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## **Citizens Adrift**



*Paul Howe*

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**Citizens Adrift**  
The Democratic Disengagement  
of Young Canadians



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When I began thinking about this project on democratic disengagement among young Canadians, I might have been considered part of that demographic group on a generous definition of the term. By any reckoning, that is no longer the case, which is a roundabout way of saying that the project has been a fair time in the making, from initial conception through to publication of this volume. Along the way, I have received generous support and encouragement from a number of individuals and organizations.

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# Introduction

The suggestion that young Canadians are politically disengaged tends to provoke strong reactions. One is swift agreement accompanied by firm conviction that the problem can and should be fixed. A second is scepticism, reflecting the view that engagement comes in many different forms and young people should not be uniformly branded. There is a measure of truth in both responses. Political disengagement among young Canadians is real enough and can be ameliorated through concerted effort, but it is also multifaceted in both its manifestations and underlying causes, and does not admit of either simple summation or solution.

This study explores the phenomenon from various angles, searching for that which is most fundamental in the behavioural and attitudinal patterns sometimes cited as evidence of young people's disengagement. The position taken is that political disengagement involves more than just politics. Young people have not turned away simply because politics is uninteresting, the parties are all the same, elections are sometimes uncompetitive, or politicians are untrustworthy. If these are exacerbating factors, they do not constitute the primary reason for waning political engagement among younger Canadians or an adequate analytical foundation for developing proposals to address the issue. Instead, political disengagement reflects broader changes in political culture, that constellation of ingrained attitudes and dispositions that individuals bring to their understanding of democracy and their own role and responsibilities within the democratic system. Political culture includes not just political content, but all attitudes and dispositions of relevance to politics, including those more social and cultural in nature. The origins of political disengagement lie in this more encompassing realm.

The steep challenges involved in engaging Canadians politically have been evident in other democratic developments of late. Recent initiatives to change the electoral system in several provinces have broken new ground in Canadian democratic practice. They are the first to seriously contemplate the adoption of proportional representation (PR). Those provinces pushing

furthest in the process – BC, PEI, and Ontario – have held referendums to give citizens the final say on whether to move ahead. In two of those cases, BC and Ontario, the referendum was preceded by a more innovative procedure still: a citizens' assembly assigned the task of deliberating at length on the merits of different electoral systems and presenting a recommended alternative to be put to a general vote. Many with an interest in democratic reform anticipated that Canadians, often frustrated at a lack of say in government, would jump at this opportunity to refashion (or defend) an important pillar of our electoral democracy. And sure enough, some did: those selected to participate in the assemblies displayed enthusiasm for and dedication to their work and others watching from the sidelines followed their deliberations with keen interest. Ultimately, however, the engagement of the general public with the issue was disappointing.

The first BC referendum, held at the same time as the provincial election of May 2005, was probably the high point. Fifty-seven percent of eligible voters participated in the referendum, with 58 percent supporting the proposed single-transferable vote (STV) system – a moral victory for advocates of change, but not enough to carry the day under the supra-majority threshold established by the government. The result was more sobering when British Columbians were given a second opportunity to express their views on STV in the May 2009 provincial election: the referendum turnout was down substantially to 49 percent of eligible voters, with only 39 percent now voting in favour of the proposal. In Prince Edward Island, the province normally recording the highest voter turnout in federal and provincial elections, the referendum of November 2005 was a stand-alone event. A scant 33 percent of registered voters turned out to cast a ballot and the referendum failed by a margin of nearly 2 to 1. Turnout was somewhat better in Ontario in October 2007, where the referendum again occurred in conjunction with a provincial election. However, this was an election that produced a record low turnout, so that only 51 percent of registered voters ended up casting a referendum ballot. Moreover, surveys revealed that at the end of the referendum campaign many remained vague on the details of the proposed PR model, and that those who knew little were more likely to oppose the change (Cutler and Fournier 2007). For advocates of reform, this was perhaps the most stubborn obstacle of all: ill-informed supporters of the status quo. The end result was the same as in PEI and the second BC referendum, a resounding victory for the No side. Even if other factors also contributed to these deflating outcomes – among them poor public education campaigns and a lack of strong advocates among party leaders (Seidle 2005; McKenna 2006) – the failure of citizens to rise to the democratic occasion cannot be denied.

Instead of helping to correct the problem, the democratic reform experience of the past few years has only underscored the challenges involved in

engaging the citizenry at large. Even when a procedure is put in place that conforms to what many consider an ideal model of public deliberation, many Canadians remain indifferent to the proceedings. Advocates of reform will continue to press for change and it is to be hoped that their efforts will eventually bring about much needed modifications to our political structures and practices (Howe et al. 2005). However, it must also be recognized, in light of recent setbacks, that the revitalization of Canadian democracy rests at least as much on addressing the problem of citizen disengagement. Without this, progress on institutional reform – not to mention other issues where the quality and breadth of public engagement is critical to a successful outcome – will be halting. The possibility of a richer democracy will remain unrealized.

The fact that young Canadians are especially prominent among the ranks of the disengaged invites many questions. A preliminary one involves a simple point of clarification: what is meant by the phrase “young Canadians”? The answer is necessarily vague. Beyond underlining that it does not refer exclusively to “youth,” a group I take to mean those no older than twenty-one, the age limits are flexible. Some researchers focus on those fifteen to twenty-four, others on those eighteen to twenty-nine, yet others on those twenty-one to thirty-five. The precise demarcation is not crucial, as the basic pattern on a number of key measures is one of gradually diminishing political engagement at younger ages. Moreover, the pitch of the age gradient is typically found to be steeper today than in the past, suggesting disengagement among today’s young adults is not simply the replication of an age-old pattern. Instead it signals, at least partly, a generational change. It is this feature of democratic disengagement that is the most disconcerting, as it potentially carries significant consequences for the long-term vitality of Canadian democracy.

The past ten years have seen considerable discussion and analysis of this emergent issue in both academic circles and the public arena. Since the federal election of 2000, when overall voter turnout dropped sharply to just over 60 percent and the spotlight fell on the high abstention rates among young electors, a variety of studies have investigated the political disengagement of young Canadians. A handful of traditional academic papers have appeared, but the larger part of this work has been sponsored by think-tanks and government agencies, including papers produced under the auspices of the Institute for Research on Public Policy, the Centre for Research and Information on Canada, the Canadian Policy Research Networks, the Canada West Foundation, Elections Canada, Statistics Canada, and the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy.<sup>1</sup> This work has served an essential purpose, bringing the issue to public attention, setting out basic parameters of the debate, and identifying key findings that have anchored policy discussion. However, this prior work (my own included) has largely

consisted of shorter pieces with a practical orientation that can take us only so far in our understanding of the issue.

Studies of greater depth and focus are needed at this stage. Works from elsewhere provide some general guidance as to the form these might take. These include a number that identify gradual evolution in the mores, habits, and values of citizens as the principal force giving rise to generationally driven changes in democratic engagement. One is Robert Putnam's influential tome *Bowling Alone*, which documents the sharp decline of "social capital" in the US over the past several decades and outlines its deleterious consequences for American democracy (2000). Another is Russell Dalton's rejoinder to Putnam, *The Good Citizen* (2008), which offers a more optimistic assessment of generational patterns of democratic engagement in the US and is grounded in his larger body of work in the same vein (Dalton 2004, 2006). Other relevant studies are comparative, including Martin Wattenberg's *Is Voting for Young People?*, a study of habits of news media use, political knowledge, and political participation among young people in the developed democracies (2008). There is a common recognition in these works that voter turnout is but one element in a larger syndrome of attitudes and behaviour and that political disengagement can only be understood in the context of broader social and cultural change. There are also important differences across these and other works in their general characterization of the changes taking place – some are relatively optimistic, others gloomier – and the identification of the root causes putatively responsible for reshaping patterns of political involvement among younger generations.

Such studies, and the theoretical perspectives they advance, have informed research on the political disengagement of young Canadians but have not yet been emulated in Canadian studies of comparable scope or depth. This, then, is the contribution this book seeks to make: to push beyond established findings in recent research on the disengagement of young Canadians to engage more fully with themes developed in the broader comparative literature. It aims for depth over breadth: rather than canvassing all facets of disengagement among young Canadians, the study concentrates on the two areas deemed most essential. These are the evolution of *political attentiveness*, which encompasses trends in political interest, political knowledge, and habits of news media use; and trends in *social integration*, the connections to community and the social norms that influence how people conduct their lives on a general plane and the extent and manner of their engagement with the political world.

The political attentiveness of the citizenry has been an abiding concern of political scientists ever since early public opinion research revealed some decades ago that the average citizen is not nearly as interested in, or knowledgeable about, politics as classical theories of democracy had commonly

supposed. These shortfalls have taken on new significance in recent years as evidence has accumulated in a number of the developed democracies of a significant gap between younger and older citizens on various measures of political attentiveness. If the traditional concern was that citizens fell short of the lofty ideals of abstract democratic theory, the current apprehension is that younger generations are failing to meet the rather minimalist expectations typical of contemporary theorizing about the conditions necessary for democracy to work fairly and efficiently. Determining whether and why this is so, and how it might be remedied, constitutes one key piece of the disengagement puzzle.

Meanwhile, there is also widespread recognition that there are broader changes afoot contributing to the democratic disengagement of younger generations. The postwar period has seen significant changes in lifestyles and social norms that have, according to various theorists, gradually weakened the bonds of social integration in the developed democracies. Philosophical works taking up this theme sometimes adopt a longer time frame, underlining the historical ascendance of liberal individualism and the stress this has placed on values of community and solidarity in the modern period (Taylor 1991; Barber 2003). The treatment of these matters here is more empirical than philosophical, more contemporary than historical, but these broader perspectives hover in the background of the analysis. The general supposition borrowed from the philosophers is that community in some form or other is prior to democracy, that a healthy measure of social solidarity and shared public purpose is necessary for democracy to flourish. If there has indeed been some unravelling of the ties that bind among younger generations, this too represents an important seam to be exposed and explored in order to understand fully the origins and implications of rising disengagement among the young.

