CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH AND OF NEW AND ABORIGINAL CANADIANS:

Preliminary Findings From CRIC Research

ABSTRACT

In this article, Gina Bishop examines levels of civic engagement among Canadian youth, including a significant decline in voter turnout which is of particular concern. She outlines the efforts of the Centre for Research and Information on Canada to better understand the attitudes and values of young people today, as it is these which affect their political participation. Research thus far has focused on young leaders from Ontario and New Brunswick. Findings suggest that Canadian youth indeed care deeply about their communities, but choose to contribute in ways other than through traditional institutions.

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The growing interest in democratic reform among Canadian provinces, and the federal government, is one that should not come as a surprise. This renewed interest is closely tied to the fact that many politicians and other decision-makers are grappling with the growing sense that many Canadians are holding increasingly negative and cynical views of political institutions, and public life. Along with declining voter turnout, this has forced political decision-makers to seek ways to reverse these trends, in order to revive feelings of integrity and respect towards political institutions and towards those who choose public life.

The studies of democratic reform which have taken place or are underway across the country provide an important opportunity to examine the role of the citizen in the modern Canadian state, and to initiate an examination of citizen engagement. William Reuben defines civic engagement as follows:

> *Civic engagement is the participation of private actors in the public sphere, conducted through direct and indirect interactions of civil society organizations and citizens-at-large with government, multilateral institutions and business establishments to influence decision making or pursue common goals. Engagement of citizens and citizens' organizations in public policy debate, or in delivering public services and contributing to the management of public goods, is a critical factor in making development policy and action responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people and potentially of the poor.*[1]

Clearly, the civic engagement of a population is directly linked to the quality of its democratic system. One popular way to measure changing levels of civic engagement has been through comparisons of voter turnout over time. Voter turnout in federal elections in Canada has been decreasing steadily since the late 1980s. In 2004, only 61% of eligible voters cast a ballot, the lowest level of voter participation recorded in Canadian history for a federal election. Furthermore, the continuing decline in voter turnout has raised a great deal of concern in that it affects not only Canada, but also many other industrialized countries.

In addition, the evidence suggests that young people today are voting in fewer numbers than young people did a generation ago, and that fewer are joining political parties. The reasons for reduced voter turnout, particularly among young Canadians, are varied and complex. For example, as Brenda O'Neill has pointed out, voting remains a fairly simple exercise and has remained relatively unchanged over the years, except for some changes to the registration process. Furthermore, the frequency at which Canadians are asked to vote has remained relatively stable. Information on political parties and candidates is also widely available to this internet-savvy generation (though as with many things, quantity does not always equal quality, or mean that the information is easy to process).[2] The answers, therefore, must lie elsewhere.

In addition to declining formal political involvement and activity, another important measure of civic engagement is sense of community, and community involvement. Sociologists have identified a variety of factors contributing to a change in the way young people view their community,

and their place within it. These include: the declining importance of organized religion; changes in the structure of the family; the growing importance of new communications media, notably the Internet; a declining emphasis on civic education within schools; growing mobility due to the changing nature of job market; and shifts in values that include a lesser regard for authority, greater moral relativism and growing emphasis on individual autonomy. Many of these changes may contribute to a weakening sense of attachment to the community.

In order to develop the tools to be effective in encouraging higher civic engagement and participation, researchers, politicians, community leaders and public servants must know more about the voter turnout decline among the youngest generation of Canadians. This includes understanding the values they hold towards community and public service.

CRIC's Research on Youth Civic Engagement in Canada

Over the past few years, CRIC has examined the attitudes and values of young leaders to learn about their views of the political process, and gain insight into factors affecting their political participation. The research that CRIC has conducted to date on these issues, focusing on young leaders in Ontario (2003) and in New Brunswick (2004), suggests that what is occurring is not a retreat from community leadership among younger Canadians but rather a shift in priorities and leadership style.

CRIC's focus groups revealed that most respondents placed quite a high value on family, and on community. There was no evidence to suggest that respondents did not care about their communities or their world, were selfish, unduly cynical, or had no ideas about what they would like to see in the way of positive change. One could say that most young Canadians are not less interested in leading and in contributing to their communities than were previous generations, but are instead more likely to make their contributions outside of traditional institutions that include political parties and the electoral system, the public service, and churches.

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At the same time, the youth in CRIC's focus groups did not usually make the connection between unpaid work that they were already doing in their community, and volunteering. The concept of "volunteering" was perceived as intimidating by most of the young leaders in the focus groups, something that required a major, long-term commitment that most could not or were not willing to make. Furthermore, those who had attempted to volunteer in an official way reported that they found it difficult to know where to start, or that they had encountered organizations that tried to impose a specific schedule of involvement – to which they could not commit.

CRIC's surveys have also found that levels of cynicism towards elected officials and government are no higher among younger Canadians than among the general population. Participants displayed limited political literacy or awareness. Many said that they rarely discussed political issues, and indeed that they were not interested in politics; government and public service were perceived to be in the hands of an elite from which they are excluded. However, with some prodding, most were able to quickly articulate ideas about how to change their world for the better. Many also seemed to be trying to understand how they could better exercise their responsibilities as citizens. Thus, to label young leaders as apathetic, disillusioned, or uncaring about what is happening around them is simplistic.

