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18-year-olds too Immature to Vote, Studies Suggest



In the spring of 2004, a million Canadians received a letter in the mail reminding them to vote in the upcoming summer election. All had turned 18 since 2000, when Jean Chrétien won his third consecutive majority, and all had earned the right to cast a ballot. Few did. Despite the mass-mailed exhortations by Canada's chief electoral officer, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, just 38.7 per cent of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 21 voted, adding to what Kingsley called a "disturbing" trend among young people. "The decline in turnout at federal elections since 1988 is largely confined to those Canadians born after 1970," he said in a speech.

Young people don't vote, a problem that's now discussed so much that our eyes can be forgiven for glazing over - like a teenager's in a civics class - whenever it's raised. In Canada, the U.S., the U.K. and elsewhere, there are high-profile campaigns to try and lower the voting age to 16 in the hope it will encourage young people to take part in the democratic process.

But there's a growing body of evidence to suggest that's a wrong-headed approach. Scientific, sociological and demographic evidence indicates that young people are, in essence, too immature and too detached from functioning society to be entrusted with the vote. What if the move to lower the age from 21 to 18 was wrong in the first place and ought to be reversed?

The idea of raising the age of suffrage isn't that far-fetched. It was only in 1970, after all, that the federal government hit upon 18 as a good age to start kids voting. But kids today aren't what they were in 1970 - not the stakeholders in the political process, nor the models of civic engagement their boomer parents once aspired to be. Many today still live at home, more remain in school longer, and more move willy-nilly from job to job before settling on a career. In 1971, 22 per cent of Canadians between 15 and 19 held full-time jobs, compared with just 13 per cent in 2001, according to Statistics Canada. "The traditional adulthood of duty and self-sacrifice is becoming more and more a thing of the past," James Côté, a sociologist at the University of Western Ontario, explains. In 1970, adolescence ended abruptly after the age of 19; now it languishes well into one's 20s or 30s.

Putting adulthood off for so long means 18-year-olds have more in common with children than with the 30-year-olds with whom they share the vote. In the U.S., "18-year-olds are pretty incompetent," said Michael Barone, author of *Hard America, Soft America*. "You watch them at McDonald's and they don't know what to do. But American 30-year-olds are the most competent 30-year-olds in the world." In his book, Barone argues that young people under the age of 18 now live in what he calls "soft America," where they remain sheltered from the rigours of competition and accountability. After 18, at university, community colleges or in the private sector, they move into "hard America" and "develop the abilities of productivity, competence and creativity far above what most people at 18 thought they were capable of."

That shift in the social fabric - extending the security blanket of childhood into the mid-20s and beyond - is mirrored by new scientific research into the brain's development. Medical science is now awash in studies showing how teenage brains are underdeveloped, particularly in areas dealing with judgement and impulse control. For example, Deborah Yurgelun-Todd, a research scientist at Harvard Medical School, has found young people often have difficulty interpreting complex cues from the world around them. "Just because teens are physically mature, they may not appreciate the consequences or weigh information the same way as adults do," she told reporters in 2004. "Good judgement is learned, but you can't learn it if you don't have the necessary hardware."

Bolstering that opinion is a recent study by the U.S. National Institutes of Health, which found that brain functions controlling judgement and risk assessment - the human brain's so-called

"executive branch" - aren't fully mature until age 25. Ruben Gur, a professor of PSYCHOLOGY and director of the Brain Behavior Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania, has found that the parts of the brain most important to critical thinking are the last to develop. Neurological science, Gur has said, argues for raising the age of legal majority to 22 or 23. Not surprisingly, much of this research has been used to advance arguments in some U.S. states that the age of sexual consent, as well as the legal age for smoking, drinking and driving a car should be raised. In Ontario and Michigan, efforts are being made to bring the age of mandatory school attendance to 18.

Put kids with half-baked brains in a North America that's learned to coddle its young and you get a group of voters who can't manage to scratch an X on a ballot. Since it dropped the voting age in 1970, Canada has watched its turnout rate drop. The move 35 years ago came amid a flurry of similar changes around the world driven largely by the politically active baby-boom generation. "At the time, Trudeau argued that this was to assuage the intergenerational conflict and the upsurge of youth activism," said Dennis Pilon, a Trent University political scientist. "He felt this was a move that would incorporate young people into the political system at a time they were challenging it and raising questions." Then-U.S. President Richard Nixon was a leading supporter of the change south of the border and gushed about the benefits of extending the FRANCHISE to 11 million new voters - many of them barely out of high school. "You will infuse into this nation some idealism, some courage, some stamina, some high moral purpose," Nixon said.

How wrong they were: though voter-turnout rates among Canadians of all ages had been in slow but steady decline for decades, they dropped steeply after 1988 - the same year those born in 1970 reached 18 and earned the right to vote. The U.S., which lowered its voting age from 21 to 18 a year after Canada with the passage of the 26th Amendment, has witnessed a similar trend. Indeed, lowering the voting age didn't have the effect many expected - or hoped for. Young people today have essentially tuned out. According to one Elections Canada survey of Canadian youths immediately after the 2000 federal election, one in five could not name Jean Chrétien as leader of the Liberal Party and half could not identify former Prime Minister Joe Clark as leader of the Progressive Conservatives.