In identifying shortfalls in the current state of citizen engagement in Canadian democracy, the question naturally arises what a stronger democracy might look like. To my mind, the answer is necessarily vague because democracy is an open-ended proposition, the goalposts subject to repositioning as the expectations, ambitions, and capacities of “the people” evolve. Certainly a more vibrant democracy would be one in which there is a stronger sense of common purpose and solidarity among citizens, who manifest their solidarity in part by closely attending to, and regularly participating in, the political life of community and country. The end goal may be imprecisely defined, but the direction of change required at the present time is not.

Clearly, these themes and goals are not uniquely Canadian, and so in the chapters that follow significant effort is made to place the Canadian experience in a comparative perspective. In some instances, this means assembling information and data on Canada and other countries and drawing the

relevant comparisons. In other places, the work is comparative in the sense that it is informed by theoretical perspectives generated elsewhere – including those of Putnam, Dalton, Wattenberg, and others – and is sensitive to the implications of findings emerging from the Canadian case. Sometimes, this is simply a matter of situating Canada within an extant theoretical framework, but in other cases it involves suggested amendment of existing theory to better accommodate findings from the Canadian case. Consequently, the book is not just an empirical study of democratic disengagement among young Canadians informed by broader theory, but also a case study that seeks to offer new theoretical insight that could be applied elsewhere. The hope is that the conceptual and empirical contributions resonate with audiences both inside and outside Canada and make some useful contribution to broader debates.

Exploring key thematic elements at length reflects the academic orientation of the study, but there is a practical purpose as well. The latter part of the book outlines ideas for policy initiatives large and small that could make a substantial difference to the political engagement of young Canadians. Some initiatives would require considerable effort and dedication, so their success will depend on the priority the issue receives. At this stage, the necessary sense of urgency does not seem to exist. The political disengagement of young Canadians has occasioned considerable handwringing and expressions of concern, but to date has produced no concerted effort to address the problem. A cynic might observe that parties in power probably do not stand to gain from making this a priority. Younger voters, at the federal level at least, show relatively greater support for small parties than the major players, the Liberals and Conservatives. One poll just prior to the 2008 federal election, for example, found that 48 percent of those under thirty-five were planning to vote for the NDP, Greens, or Bloc Québécois, compared to only 31 percent of those fifty and over (Strategic Counsel 2008). If voter turnout were suddenly to jump 30 points among those under thirty-five, the impact on election outcomes could be quite substantial. An optimist, on the other hand, would be impressed by the fact that leaders at both provincial and federal levels have undertaken certain reform initiatives, such as opening the door to electoral reform and introducing fixed election dates, that run counter to their own self-interest. With a firm push from various quarters – academics and others engaged in policy research, the media, election agencies, smaller political parties, factions within the larger parties, concerned citizens at large – reversing the disengagement of young Canadians could be made a higher public priority.

## **Methodology**

This study is concerned with evolving trends in citizen attitudes and behaviours broadly relevant to democratic engagement. Consequently, the

main method of investigation is quantitative, more precisely the analysis of large-scale surveys of the general population in Canada and other countries.

One key objective throughout is to distinguish those patterns and tendencies that are common to young people of different periods and those that have grown more pronounced among generations coming of age in recent times (more technically, the relative significance of life-cycle and cohort effects). The most effective way to do this is to track citizen attitudes and behavioural patterns over time, which necessitates turning to existing datasets from earlier and more recent periods. Bringing together a wide array of secondary data sources capturing different facets of citizen engagement provides insight into the longitudinal trends in political participation and disposition that have brought us to our current pass.

The book also draws extensively on a more current survey conducted specifically for the study and designed to fill a number of important gaps in our understanding of democratic engagement. The Canadian Citizen Engagement Survey 2007-08 (CCES 2007-08), a survey of nearly 2,000 Canadians, provides up-to-date measures on certain indicators, as well as allowing for exploration of areas not closely examined in prior survey research.<sup>2</sup>

This predominantly quantitative approach is complemented by other methods, including historical reflection, aimed at providing a richer understanding of past experience than can be captured by numbers alone, and philosophical inquiry, designed to anchor the empirical (and, in places, prescriptive) analysis in normative principles distinguishing desirable and undesirable democratic outcomes. As with other studies on the topic of democratic disengagement, the book is principally aimed at a scholarly audience but also endeavours to engage with readers outside academia with an interest in this important policy issue. Quantitative results, along with findings and theories from the scholarly literature, are presented in a manner designed to render them intelligible to readers who may not be deeply steeped in these matters.

### **The Book in Brief**

The study is divided into four parts. Part 1 consists of two chapters: Chapter 1 sets the stage by examining patterns of political participation across age groups at different points in time and is followed by a preliminary assessment of the factors sometimes held responsible for declining involvement among the young (Chapter 2). This first cut at explaining disengagement raises as many questions as it answers, however, so much of Chapter 2 is devoted to identifying the issues that need to be addressed in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the matter. In doing so, the chapter goes beyond the brief outline offered here to provide a more detailed foregrounding of subsequent chapters and the overall structure and logic of the inquiry.

Part 2 of the book, Chapters 3 to 5, examines contours of political attentiveness in the past and present – knowledge of politics, interest in politics, and patterns of news media use – in both Canada and other countries and considers the implications for political engagement. Part 3, Chapters 6 to 8, takes up the theme of social integration, considering how the ties that bind individuals to their communities have weakened over time, and the consequences for democratic involvement.

Part 4 synthesizes and summarizes in two distinct ways: by presenting a theory of social change that helps account for changing patterns of political attentiveness and social integration over the long haul (Chapter 9); and by distilling key findings to produce policy recommendations aimed at encouraging broader and deeper engagement among younger citizens (Chapter 10). The latter suggestions are tailored to Canada, but to the extent the general analytical framework of the book applies elsewhere, the policy recommendations probably do as well. Many of these will already be familiar to those immersed in the subject of democratic disengagement, while a few are more novel. The principal contribution is to suggest where emphasis should be placed in order to tackle the problem of young people's current disengagement from politics at its foundations.

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## **Citizens Adrift**



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Part 1  
**Setting the Stage**



# 1

## Democratic Participation in Canada

Mention democratic disengagement and the issue that first springs to mind for most people is declining voter turnout. This is not necessarily because people put excessive stock in elections as a vehicle for citizen engagement. Indeed, many would insist there is more to democracy than simply casting a ballot every so often. However, from a practical standpoint, voter turnout is an indispensable measure because it is based on a census of all eligible citizens. On those occasions when *everyone* has the right and opportunity to participate in a democratic activity that requires only modest personal effort, how many actually do so?

The short answer is, fewer nowadays than in the past. The long answer, which offers greater insight into the meaning and significance of declining voter turnout, is more involved. It entails looking more closely at patterns of electoral participation among younger and older Canadians over time, as well as paying some attention to the methods by which voter turnout is measured. Much of this first chapter is devoted to a close examination along these lines of trends in electoral participation in Canada. The conclusion is that declining turnout and low levels of participation among young Canadians are portentous developments, signalling something seriously amiss with contemporary Canadian democracy.

Recognizing, however, that voting is but one form of democratic engagement, other forms of participation are considered as well, including involvement in other political activities, volunteering, and membership in groups within the community. Casting the net wider is necessary in order to address the important counter-argument, voiced both in Canada and elsewhere, that young people do not participate less, they simply participate in alternative ways more to their liking and of their own choosing. The empirical evidence brought to bear on the issue in the latter part of this first chapter suggests this argument is not without merit and necessitates some amendment of earlier observations. It does not, however, alter the essential conclusion: there is a sizable block of young Canadians, too large by any reasonable

yardstick, whose disinclination to be involved in public affairs extends across a broad range of civic and political activities.

Attention turns in Chapter 2 to a preliminary investigation of factors that help explain this broad-based disengagement among a substantial vein of the young adult population. Three prime suspects are considered – disaffection with politics and government, inattentiveness to politics, and the weakening of social integration – but only two are retained for further consideration. If political discontent is alive and well from sea to shining sea, it does not seem to be a significant force undermining participation in politics, either in general or among young Canadians in particular. Political inattentiveness, on the other hand, more specifically low levels of political interest and knowledge and spotty attention to public affairs via news media, is having a deleterious effect on the political involvement of young Canadians. So too are the twin elements of diminished social integration outlined below, relatively weak attachments to community among younger Canadians, and heightened individualism.

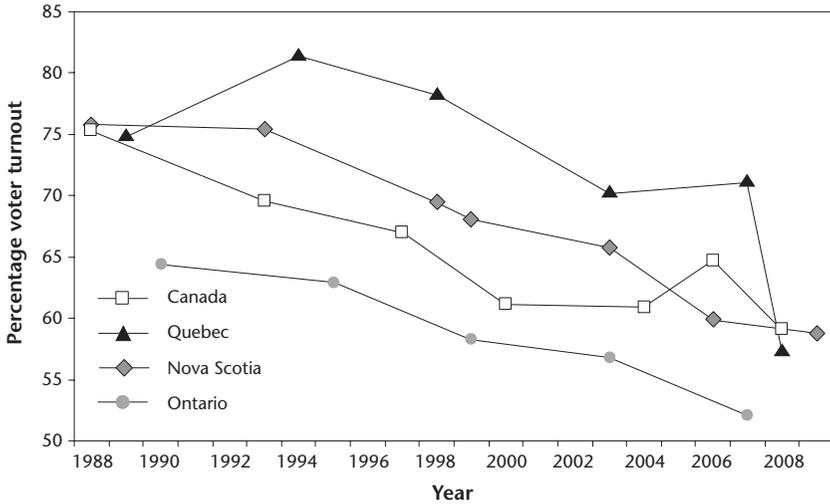
This examination of different forms of political and civic participation and the reasons for the diminishing involvement of a significant swath of young Canadians sets the stage for the remainder of the book. More probing analysis of patterns of political attentiveness and social integration is undertaken in the six chapters comprising Parts 2 and 3, which form the book's core. The final two chapters in Part 4 address the origins of these important changes in the attitudinal and behavioural proclivities of younger generations and offer a series of ideas for encouraging young Canadians to re-engage with their democracy.

