

Libraries and Voting 101

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Coinciding with the rise in youth culture, the age to vote in Canada dropped from 21 to 18 in 1970 (Elections Canada, 2014). Surprisingly there has not been an influx of youth voters since. Although young people make up a large portion of the voter population, their voter participation rate is low according to Youth Voter Turnout in Canada (Library of Parliament, 2016). For the 2015 Federal election, voter turnout was 68.3%. Only 57.1% of voters were ages 18–24; although this is 18.3% higher than the 2011 federal elections, it is important for organizations to engage for youth (Elections Canada, n.d.).

WHY YOUTH DO NOT VOTE

If something is important and valued, a trite explanation is never acceptable for missing out. According to research conducted by Elections Canada about why citizens did not vote in the 2015 federal election, 32.9% of non-voting youth stated they were not interested in politics as opposed to 31.8% all non-voters; the explanation everyday life was “too busy” was 5% higher for youth than all non-voters (Elections Canada, 2016). The results align with Phillip Haid’s (2003) explanation for why youth

may not vote: a lack of political and civic knowledge, and a lack of trust and confidence in the government. Youth may also be over-informed by the media with cynical information.



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THE RELEVANCE OF VOTING FOR YA SERVICES IN LIBRARIES

Public libraries strive to provide information access. Guiding public librarianship is the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. Their Statement on Intellectual Freedom declares, “Libraries contribute to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom and help to safeguard basic democratic values and universal civil rights” (IFLA, 2015). Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, n.d.), states, “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.” Voting is integral to a democratic society. “Research has shown that those who choose to vote when they are young, tend to continue to do so in future as the opportunities arise” (Elections Nova Scotia, 2018, p.13). Libraries can provide information to young people to ensure their lifelong participation in a democratic society.

HOW LIBRARIES CAN SUPPORT DEMOCRACY

Enhance knowledge

If voting is valued by an individual, they will make every effort to take part in the act. Educating youth about their civic responsibilities and rights not only raises their attention to voting but also sparks their interests and equips them with knowledge and builds their confidence. However, some schools fail to achieve this goal because they lack resources such as relevant learning materials or teaching staff. As a resource repository, libraries can collaborate with schools to equip youth with the knowledge of voting and procedures related to elections and help them be aware of their voting rights.

Libraries can also partner with non-partisan organizations to present workshops, lectures or activities which spark open discussions and answer related questions about voting and elections. Recruiting youth volunteers to help facilitate these educational activities will get

youth more involved because they are more inclined to listen to their peers than adult authorities. Social media can also be used as a tool to attract the attention of youth. It can also enhance their knowledge by offering how-tos in infographic, Snapchat or video formats.

Increase motivation

Motivation is driven by interest. “If we want kids to vote, to be engaged, we need to address them directly, hear their concerns, give them a reason to be



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engaged,” says Stephen Young, founder of Ontario’s Civics Education Network. “So focus, teach and work locally. Transit, schools, the city, garbage, policing. These are all local issues of deep interest to kids” (as cited in Beach, 2015). If as a society we want youth to be engaged, politics need to address the interest of youth to keep them engage.

According to a study conducted by CIRCLE (The Center of Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) (n.d.), youth become more motivated to vote when organizations or campaigns reach out to them and provide voting guidance. For instance, Elections Nova Scotia created content targeting youth ages 16-18, and approached those who turned 18 since the past election to ensure they made the necessary steps to get on the voting registration list. 20% of the letter recipients responded, and 70% of those respondents voted in the 2017 Provincial election (Elections Nova Scotia, 2018). Library staff are encouraged to have one-on-one discussions with kids about voting and inspire kids to share opinions and have respectful debates about their disagreements.

Provide Resources

Social media and the internet may make communication easier, but they also may saturate youth with information overload. Youth are sometimes unsure about the reliability of resources they find online. Libraries can provide support in this by offering information and resources. The following resources will help youth strengthen their knowledge around elections and voting procedures:

- ***Elections Canada (elections.ca)***: This online resource provides information on how to register to vote, identifies federal ridings and their election candidates, and helps individuals locate their polling stations.
- ***Student Vote (studentvote.ca)***: Student Vote offers students the opportunity to take part in a parallel election and vote for real candidates during an election period.
- ***NewsWise (newswise.ca)***: NewsWise is a news literacy program. It provides youth with learning modules to enhance their understanding of healthy democracy, as well as tools to find and filter information on the Internet.
- ***Vote Compass (votecompass.com)***: Youth love surveys! Vote Compass provides users with short questionnaires and identifies which political parties align with their survey responses.
- ***Elections Nova Scotia (electionsnovascotia.ca)***: Elections Nova Scotia is a one stop resource for voting in Nova Scotia.
- ***City Hall School***: Calgary and Edmond students in grade 3 to 12 can learn about municipal issues through the education program *City Hall School*.

Ideas for programming within libraries

- Provide a space for safe discourse.
- Participate in Democracy Week (<http://democracy-democratie.ca/>)
- The United Nations has declared September 15 as the International Day of Democracy. Celebrate this annual event by creating a display or hosting an event.
- Having the right ID for a library card can be tough for some youth—imagine how challenging it can be for some these individuals to get on a voting registration list! Invite an election agency into your branch to provide information about how to register to vote.
- Invite politicians to library programs, not to promote their own ideologies or their parties but to talk about the experience of being in politics
- Make voting a non-anomaly. Invite you to vote for their favourite book or movie, snack for your next program, and more. When it comes time to cast a ballot in a real election, voting will be “no big deal”.
- Jobs are available in facilitating the voting process for municipal, provincial and federal elections. Provide youth with information about where to find these jobs. These opportunities offer a great way for youth to earn extra cash, gain new skills, and experience voting and democracy in action.
- Create book and movie displays that highlight voting.
- Be the change. Of all our suggestions this may be the most individual choice; however, we can't help but think of Halifax City Councillor Lindell Smith who is on leave from the Halifax North Public Library. During the lead up to 2016 Municipal elections he realized he could be a voice for his community, took the risk and successfully ran for the position.

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