LEARNING TO BE A FULL CANADIAN CITIZEN:

Youth, Elections and Ignorance

ABSTRACT

There is growing concern over the near absence of youth engagement in the democratic process today. In this article, Dr. Cook shares the results of a study based on Student Vote 2004, a civics project that encouraged both elementary and secondary students to learn about government in conjunction with the recent federal election. Results show that teachers welcomed new curriculum materials on a topic about which young Canadians lack even basic understanding.

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The discouragingly low percentage of Canadians who chose to vote in the just-past federal election campaign – the lowest at 60.5% since Canada's first federal election held 137 years ago – has preoccupied political observers throughout the summer. Even more worrisome, however, is the rate by voter age: in the 2004 election, 80% of those aged 58 to 67 voted, 66% of those between 38 and 47, while only 22% of 18 to 20 year-olds did so.[1] Clearly, the civic disengagement of newly-minted voters, those fresh from mandated civics courses in high school, is greatest of any group in the population. Yet behind this specific anxiety related to voter turn-out is a considerable educational literature which explores the roots of youth apathy to broader questions of civic commitment and involvement,[2] especially as these relate to the teaching of social studies and history,[3] the difficulties of engaging students' interest in formal civics instruction,[4] and the far-ranging implications for civic culture of youths' disinterest, and even their rejection of the accepted norms for demonstrating "good citizenship."[5]

There is little consolation in recognizing that ours is not the only country in the world with the problem of voter apathy. The United States was able to entice only 51%[6] of its citizens into the voting booth, for example, and there is considerable evidence to suggest that young people in America are no more enthusiastic or trusting of the political process than their Canadian cousins.[7] In the United States, as in this country, a range of extra-curricular and in-school programs have been initiated to encourage students' active involvement in the democratic process through community activities with a civic foundation, with the additional aim of developing the necessary skills to be able to appreciate and value the democratic experiment. Most of these projects have been mounted by unusually committed teachers with a significant investment in social activism, and with a track record of knowledge and connections throughout their communities. Too rarely are the projects aimed at the general population, both students and teachers, who might well be actively sceptical of the process they are investigating rather than virtuously supportive.

The project to encourage civic engagement discussed here was initiated by an independent, small group of Toronto-based young people not far outside that 18 to 20 year-old category. Their idea was simple and workable: provide teachers with the materials to carry out a parallel election during an official election campaign, but with the difference that students would be the electors. They presented their proposal to many potential sponsors before garnering enough support to make the idea a reality. In fact, finding adequate funding has taken enormous amounts of their time throughout the life of the project.

The first experiment was in the October 2003 Ontario election, during which the team was supported by Elections Canada and other sponsors. This project provided polling supplies for a class- or school-wide election. The team also developed a curriculum package for teachers to support the voting activity with in-class instruction. The run-away success of the Ontario provincial project made a similar initiative during the 2004 federal election possible. The curriculum package attached to the federal election project, entitled Student Vote 2004, was a considerably more elaborate teaching kit with modules for students in elementary school to grade 6, and a secondary school package featuring lessons and resources on leadership styles, the political spectrum, suggestions for involving local candidates in the classroom and much else. Both the elementary and secondary modules provided constituency maps and posters from Elections Canada for display and teaching support.

I first became aware of the project through teachers in my local area, and by a former teacher education student in the B.Ed program where I teach. This young teacher was now a member of the Student Vote 2004 team. I was intrigued by several features of this project. First, as noted, the widespread popularity of the student vote exercise reached more teachers and students than any other civics project of which I am aware. The simplicity and obvious relevance of the students' parallel vote lent it a veracity, at least for teachers, which was almost unique in my 32 years' experience in education. Teachers who chose the pared-down version could opt to take their students through the voting process and nothing else; others could make the vote the culminating activity of an intensive civics and community education program. Secondly, the project offered the chance to explore the degree of importance of teachers' and students' knowledge as it related to "satisfaction" with the project, and with the voting process itself.

