but cannot conclusively answer what is causing disinterest.<sup>19</sup>

### *Political Parties*

Analyzing party opinions, a strong correlation is found between young people's feelings toward parties and their propensity to vote. Further, results show a strong correlation between respondent's feelings toward political parties generally and their propensity to vote (see INSERT Table 8). Analyzed individually, only attitudes toward the NDP exhibit a significant relationship with the decision to vote, but when data from all five questions is aggregated in an additive scale, party opinions reveal a strong correlation between party feelings and the decision to vote (CV=.671). This illustrates that youth who regard parties favourably are more likely to vote,

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<sup>19</sup> Explanations in the literature are also inconclusive. For example, Turcotte (2005:2) argues that a difference in the priorities of federal parties and young people explains the disinterest; while Howe (2003:22) hypothesizes it may be because of a lack of knowledge. It is clear however, that cynicism toward political objects is not primarily responsible for weak senses of civic duty and low levels of political interest among the cohort (see Blais et al., 2002:34; O'Neil, 2003:16; Rubenson et al., 2004b:416). This is consistent with the generational argument that young people's disaffection is the results of cultural changes and a shift in values.

whereas those who perceive parties negatively have a lower rate of turnout. The relationship between opinions of the NDP and the decision to vote are interesting. Based on the analysis of civic duty and political interest, it is likely that the youth who view the NDP positively are the same individuals with above average senses of civic duty and levels of political interest. This suggests that young Canadians who value participation and possess a better understanding of the political process have a greater likelihood of voting for the NDP. Overall, the data suggest that attitudes toward political parties are an important determinant of a young person's propensity to vote.

The responses of the qualitative survey emphasize the negative implications the relationship between party attitudes and the decision to vote have for the non-voting of young people. To gain greater insight as to why some youth perceive parties negatively respondents were asked "Do political parties appeal to/reflect the interests of young people?" A sizable 84 per cent of participants reported that political parties do not appeal to young people (see INSERT Figure 4). Further, 76 per cent of participants reported feelings of support with the statement, "the decline in voter turnout is the result of anti-party sentiment [,]" (see INSERT Figure 5).<sup>20</sup>

To determine the causes behind anti-party sentiment participants were probed as to why political parties are unappealing (Q21). A majority of respondents directed blame to the party organizations, citing that do not adequately represent the interests of young people (26 per cent), are not trustworthy (18 per cent), and are ineffective in reaching out to the younger demographic (see Figure 6). By contrast, 32 per cent of responses redirected the responsibility to young people, arguing that parties would do more to appeal to the interests of youth if they presented themselves as an important political group. If some youth recognize that it is relatively easy for parties to ignore groups who do not actively vote, why are they not more engaged in the political process? Perhaps they are, but the large percentage of respondents who assign blame to parties does not feel a responsibility to actively engage and indicate little incentive to actively pursue change. This may be because a majority of youth simply do not care about the political process and are "tuned out" of Canadian politics (see Gidengil et al., 2003:14).

The responses from the qualitative sample indicate a pressing need for further research into the anti-party feelings of Canadian youth. Given their weaker sense of civic duty and lower levels of political interest, it is unlikely that these young people will actively seek involvement or encourage parties to broaden their appeal and mandates to better reflect the interests of the younger demographic. This has implications for levels of party membership as well as the types of members that are recruited, representation of interests in party mandates and policy, and of course, democratic governance. If the interests of one group of citizens are marginalized from parliament they will not likely be reflected in legislation and this is problematic for the effectiveness and democratic nature of Canada's federal parliament.

While the results of this study are consistent with most previous research, they conflict with Gidengil et al.'s (2005:6) own earlier analysis of the same 2004 CES data set which argues that the priorities of youth and older generations are so closely related that young Canadians cannot possibly be "turned off" of electoral political because parties pay scant attention to their interests. Though younger and older Canadians may have similar priorities, it could be the ways in which parties are marketing their mandates to the electorate that make young people feel as if their interests are not being represented. Just as a corporation would employ an alternative marketing strategy for different demographic groups, parties too should consider their audience when campaigning. That said, it is difficult to advise parties to cater to societal groups who do not vote.

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<sup>20</sup> Please note that 34 per cent 'strongly agreed' with the statement, while 42 per cent indicated they 'agreed somewhat'.

Therefore, both parties and young Canadians have a role to play in mobilizing – parties need to better target youth, and young people must give parties a reason to listen.

