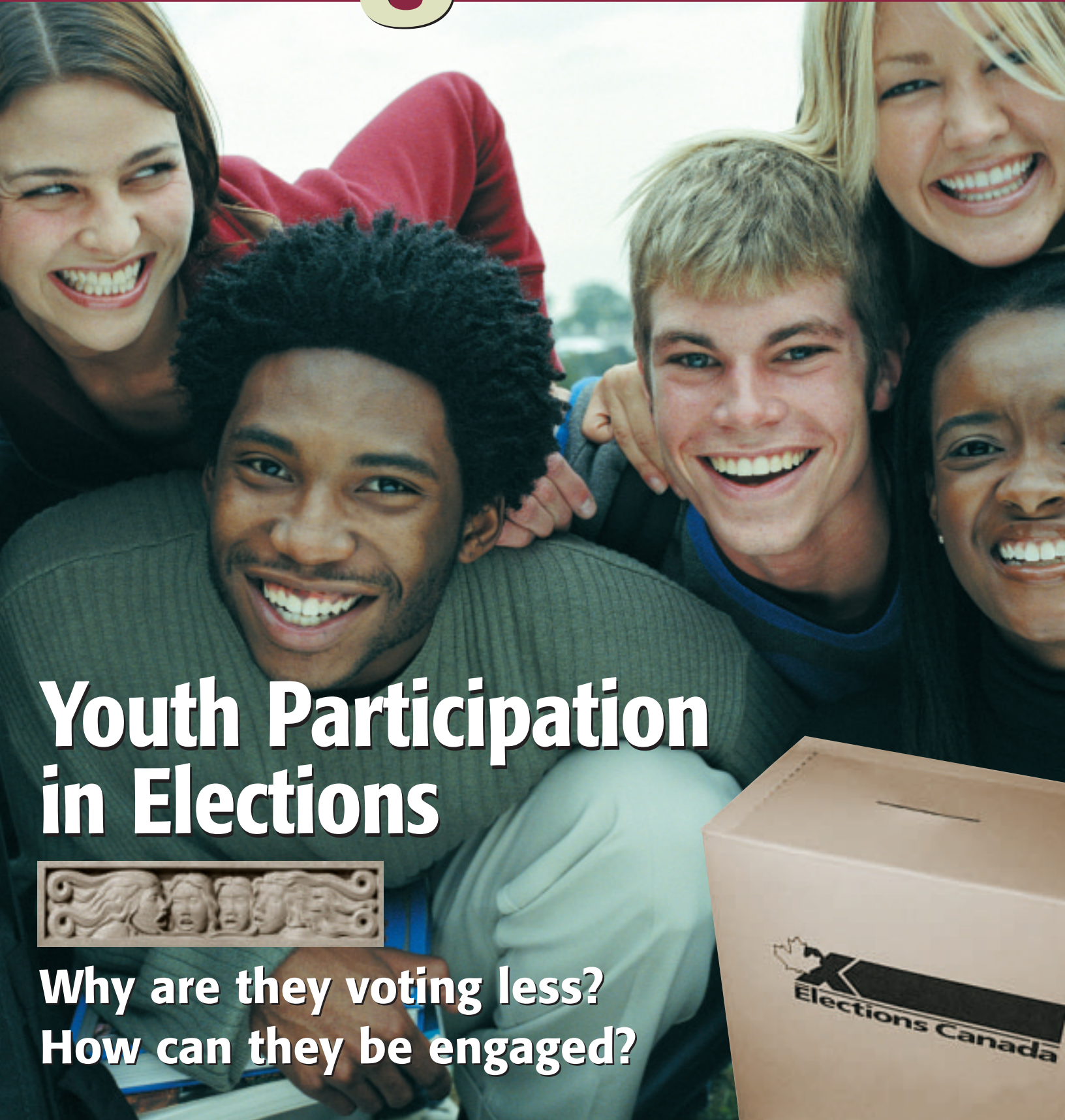


# ELECTORAL Insight



## Youth Participation in Elections



Why are they voting less?  
How can they be engaged?





# How Old Is Old Enough to Vote?

## *Youth Participation in Society*

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According to a reductionist definition, a democratic society is a society that has its citizens participate in major collective decisions by granting the right to vote. Based on this perspective, young electors, who are supposed to be less likely to show up at the polling station, have regularly been the subject of a whole range of questions. We are interested here in a specific aspect of the general problem: allowing 16-year-olds to vote.

For over a decade, the subject has surfaced and resurfaced, without, however, leading to any change in the rules. In 1990, the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Lortie Commission) studied the question and commissioned specific research.<sup>1</sup> At the final stage of writing their report, the members of the Commission decided against proposing that the voting age be lowered. In the years that followed, the question was raised again, occasionally sustaining somewhat limited debate.<sup>2</sup> Just recently, Quebec's Estates General on the Reform of Democratic Institutions considered the idea of lowering the voting age, but dismissed it: 58 percent of the participants opposed it. However, during its most recent policy conference, in March 2003, the Parti Québécois included in its program a referendum on the advisability of giving the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds.