### **General Trends in Voter Turnout and Methodological Matters**

The decline in voter turnout in Canada in recent times has been much discussed and analyzed. Since 1988, voter participation at the federal level has dropped from 75 percent, roughly the postwar norm, to below 65 percent in each of the elections of 2000, 2004, and 2006, and just under 60 percent in 2008 (Figure 1.1). Turnout in provincial elections has also been falling sharply over the same period. In Quebec, the 2008 election saw turnout drop dramatically, to below 60 percent, following a steady decline since 1994. In Nova Scotia, voter participation has slowly ebbed and also edged below 60 percent in 2009, while turnout in Ontario, normally in the 60 percent to 65 percent range in the 1970s and 1980s, tumbled to just over 50 percent in the provincial election of 2007. If space on the graph permitted, Figure 1.1 could be expanded to reveal that most other provinces, with the exception of Prince Edward Island, have witnessed a similar decline in electoral participation in recent times, including Alberta, where turnout in the 2008 provincial election fell to an historic low of 40.6 percent.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1.1

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**Voter turnout in federal and provincial elections, Canada and selected provinces, 1988-2009**


Sources: Directeur Général des Élections du Québec 2008; Elections Canada 2009; Elections Nova Scotia 2009; Elections Ontario 2007.

As researchers attentive to these trends have started to pay more attention to who votes and who does not, the most striking finding has been the low level of participation among young Canadians. Provincial turnout patterns are not generally scrutinized as closely, but a large gap in turnout between younger and older citizens has been reported for New Brunswick (Howe 2007b), British Columbia (Elections BC 2005, 33), Manitoba (Prairie Research Associates 2004, 4-5), and Alberta (Leger Marketing 2008, 36).

At the federal level, there has been closer study of age-based differences in turnout. One report appearing in 2003, based on a large national survey, produced the startling estimate that a mere 25 percent of those aged eighteen to twenty-four had voted in the 2000 federal election (Pammett and Leduc 2003a, 20). This figure caught the attention of many and gave added impetus to the public debate already underway on the political disengagement of young Canadians. As a survey-based estimate, however, it faced a common problem with this method of assessing political participation: significant inflation. The actual voter turnout reported by survey respondents was 82.3 percent overall and 50.1 percent among those under twenty-five.<sup>2</sup> The first of these figures was obviously inaccurate, since actual turnout in the 2000 election was only 61.2 percent.<sup>3</sup> The researchers made a statistical adjustment

to the survey data to bring the overall turnout level down to that figure, this same adjustment yielding the 25 percent turnout estimate for those under twenty-five.

Other evidence would suggest that the study probably overshot the mark in pegging turnout among young voters that low. After the subsequent federal election in 2004, Elections Canada used a new method to estimate turnout by age group, based on a large sampling of voters list records after the election (Elections Canada 2005). This approach avoids the problem of inflated reporting, since it is based on administrative records of participation, which include the age of each elector. Using this method, the turnout level estimated for those aged eighteen to twenty-four in the 2004 election was 37 percent. While one interpretation of this result might be that turnout among young people moved sharply upwards between 2000 and 2004 – Elections Canada had, after all, launched numerous initiatives in that period to boost turnout among young voters – this does not square with other results. The same voters list study found that the true turnout levels in 2004 for older age groups were in the 65 to 75 percent range, on average about 9 percentage points *below* the adjusted survey-based estimates from the 2000 election (Pammett and Leduc 2003a, 20). Unless turnout in 2004 simultaneously jumped among young people and slumped among older voters, it would seem that the study of the 2000 election was off the mark in its statistical adjustment procedures.

The point is not to criticize the earlier study nor to suggest that the democratic impulse is alive and well among young Canadians, as 37 percent is hardly a stellar participation rate. It is simply to establish that there is no evidence that turnout among the young has spiked sharply upwards in more recent federal elections. With this new methodology providing more reliable estimates of turnout by age group, the gap between younger and older adults can be gauged more precisely. Since Elections Canada is continuing with this study at each federal election, it is also possible to use the 2004 study as a baseline to track changes in turnout across different age categories over time. Table 1.1 compares results of the studies conducted after the 2004, 2006, and 2008 elections. The table reveals an improvement in turnout among young Canadians in the 2006 election and a slight closing of the age gap. Turnout that year increased by 6 to 7 percentage points among younger age groups (those under forty-five) but by no more than 2 to 4 points among older groups. In 2008, participation among younger groups declined, in some cases back to 2004 levels, but at the same time fell by a greater margin among all older age categories (save the eldest). As a result, the turnout gap between young and old was again slightly reduced.<sup>4</sup>

These trends bear monitoring and as time goes by it may become possible to detect the arc of participation in particular demographic categories more

Table 1.1

Voter turnout in Canadian federal elections by age group (%)			
Age	2004	2006	2008
18 to 24	37.0	43.8	37.4
25 to 34	44.0	49.8	48.0
35 to 44	54.5	61.6	53.9
45 to 54	66.0	70.0	59.7
55 to 64	72.9	75.4	65.6
65 to 74	75.5	77.5	68.4
75+	63.9	61.6	67.3

Sources: 2004 and 2006: Elections Canada 2008, 9; 2008: Elections Canada 2010, 8.

clearly. At this stage, the more consistent pattern that might be emphasized is that turnout among the most participatory age group, those sixty-five to seventy-four, has been more or less double that of young adults under twenty-five in each of the last three federal elections. The reasons for this stubborn gap and how it might be reduced more substantially are subjects that merit close investigation.

Efforts to probe the reasons behind electoral disengagement have, however, been hindered by mounting challenges in persuading people to talk about these matters. Survey response rates have been on the decline, slowly over the long haul and more precipitously in the last few years. Unbeknown to most casual consumers of polling research, the average response rate across the industry now sits at around 10 percent (PMRS Response Rate Committee 2003). The drop has been especially sharp among young adults, for reasons that are not entirely clear. Technological developments are certainly a factor (increased use of cellphones and call-screening, for example) but do not seem to explain the phenomenon fully. In any event, no polling organization has been immune from the problem, even those concentrating on academic survey research, which generally go to considerable lengths to capture hard-to-reach and reluctant respondents (and which still manage to secure overall response rates around 50 percent). The result has been a significant decline in the representation of young adults in the survey samples commonly used to track and analyze patterns of political engagement. In the 2004 Canadian election study, for example, the eighteen to twenty-nine age group comprised only 15.4 percent of the sample,<sup>5</sup> well below their estimated share of the population, 19.9 percent (Elections Canada 2005, Appendix, 2). Just four years earlier, in the 2000 Canadian election study, there was no such discrepancy between the representation of this age group in the survey sample and the population. The main concern with this abrupt decline in survey participation among young adults is not smaller sample

sizes, but the representativeness of those samples. It is widely recognized that those with some interest in politics are more inclined to participate in surveys on political matters (one reason voter turnout rates on surveys are inflated). If response rates are lower or dropping more rapidly among young adults, over-representation of the politically engaged in that group may be especially acute. Consequently, the gap between young and old may appear less profound and downward trends among the young less pronounced than they would if the politically disengaged were fully present and accounted for in our survey samples.<sup>6</sup>

These are, however, new challenges to an unobstructed view of the landscape, and our understanding of the present rests at least as much on a clear assessment of the past. For this purpose, there is a rich body of prior survey research, dating back to a time when methodological barriers were less formidable, that can provide insight into earlier trends in citizen engagement that have brought us to our current pass. This study makes considerable use of such earlier data sources. It also draws extensively on one more current survey conducted specifically for the study, which was designed to fill a number of important gaps in our understanding of democratic engagement. These varied sources underwrite analysis and reflection on the decline in voter turnout along with other manifestations of waning civic involvement, as well as the broader social and cultural tides of change relevant to these developments.

### **Two Key Variables: Age and Electoral Participation**

Before pursuing other lines of inquiry, however, there is considerably more to be said about the canary in the political disengagement coal mine, declining voter turnout. The observation that turnout is disconcertingly low among today's young adults can be taken further to provide new insight into the phenomenon, along with important grounding for a broader analysis of political disengagement. This elaboration involves recognizing that both age and electoral participation are more complex variables than is immediately apparent.

### **Life-Cycle and Cohort Effects**

Age, for its part, marks two quite different characteristics: how old someone is and their year of birth. Both are potentially relevant to political engagement. How old someone is tells us something about their current stage of life, their likely level of maturity, their "stake" in society, and other factors that might reasonably be expected to influence political involvement. To link low voter turnout among young adults to these types of factors is to assume it is a function of the fact that they are in the early stages of adulthood. Two assumptions normally accompany this line of thinking: today's

young adults will change their ways as they age, eventually attaining turnout levels as high as older adults; and a reduced propensity to vote is something that would have been evident among young adults of the past as well. It is, then, a relatively optimistic interpretation, suggesting that low voter turnout among today's young adults is simply a normal phase that each generation passes through on its way to reaching peak levels of political engagement later in life.

In addition to reflecting how old someone is, however, age also reflects one's year of birth, or more descriptively, the period in which one was born and came of age. Many believe that people's basic values and dispositions, including those relevant to political engagement, are shaped by the social and political environment prevailing during the early years of childhood and adolescence. These formative influences exert a strong and steady pull throughout a person's life, leading to abiding differences in certain attitudes and behaviours among those born at different points. To link low voter turnout among today's young Canadians to these types of factors is to suggest it reflects something distinctive about those who came of age in more recent times. The attendant expectations in this case are more pessimistic: lower turnout would not necessarily have been evident among young people of the past and today's young adults will remain relatively disengaged from electoral politics even as they age.