#### *Party Leaders*

Examining the link between reported attitudes toward politicians and voting revealed a significant, relatively strong relationship (see INSERT Table 10 and Table 11). The evaluations of attitudes toward the individual party leaders in the 2004 election did not reveal significant relationships, but, when assessed on an additive scale, general opinion of party leaders did show a strong correlation with the act of voting. This suggests that young voters view all politicians, and notably leaders, negatively, but do not harbour particularly negative opinions of any one leader. This may be because young people have no interest in seeking additional information that might influence their attitudes toward individual leaders. This supports the analysis of civic duty, political interest and political parties, because a young person who has negative feelings toward these political objects is unlikely to view party leaders favourably or take the time to learn about their leadership so that s/he may form significant negative or positive opinions of them.

Interestingly, we do not see a relationship between attitudes toward Jack Layton and voting. This indicates that youth who reported voting are attracted to the NDP party generally and not based on the appeal of its leader. Generally, the insignificant relationship between voting and attitudes toward individual party leaders is perhaps symptomatic of a broader democratic malaise among the cohort. Particularly, it raises questions concerning the effectiveness of leadership. Perhaps if youth perceived leaders to be inspirational and charismatic they would have a greater inclination to participate electorally. A lack of inspirational and motivational leadership has implications for party membership, electoral participation and general political engagement as explained by the mobilization framework.

These results are consistent with Pammett and Leduc's (2003) comparison of the political leadership cohorts of potential voters became eligible under and the proportion these groups vote. Theoretically, individuals who first started voting under uncharismatic leadership voted at a lower rate in the 2000 election. Data also confirm Haid's (2003) argument that young people lament the lack of charismatic leadership among contemporary federal politicians. Generally, this analysis illustrates that young people who view politicians in general, and federal party leaders, favourably had a greater propensity to vote in the 2004 election; whereas those who reported negative opinions exhibited a lower rate of turnout.

#### *Possible Solutions*

Although multivariate analysis is required to more fully determine the impact of attitudes on voting behaviour, if attitudes do indeed exert a meaningful influence on the act of voting what solutions exist to help reengage young people politically? Which methods and approaches hold promise to strengthen young Canadians' senses of civic duty and levels of political interest as well as improve their relationships with federal political parties and their leaders? To shed some light on these questions, respondents from the University of Guelph sample were asked what could be done to "engage young people in the voting process" (Q29).

Overall, the largest percentage of respondents cited increasing political education as the most effective means of encouraging the voter turnout of young people (27.3 per cent, see Table 12). Clearer party mandates and greater emphasis on issues relevant to young people received the second highest frequency of responses (19.5 per cent) and better marketing, media coverage and celebrity endorsements the third (13 per cent).

Not surprisingly, the promotion of political education is frequently cited as a remedy in other literature (see especially Pammett and Leduc, 2003) given that increased political knowledge theoretically strengthens an individual's sense of civic duty and hence his/her propensity to vote.

Education focused responses in this survey advocate an early civics education program, integrated in elementary school programs much like math or science. Responses indicate that implementing a half credit high school course (as in Ontario) is a start, but stress that civic education needs to begin earlier to properly acquaint young Canadians with the importance of political institutions and electoral participation.<sup>21</sup> Respondents also suggest the potential benefits of non-conventional forms of education, such as educational programs, speeches and advertisements endorsed by young celebrities. In fact, many hypothesize that celebrity campaigns were responsible for the increased turnout among younger voters in the 2004 American national election. Taken together, these responses emphasize the importance of civic education, particularly awareness raised by non-conventional proponents.

The responses relating to political parties focused on the scant level of attention respondents feel federal parties pay to issues that concern young Canadians and the perceived ambiguity of party mandates. Respondents expressed discontent that the government does not pay enough attention to issues that are important to youth (such as the Ontario Student Assistance Program and Community Service Learning and minimal government expenditures on job training programs geared at new graduates, job creation for young people, increased Ontario Health Insurance Plan funding, better social programs for young families, among others). Though many of these issues are broadly addressed in campaigns (such as social programs, job training, health care, post-secondary education and so on) how they specifically affect the younger demographic is not. Highlighting the relevance of these issues for youth increases a young person’s stake in the political process and may encourage him/her to vote.

In terms of party mandates, many respondents cited expressed frustration with the brokerage or watered-down mandates of the larger federal parties. Respondents indicated that parties promoting more ideological issue positions would produce clearer choices for young voters and encourage turnout. This is consistent with the “lack of meaningful choices” response many respondents cited as a primary reason for abstention. Finally, another popular suggestion focused on improving marketing and media coverage. Responses highlighted increasingly superficial media coverage, stressing that better media reporting (especially through the internet) is a useful means of increasing awareness. Other recommendations included: emphasizing the difference voting can make, showing young people the good government can do, promoting young political leaders who can relate to and inspire youth, and increasing direct interaction between politicians and the public (i.e. through door-to-door canvassing and so on).