This is not, of course, a burning issue; but it is not out of the realm of possibility either. Given the circumstances, it is worth putting this subject in perspective by recalling some of the milestones that have marked the debates and the changes made to the age at which we are entitled to

exercise our civil rights by voting. After noting that the decisions are not made on the basis of absolute and purely rational criteria, we bring into the discussion those most immediately concerned, young people between 16 and 18. We do so using the results of two surveys, conducted in 1990 and 1998.<sup>3</sup> Although they cannot be used to determine definitive positions, the observations made shed some light and provide at least some food for thought.

### **Age, a socio-historical construct**

Age is a socio-historical construct, the variants of which are a function of the times and social contexts. The changes in the voting age illustrate this well.

In Canada, electoral rights have evolved considerably since the establishment of the first modern electoral system.<sup>4</sup> The progress seems less obvious in the case of the threshold for the age of majority: set at 21 at the time of Confederation, it has been changed only once at the federal level, in 1970.<sup>5</sup> The disappearance of the poll tax, the abolition of discrimination based on sex or racial origin and the lowering of the age of majority all reflect a desire to expand the recognition of citizen authority.

Have the changes been rational? Were they, for example, brought about by some positive change in civil or criminal law producing a review of the right to vote? To take one case, a study of the French parliamentary debates<sup>6</sup> shows both that the same arguments recur and that they can easily be



used by either side, to support or oppose lowering the voting age. In the end, the historical analysis reveals that the observed changes result primarily from *political will*, usually within Parliament, and with no real public debate.

This same ambivalence is found today in newspaper articles, on Internet sites on democracy, and in Parliament.<sup>7</sup> For some, the enthusiasm and zeal of the “young” would justify lowering the voting age to the benefit of society as a whole; others, on the contrary, associate

the zeal of youth with excessive high spirits and an inexperience that calls for the greatest caution. The young are simply “not ready” to vote! The reversibility of the arguments tends to show the strictly *political* – although not *partisan*<sup>8</sup> – nature of the decisions about lowering the voting age. Politics may not be typically irrational, but it implies choices sometimes made more or less independently of public opinion.

There are, in fact, objective reasons for lowering the voting age today. Here is what those most concerned think.

### “Am I ready to vote?”

Although the question did not take quite this form, this was, for all practical purposes, what the students of two Quebec cities surveyed in 1990 and 1998 (see Methodological Note) had to ask themselves. Their answers follow, cross-referenced to certain factors that illuminate them from a variety of angles. We will comment on them briefly, before concluding with some general thoughts on the political participation of young people.

Table 1 shows that, in both 1990 and 1998, a majority of the students surveyed were against giving the vote to 16-year-olds. Reflecting the received wisdom that young women are less interested in politics, the female students were more categorically against the idea than their male counterparts, with the gap even growing from 1990 to 1998. In fact, the idea gained a favourable majority among the boys (going from 47.0 percent to 51.9 percent), while the opposition among the girls gained a few points (from 57.3 percent to 59.3 percent). It can also be seen that opposition to the idea increases with age (Table 2),

**Table 1: Opinions on the Right to Vote at 16 Years of Age (percentages)<sup>1</sup>**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey	1998 survey
Agree	44.0	45.5
Disagree	53.6	54.5
N	832	847

<sup>1</sup> The total for the 1990 survey does not equal 100%, because 2.4% of the subjects did not answer this question. In all the other tables, however, the distributions are based on the number of answers actually recorded. Only the results of those respondents who said they agreed with the question or statement are reported there.

**Table 2: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Level of Education (percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	Secondary IV	Secondary V	Secondary IV	Secondary V
Agree	49.7	40.9	47.3	43.4
N	384	428	427	410

**Table 3: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Degree of Interest in Politics (percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	A lot/Somewhat	Little/Not at all	A lot/Somewhat	Little/Not at all
Agree	46.5	43.9	51.3	41.5
N	355	456	343	491

**Table 4: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Perceived Importance of Voting (percentages)<sup>1</sup>**

Right to vote at 16	You have to vote to make politics conform to your ideas	
	Agree completely/Somewhat	Disagree completely/Somewhat
Agree	45.5	41.5
N	726	82

<sup>1</sup> This question was asked only in 1990.

although the gap seems to narrow over time: while 2.4 percent fewer Secondary IV students supported the idea in 1998, 2.5 percent more Secondary V students did. Of

relatively limited political significance, it is reasonable to think that these initial results become more meaningful when the opinions are cross-referenced with other factors.