The technical terms for these two accounts of age-related differences are life-cycle and cohort effects. The first sees people's behaviours and attitudes as a function of changes people experience as they age and move through different stages of life. The second interprets them as reflections of the distinctive and abiding qualities of the birth cohort to which people belong. Researchers looking at voter participation have drawn on this conceptual distinction to provide some important grounding for our understanding of current patterns of turnout among young Canadians. Using the surveys conducted during each federal election from 1968 through 2000 (save 1972), the research team overseeing the Canadian election study has conducted analysis comparing young people of the present and past and tracking how voting tendencies have evolved as cohorts have aged – the necessary method to detect life-cycle and cohort effects. A pure life-cycle account would anticipate similar levels of turnout between young adults of the past and present, along with a pattern of increasing participation among young adults as they age over time. An unqualified cohort account would anticipate lower levels of turnout among younger cohorts joining the electorate and no increase in participation within these cohorts as they grow older.

There is also the possibility that *both* effects contribute to low voter turnout among today's young adults, and this, in fact, is what the empirical results reveal. Voter participation is affected by life-cycle dynamics, as turnout

increases by roughly 15 percentage points between the ages of twenty and fifty (Blais et al. 2004, 224). Thus part of the current turnout gap between younger and older Canadians reflects an abiding tendency of young adulthood. In addition, however, there are substantial cohort effects that have produced lower participation rates in new birth cohorts joining the electorate over time. Even though people are more apt to vote as they grow older, turnout levels remain consistently lower than for earlier cohorts at the same age. These cohort effects date surprisingly far back: compared to those born before 1945, turnout levels are about 2 to 3 points lower in the 1945 to 1959 birth cohort, another 10 points lower in the 1960s cohort, and a further 10 points lower in the 1970s cohort (Blais et al. 2004, 225). Although this research has not been extended to those born in the 1980s, an approximate estimation is simple enough. The Elections Canada study of participation by age group in the 2004 election found that turnout was 7 percentage points lower among those aged eighteen to twenty-four (born in the 1980s) than among those aged twenty-five to thirty-four (born in the 1970s) (Elections Canada 2008, 9), and the difference between the two age groups was about the same in the 2006 study. The calculations by the election study team suggest that the life-cycle difference between the average ages for these groups – twenty and thirty, respectively – is 8 to 11 percentage points and therefore can account for this entire gap (Blais et al. 2004, 224). This suggests that the turnout decline among rising cohorts has levelled off: when life-cycle effects are taken into account, participation among the 1980s cohort is roughly the same as the 1970s cohort, which is to say, about 20 points below the turnout level of those born in the 1940s and earlier.

While both life-cycle and cohort effects contribute to a turnout gap between young and old, there are important differences between the two. One is that life-cycle effects are typically seen as the more readily explicable phenomenon. That people are less apt to vote when they are younger can be tied to any number of self-evident features of early adulthood: residential mobility (Highton 2000), a focus on personal goals that take priority over politics (higher education, establishing a career, finding a life partner – see Strate et al. 1989), or perhaps simply a general lack of life experience (Highton and Wolfinger 2001). That the young people of today are less likely to vote than young people of the past, by contrast, poses a greater mystery: what is it about younger cohorts, or their social and political environment, that has made them less apt to participate in electoral politics?

A second key difference lies in the impact of life-cycle and cohort effects on overall participation levels. A steady churn of younger non-voters gradually maturing into voters, the life-cycle dynamic, does not pull down aggregate turnout. Cohort effects, on other hand, do have this impact, as younger people less committed to voting take the place of more participatory older cohorts. This happens only slowly, of course, since generational turn-

over is a gradual process. This is why the downward pressure on turnout that started in the early 1970s among those born in the late 1940s and 1950s has only come to our attention in the past ten years or so. The impact at the outset was negligible: the decline in voting among the 1945 to 1959 cohort was small and this group represented only a fraction of the electorate at that time. Any downward effect was easily masked by the fluctuation produced by other factors that influence turnout in any given election. The aggregate impact only became noticeable as the turnout gap grew larger with successive cohorts (those born in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s) and as these cohorts came to account for more of the total electorate. The continuation of these processes would lead us to anticipate that turnout will remain on a downward trend (marked by less predictable short-term fluctuations) until cohorts less committed to voting eventually come to comprise the entire adult population. The one consolation is the apparent levelling-off of turnout decline among those born in the 1980s. If this continues to hold for this cohort and others to follow (a risky assumption, mind), there is a turnout floor in sight of about 55 percent, 20 points lower than the historic norm of around 75 percent. This would represent a new baseline for voter turnout in Canadian federal elections, with fluctuations around that figure dependent on a bevy of election-specific factors that make precise predictions impossible. In the absence of successful initiatives to reverse the downward trend, voter participation would presumably dip below 50 percent from time to time.

In light of the foregoing, there is a natural tendency to give greater heed to cohort differences in turnout than to the life-cycle dynamic. The latter, reasonably characterized as a “normal” and self-correcting tendency among the young, can appear relevant only as a confounding factor that must be taken into account to reveal the true magnitude of cohort effects, after which it can be safely set aside. The analysis that follows in subsequent chapters is not quite so dismissive. In employing the conceptual distinction to investigate various dimensions of democratic disengagement among young Canadians, the initial approach is to follow the standard logic, treating life cycle and cohort as separate demographic effects to be carefully separated, like white and yolk, through appropriate conceptual reasoning and analytical techniques. However, rather than discarding the one not required in the standard recipe, it is set aside for later purposes. As life-cycle patterns continue to materialize, they are gradually folded back into the mix by blending the two demographic effects in a theory designed to explain why younger generations have become increasingly disengaged over time. The distinction between life cycle and cohort thus serves a twofold purpose, helping to map the contours of young people’s participation in order to distinguish the perennial from the new, but also setting the stage for a blending of the perennial and the new that offers a different understanding of the root causes of democratic disengagement.

### **Habitual and Intermittent Non-voting**

If our understanding of age differences in voter turnout is enhanced by acknowledging the important distinction between life-cycle and cohort effects, it can also be advanced through further refinement of the concept of electoral participation. Whether an individual votes in any given election is simple enough and requires no great elaboration. But focusing on someone's actions (or inaction) in a single election can be misleading. People who normally vote may miss one election because they were otherwise occupied and unable to get to the polling station, or they may have deliberately abstained, but only for reasons specific to that electoral contest. Consequently, participation across multiple elections is a more meaningful measure: Does someone vote always, sometimes, or never? What about young people: Are they habitual voters, intermittent voters, or habitual abstainers? And how do they stack up in this respect against young people of the past? These are slightly more complex questions that can reveal more about the nature of declining voter turnout and the participatory tendencies of today's young adults.<sup>7</sup>

The expectation from some recent commentary would be that a good number of the non-voters among today's young adults are people who never vote. The same researchers responsible for the widely cited cohort analysis of Canadian voting patterns over time have elsewhere suggested that young Canadians have "tuned out" of electoral politics and are "turning their backs on electoral politics in unprecedented numbers" (Gidengil et al. 2003, 9). Another scholar who has written widely on the issue of political disengagement has warned that many of today's young Canadians can be characterized as "political dropouts" (Milner 2005). These pithy descriptions have not, however, been based on analysis of the participation of individuals over multiple elections. The presence of cohort effects among younger generations can certainly give the impression of electoral desertion, as it is easy to assume that consistently lower turnout means that some individuals within a given cohort must be failing to vote at each opportunity. However, this is not necessarily the case, as cohort effects only indicate stable behaviour at the group level, which can be consistent with a wide range of participatory tendencies at the individual level. To take a hypothetical example: if voter turnout in a particular cohort is a steady 50 percent over time, it may be that half the individual members of that cohort always vote and half never do; or it could be that *every* member of the cohort votes *half* the time, thereby generating 50 percent turnout at each election. Of course, between these two extremes is an infinite range of possibilities, since people can have a propensity to vote anywhere between 0 percent and 100 percent. As long as propensities remain stable – and this does not even have to be individual propensities, just aggregate propensities within the group – the behaviour

of the cohort will be constant. So, stable turnout within a cohort does not provide sufficient evidence to draw conclusions about the participatory proclivities of individual voters.

The only way to find out what stability at the cohort level means is to analyze participation by individuals across multiple elections. While panel surveys in which respondents are interviewed at multiple points in time are one way to capture such information, these come with their own particular methodological challenges and are not frequently conducted. Cross-sectional surveys that ask respondents at a given point about their past participation in multiple elections are a more readily available source.

Table 1.2 uses two such studies separated by thirty years to assess voting propensities at two different points, along with change in those propensities over time. Respondents from the 1974 and 2004 Canadian election studies are categorized based on their reported participation in three elections: the federal elections of 1974 and 2004, the previous federal elections (in 1972 and 2000), and the most recent provincial election. For both periods, the youngest age group is limited to those aged twenty-five to twenty-nine, to ensure that all respondents would have been eligible to vote in all three elections in question.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1.2 reveals changing patterns of non-voting over time, changes that are most significant among younger adults. Consider first the earlier data. In 1974, there were exceedingly few habitual non-voters in the population as a whole. Only 1.3 percent reported voting in none of the three elections in question (total column). Furthermore, there were no more habitual non-voters among the youngest group than in older age categories – in fact, in what is partly a statistical quirk, there were none.<sup>9</sup> Thus non-voting among those under thirty was solely a reflection of an elevated proportion of intermittent voters; and within this category, occasional non-voters, who participated in two of three elections, were far more numerous (27.0 percent) than more frequent non-voters, who voted in only one (6.9 percent). The conclusion for the earlier period is unambiguous: lower turnout among young adults was solely due to their elevated propensity to vote intermittently rather than the presence of any significant block of habitual non-voters.