The variety of recommendations supplied by respondents suggests that engaging young people in the political process requires a multi-faceted approach. Notably, better civic education, more effective party campaigning and outreach as well as advertisements and marketing are cited by respondents as the best methods of promoting turnout. These proposed solutions hold promise to strengthen the civic duty and political interest of young people and positively affect their perception of federal political parties and party leaders. They are also a good starting point for further discussion concerning improved turnout and the political engagement of young people.

**TABLE 14: “What can be done to engage young people in the voting process?”**

	Frequency	Per Cent
Stop the scandals/ show young people what good government can do/ tell them their vote can make a difference	8	10.4

<sup>21</sup> That said, the US has a long-established civics curriculum that has not exerted a meaningful influence on the electoral participation of young Americans. In fact, despite the onset of this rigorous program, US turnout among the younger demographic has actually decreased since the 1970’s (Galston, 2004:265).

Need young mentors or politicians who can inspire and relate to youth	6	7.8
Make voting more accessible via internet voting or creating polls in malls and other venues where youth congregate	4	5.2
Better marketing and media coverage, particularly celebrity endorsements	10	13
Improve political parties by offering clearer mandates and placing greater emphasis on issues relevant to youth	15	19.5
Increase early political education i.e. mandatory involvement in volunteering, not solely scholastic education	21	27.2
Need a face to face connection with politicians i.e. door to door canvassing	6	7.8
Nothing can be done	3	3.9
Institutional changes i.e. lower voting age/electoral system, etc.	4	5.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Guelph Survey**

*Summary of findings and Limitations of this study*

The data presented indicates that attitudes toward party leaders had the strongest relationship with the voting of Canadians aged 18 to 24 in the 2004 federal election. Similarly, party attitudes and political interest also exhibit a strong correlation with voting; while the effect of civic duty is more moderate. Thus, young people who reported relatively positive attitudes toward these determinants were more likely to have voted, whereas those who cited negative opinions had a lower rate of turnout. Taken together, the findings highlight the interrelatedness of these variables. It appears that youth who report negative attitudes toward parties and party leaders are more likely to express weak senses of civic duty and low levels of political interest and vice versa. This suggests that the development of negative political attitudes is perhaps cyclical, in that a negative opinion of one political object can trigger disapproving opinions of other objects. The interconnectedness of these determinants supports that conclusively determining the causes of youth abstention requires further research. It also supports the generational hypothesis that the increasing political disaffection of young people is perhaps the result of a broader, generational shift.

Although the results indicate that political attitudes may be useful in explaining turnout decline over time, this study can only make preliminary predictions as to the effect of attitudinal variables on the voting behaviour of Canadian youth. Assessing the affects of attitudinal factors on the 2004 electoral contest does not mean that young people’s attitudes toward civic duty, political interest, political parties and party leaders had a comparable effect on previous elections, or that they can firmly predict their effect on future elections. More research is needed to help explain the culture of political detachment among Canadian youth, but the study of political attitudes is perhaps one point of departure.

The smaller sample size used by this study also limits its explanatory value. A larger sample that includes more data concerning the political behaviour of Canadian youth would likely yield greater predictive value. Furthermore, since the dependent variable (the act of voting) analyzed here is nominal, only less powerful statistical analyses can be performed. In addition, although the qualitative study is useful for gaining additional interpretive insight, it does not meet the methodological requirements to conduct tests of significance and measures of association. Finally, both surveys include proportionately more voters than nonvoters (given that surveys generally encourage turnout – see Abramson and Aldrich, 1982:503-4).<sup>22</sup> Therefore there may be a bias when attempting to draw comparisons from the CES non-voting cases to the general population of young Canadian non-voters.

### **Conclusion**

It is interesting to note that federal voter turnout increased by approximately four per cent in the 2006 election. Whether this increase was an anomaly and perhaps a result of the heightened competitiveness of the electoral opportunity structure at the time is not clear. The 2004 election was also relatively competitive compared with previous electoral contests, but produced one of Canada's lowest electoral turnouts to date. Therefore, the only means of conclusively determining whether the political attitudes of Canadian youth and their propensity to engage politically is improving, is to conduct further studies and analyze future election returns/surveys.