It is logical to think that a greater interest in politics or a sense that one is more affected by government decisions would make one more receptive to the proposal to give 16-year-olds the vote. And indeed, although a majority still opposed the suggestion, those who were very or somewhat interested in politics were less opposed than those who were slightly or not at all interested (Table 3). Between 1990 and 1998, however, the difference increased; those most interested agreed with the idea by a slight majority, while those least interested were yet a bit more opposed. The partisans and opponents of the vote for 16-year-olds could also be classified depending on whether they felt affected (very often or often) or not (not very often or never) by government decisions.

Another aspect of the resistance to the vote for 16-year-olds is that there is a majority opposed, even among those who feel that voting is important to “make politics conform to your ideas” (Table 4). In reality, the most decisive factor in determining support for or opposition to lowering the voting age is the degree of attachment to a political party, although this effect became less pronounced between 1990 and 1998 (Table 5). The latter observation is no doubt related to other data reported in Table 11: confidence in various “institutions,” particularly the Church and political parties, diminished somewhat between 1990 and 1998; in contrast, it is interesting to note that confidence in elected officials increased by 2.7 percent.

Openness to the idea of 16-year-olds voting also varies with one’s idea of what makes a “good citizen.” Depending on whether you think ideal citizens are people who “mind their own business without making a fuss,” or people who “are prepared to get involved and

**Table 5: Right to Vote at 16  
Opinions by Partisan Affinity  
(percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	Close to a party	Not close to a party	Close to a party	Not close to a party
Agree	56.3	41.1	52.5	42.5
N	213	599	238	598

**Table 6: Right to Vote at 16  
Opinions by Conception of a Good Citizen  
(percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	Good citizens...		Good citizens...	
	mind their own business	demonstrate for their ideas	mind their own business	demonstrate for their ideas
Agree	38.3	47.4	35.4	47.7
N	214	597	161	673

**Table 7: Right to Vote at 16  
Opinions by the Relation Between Rights and Duties of a Good Citizen  
(percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	Good citizens...		Good citizens...	
	assert their rights	fulfill their duties	assert their rights	fulfill their duties
Agree	46.8	41.8	47.4	39.0
N	547	263	620	210

**Table 8: Right to Vote at 16  
Opinions by Attitude to the Law  
(percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	A good citizen...		A good citizen...	
	respects the law	need not respect an unjust law	respects the law	need not respect an unjust law
Agree	43.0	53.4	38.9	52.0
N	646	163	422	415

demonstrate to defend their ideas,” you have a different attitude to lowering the voting age (Table 6). The same trends are evident when the opinions are linked to the contrast between citizens as people who feel it is more important to assert their rights, or people who feel it is more important to fulfill their duties (Table 7). Finally, the partisans of order, who want a good citizen to “respect the law under any circumstances,” are proportionally more

resistant to giving 16-year-olds the vote; this particular position is particularly conspicuous since there is majority support for the idea among those who feel that a good citizen need not obey the law when it seems unjust (Table 8).

In the same vein, it would seem only logical that a significant proportion of those in favour of the general status quo (“Our society does not need major changes”) would oppose giving the

vote to 16-year-olds (Table 9). It is more surprising that a majority, although a smaller majority, of the much larger group declaring itself in favour of change still oppose the idea.

In closing, there are two paradoxical results that we cannot leave unremarked. In 1990, participation in at least one association reduced the opposition to lowering the voting age (Table 10). What is surprising is that, in 1998, opposition was highest among those who do participate. Another surprise: proportionately more, and in some cases a majority, of those people with less confidence in a series of “institutions” (school, church, bureaucracy, politicians and media) accept the idea of 16-year-olds voting. One notable exception is the case of political parties in the 1990 survey (Table 11).

## Conclusion

To sum up, the results presented will undoubtedly feed the opposition to giving 16-year-olds the vote. Thus, it is worth noting that even a majority of those 16 to 18 do not want the vote for those under 18. It should also be noted that there is a connection between political involvement, certain conceptions of citizenship, and openness to such an idea.

**Table 9: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Attitude to Change (percentages)<sup>1</sup>**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	Our society does not need major changes		Our society does not need major changes	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree completely/ Somewhat	Disagree somewhat/ Completely
Agree	34.3	46.3	40.2	46.8
N	108	697	169	666

<sup>1</sup> The choice of responses is different in 1990 (agree and disagree) and 1998 (agree completely/ somewhat and disagree somewhat/completely).