Nowadays, patterns of non-voting have changed significantly, especially among younger cohorts. The most important change is the emergence of a sizable contingent of habitual non-voters. In the 2004 data, the incidence of habitual non-voting among those aged twenty-five to twenty-nine, non-existent in 1974, sat at 11.1 percent. The incidence among those aged thirty to thirty-nine was also much higher in 2004 than in 1974 (9.9 percent versus 1.7 percent), and was modestly elevated in the forty to forty-nine age category (4.4 percent versus 0.7 percent). It is only among those fifty and older that habitual non-voting remained at the minimal levels seen in 1974.

Table 1.2

**Multi-election voter participation, 1974 and 2004 (%)**

Elections voted in	Age						Total
	25-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	
<i>1974</i>							
None	0.0	1.7	0.7	1.2	2.3	2.3	1.3
One	6.9	6.7	2.5	2.6	2.7	2.3	4.0
Two	27.0	19.3	13.9	13.7	11.5	12.2	16.4
Three	66.0	72.3	82.9	82.5	83.5	83.1	78.3
(N)	(259)	(404)	(439)	(343)	(260)	(172)	(1,877)
<i>2004</i>							
None	11.1	9.9	4.4	2.4	2.6	1.8	4.9
One	15.7	10.9	4.8	1.4	1.4	3.0	5.3
Two	19.9	13.8	11.0	10.5	7.8	6.9	11.2
Three	53.2	65.4	79.7	85.7	88.2	88.2	78.6
(N)	(216)	(477)	(745)	(630)	(348)	(331)	(2,747)

*General note:* Columns in this and other tables may not add up to precisely 100 percent due to rounding. For tables based on survey data, weights supplied by the original investigators to produce representative national samples have been applied where available.

*Note:* The calculations are based on reported participation in the last two federal elections and most recent provincial election.

*Sources:* 1974 and 2004 Canadian Election Studies.

Meanwhile, there continued to be, as in 1974, elevated levels of intermittent voting among younger adults. Adding one- and two-time voters together, nearly 36 percent of those under thirty can be classified as intermittent voters in the 2004 data; among those fifty and over, this combined total drops to roughly 10 percent. Yet there is also an important change within the category of intermittent voters, as one-time voters have become more common, again among younger age groups in particular. Whereas the ratio of two- to one-time voters among the under thirty group in 1974 was about four-to-one (27 percent versus 6.9 percent), it is now almost one-to-one (19.9 percent versus 15.7 percent). A similar shift in this ratio, though less pronounced, appears in the thirty to thirty-nine and forty to forty-nine age groups. It is only among those fifty and over that the proportion of two- to one-time voters is more or less unchanged from 1974. In these changing patterns lies further evidence of a weakening disposition to vote among younger cohorts.

Clearly, considerable changes have occurred in the composition of the non-voting population, especially in younger cohorts. The simplest way to summarize the changes is to say there has been an increase in the lower two

categories (habitual non-voters and one-time voters) at the expense of the upper two. A slightly more complex way to summarize the difference is to think about what the results suggest about general propensities to vote. The 1974 results come very close to what would be expected if *all* young voters at that time were generally disposed to vote at each opportunity. To be precise, statistical theory suggests that if *every* young voter had an 87 percent likelihood of voting in each of the three elections in question, we would expect to see 0 percent missing all three, 4.4 percent voting in one, 29.5 percent voting in two, and 65.9 percent voting in all three.<sup>10</sup> The fact that this very nearly matches the actual pattern in the 1974 data suggests that non-voting at that time was a largely random occurrence: most young people were generally inclined to vote at each opportunity, but due to random circumstance, a sizable number had missed one recent election and a handful had missed two. The 2004 results for young adults, on the other hand, cannot possibly be explained by assumptions of a uniform propensity to vote, not even assumptions of a *lower* uniform propensity to vote. The pattern that appears in Table 1.2 could only be produced if some of today's young adults are highly inclined to vote at any given opportunity and others are highly disinclined. So, another way to summarize the changes is to say that a new group – inveterate abstainers – has emerged on the electoral scene, as a result of which there is now, compared to thirty-some years ago, much greater variation in the propensity to vote among young adults.<sup>11</sup>

Further insight into the mechanisms behind habitual and intermittent non-voting can be gleaned from the reasons survey respondents offer for failing to vote at particular opportunities. For example, when non-voters were asked in the 2004 election study why they did not participate in that particular contest, 65 percent of habitual non-voters cited relatively substantial impediments – they did not know for whom to vote or what the issues were, had no interest in the election, felt their vote would make no difference, or (perhaps most tellingly) were not really sure why. Such reasons were cited by only 30 percent of intermittent voters who had missed the 2004 election. Meanwhile, 59 percent of the latter cited circumstantial reasons for not voting – they simply forgot, were too busy or too ill to vote, were absent on election day, were not registered, or were uncertain about where to vote – compared to only 19 percent of habitual non-voters (author's calculations based on 2004 Canadian election study).<sup>12</sup> The latter are reasons more clearly linked to happenstance and for that reason more likely to be random in their effects, preventing Person A from voting in one election, Person B in the next – in other words, producing intermittent abstention. More profound impediments to electoral participation, on the other hand, are more likely to be carried forward by the same individual from one election to the next and hence to be associated with habitual non-voting.

Pulling these findings together can help make sense of the general evolution of voting among young Canadians over time. In the past, turnout was somewhat lower among young adults mainly because of their greater tendency to vote intermittently. This is consistent with the notion that lower participation among the young at this time principally represented a life-cycle dynamic – a reflection, in other words, of the early stage of adulthood, when people are preoccupied with other matters and do not always find the time to vote, even if so inclined. This is a type of effect likely to impinge upon many if not most young adults, leading to an overall pattern, evident in the 1974 data, consistent with random abstention. As these young voters have aged, however, they have, in aggregate, changed their ways, just as life-cycle theory would predict. We can trace these changes by consulting Table 1.2 and noting that those who were in their twenties in 1974 are the same people (or at least a sample of the same people) who would have been in their fifties in 2004. Now that they are considerably older, their intermittent voting has tailed off (combined one- and two-time voting has declined from 33.9 percent to 11.9 percent) and habitual voting has increased by about the same amount (from 66.0 percent to 85.7 percent). Young intermittent voters of 1974, for the most part, had matured into middle-aged habitual voters by 2004.

There is no reason to think this life-cycle dynamic would have disappeared over time and the evidence in Table 1.2 suggests it has not. We continue to see higher levels of intermittent voting among the young than the old and would anticipate that many of today's sporadic twenty-something voters will eventually move on to become consistent electoral participants. What is new is the marked growth in the category of habitual non-voters. These individuals, their non-voting rooted in more profound motivational impediments, are more set in their ways. It is this group that distinguishes the young people of today from those of thirty years ago and that is responsible for the cohort effects that have seen turnout declining steadily among rising generations over the past number of years.

After much ado, then, the conclusion is that the characterizations in recent commentary do seem apt: some young people are electoral “dropouts,” who are “turning their backs” on electoral politics. This established, a criticism arises concerning existing efforts to boost voter turnout. Most of these initiatives (some contained in a federal bill, C-16, that failed to pass prior to the dissolution of parliament in the fall of 2008) are unlikely to win over electoral dropouts and are instead designed to improve turnout among intermittent participants. These include such measures as providing more opportunity for advance voting, allowing for voting at regular polling stations on two consecutive days, including a day of rest (i.e., Sunday and Monday), and making it easier for unregistered voters to sign up to vote on the spot. Such measures address circumstantial reasons people with an inclination to vote

sometimes fail to do so. That they are likely to influence intermittent non-voters only probably explains why their overall effects tend to be limited (Blais et al. 2007). To achieve more substantial effects, habitual non-voters must be targeted through a different set of initiatives.<sup>13</sup>

From a normative standpoint, moreover, intermittent voters are probably of lesser concern than those who never vote. Through their past behaviour, they have demonstrated the willingness and wherewithal to participate at least on occasion. If future occasion warrants – when issues they consider important are on the public agenda, arguably the most critical time for people to make their voices heard – the likelihood of their voting is high. By contrast, it is not nearly as clear that habitual non-voters will find their way to the polling station when issues that matter to them are at stake (or perhaps more precisely issues that *should* matter to them, since lack of political awareness, explored at some length in later chapters, is a distinguishing trait of habitual non-voters). The fact that elections agencies have focused on administrative measures aimed at the easy targets among the non-voting population is understandable, given the limited resources and policy tools at their disposal. However, if efforts to boost participation succeed only in increasing the frequency of voting by intermittent voters, they can be considered but a limited success. As we explore the factors giving rise to habitual non-voting and the deeper disengagement from public life underlying this pattern of behaviour, it will become clear that more far-reaching initiatives involving a broader range of players will be needed to turn the tide.

### **Habitual Non-voters: A Closer Look**

If an emphasis on habitual non-voters provides a more defined conceptual and normative focus for the analysis of electoral disengagement, it can also have the appearance of diminishing the scope of the problem to the point of insignificance. After all, according to the estimate in Table 1.2, only about 11 percent of those aged twenty-five to twenty-nine could be deemed habitual non-voters in 2004. Compared to the more dramatic numbers for abstention rates among young voters in individual elections (50 percent or more), this seems a rather modest and manageable figure.

This would be a hasty conclusion, however, as the 11 percent figure vastly understates the true level of habitual non-voting. This is because the Canadian election studies, despite the best efforts of those involved, have not escaped the intractable problem of inflated estimates of voter turnout. For example, the turnout level reported by respondents in the 2004 study for the federal election just past was 86.4 percent, whereas the actual turnout on 28 June 2004 was 60.9 percent. If this discrepancy seems large, the flipside of these numbers, the incidence of non-voting, makes the distortion seem even greater: 13.6 percent non-voting reported on the survey versus 39.1 percent in the real world, almost a threefold difference.