The analysis above indicates that the problem of youth non-voting is complex and cannot be wholly explained by one existing model. Therefore, researchers must remain flexible that any combination of factors could possibly account for the declining voter turnout of young people. An analysis of the literature and findings of this study raise questions for further research concerning the causes of weak senses of civic duty, low levels of interest and reported disenchantment with federal political parties and their leaders. The interconnected relationships of the variables hint that the factors inciting youth disengagement are not simple. It also supports that widespread negativity is perhaps indicative of a broader generational value and culture shift. Negative orientations do not necessarily mean that young people view these political objects through a pessimistic lens, but could in fact indicate their general lack of concern with all things political, or all traditional political objects.

In sum, although further research is necessary, this study suggests that young people's attitudes toward civic duty, political interest, political parties and party leaders may be valuable determinants for analyzing voting behaviour. Their influence on the act of voting in the 2004 federal election indicates that they may be useful predictor's of young people's propensity to vote more generally. If further studies conclusively determine a strong relationship between attitudinal determinants and the decision to vote, researchers may want to explore methods of ameliorating the political attitudes of young people as one means of increasing turnout.

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<sup>22</sup> Turnout is typically overestimated in surveys of this nature given that people with an interest in politics are more likely to respond to surveys; the act of completing a survey both prior to and after an electoral contest increases the likelihood of voting; and social desirability prompts overrepresentation (see Blais et al., 2004 and Rubenson et al., 2004a).

## Appendix One

### 2005 Qualitative Survey

#### Civic Duty

Numeric Code	Text
Q12	In the 2004 federal election approximately 22% of Canadians 18-24 years old voted. Is this: a very serious problem, quite a serious problem, not a very serious problem, or not a problem at all? Why/Why Not
Q15	What does civic duty mean to you
Q16	How would you rate your sense of civic duty: very strong, quite strong, average, not very strong at all? Why/Why Not

#### Party Attitudes

Numeric code	Text
Q17	Do you believe political parties are a necessary tool for democracy?
Q18	How do you feel about parties in general?
Q19	The decline of voter turnout among youth is often seen as the result of anti-party sentiment. Many surveys say that youth perceive the major parties as unresponsive, increasingly detached, and partly responsible for the inadequate functioning of the political process. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement? Why/Why Not
Q20	Are you or have you ever been a member of a political party? Yes/No Why/Why Not
Q21	Do you think that political parties in general appeal to/reflect the interests of young people? Yes/No Why/Why Not

#### Opinions on Non-Voting

Numeric	Text
Q13	In your opinion, is there something about this generation of young Canadians that makes them less likely to vote than younger voters of generations past?
Q29	What should be done to engage young people in the voting process?

## Appendix Two

### 2004 CES Questions

#### Civic Duty

<b>Numeric</b>	<b>Text</b>
Q10a	About 25% of Canadians 18 to 24 years old voted in the 2000 federal election. Is this: a very serious problem, quite a serious problem, not a very serious problem, or not a problem at all?

#### Political Interest

<b>Numeric</b>	<b>Text</b>
Q(A5)	How interested are you in the federal election?
Q(A6)	How interested are you in politics generally?
QP(B1)	How much attention did you pay to news about the federal election on T.V.?
QP(B2)	How much attention did you pay to radio news about the federal election?
QP(B3)	How much attention did you pay to news about the federal election in the newspapers?

#### Party Attitudes

<b>Numeric</b>	<b>Text</b>
Q(1a)	How do you feel about the FEDERAL Conservative PARTY?
Q(1b)	How do you feel about the FEDERAL Liberal PARTY?
Q(1c)	How do you feel about the FEDERAL NDP (the New Democratic Party)?
Q(1e)	How do you feel about the BLOC Québécois?
Q(2d)	How do you feel about political parties IN GENERAL?

#### Party Leader Attitudes

<b>Numeric</b>	<b>Text</b>
Q(G1)	How do you feel about Stephen Harper?
Q(G2)	How do you feel about Paul Martin?
Q(G3)	How do you feel about Jack Layton?
Q(G4)	How do you feel about Gilles Duceppe?
Q(G6)	How do you feel about Politicians in general?

## Appendix Three

### Complete Survey

#### Question 1 (1 point) [Save](#)

(optional) Age:

#### Question 2 (1 point) [Save](#)

Gender:

- Male
- Female
- refuse to answer

#### Question 3 (1 point) [Save](#)

(optional) To which ethnic or cultural group(s) did your ancestors belong?

