

# UNDERSTANDING AND ADVANCING YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN CANADA

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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SocialScience**

Network for Economic  
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# ABOUT THIS REPORT

This summary highlights key insights from the report, “Understanding and Advancing Youth Civic Engagement in Canada,” prepared by the Consortium on Electoral Democracy (C–Dem) in partnership with the Centre for the Study of Political Behaviour (CSPB) and the Network for Economic and Social Trends (NEST) at Western University in November 2024, and the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue “Advancing Youth Civic Engagement in Canada” report. Both reports were funded by Max Bell Foundation.



Drawing on prior academic research, quantitative survey data, grey literature, and interviews with civil society organizations, the 2024 report examines the state of youth civic engagement in Canada, the underlying factors that influence youth participation, and what has been – and can be – done to improve youth civic engagement. This summary highlights the key findings from this research and the Wosk Report in an accessible format to support the efforts of policymakers, civil society organizations, educators, and engaged citizens.

*For more details, we encourage readers to consult the full report.*

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# BACKGROUND

## Purpose

Civic engagement is the heart and soul of a strong and healthy democracy. In Canada however, as in many countries around the world, democratic engagement has been in decline in recent decades and evidence suggests that this deterioration has been especially pronounced amongst young Canadians.

Voter turnout provides one of the most visible markers of declining levels of civic engagement amongst youth, with less than half of eligible voters aged 18–24 voting in the 2021 election. Beyond turnout, youth disengagement is widespread across a range of participatory activities.

Existing research suggests that young people today are less attentive and knowledgeable about politics and are less inclined to join a political party, attend a public meeting, contact a politician, or engage in volunteering when compared to youth from previous generations.

These patterns raise critical questions about the health of democracy in Canada. What drives youth engagement and disengagement? How can public institutions and civil society organizations more effectively support young Canadians in developing lifelong habits of civic participation?

## Approach

To better understand the factors shaping youth civic engagement, identify best practices and promising strategies, and develop a set of evidence-informed recommendations to help guide future efforts, C-Dem's research team focused on four sources:

**1. Academic Literature:** A semi-systematic review of existing academic work on youth political participation and civic behaviour, in Canada and abroad, with particular attention to studies published since 2010.

**2. Public Opinion Survey Data:** Empirical analysis of national survey data collected by C-Dem through the Canadian Election Study and Democracy Checkup projects, covering a period from 2019 to 2023 and encompassing over 90,000 respondents.

**3. Grey Literature:** Examination of non-academic reports, program documents, and evaluations related to youth civic engagement produced by governmental and non-governmental organizations.

**4. Expert Interviews:** Discussions with representatives from eight organizations that offer youth civic engagement programming in Canada, to draw on their firsthand experiences and “on-the-ground” insights.

# KEY FINDINGS

## What we learned from the academic literature

Existing academic work provides a strong foundation for understanding core questions like “*what does youth civic engagement look like?*” and “*what impacts levels of engagement?*”

### Forms of Civic Engagement

The academic literature identifies six primary types of political participation:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>1. Voting</b><br>Casting a ballot in an election at any level (municipal, provincial, or federal)    | <b>4. Protests &amp; Political Consumerism</b><br>Taking part in activities like signing a petition, joining a demonstration, or participating in a boycott or buycott     |
| <b>2. Digitally Networked Participation</b><br>Participating in political activity or discussion online | <b>5. Civic &amp; Community Participation</b><br>Volunteering or being involved with local groups, initiatives, or activities  |
| <b>3. Institutionalized Participation</b><br>Interacting with parties, candidates, or elected officials | <b>6. Leadership and Personal Development</b><br>Being involved in opportunities that facilitate public speaking, leadership, decision-making, and networking capabilities |

### Drivers of Civic Engagement

Five major drivers of youth engagement were identified across the literature:

- **Knowledge** of political systems and current issues;
- **Interest** in politics and societal affairs;
- **Efficacy**, both internal (confidence to act) and external (belief that institutions will respond);
- **Resources**, including time, money, and access to civic education; and
- **Socialization**, shaped by schools, families, peers, and organizations.

If any of these factors are missing, it can create a **barrier** to civic engagement.