There are two main reasons for this. One is that politically engaged individuals are more likely to agree to be surveyed. The other is that people will sometimes indicate they voted when in fact they did not, whether due to faulty recall, an inclination to give the socially acceptable response, or some combination of these. The first problem can be tackled by achieving a higher response rate on surveys in order to reach those less taken with politics. The only studies that are able to push significantly beyond the response rates achieved by the Canadian election studies (high-quality surveys that make maximization of response rates a priority) are those that are government-sponsored. For this reason, a Statistics Canada survey on social engagement conducted in 2003, the seventeenth in the General Social Survey (GSS) series, is an important source for more definitive assessments of voter participation patterns. Canadians may like to complain about their government, but should have no cause to criticize the data collection efforts of our national statistical agency. A high response rate of 78 percent, well above the 50-55 percent range achieved in recent election studies, means that the survey's estimates of voter turnout are more in line with reality. A large sample size of nearly 25,000 Canadians is another significant benefit, allowing for fine-grained analysis within narrowly defined subgroups, which allows for consideration and refinement of various propositions relating to the electoral participation of young Canadians.

With respect to voter turnout, the Statistics Canada survey asked respondents whether they had voted in the most recent federal, provincial, and municipal elections.<sup>14</sup> Table 1.3 displays voting patterns across the three elections for the same age groups as before. The finding that immediately leaps out is the sharply higher rate of habitual non-voting among young adults. Compared to the 11.1 percent estimate for those aged twenty-five to twenty-nine based on the 2004 Canadian election study data, the figure here is 33.8 percent, equal now to the percentage of habitual voters. The incidence of habitual non-voting is similarly elevated for other age categories compared to the earlier estimates: 25.7 percent among those aged thirty to thirty-nine, 16.3 percent among those forty to forty-nine, and roughly 10 percent among those fifty and over.

One small problem with these estimates is that the Statistics Canada study, unlike the election studies, was not restricted to those residents of Canada eligible to vote in elections, namely, Canadian citizens. Nor did it ask respondents about their citizenship status or inquire whether they had not voted because they did not hold Canadian citizenship. The survey did, however, ask all respondents whether they were born in Canada and, if not, when they had immigrated. Using this information, recent immigrants (1995-2003) less likely to have attained citizenship were excluded from the calculations in Table 1.3 (and in subsequent turnout calculations based on this study below). With pre-1995 immigrants still in the sample, a reasonable

Table 1.3

Multi-election voter participation, 2003 (%)							
Elections voted in	Age						Total
	25-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	
None	33.8	25.7	16.3	11.6	9.2	8.7	17.2
One	12.4	7.4	5.1	4.5	2.9	2.3	5.5
Two	19.8	20.1	17.5	14.8	12.3	11.3	16.3
Three	34.0	46.8	61.2	69.1	75.7	77.7	61.0
(N)	(1,809)	(4,003)	(4,651)	(3,698)	(2,341)	(2,444)	(18,946)

Note: The calculations are based on reported participation in most recent federal, provincial, and municipal elections.

Source: Statistics Canada, GSS 17 (2003).

approximation is that roughly 1.5 percent of all respondents aged twenty-five to twenty-nine would be ineligible non-citizens, as would approximately 2 percent of respondents fifty and over.<sup>15</sup> Subtracting these numbers from the figures in Table 1.3 would put habitual non-voting a shade over 30 percent among those in the youngest age bracket and in the 6-10 percent range for older age groups.

These results might be further queried by asking whether the inclusion of municipal voting in our measure of electoral participation is appropriate, since people tend not to vote as often at the local level as they do in provincial and federal elections. One response would be that examining different types of elections in an analysis of habitual non-voting is actually more appropriate, since it allows for the possibility that people may have an aversion to one type of election – refusing to vote for those  $\$ \& @!$  politicians in Ottawa, for example – but not be generally disinclined to participate. With all three levels of government included, the measure of habitual non-voting captures failure to participate across a diverse range of electoral opportunities, thereby reflecting more on the person abstaining than on the specifics of any given electoral context.

Still, it remains true that people do not vote as much in municipal elections, and if the voting questions were restricted to federal and provincial elections, rates of voting for each election would almost certainly be higher, the incidence of habitual non-voting lower. But this does not mean they would be more accurate, since reported turnout rates, even on this gold-standard survey, remain stubbornly inflated. For example, the overall turnout reported by respondents for the last municipal election is 60 percent, significantly higher than true municipal turnout levels.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, reported turnout on the Statistics Canada survey for the most recent federal election (2000) is 76.1 percent, 12 points higher than the actual turnout figure of

64.1 percent.<sup>17</sup> Given this inflation, the results in Table 1.3 undoubtedly remain significant *underestimates* of the extent of habitual non-voting.

A truer estimate can be calculated by starting with the one bedrock set of figures available from around the time of the Statistics Canada survey – the estimate of turnout by age group for the 2004 federal election from the Elections Canada voters list study cited earlier (Elections Canada 2005) – and then using the Statistics Canada study to determine: the likelihood of abstaining provincially if one has abstained federally; and the likelihood of abstaining at the municipal level, if one has abstained federally and provincially. In the case of those aged twenty-five to twenty-nine, the relevant figures are: 54 percent abstention in the 2004 election, an 86.4 percent chance of having abstained provincially, and a 93.2 percent chance of having abstained at the municipal level. Multiplying these figures together produces an estimate of habitual non-voting for those under age thirty of 43 percent, no longer what might seem an acceptably small minority of young adults, but very nearly half.

If estimates of habitual non-voting derived from these other sources are sobering, it is equally instructive to consider a slightly different calculation: the proportion of non-voting accounted for by electoral dropouts. Habitual non-voters contribute more than their share, since by definition they abstain consistently rather than intermittently. Thus the calculations in Table 1.4, based on the estimates of different voter types for the twenty-five to twenty-nine age group in the 2003 Statistics Canada study, show that habitual non-voters, while representing 34 percent of this age band, account for almost 70 percent of the *total abstentions* reported for the three elections in question. Thus, habitual non-voting is the major contributing factor to the turnout decline that has occurred within this age category and, indeed, to the overall drop that has taken place in the past twenty years.

The long and short of it is that the problem of electoral disengagement does not fade into insignificance when the focus shifts from non-voting in

*Table 1.4*

**Shares of habitual versus intermittent non-voters (aged twenty-five to twenty-nine)**

Elections voted in	(%)	(N)	Number of abstentions	Total abstentions (%)
None	33.8	(612)	$612 \times 3 = 1,836$	69.5
One	12.4	(224)	$224 \times 2 = 448$	17.0
Two	19.8	(358)	$358 \times 1 = 358$	13.6
Three	34.0	(615)	$615 \times 0 = 0$	0.0
Total	100	(1,809)	2,642	100

Source: Statistics Canada, GSS 17 (2003).

general to habitual abstention. At least one-third of Canadians under age thirty, and probably slightly more, have largely checked out of electoral politics. This is the principal reason participation has declined significantly among younger voters, and is a significant factor in the overall decline in voter turnout. The future looks no brighter, as there is no compelling reason to think this pattern of habitual abstention will disappear of its own accord. While a good number of young people who currently vote intermittently will probably graduate from this category to become habitual voters and thereby pull up the overall turnout level of younger cohorts as they age, habitual non-voters are less likely to change their stripes. Whether rising electoral abstention is considered critical in its own right or treated as a barometer of some deeper current of disengagement, the patterns revealed by jointly analyzing life-cycle and cohort effects on the one hand, and habitual and intermittent patterns of electoral participation on the other, suggest cause for significant concern.

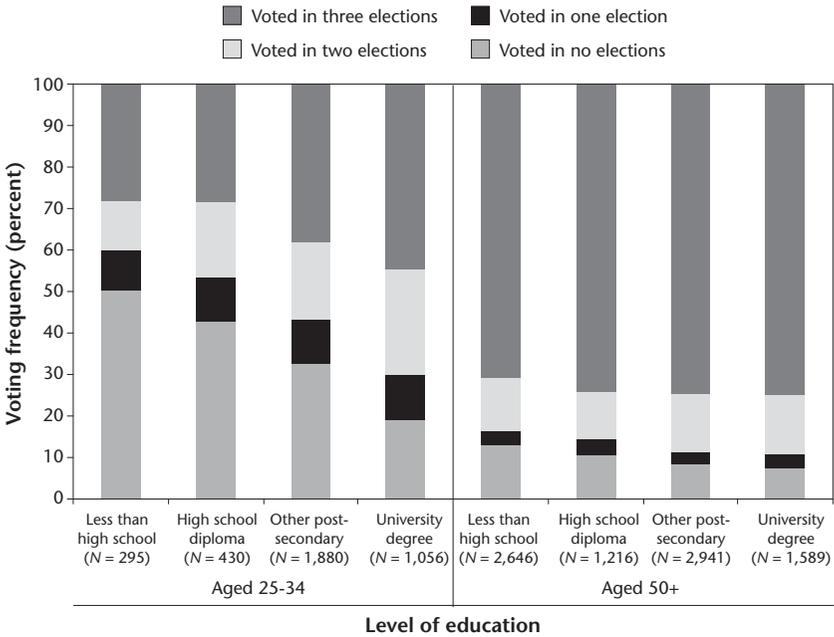
### **Habitual Non-voting Across Socioeconomic Categories**

Other implications of rising levels of chronic disengagement can be revealed by revisiting further results from the recent study of voter participation. One pertinent finding from the Canadian election study team, based on the surveys conducted from 1993 to 2000, is that the turnout decline among younger Canadians over that period was concentrated among those with lower levels of formal education – those with only a high school diploma and high school dropouts. Among those with a university degree, turnout held steady over this period (Gidengil et al. 2003, 10). This can be seen as a case of good news and bad news. On the one hand, it is reassuring that at least one group of young Canadians was resistant to the general tide of declining turnout within their cohort. On the other hand, if turnout was holding steady among those with more education, it was necessarily dropping by more than average among those with less. The result, as these researchers suggest, has been a widening participation gap across levels of educational attainment, a trend that raises concerns about broader socioeconomic inequalities in participation and the potential consequences of the uneven influence of the privileged and the disadvantaged sections of society on public policy.