For example, Canadian, French, English, Chinese, Italian, German, Scottish, Irish, Cree, Micmac, Métis, Inuit (Eskimo), East Indian, Ukrainian, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Filipino, Jewish, Greek, Jamaican, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Chilean, Somali, etc.

#### Question 4 (1 point) [Save](#)

(optional) Declared Major and Minor (if any):

#### Question 5 (1 point) [Save](#)

Rate your interest in politics on a scale of 0 to 10.

0 means no interest at all, 10 means extremely interested.

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

**Question 6** (1 point)  [Save](#)

Rate your interest in Canadian politics on a scale of 0 to 10.

0 means no interest at all, 10 means extremely interested.

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

**Question 7** (1 point)  [Save](#)

Are you satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada?

Yes/No Why/Why Not

**Question 8** (1 point) [Save](#)

Did you vote in the 2004 federal election?

- Yes
- No

**Question 9** (1 point) [Save](#)

If you DID NOT vote, what was the main reason you did not vote? If you DID vote, what was the main reason you did vote?

**Question 10** (1 point) [Save](#)

Would you feel more confident/comfortable voting now than you did before starting this course?

Yes/No Why/Why Not

**Question 11** (1 point) [Save](#)

If there was a federal election today would you vote?

Yes/No Why/Why Not

**Question 12** (1 point) [Save](#)

In the 2004 federal election approximately 22% of Canadians 18-24 years old voted. Is this: a very serious problem, quite a serious problem, not a very serious problem, or not a problem at all?

Why/Why Not



**Question 13**

(1 point)  [Save](#)

In your opinion, is there something about this generation of young Canadians that makes them less likely to vote than younger voters of generations past?

(you can select multiple options)

- lack of integration into the political system
- lack of encouragement
- feelings of apathy and general distrust in politics
- diminished sense of civic responsibility
- lack of information, understanding, knowledge
- little political interest
- lack of meaningful choices
- irresponsibility, rebelliousness, laziness
- Other
- no, there is nothing about this generation of young Canadians that makes them less likely to vote than younger voters of generations past.
- None of the other options

**Question 14**

(1 point)  [Save](#)

If you selected other in the above question, please specify:

(or if you would like to add further comments)



**Question 15**

(1 point)  [Save](#)

What does civic responsibility/duty mean to you?

**Question 16** (1 point) Save

How would you rate your sense of civic duty: very strong, quite strong, average, not very strong, or not strong at all?

Why/Why Not

**Question 17** (1 point) Save

Do you believe political parties are a necessary tool for democracy?

Yes/No Why/Why Not

**Question 18** (1 point) Save

How do you feel about parties in general?

Use any number from 0 to 100. 0 means you REALLY DISLIKE the parties and 100 means you REALLY LIKE the parties.

Explain your numeric response.

**Question 19** (1 point) Save

The decline of voter turnout among youth is often seen as the result of anti-party sentiment. Many surveys say that youth perceive the major parties as unresponsive, increasingly detached, and partly responsible for the inadequate functioning of the political process. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement?

Why/Why Not

**Question 20**

(1 point) [Save](#)

Are you or have you ever been a member of a political party?

Yes/No Why/Why Not

**Question 21**

(1 point) [Save](#)

Do you think that political parties in general appeal to/reflect the interests of young people?

Yes/No Why/Why Not

**Question 22**

(1 point) [Save](#)

Which of the following do you think does this the best:

- Liberals
- Conservatives
- NDP
- Bloc
- Green Party
- Other
- None

**Question 23**

(1 point) [Save](#)

In federal politics, do you usually think of yourself as a liberal, Conservative, NDP, Bloc Quebecois, Green, other, or none of these?

If other please specify.

**Question 24**

(1 point) Save

If not, do you generally think of yourself as being a LITTLE closer to one of the federal parties than to the others?

Yes/No Why/Why Not

**Information**

Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements?

**Question 25**

(1 point) Save

So many people vote that my vote hardly counts for anything.

- strongly agree
- somewhat agree
- somewhat disagree
- strongly disagree

**Question 26**

(1 point) Save

I don't think the government cares much about what people like me think.

- strongly agree
- somewhat agree
- somewhat disagree
- strongly disagree

**Question 27**

(1 point) Save

There is no point in voting for a party that will only win a few seats.

- strongly agree
- somewhat agree
- somewhat disagree
- strongly disagree

**Question 28**

(1 point)  [Save](#)

All federal parties are basically the same; there isn't really a choice.

- strongly agree
- somewhat agree
- somewhat disagree
- strongly disagree

**Question 29**

(1 point)  [Save](#)

What should be done to engage young people in the voting process?



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