Governing Past the Next Election

In this edition of Managing Past the Next Election, Dr. Lori Turnbull, the Director of the School of Public Administration at Dalhousie University examines the issue of Youth Disengagement in our electoral system. She notes that young Canadians typically vote in lower numbers than older Canadians yet are concerned about the same issues as most citizens. The difference may be in the “how” politicians communicate to young voters who are looking for more dialogue and solutions and not the hyper-partisan short-term nature of our current politics.

Youth Disengagement—Maybe it is Us, Not Them

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Youth disengagement has long been a concern in Canadian politics, as Canadians aged 18–34 have typically voted in lower numbers than other age groups. Youth turnout bumped up considerably in the 2015 election, particularly among young women, but was still roughly ten percentage points below the overall turnout of 68%. Forty-five percent of voters aged 18–25 supported the Liberals in this election; these results have led some analysts to conclude that the relative youth of Liberal leader Justin Trudeau, combined with the Liberals’ strategic use of social media during the campaign, came together in the extension of an effective olive branch to the youngest eligible voters, a demographic which had chosen previously to take a pass on the federal ballot.

Time will tell whether the youth vote will be as mobilized in the 2019 election. For its part, Elections Canada has launched a social media campaign aimed at promoting youth participation in the election as well as a Student Vote program designed to create an authentic voting and citizenship experience for elementary, middle and high school students who, at this point, are still too young to cast ballots.
If you ask young voters about the issues that matter most to them, their answers are consistent with what you will hear from Canadians of all ages. They care a lot about climate change, affordable housing, health care, and the cost of living. Young voters might be more likely than older voters to cite mental health issues, gender equity, and Indigenous reconciliation as matters of high importance to them, but these too are issues on the radars of Canadians of all demographics. So, it would be a mistake for parties and candidates to design unique campaign content for youth voters. Instead, they should focus on the “how”: how to communicate with young Canadians, how to behave before, during, and after the election, and how to build consensus around long-term solutions to vexing social problems.

This generation of youth voters faces a more uncertain future than their parents and grandparents did, due to factors such as the preponderance of precarious work and growing awareness of the consequences of climate change. In light of this, it might be the case that while younger Canadians are worried about the same set of issues as everyone else, they might be more worried than others. They are looking for solutions. But the hyper-partisan, short-term focused political elite does not offer much hope in its current form.

The 2019 campaign has been more focused on climate change than any one before it, and there is no question that the level of engagement on this issue among young voters is palpable. Teenage environmental activist Greta Thunberg, who is famous for starting the “school strike for climate” movement and for speaking frankly to political leaders about the need for more action on climate change, had blunt advice for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau during a face to face meeting in Montreal at the end of September. After she told him that he was not doing enough to protect the environment, the Prime Minister’s number of voters aged 29–34 who rank him as their preferred prime minister plummeted from 35% to just over 24% in just 24 hours. (Nanos Research https://election.ctvnews.ca/the-greta-effect-nanos-survey-suggests-young-voters-turning-on-trudeau-1.4616701)

In all likelihood, it’s not just Thunberg’s message that appeals to young voters, but also the style with which she delivers it. She’s all about straight talk. There is no nonsense with her. Politicians, in contrast, are often accused of manipulative messaging and even lying in their attempts to score points on their opponents. Thunberg’s approach is a breath of fresh air; politicians looking to connect with young voters could take a page from her book.

Youth are looking for more dialogue and fewer soundbites, more collaboration and less conflict, more long-term plans and fewer empty promises and band-aid solutions. To gain youth trust, parties need to resist the urge to attack one another and look for ways to find common ground. It is possible that, at least in the short to medium term, no party will be able to hold a majority in the House of Commons on its own. Coalition governments have not been a prominent feature in Canadian political history. Minority governments tend to be seen as temporary scenarios to be resolved as soon as public opinion polls suggest that a majority might be within reach. It might be time for parties to treat minority government as the new normal and to open themselves up to partnerships, whether formal or informal, so that we can achieve results on policy goals. Institutional reforms, such as resisting the urge to treat every vote as a confidence vote, could open the system up to more meaningful collaboration without asking the parties to abandon their identities altogether.
Measures like e-voting, more civic education in schools, and the revitalization of youth caucuses in political parties have long been features of discussions aimed at increasing youth engagement in politics. None of these measures is enough to secure broad youth engagement on its own but each could be part of a suite of solutions. Also, there is some support, including from Fair Vote Canada, for the idea of lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. This would allow people to form the habit of voting when they are younger and still in high school, where civics classes could teach them to practice good intellectual self-defense and to make informed decisions as voters.

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