Examining the relationship between education and voting in the Statistics Canada study of 2003 yields evidence broadly consistent with these conclusions, but suggests an important caveat as well. The high response rate again helps bring the analysis closer to the reality on the ground by reducing the over-representation of electorally active citizens.<sup>18</sup> The very large sample size of the Statistics Canada study also generates greater confidence in estimated turnout rates for educational categories with relatively few respondents, in particular young adults who have not completed high school.<sup>19</sup>

Figure 1.2

**Voting propensity by age and education level**



Source: Statistics Canada, GSS 17 (2003).

Figure 1.2 displays voting propensity by education level within two age groups, those aged twenty-five to thirty-four and those fifty and over. The result that stands out immediately is the high incidence of habitual non-voting among young adults who did not complete high school (50 percent) and the sharp drop in this figure as education increases to the level of university graduate (19 percent) – a pattern consistent with the conclusion that growing abstention among less-educated young Canadians is the nub of the voter disengagement problem. The comparison with older voters reinforces this proposition, as education has much less impact on habitual non-participation within this age stratum. Only 6 percentage points separate those who did not complete high school (13 percent) from those with a university education (7 percent).

Viewed another way, however, the figure also clearly reveals that the university-educated among younger cohorts have not been immune to the electoral abstention contagion. A different comparison involves drawing comparisons between the two age categories within each education level. In all cases, there is a sharply higher incidence of habitual non-voting among younger citizens: almost a threefold difference among the university-

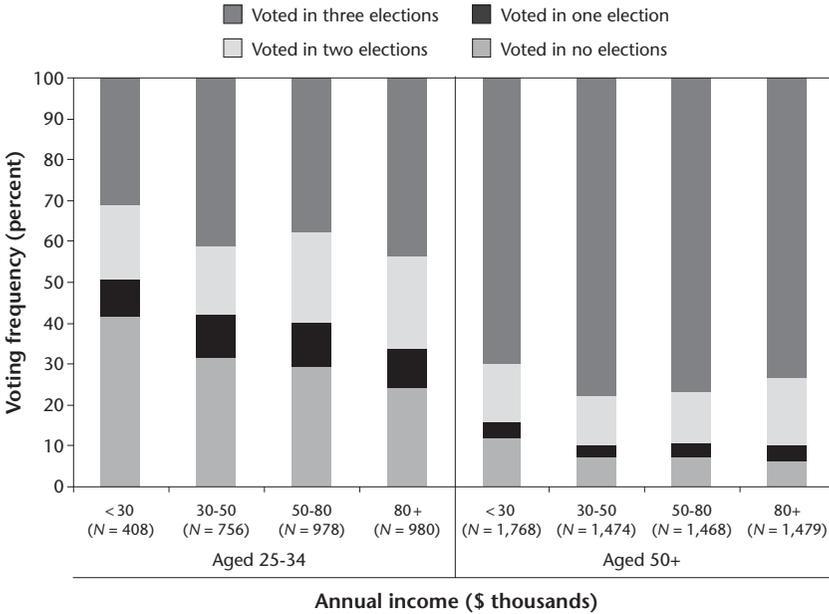
educated (19 percent versus 7 percent) and a fourfold difference for the other groups: those with other postsecondary education (33 percent versus 8 percent), those with a high school diploma (43 percent versus 11 percent) and those with none of the above (50 percent versus 13 percent). Relevant too is the fact that those with some sort of postsecondary education represent the larger part of the young adult sample in the survey – university graduates 20 percent, those with other postsecondary education (some university, community college, or trade/technical training) another 58 percent. While these figures are slightly inflated compared to actual population figures, it remains the case that those with some postsecondary education are in the majority among Canadians under age thirty.<sup>20</sup> Given their substantial weight in the population, the large rise in habitual non-voting among younger cohorts that has taken place over the last number of years simply could not have occurred without a significant “contribution” from those at higher levels of educational attainment.

The same conclusions about patterns of habitual non-voting apply when we look at another important socioeconomic variable, income level (Figure 1.3). Among younger adults, the increase in habitual non-voting with decreasing household income is steep, the resulting gap between the most and least affluent considerable (18 percentage points), while among older Canadians habitual non-voting among those in the bottom income category is only slightly greater than in the high-income group (a difference of 6 percentage points).<sup>21</sup> Yet the fact that income shows a stronger connection to voter participation among the young does not mean that well-heeled young Canadians have remained above the fray. The pervasiveness of the turnout gap between young and old is revealed by a consistent fourfold difference in the level of habitual non-voting between younger and older respondents at each income level. The problem of habitual non-voting among young adults is clearly evident across the entire socioeconomic spectrum.

These results point to a twofold conclusion. If voting patterns associated with education and income remain stable as younger cohorts age, then the contours of habitual non-voting apparent in Figures 1.2 and 1.3 will gradually reshape the socioeconomic profile of the active electorate as a whole. Those disadvantaged in various ways will, relatively speaking, be substantially less involved in electoral politics than society’s middle and upper crusts. As others have argued, differing rates of participation across social classes can have significant consequences, allowing for public policy changes – cuts to social programs, tax cuts for the well-to-do – that hurt the interests of lower classes (Lijphart 1997; Milner 2001). Habitual non-voters, though more likely to suffer the adverse consequences of such actions, are unlikely to vote en masse to stop them. The experience of the 1990s, when significant cuts were made to various social and welfare programs across most provinces with no obvious electoral response from disadvantaged strata of Canadian society,

Figure 1.3

**Voting propensity by age and household income**



Source: Statistics Canada, GSS 17 (2003).

exemplifies these political dynamics in action. Greater inequalities in participation in future years are likely to continue the trend. At the same time, an exclusive focus on the impoverished and poorly educated is not an adequate response to what is clearly a broad-based disengagement from electoral politics among younger Canadians. To enhance engagement *and* ensure equal representation for all, a two-track strategy is needed: to boost involvement among younger cohorts in general, while paying particular attention to those disadvantaged in various ways, whose interests are unlikely to be adequately represented without their own active participation in politics.

**Beyond Voting**

Before proceeding to examine factors that might have given rise to the relatively acute form of electoral disengagement that is habitual non-voting, it is important to take account of other forms of involvement in Canadian politics and civic affairs. While voting is an important facet of democratic engagement, it is also unique among participatory acts in that it is the only one with a participation target – the notional target, at least – of 100 percent.

For other forms of political and civic activity, there is generally no expectation that all will participate. We expect and accept that only a section of the population, perhaps a relatively small minority, depending on how intensive and time-consuming the activity in question is, will engage. At the same time, however, in assessing patterns of involvement across multiple realms of civic and political involvement, the reasonable hope would be that aggregate rates of involvement would be significantly higher. If it is unrealistic to expect that everyone will do everything in the civic and political arena, a more realistic ambition for a vibrant democracy is that most citizens will do something beyond voting.

One form of more intensive democratic engagement is involvement in a political party. Despite the voluble criticism sometimes directed their way, parties remain vital cogs in the democratic system, serving as important vehicles for the articulation of interests and ideologies, as instigators and contributors to public debate, and as the principal agents in the implementation of public policy. Any decline in citizen involvement in political parties must be of concern, for parties without partisans are unlikely to fulfill these functions as effectively as parties with a more robust and active membership (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000).

With respect to young Canadians, there is clear evidence that voter participation patterns are mirrored in trends in party involvement. As in other countries, Canada's political parties suffer from a dearth of young members. A survey of nearly 4,000 Canadian party members carried out in 2000 found that only 6 percent were under age thirty, whereas 42 percent were sixty-five or older (Cross and Young 2004, 432). Furthermore, the available evidence suggests that this is a generational rather than a life-cycle phenomenon (as would seem to be true in other countries too; see Whiteley 2007). In earlier decades, concerns were sometimes voiced about the excessive prominence and influence of the youth wings of Canadian parties, an issue rarely mentioned nowadays (Young and Cross 2007, 1). Surveys confirm a significant drop in the proportion of adults under thirty who have ever been a member of a party, from just under 10 percent in 1990 to 5 percent in 2000, a sharp decline over a relatively short time (Gidengil et al. 2004, 129-30).

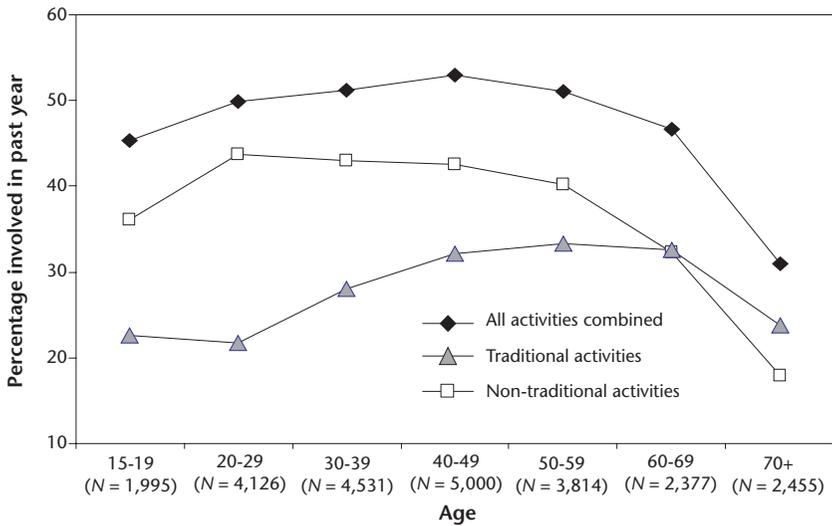
While there may be shortcomings of the parties partly to blame for these trends, there are broader issues to be considered relating to young people themselves and their propensity to participate in the political realm. Those who have closely studied the role of young people in Canada's political parties see their conspicuous absence as a reflection of "structurally grounded generational change" (Young and Cross 2007, 26). As with voting, there may be easy solutions that sound rather tempting (e.g., the parties should pay greater attention to issues of concern to young people), but these will not make a significant dent if the core of the problem lies elsewhere.