**Table 10: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Participation in an Association (percentages)**

Right to vote at 16	1990 survey		1998 survey	
	Not involved in any	Involved in at least one	Not involved in any	Involved in at least one
Agree	40.5	47.8	47.7	44.4
N	304	508	258	579

**Table 11: Right to Vote at 16 Opinions by Amount of Confidence in... (percentages)<sup>1</sup>**

Survey	Right to vote at 16	School		Church		Bureaucracy		Media		Politicians		Parties	
		Some	Not much	Some	Not much	Some	Not much	Some	Not much	Some	Not much	Some	Not much
1990	Agree	41.6	61.6	41.8	49.7	42.4	50.6	44.9	45.2	41.7	47.2	45.9	44.6
	N	671	138	488	320	536	269	483	325	345	458	283	522
1998	Agree	41.2	60.1	37.8	50.7	41.6	48.8	44.9	45.8	44.4	46.0	41.0	53.6
	N	638	193	341	491	387	443	356	476	243	589	144	690

<sup>1</sup> The options available to the respondents were some confidence or not much confidence.

On that basis, it would seem appropriate to concentrate on giving young people better preparation for exercising their civil rights, rather than on whether to give them the right to vote at 16 or 18. This concern is all the more pressing given that, for some time now, there seems to have been a disenchantment

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with politics. That being said, the issue should not be reduced simply to the observed drop in voter turnout in the past 12 to 15 years. This rather misleading reading would result in large part from a narrow conception of citizen involvement, which is no longer simply a question of voting.

Photo: Wayne Brown



Every year, Chief Electoral Officer Jean-Pierre Kingsley meets with students attending the Forum for Young Canadians, in Ottawa, to talk to them about the electoral process.

However, while citizen involvement is not restricted to elections, these remain crucial to the democratic conduct of civic affairs. Democracy is, of course, a hands-on affair, but there is obviously no harm in supporting it with philosophical principles and “theoretical” knowledge, with an eye to producing better citizens for tomorrow. ✕

### Methodological Note

In May and June 1990, 832 students were surveyed in seven schools in the cities of Québec and Lévis. The sample was composed almost equally of boys and girls (52 percent and 48 percent), almost all between 16 and 18 (96 percent). A little less than a third (31 percent) of the respondents had been educated exclusively or primarily in private schools.

In 1998, at the same point in the school year as in 1990, the same schools took part in the survey – with the exception of one private school, which was replaced by another private school. The survey was given to 847 students and, again, slightly more were boys than girls (53 percent and 47 percent), most between the ages of 16 and 18 (97 percent). Compared to the sample for 1990, the new sample had slightly fewer students from private schools (28 percent).

The composition of the sample is not random; the schools were chosen to reflect the social and cultural diversity of the region being studied. The survey was given during class time (generally a civics or history/geography class) and sometimes with the teacher present, which produced a very high response rate.

The surveys were funded by various sources, including in particular the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Lortie Commission) for the 1990 survey, and the Fonds Gérard-Dion of the Université Laval for the 1998 survey.

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## NOTES

1. See Kathy Megyery, ed., *Youth in Canadian Politics: Participation and Involvement*, Research Studies of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, Vol. 8 (Supply and Services Canada, Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991).
2. For example, see Raymond Hudon, "Le droit de vote à 16 ans. Une décision purement politique," *Le Soleil* (May 31, 1996) or "Evaluating the Pros and Cons. Are 16-Year-Olds Ready to Vote?" *Elections Today* Vol. 6, No. 3 (Fall 1996).
3. See the methodological note.
4. See J. Patrick Boyer, *Political Rights: The Legal Framework of Elections in Canada* (Toronto: Butterworths, 1981), pp. 129–137.
5. The right to vote at 18 was given in 1963 in Quebec and in 1971 in Ontario. The *Military Voters Act, 1917*, which set out the conditions for Canadian military personnel to vote during a conflict, gave all soldiers on active service the right to vote ([http://www.archives.ca/05/0518/05180204/051802040102\\_e.html](http://www.archives.ca/05/0518/05180204/051802040102_e.html)). However, in 1993, Bill C-114 withdrew this right from soldiers under the age of 18.
6. Before the adoption of the current age of majority of 18 in 1974, no less than a dozen constitutions or acts changed the age of majority between 1791 and 1875, some lowering it and some raising it.
7. Peter Adams, Liberal Member of Parliament for Peterborough, Ontario, recently presented a private member's bill proposing that the voting age be lowered to 16 (Roy MacGregor, "At 16, teens are considered mature enough to drive, marry and work – so why not vote?" *The Globe and Mail*, March 4, 2003).
8. Although as Patrick Boyer (*Political Rights*, p. 132) notes, such intentions can manifest themselves. Thus, giving the right to vote to new categories of electors in 1917, in the middle of a war, was essentially an effort to get the Conservative government of the day re-elected. On the other hand, withdrawing the right to vote from soldiers under the age of 18 was primarily an effort to standardize the electoral rights of all citizens.