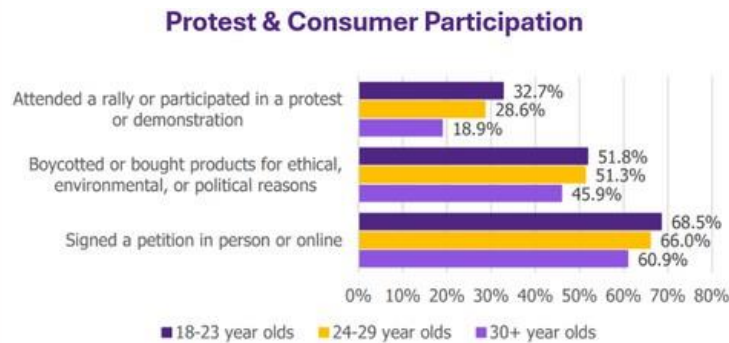
# What we learned from public opinion surveys

To understand how well the findings from the academic literature apply in Canada today, we used survey data from the 2019 and 2021 Canadian Election Studies and Democracy Checkup surveys (2019–2023) to examine two groups of youth – 18–23 year olds, and 24–29 year olds.

## Assessing Civic Engagement

In general, the data show that youth in both age groups differ from older Canadians in terms of the way that they participate in civic and political life.

Youth are less engaged in formal political activities like voting and institutionalized forms of participation. One important exception, however, is volunteering for candidates and parties.



Source: Democracy Checkups, 2019-2023

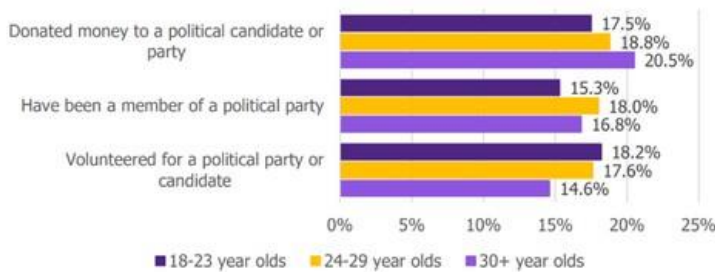
## Drivers and Barriers to Participation

The data suggest that young people are **less informed** (lack knowledge) about politics, are slightly **more likely to think that government doesn’t care about them** (lack efficacy), and report **slightly lower levels of interest** in politics compared to older age groups.

The impact of **resources** also varies. **Lack of time** is seen as a significant barrier for many youth, particularly with respect to voting. On the other hand, **financial resources** seem to be more important for those over 30 when it comes to donations, boycotts, or political consumerism, while young people tend to participate in these activities across income levels.

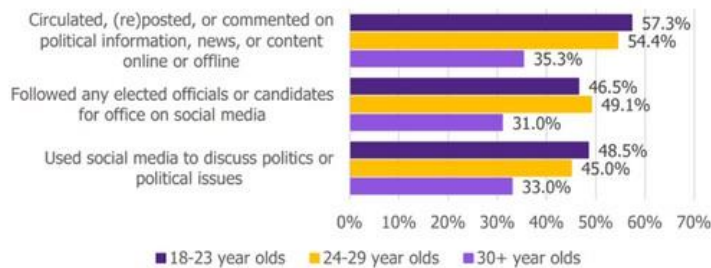
For many youth, civic participation is driven **less by a sense of civic duty**, especially compared to older Canadians, and **more by a desire to make a tangible impact**.

### Institutionalized Participation



Source: Democracy Checkups, 2019-2023

### Digitally Networked Participation

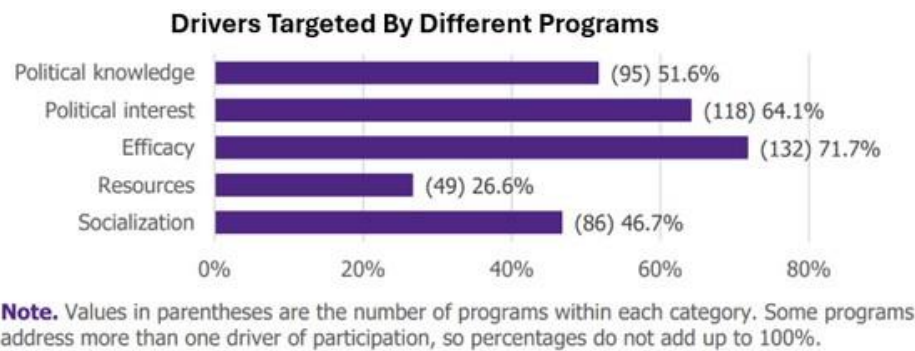
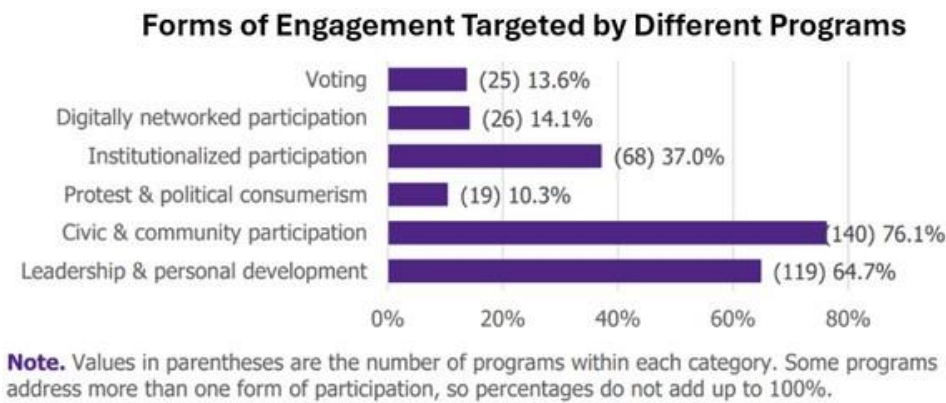
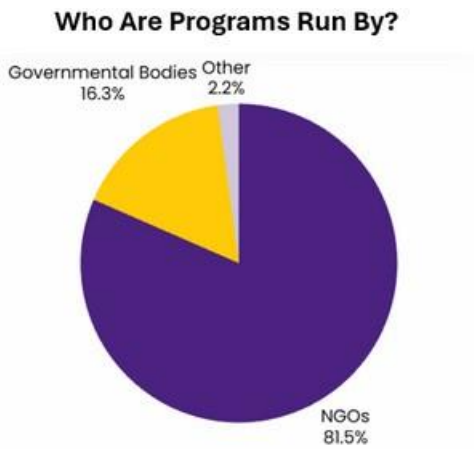


