

Youth Enfranchisement: A Case For A More Democratic Canada

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Abstract

Despite granting its citizens universal suffrage, Canada continues to experience declining numbers in voter turnout (Library of Parliament 2010, 1-4). As fewer Canadians choose to participate in the electoral process, the very foundations of liberal democracy come into question as the legitimacy of a government elected by a dwindling number of supporters becomes increasingly unclear. While the topic of electoral reform is dominated by the debate over proportional representation versus the first-past-the-post system, this paper instead focuses on the legal voting age. I contend that lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 in Canada will create a more equitable, fair, and inclusive electoral system, thus strengthening fundamental democratic values. In this essay, I will discuss how the current system is unfairly excluding youth from participating in decisions that affect their future, why the argument for maintaining the current age is flawed, and how a lower voting age would increase political interest and create a more engaged electorate.

Introduction

A cornerstone of liberal democracy in Canada is the right to fair and free elections. Despite granting its citizens universal suffrage, Canada continues to experience declining numbers in voter turnout (Library of Parliament 2010, 1-4). As fewer Canadians choose to participate in the electoral process, the very foundations of liberal democracy come into question as the legitimacy of a government elected by a dwindling number of supporters becomes increasingly unclear. As academics, politicians, and government search for the antidote to voter apathy, many look to electoral reform. In Canada, the topic of electoral reform is dominated by the debate over proportional representation versus the first-past-the-post system. While this is a worthy debate, I will instead focus on a much less discussed issue: the legal voting age. As democracies around the world look for new ways to reinvigorate their electorate, countries like Austria and Germany have lowered their voting age to 16 in an attempt to catalyze political interest (Peto 2018, 278). I contend that lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 in Canada will create a more equitable, fair, and inclusive electoral system, thus strengthening fundamental democratic values. In this essay, I will discuss how the current system is unfairly excluding youth from participating in decisions that affect their future, why the argument for maintaining the current age is flawed, and how a lower voting age would increase political interest and create a more engaged electorate.

Many of the most pressing issues that our nation faces are inherently intergenerational—that is, the decisions made today will be most felt by younger generations. I will examine the case study of climate change to illustrate the complexity of intergenerational issues, as it will disproportionately affect young Canadians. While there have been attempts by government to mitigate climate change, the drastic transformations required are often “rejected on the grounds that they cost too much, and that those who pay for them will not reap any of the benefits” (Wolf 2009, 350). On the other hand, many youth argue that not taking immediate and bold action is unjust and is unfairly shifting the burden onto future generations (351).

So when should climate action happen and who should bear the cost? The case of Greta Thunberg illustrates the need for a more nuanced look at this question. Frustrated by her government's inaction against climate change, 16-year-old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg began skipping school on Friday afternoons to hold a protest at the Swedish parliament. Thunberg's one-person strike has since snowballed into an international movement with thousands of students across the world joining in weekly strikes to demand immediate climate action. Thunberg's message is clear: the current generation of decision-makers is disproportionately shifting the burden of climate change onto future generations (Thunberg 2019, 175). Furthermore, the current political system is unfairly excluding youth from having an equal say in the outcome of their future. By preventing youth from voting, the current electoral system is preventing an entire generation from participating in decisions that will have long-lasting effects on their futures. Without a voice in the political system, youth like Thunberg instead take to the streets, skipping school every Friday to urge world leaders to heed the message of a generation that is being disenfranchised by the current political system. Reducing the voting age from 18 to 16 will allow youth to have a fair say in the outcome of their future and ensure a more democratic and equitable electoral system.

The movement ignited by Thunberg also counters the common assumption that teenagers lack the knowledge and maturity required to make an informed political decision (Peto 2018, 278). This assumption is widespread. For example, Chan and Clayton argue that since "16- and 17-year olds have less political knowledge than their elders, and because knowledge is normatively relevant for political maturity, . . . 16- and 17-year-olds are too politically immature to vote" (280). While many dismiss the validity of Thunberg's views because of her age, anyone who has attended a Fridays For Future rally can attest to the astounding competency by which the teenagers in attendance speak about science, the environment, and the importance of fairness and justice in our society. I assert that while having a base level of knowledge is important, we are on tenuous ground when we deny teens the right to vote by arguing that they are not politically mature.