It has been argued that one explanation for youth apathy is ignorance about the Canadian parliamentary and electoral system. Others assert that youth disengagement is due more to dissatisfaction with political choices, than with lack of information.[8] I wondered how knowledge fit into the pattern of disavowal of the political process for these teachers and students, and how useful the curriculum package had been for them as a source of information and prod for civic engagement. Using names of educators provided by the Student Vote 2004 team, all of whom had indicated an interest in participating in educational or media analysis of the project, an e-mail was sent to all educators involved in the Student Parallel Vote activity. Approximately 850 educators were contacted for this purpose. Of this group, 112 educators completed a first pre-parallel election questionnaire and returned it to my research assistant via email. Forty-two educators completed a second questionnaire, completed after the voting exercise and instruction, also by e-mail. From the group of 42 teachers, a representative sample of 10 was interviewed by telephone. These discussions were meant to explore in more detail the teachers' use of the curriculum package, teachers' views of students' learning as a result of the instruction received, and the degree to which teachers could demonstrate students' learning and engagement in issues relating to the federal election.

The small size of the rate of teachers' returns requires some explanation. Throughout the spring of 2004, an election call was anticipated at several junctures. Educators began signing up for the Student Vote 2004 project early in the winter on the assumption that classroom activities throughout the late winter and spring would be supportive of, and help to interpret, the campaign process underway in that period. For a variety of reasons, the election call was delayed, and as the term proceeded, classroom time was taken up with other topics and review for final examinations. Many teachers abandoned their earlier plans to make the Student Vote 2004 project a central feature of their instruction and activity program, writing to our team and those directing the project with their apologies. Hence, the group which participated in this research represents a particularly committed cadre of teachers who persisted in the instructional process despite the unfavourable timing of a late-June election. It is an open question as to how representative it is of the larger teaching force which originally expressed interest in the project, and which might well have participated only in the parallel student election, rather than in the instructional component as well. It is also probable that while some of the original group of 850 teachers did make some room for the in-class instruction, they felt that there was insufficient time for them to complete even the first questionnaire.

Recognizing the distinct limitations of the small sample of teachers surveyed and interviewed, some trends were clear:

• The vast majority of educators involving themselves in this assessment project were actively involved in classroom instruction, two-thirds of whom had the responsibility of teaching civics either as the stand-along half course in Ontario, or as part of a social studies or history course elsewhere in Canada. The majority indicated that their interest was primarily to involve students in an important democratic function, but also to add to their knowledge of the Canadian parliamentary system, which is frequently confused by students with the American system as a result of the regular television diet consumed by most adolescents.

• Almost half of the teachers participating in this assessment would be classified as novice teachers, new to the profession, and sometimes new as well to the subject content relating to the election and democratic process. These teachers expressed great interest in learning more about the area in order to further interest their students.

• The Student Vote 2004 project was used most commonly with students between grades 7 and 12 rather than in the elementary grades. Teachers in the lower grades reported that concepts related to parliamentary democracy were "hard" for students to understand. In all cases, students were exposed to the shadow election process and this was often on a school-wide basis, rather than as a classroom unit. However, of the participating educators, almost half spent a week or more on formal instruction in support of the parallel vote. More than half of the teachers in this group reported devoting 20% or more of this time to the curriculum resource.

• The time constraints imposed by the late election call meant that many teachers shelved their plans to use sizable portions of the curriculum package. Many seemed to combine elements from

separate lesson plans to address particular areas of interest by their students, or to address local issues. The time of year during which the lessons were being taught also discouraged much consideration of difficult topics, or ones which were thought to be "dry."

• Teachers relied mainly on conventional classroom products such as tests or written assignments when they attempted to assess students' learning of the concepts behind the Canadian election system. However, because of the time of year, most teachers reported that the tests and examinations were already set before the Student Vote 2004 program was implemented. Hence, very little evidence of students' learning or engagement resulted from teachers' use of these curricula.

