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Web, text messaging target youth vote

Marathon focuses on federal election Go Vote! is message from coalition

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SURYA BHATTACHARYA

LIFE WRITER

On Jan. 16, a week before election day, a dozen youth organizations from across the country will stage a 16-hour "awareness" marathon to encourage young people to get out and vote.

"With past campaigns, various (political) parties get excited about the youth vote earlier on in the campaign," says Robert Barnard, of D-Code, an organization that works with youth engagement and policy, "but this time there is focused effort towards the end of the campaign, a time that is really critical."

After researching the voting patterns of 18- to 29-year-olds, Barnard realized that by the time elections come around, young people, especially college and university students, are often distracted by school, thanks to exams and "other things."

So the organizations are launching a series of non-partisan events for 16 hours on Jan. 16 in an effort to get out the vote. Events will include celebrity public service announcements, televised interviews with federal political leaders, conducted by young journalists who will compile questions from young voters, and online and text messages from political parties to young voters.

TXT ME 2 UR LEADER ;) is a text messaging campaign set up by the Democracy Project, one of the organizations banding together as Go Vote!

From <http://www.govote.ca>, participants can link on to the Democracy

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Project site and use a six-digit code to sign up with political parties for updates and breaking news. Parties can also use the link to conduct their own polls of young voters.

"Text messages are limited to 136 characters so it's going to be fun to see political parties try to condense their messages and abbreviate in text language," says Angela-Claire Coutts of the Democracy Project.

On Jan. 16, messages sent to the Liberal, Conservative, NDP and the Green parties will receive personal responses, Coutts promises.

"They'll have to get straight to the point," she says.

Transcripts of exchanges by leaders in text message form will also be available.

Other organizations in the coalition — such as the Vancouver-based Get Your Vote On and Apathy Is Boring, of Montreal — are working to get young people to identify issues that affect them, help them find their ridings and candidates, register to vote, and know where to go to cast a ballot. Then they want youth to get out and vote.

It's a complex task. Canada's 1.5 million college and university students make up a significant transient population. They may live in one province and vote in another, and regulating them, Barnard says, is one of the biggest challenges that Elections Canada faces.

Barnard says the number 16 has another purpose other than rallying youth a week before the Jan. 23 election. Organizers also want to continue the debate on lowering the voting age to 16.

"If they can have a drive, have consensual sex and get a job, why can't they vote?"

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