Source: Democracy Checkups, 2019-2023



# What we learned from the grey literature

To supplement the insights from the literature and data, the research team turned to grey literature sources – including program reports, government documents, and NGO evaluations – to perform a holistic examination of more than 180 existing programs designed to stimulate youth civic engagement. The team examined who administers programs, the audiences they target, and the type of programming offered.

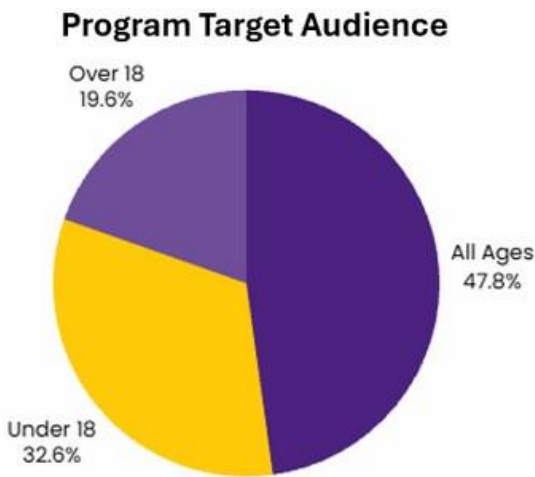


The program review revealed a wide diversity of target audiences within the broad category of “youth.” Many programs (27%) are tailored to specific populations: newcomer youth, racialized youth, youth who identify as female, and Indigenous youth. Very few initiatives focus on other groups, such as rural youth or youth with disabilities.

## Three Key Approaches

Across the landscape of existing initiatives, three models of civic engagement programming emerged as effective and promising:

- **Place-based community education**, which grounds engagement in local context and community identity, by connecting a traditional classroom education to real world experiences;
- **Project- or activity-based service learning**, which provides experiential, hands-on opportunities for youth to contribute directly and advance issues or causes that are meaningful to them;
- **Youth–adult partnership models**, which emphasize mentorship, collaboration, and the co-creation of civic projects by connecting youth with elected officials and community leaders to work together on issues of common concern.



# What we learned from practitioners

To ensure that our research findings were consistent with lived experiences, the team conducted interviews with representatives from eight civil society organizations delivering youth civic engagement programming across Canada. These interviews offered critical insights into how civic engagement is understood, what is working on the ground, and what challenges organizations face.

## Shared Understanding of Youth Civic Engagement

The organizations echoed the idea of taking a broad and inclusive definition of youth civic engagement. For these practitioners, civic participation encompasses a wide range of formal and informal activities, and while it is true that young people are less engaged in particular forms of engagement (like voting), they *are* engaged in other less traditional ways.

Interviewees echoed the importance of the core drivers identified from the academic literature and discussed how their programming aims to address related barriers. In contrast to other findings, though, the organizations suggested that interest is not a large barrier: from their experience, youth are often passionate and interested in issues, and instead struggle to turn that interest into action due to other factors.

Several organizations also emphasized polarization as an increasingly relevant barrier, suggesting that young people are disengaged in part as a response to political division, hostility, and misinformation, especially in online spaces.