These trends allow for some modest generalizations, both regarding this curriculum package, and others of its type. Level of satisfaction by the participating educators with the project as a whole was reportedly high; however, given the responses, it is not possible to distinguish between satisfaction with the parallel vote process and the formal curriculum. Certainly, while less than 1% of the educators admitted to using absolutely none of the curriculum package, there was a lesser commitment to the classroom resource materials simply because there were few classes left in the school year by the time the election call came. In addition, the pressure exerted by final examinations and the readying of the final marks meant that the few classes remaining were devoted to concerns other than these. Nevertheless, teachers reported satisfaction with the Instructional Resource's information (as the secondary-level teaching modules were called), making particular mention of sections which defined terms, concepts and the stages of an election, the background of the parliamentary election process, parties and the gaining of the franchise, and the constituency maps.

The degree of teacher satisfaction appears to be correlated with several factors. Teachers with older students were considerably more satisfied and believed that students had benefited more from the experience than those teaching younger students. Teachers with a strong knowledge or interest base, including those with the responsibility for teaching civics, seemed more inclined to require students to engage in research of party platforms and local candidates' positions, and produce reflective assignments for course value. Teachers noted as well that the entire program was more successful with students who had already received instruction through a history or civics course. Perhaps this knowledge on the part of students permitted these teachers to spend more classroom time in debating questions, rather than simply imparting necessary information. It also suggests that such teachers were more interested in pursuing such questions beyond the mechanics of electioneering.

Despite teachers' claims that many students enjoyed the program, especially older students closer to voting age and those who were sufficiently well informed to follow the election issues, teachers were not able to demonstrate their students' increased civic engagement as a result of this program. Most teachers reported that students submitted research-based assignments or wrote tests based on the process they had experienced, but very few could offer evidence of engagement in the process outside of school, or evidence of attitudinal change.

It seems clear from both of the Student Vote projects, and particularly from the responses of the teachers involved in the latest initiative, that many teachers welcome supportive, interesting and flexible curriculum materials as they struggle to introduce young people to the mysteries of the Canadian electoral system. It is clear, too, that curriculum support offered too late in the school year can rarely be effectively used. Despite the easy assertions that teachers can find anything they need on the Internet, a program like this one has enormous attraction for teachers, particularly conscientious ones. Teachers reported that students lack an understanding of our complex electoral system, and presumably as well, of the many issues not directly connected to the electoral process. Based on the responses to our questions, teachers also seem to feel that they themselves lack a full understanding of how the Canadian system operates, as well as the implications for our institutional and social life as a society.

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Canadian youths might be as disaffected as they are ignorant, but their teachers believe that they need the information background contained in programs such as this one. Such projects as Student Vote 2004 deserve the support of the academic and governmental communities as one important component in the construction of responsible and knowledgeable Canadian citizens. Our track record to date indicates that we need all the help we can find!

References

[1] *Maclean's Magazine.* 19 July 2004, 15-18.

[2] Ken Osborne. *Teaching for Democratic Citizenship.* Toronto: Lorimer, 1991 and Alan Sears, "Social Studies in Canada." *Trends & Issues in Canadian Social Studies.* Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press, 1987, 18-38.

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[6] *Maclean's Magazine,* op cit.

[7] See, for example, Education Commission of the States. *Every Student a Citizen: Creating the Democratic Self.* Denver: Education Commission of the States, 2000. C. Hahn. *Becoming Political: Comparative Perspectives on Citizenship Education.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998 and Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne. "Educating for Democracy." Eds. R. Hayduk and K. Mattson. *Democracy's Moment: Reforming the American Political System for the 21st Century.* Lantham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2002.

[8] One such proponent is Henry Milner, visiting fellow at the Montreal Institute for Research on Public Policy. See his *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work*



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