Differences among young new Canadians

Like the 2004 research project on young leaders in New Brunswick (discussed below), the 2003 study of young leaders in Ontario found differences among certain groups. Of particular interest, the results of the focus groups showed that first or second generation Canadians were much more likely to be aware of and interested in politics and government than those whose families had been established in Canada longer. Yet, young first or second generation Canadians were no more positive or negative about government and politics than their counterparts.

Of the few focus group participants interested in government or political work, most were first or second generation Canadians. Equally interesting, these young leaders stood out from the other participants because they were the only ones who mentioned discussing politics, government or current news with family and friends.[3]

Differences among young Aboriginal Canadians

The existing research on voting patterns of Aboriginal Canadians shows that on average, they are less likely to vote in federal elections than are non-Aboriginal Canadians. However, there can be significant variations in different areas of the country; in some cases, their rate of participation is actually *higher* than the Canadian population as a whole.[4] Based on CRIC's research to date on young leaders, we have learned that while voter turnout is an important indicator to consider when talking about civic engagement, it is not the only barometer.

As previously noted, lower voter turnout should not be confused with political inaction or apathy; this is perhaps even more true in the case of Canada's Aboriginal population. Alain Cairns makes this point clearly: "Political enthusiasm and academic adrenalin are more easily stimulated by the heady wine of Aboriginal nationalism than by the more humdrum business of elections[5] for minority

Aboriginal populations unlikely to gain more than a toehold in legislatures[…]"[6]

In the 2004 New Brunswick research on young leaders, differences were observed between Aboriginal participants, who were generally aware of at least local government and politicians, and non-Aboriginals, who were more likely to think that government and politics had little to do with their day-to-day lives. The focus groups revealed that young Aboriginal participants had a heightened awareness of politics and government, and were better able to see the relationship between government and politics and their everyday life. Young Aboriginal participants who indicated an interest in politics most often said that they were interested in local, regional and national politics as this affects their own communities. Finally, most Aboriginal participants expressed interest in Aboriginal self-government, although some questioned current political practices in their communities.

CRIC's focus groups that young Aboriginal participants were more likely than non-Aboriginal participants to be actively involved and engaged in support of others in their communities, and to feel ownership towards their communities. Some expressed that they felt they personally had the power to make things happen, to make a difference in their communities. However, of all the young Aboriginal participants, only a few felt that they enjoyed respect of those in their community now, and like many of their non-aboriginal counterparts, most believed that if they were ever to have the power to effect change, it would not be in the near future.

In contrast to their non-Aboriginal counterparts, young Aboriginal leaders were more inclined to believe that they were "real" functioning citizens at this stage of their lives. Some were already engaged at some level in political activity now. Several of the Aboriginal participants indicated that they are already working in their communities with the current political leaders, while some spoke about their own efforts to share ideas and concerns with the elders of their communities. This particular group of participants was anxious to take action now, instead of waiting until later in life. Those who took action also reported that, through taking action, they earned a level of respect from the leaders of their communities that surprised them.

Conclusion

Given these findings, the challenges faced by decision-makers are not how to generate interest among young Canadians in community service, nor how to or combat unusually high levels of cynicism within this demographic. Rather, the goal must be connecting with young Canadians by building bridges between their networks and traditional community institutions.

CRIC is continuing its research in this area; this spring, CRIC will be conducting a national qualitative research project to further explore the preliminary findings reported here, to better understand the particular values and attitudes of young Aboriginal Canadians and young new Canadians. Results from this research will be available by June 2005.

Through better understanding the values and attitudes of Canada's next generation, and by encouraging younger citizens to become involved in the development of policies that shape and affect their day-to-day lives, the way is open to achieve two important goals: helping to reverse the trend towards declining voter turnout, and increasing the interest that Canadians have in public policy and the sense of responsibility that people share for our country's future. Success in this can only strengthen Canadian democracy.

Notes

[1] William Reuben, "Civic Engagement, Social Accountability, and Governance Crisis", p. 2. Available at http://www.worldbank.org/participation/civicengagement/civicengagementsocialaccountabilitygovernancecrisis.pdf.

[2] Brenda O'Neill, "Youth Participation – What We Know, and What We Don't Know" in CRIC Paper No. 15 *Canadian Democracy: Bringing Youth Back Into the Political Process,* December 2004, p. 3.

[3] Unfortunately, further conclusions are difficult to reach at this point, given that during the execution of this first project in 2003, priority was not given to exploring these differences in a more systematic way. However, in the subsequent research project focusing on young leaders in New Brunswick, CRIC was better prepared to capture and explore differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, within the scope of the larger project.

[4] Daniel Guérin, "Aboriginal Participation in Canadian Federal Elections: Trends and Implications" in *Electoral Insights,* November 2003, p. 10

[5] With the exception of the northern territories.

[6] Cairns, p. 7