## Types of Programming

**A consistent message across interviews was the idea that “youth” should not be treated as one single population.** This is reflected in the diversity of program designs used by the eight organizations we surveyed. Many programs target school-age youth through civic education efforts focused on early and timely interventions designed to provide foundational skills.

Other programs target young adults (18 and older) and focus on directly encouraging political participation in activities like voting or emphasize fostering civic leadership skills. Several programs also target specific groups (such as newcomer or Indigenous Canadians) or acknowledge the importance of ensuring were designed to serve diverse audiences.

## Key Challenges

- **Within civic education programs,** challenges include connecting educators with resources and training, ensuring curriculums support civic learning, enabling teachers to discuss political issues without fear of controversy, and building institutional memory (especially in communities with low educator retention).
- **Within programs targeted at older youth,** key challenges are navigating inherent skepticism or cynicism about the motivations behind programs, and reaching “NEET” young people (“Not in Employment, Education, or Training”). Interviewees emphasized the importance of making efforts to reach youth where they are, through the mediums they prefer.
- **For organizations themselves,** interviewees discussed the challenges of building and sustaining partnerships, and the importance of maintaining a consistent presence with youth outside of elections. Most significantly, interviewees mentioned the lack of long-term funding for initiatives, and expressed a strong desire to move away from short-term, project-specific grants that create high levels of organizational instability and uncertainty.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings from the four sources, we offer ten recommendations to guide future action – five priorities for program investment, and five directions for future research.

## Program Priorities

1. **Build National and Regional Youth Engagement Networks**, to help bring together the community of academics, policymakers, and practitioners to learn from each other and share best practices;
2. **Create a Comprehensive Civic Engagement Resource Repository**, so that youth, educators, and community leaders can easily access vetted civic engagement tools and resources;
3. **Engage Youth Where They Are**, by recognizing that youth understand political engagement differently and supporting a flexible approach;
4. **Expand Youth Leadership Training and Mentorship Opportunities**, to equip youth to act as civic engagement advocates within their own communities and mobilize their peers; and
5. **Transition to Sustainable, Multiplier Funding Models**, to support organizations in continuing successful programs and initiatives over time and avoiding loss of infrastructure and expertise.

## Research Priorities

1. **Examine the Multiplier Effect of Youth Engagement**, to understand whether different types of civic participation support long-term, broader civic engagement over a lifetime;
2. **Explore Heterogeneity Amongst Youth**, and the differences that exist between age cohorts and sociodemographic groups;
3. **Imagine Non-School-Based Civic Education & Programming**, and think about how best to reach youth outside of the educational environment;
4. **Evaluate the Role of Social Media**, including whether digital participation has a positive or negative impact on civic engagement; and
5. **Assess the Impact of Political Polarization**, and whether it has mobilizing or demobilizing effects.

Together, these recommendations chart a path toward building a stronger, more inclusive culture of youth civic engagement in Canada.



# VALIDATION

The “Advancing Youth Civic Engagement in Canada” report written by the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue documented the outcome of three validation workshops that considered the findings and recommendations put forward in our report. This work validates much of what we found, but also adds important nuance.

## Key Findings

The Wosk Centre report reinforces our finding about the unique nature of youth participation, which is heavily focused on digital engagement, volunteering, protests and consumerism. The report also provides additional validation for the drivers of participation uncovered in our research – knowledge, socialization, efficacy, interest and resources. Finally, the report validates our understanding of the various models of civic engagement programming, and echoes the emphasis that our work places on the importance of civic education.

The Wosk Centre report provides additional nuance to the topic of youth civic engagement beyond our own work, particularly with respect to three major topics:

- **Polarization:** The potential role of polarization in “turning off” participants is prominent in the Wosk report, which suggests that this may be an important challenge to efforts to support youth engagement.
- **Mis/Dis-Information:** It is clear from the Wosk report that young people are having difficulty navigating the information environment and determining what is trustworthy. This finding echoes and expands upon sentiment expressed during our interviews with civil society organizations, which also emphasized the importance of giving youth adequate tools to navigate today’s complex media environment.
- **The relationship between knowledge and interest:** The Wosk report emphasizes that youth are particularly concerned about their gaps in knowledge about political events, and seem uncertain about how to gather the knowledge they wish to acquire

## Overall Assessment

The Wosk Centre report provides four recommendations for the future study of youth civic engagement:

1. Facilitate knowledge exchange within the education sector;
2. Expand formal channels for youth participation in decision-making processes;
3. Conduct further research into the diverse experiences of youth across Canada; and
4. Conduct further research into the impacts of digital participation.

These recommendations are consistent with and validate several of our findings. Our research team fully supports these recommendations and believe they will have a positive impact on increasing youth civic engagement in Canada.