Notwithstanding Nixon's promise that 18-year-olds would deliver idealism, courage and stamina, North Americans have seen cynicism and apathy. The young have never swayed an election in Canada or the U.S., nor have political parties found it profitable to court them, preferring older voters who are more consistent and whose issues now dominate elections. What's developed is an almost unbreakable vicious cycle, argues Lawrence LeDuc, a University of Toronto political scientist who's done numerous studies on voting patterns. The young are the driving force behind the disturbing decline in voter turnout rates in the past 10 to 15 years. While those over 60 still vote at more or less the same rate as always (upwards of 80 per cent), only 25 per cent of young people cast ballots. "Each new younger group that comes in seems to vote at lower rates and over time it tends to pull the total turnout down," said LeDuc.

The pattern has distorted our politics: "It's why we have so many aging white-male politicians going around talking about health care and why it's hard to raise issues that are relevant to younger people," said LeDuc. If there's nothing on the political menu appetizing to those between 18 and 21, there's even less incentive for them to vote. And if youth don't vote, there's no incentive for politicians to cater to issues of concern to them.

The current campaign hasn't changed this status quo. "This election, to be honest, if I could ignore it, I would," said Ilona Dougherty, the 25-year-old founder of Apathy is Boring, a non-profit group aimed at trying to bring young people back to the democratic process. Dougherty, who is not an advocate of changing the voting age, agrees politicians have failed to connect with young people. "I don't think we should just be encouraging youth with 'rah-rah, go vote, it's your civic duty.' We really need to look at fundamental systemic reasons why young people are not voting."

One hypothesis put forth, said Pilon, the Trent University political scientist, is that giving the vote to 18-year-olds introduces them to the process "when they are least anchored," either shuttling between home and university or caught in the transition between high school and the rest of their lives. "When the voting age was dropped to 18, you got a whole generation of people who didn't establish a very good relationship with the political system." Many, confronted with an election and feeling unprepared, ended up not voting at all. The precedent made it all the more likely they would not cast a ballot in the election after that, and the election after that - and so on.

In response, Elections Canada has sunk piles of money into encouraging the young to vote.

Just as he did in the last election, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, the chief electoral officer, has sent 275,000 letters of encouragement to Canadians who have since turned 18. In addition to a television commercial with a rap-music theme, Elections Canada is advertising in movie theatres to capture the interest of young people. There will be 347 more polls on university campuses or near student ghettos to make voting easier. There's little evidence, however, that such programs work. "They'd like some of us academics to tell them that the things they are doing are going to resolve the problem - and we don't think so," said LeDuc. "The demographic drivers are just too strong."

Some believe the answer lies in reducing the voting age even further. Mark Holland, the incumbent Liberal MP for Ajax-Pickering, introduced a private member's bill to reduce the age of suffrage to 16; the new voters would register in high school, thereby habituating them to the process. (The bill died over the summer.) Young people, Holland said, "don't know how to get on the voter's list, they don't know how much information they need to vote - they never really got that practical element." He added: "They're an incredibly hard group to find." While on the campaign trail, Holland seeks them out, "going to the mall, going to the local drinking establishments." While they're still in school, "We know where they are, we know how to register them," he said. "What do we have to lose in this? What's the worst thing that could happen?"

According to some - a lot. "Reducing the voting age to 16 would be a dreadful mistake," said David Denver, a professor of politics at Lancaster University, in Britain, where a well-developed movement to lower the voting age also exists. "What is the political memory of a 16-year-old?" said Denver, who has written several articles and studies opposing the idea. "My university students can't remember Mrs. Thatcher, they can't really remember anything before Blair," he said. "If you let a 16-year-old vote, they wouldn't even remember an entire government term. They simply have no basis on which to make any kind of judgement." Young people have never been interested in voting, he argued: "What are young people interested in? Sex, drink, clubs - enjoying themselves."

Then Denver goes a step further. "One might argue that if you were to put the voting age back up again - to 21 - you'd make the vote more valuable," he said. "People might realize that the vote isn't just something cheap, to be dished out to kids. People might take it more seriously." Voter turnout, he added, is declining in part because most mainstream parties have crowded into the centre of the political spectrum. All of them, like carnival barkers jostling for rubes, yell out much the same pitch, one honed through years of appealing to older voters.

Were Canada to raise the voting age to 21, the young would not be disenfranchised but rather would be given back their teeth. Older voters could keep their dentures and their political concerns about hospital waiting times and the latest bean-counting scandal - all lost on the young. Political parties, meanwhile, would be forced to contend with something new: a sector of the population that has not learned how not to vote from the tender age of 18 - but who can cast a ballot that means something.

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