

Kids vote the darndest things

Sparked by steady low voter turnout, Elections Canada and Student Vote partner to teach kids about the election process



PHOTO BY STEVE GOETZ

Kids at Keele Street Junior Public School in Toronto cast their ballots in the last election.

Millions of voters will make their way to the polls in October, but so will their kids. In an effort to boost voter turnout and political awareness, Student Vote and Elections Canada will offer underage students some voting practice at thousands of elementary and secondary schools this fall.

The parallel election initiative is designed to build an interest of politics sooner in a student's life. Studies have shown that voting habits are established early, and nearly 500,000 Nova Scotia students will get a head start through the program.

This year marks the 250th anniversary of democracy in Canada, and Student Vote's Steve Goetz says they are on track to register more schools than ever before.

"We are on the cusp of passing our record number of registered schools," says Goetz. "Our highest number was 2800, and 80 per cent of the teachers that have taken part in the past say they want to continue to use the Student Vote model as a teaching mechanism in the classroom."

The program began in 2003 when it ran alongside the Ontario provincial election. More than 1000 and 335,000 students took part. The results were reported live on CBC and in 20 newspapers on the day after. Elections Canada's Nathalie Demontigny says that the youth vote is a top priority.

"For students who are below the voting age, it's important that they have

the opportunity to experience the federal election," says Demontigny. "Student Vote is a great initiative."

She says that for voters between the ages of 18 and 24, only 37 per cent voted in the 2004 election. That number rose to 44 per cent in 2006.

Goetz says that this was one of the issues that sparked the program's inception.

"We started hearing lots of reports about low voter turnout. There is a generation of inactive citizens," says Goetz.

He says that the underage voters participating in the initiative become much more interested in politics.

"We've been able to engage over 1.5 million students to cast a ballot. They have made the choice," he says. "For the most part, they were not required to vote by their teachers. After the students start seeing [politics is] not what they thought it was, they start seeing how it affects their lives."

For today's young registered voters, Demontigny says there are many reasons why the turnout is so low.

"There is a lower level of political interest, political knowledge, and civic duty," she says. "Students are much less likely to be approached by a party or candidate, and many feel they are too busy to vote."

Even though voter turnout among 18 to 24-year-olds increased in 2006, that figure is still 20 per cent below the national

average. Demontigny says that this is not necessarily an indication of an upward trend, but Elections Canada is taking steps to make sure young voters have the necessary tools and information to vote.

Every citizen that has turned 18 since the last election will receive a reminder card in the mail called "Leave Your Mark." This card confirms the voter's citizenship and asks for consent to be added to the register of electors. Voter information cards are also going out, which outline the nearest polling station and what ID is required to vote.

This year, there are more options for proving your identity and casting your vote. One lesser-known method is to swear an oath and have an elector vouch for your identity. For more information about the election process and how to leave your mark, visit www.elections.ca.

Nathan Swyers
Managing Editor

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How do I vote?

Advance Polls

Oct. 3 • Oct. 4 • Oct. 6

Election Day

Tuesday, Oct. 14

Where can I vote?

Students have a choice: their parents' riding or the riding where they live while attending school. Advance polls are not available unless you vote in your parents' riding.

Required ID

- One government issued ID with your photo, name and address. (Driver's licence)
- Two original pieces of ID authorized by the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada. Both must have your name and one must also contain your address. (Health card and hydro bill)
- Swear an oath and be vouched for by an elector in your polling division



PHOTO BY STEVE GOETZ

Student Vote teaches children about democracy and the election process by getting them involved.