While there are many different definitions of political maturity, Chan and Clayton define it as "propositional knowledge of the political system, of what voting means, and how voting works, as well as social scientific knowledge and knowledge of current affairs" (Peto 2018, 280). If knowledge of politics is the criteria by which we allow citizens to vote, then it stands that precocious teens should be granted suffrage. If teenagers are required to have a certain level of political fluency to vote, then shouldn't adults have to meet the same requirements? Surely, adults who fail to meet the requirements should have their voting rights revoked on the grounds that they are not politically mature. While this line of argument is purely conjecture, it illustrates an important point: denying teens the right to vote based on grounds of political maturity is inherently flawed and undemocratic. Chan and Clayton's failure to take into account that using knowledge as a means to judge political maturity creates an inequitable, two-tier voting system that would result in a collapse of democratic values. While I don't claim to have the answer to this issue, I believe that granting Canadians the right to vote based on knowledge and maturity is unconstitutional.

Another common view espoused by proponents of the status quo is that teenagers are apathetic about politics and therefore, don't have any interest in voting (Zeglovits and Zandonella 2013, 1084). To this, Zeglovits and Zandonella ask the question: "why would teens be interested in a subject that they're not allowed to participate in, especially one that doesn't reflect their interests or concerns?" (1084) I believe that granting teens the right to vote will increase their awareness of political issues, reinvigorate youth interest in politics, and create a more inclusive political system that gives equal attention to the concerns of youth. In Canada, interest in political matters has been falling in recent decades with only 39 percent of adults between the ages of 18-24 voting in the 2011 federal election (Elections Canada 2018). Clearly, the issue of voter apathy extends much further than 16- and 17-year olds. Low voter turnout in youth is often dismissed as being the result of the life-cycle effect, a term used to describe the upward

trend in voter turn-out that is accompanied by an increase in age (Library of Parliament 2010, 4). However, a report by Elections Canada shows that the voter turnout for current generations is so low that there is no guarantee they will follow the upward trend predicted by the lifecycle effect (4). This lack of interest has many worried about the long-lasting effects of an entire generation that is disillusioned with politics.

So what is causing such low interest? Niemi and Hepburn's review of the literature surrounding adult political behaviour shows that the most critical period for developing an interest in politics is between the ages of 14 and 25 (Niemi and Hepburn 1995, 9). By this calculation, the current vote age is much too high. By 18, youth are almost halfway through their most informative years for political development and are much less likely to become interested in politics at this age. The case of Austria supports this argument: since lowering its voting age to 16 in 2007, research shows that given the right to vote, teens develop a newfound sense of duty and responsibility to become informed on political issues (Peto 2018, 283). In a separate study, Zeglovits and Zandonella (2013, 1098) drew the same conclusion, adding that early enfranchisement may cause greater interest in politics later in life. In addition to increasing youth engagement, a lower voting age would force politicians to pay greater attention to the concerns of younger voters. As politicians vie for the support of this new demographic, we would see an upshot in new policies and legislation aimed directly at younger generations. This change would create a positive feedback loop where the creation of youth-centred policies feed a growing number of younger voters.

Conclusion

The question of lowering the voting age continues to be hotly debated, meanwhile, diminishing numbers of citizens choose to participate in the political process. At the root of this discontent is a fading commitment to democratic values among young adults who feel ignored, betrayed, and frustrated with a political system that is disproportionately ignoring their concerns. Lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 would restore equal rights to youth and would invite them to participate in a decision-making process from which they have long been excluded. Further, despite repudiation from critics, evidence shows a lower age would increase political interest and create a more engaged electorate. Granting enfranchisement to youth would be a great step towards achieving a more equitable, fair, and inclusive electoral system.

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