Yet there is more to democratic life than just voting and parties, and a broader perspective is required to take full stock of the problem. One important response to the debate on democratic disengagement, voiced in both Canada and other countries, is that young people *do* participate in the public life of the country, but that they simply go about it in different ways from older generations. This proposition goes hand in hand with the idea that the mores and methods of conventional politics – elections, political parties, parliament, and the rest – are out of sync with the sensibilities of today’s younger generation, hence their disinclination to vote or join parties and their preference for other forms of public involvement.<sup>22</sup> Whether for this reason or others, it is undeniably the case that the participation gap between young and old is considerably smaller for a number of measures of political and civic engagement beyond voting and party membership. However, a closer look at these patterns of involvement, based on the Statistics Canada’s General Social Survey of 2003, suggests that there remains significant cause for concern about the degree of public engagement among a sizable section of today’s younger generation.

Of particular relevance to the optimistic interpretation of engagement among today’s younger citizens are newer forms of participation motivated by a wide array of political and social concerns. On the Statistics Canada study, respondents were asked if they had engaged in the following activities in the past year: signing a petition, attending a protest or march, and boycotting or choosing a product for ethical reasons. These less conventional types of political activity have become popular methods of seeking to exert political influence in the past few decades. The survey also asked respondents about their engagement in three other, more traditional political activities beyond voting during the past year: expressing their views by contacting a newspaper or politician, attending a public meeting, and volunteering for a political party (a slightly broader question about party involvement than membership *per se*).

Figure 1.4 shows the percentage of respondents in different age groups who reported participating in at least one of these six activities in the past year, along with a breakdown into the incidence of involvement in traditional and non-traditional activities. The patterns contrast markedly with the sharp age trend for the core democratic activities of voting and party membership. For the six activities as a whole, levels of participation are more or less uniform, hovering around the 50 percent mark from ages fifteen to sixty-nine. The only sharp deviation is among those seventy and over, as the incidence of participation drops to 31 percent. Looking separately at traditional and non-traditional activities, the anticipated pattern emerges: the tendency for young people to be less engaged is more evident in the realm of traditional political activity. Among those in their twenties, the incidence of party volunteering, contacting a newspaper or politician, or attending a public

Figure 1.4

**Beyond voting: Other political activities by age**

Source: Statistics Canada, GSS 17 (2003).

meeting is 22 percent, a figure that climbs to 33 percent among those in their fifties (a 50 percent increase). For the non-traditional activities – signing petitions, boycotting or choosing a product for ethical reasons, and participating in a demonstration – the pattern looks similar to that for all activities combined: fairly even participation across age groups, with the exception of a significant dip among those sixty and over.

We might be flinty in our assessment and note that, on the whole, young people, contrary to the impression that might be formed from media coverage of youth-led protests over globalization, the environment, and other contentious issues of recent times, are not exceptionally engaged in non-traditional forms of political activity. In the same vein, it could be added that middle-aged Canadians manage to be *equally* involved in non-traditional ways and *more* involved in traditional forms of politics, suggesting a more catholic approach to political activity that may be more productive in achieving change. Consistent with this observation, among those aged fifty to fifty-nine who reported involvement in at least one non-traditional activity, 55 percent also reported participating in a traditional one, compared to only a third (35 percent) of those in their twenties.

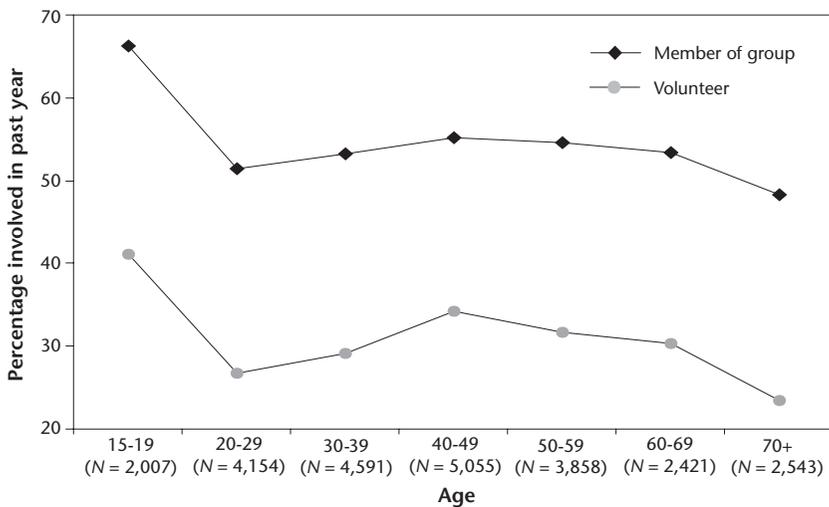
The bottom line, however, is that the general level of political activity “beyond voting” among young Canadians is comparable to that of older Canadians, suggesting the younger generation is holding its own outside

the limited arena of voting and party politics. The same holds true of two other forms of public engagement more civic than political: volunteering and involvement in non-political groups. The first is based on a question asking respondents whether they had volunteered in the past year.<sup>23</sup> The second is based on questions asking about participation or membership in six different categories of groups: school group or neighbourhood associations, service club or fraternal organizations, religious-affiliated groups, cultural or educational or hobby organizations, sports or recreation organizations, and other groups. Figure 1.5 provides no indication of any shortfall among young Canadians in these other areas of public involvement. In fact, the most active are those aged fifteen to nineteen, whose levels of volunteering and group involvement are significantly higher than any others. While this could be taken as a harbinger of a dramatic rise in volunteering and group participation among this particular cohort, a more likely explanation is that this pattern represents a temporary life-cycle effect, indicating something distinctive about the adolescent stage of life that facilitates these kinds of involvement. Aside from this and a downward dip once again among the oldest respondents, the age trend is relatively flat. There is no sign here of any marked age divide akin to that for electoral participation.

Thus far, the case for optimism seems solid: looking beyond voting at a wide range of other civic and political activities, there are few apparent signs of broader civic disengagement among young Canadians. The assessment

Figure 1.5

**Beyond voting: Volunteering and group memberships by age**



Source: Statistics Canada, GSS 17 (2003).

is less positive, however, when other socio-demographic factors that influence political and civic engagement are taken into account. Education, in particular, has a strong effect on all these extra-electoral activities and should be given due consideration in evaluating differences between age groups, given that younger cohorts on the whole have considerably higher levels of education. As would be anticipated, when each of the measures of engagement is examined within education levels, larger differences open up between the young and the not-so-young, especially among those with at least some postsecondary education. In the case of political activities (all six combined), the difference between those in their twenties and those in their fifties in Figure 1.4 (without controlling for education, that is) was just a single percentage point. When the same data are examined within educational categories, the younger group trails the older group by 9 percentage points among those with a university degree and by 4 percentage points among those with some postsecondary education but no degree. For volunteering, the uncontrolled difference in Figure 1.5 between twenty- and fifty-somethings is 5 points; the gap increases to 8 points among those with a degree, and 10 points among those with other postsecondary education. Finally, in the case of group activity, the uncontrolled difference of 3 points in Figure 1.5 becomes 6 points for those with a degree, and 12 points for those with other postsecondary education. While these age differences are not of the same order as those for electoral participation, neither can they be dismissed as negligible. And these higher educational categories, it should be recalled, represent the larger part of the under-thirty population, and indeed the more privileged segment that might be expected to be actively involved in civic and political affairs, given the well-documented benefits of higher education. Of course, without any analysis of civic involvement among young people of the past – analysis that would be difficult to undertake given the lack of suitable data sources – the possibility cannot be ruled out that the participatory proclivities of those in their twenties reflect a life-cycle pattern that will naturally correct itself with age, rather than a cohort effect portending generational decline. Still, the fact should be acknowledged that there are, once education is controlled, non-negligible differences between young and old in other areas of political and civic involvement.

The wisdom of applying such controls has been questioned by at least one observer (Arniel 2006, 100-4). It is mainly a matter of being careful about the implications that are drawn. To use education controls to argue that young adults are, contrary to appearances, less involved than older Canadians would be dubious reasoning. The level of participation in any given age group is what it is – inserting a control variable that ostensibly reveals the “true” level of engagement among younger citizens smacks of statistical sleight of hand. That said, it is surely worth pointing out that young people

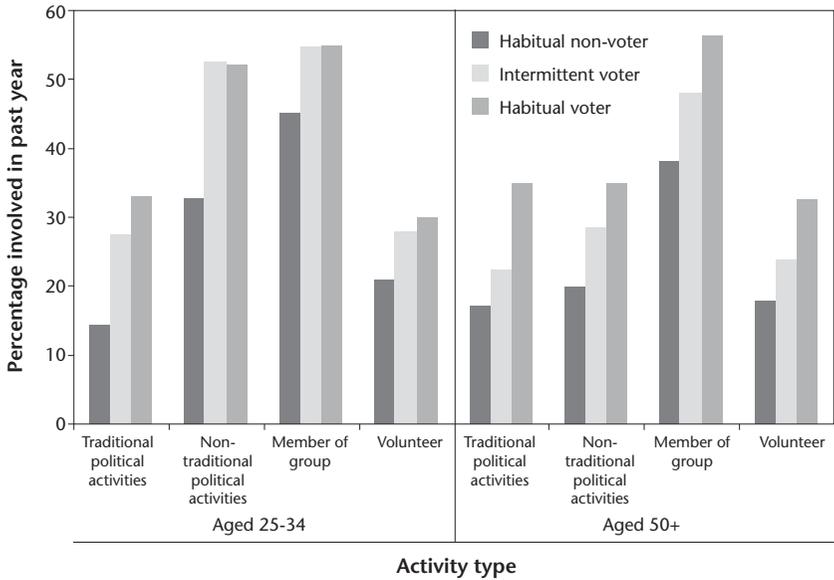
are less engaged than might be expected, given their education levels, and asking why the democratic dividend that would reasonably be anticipated from a sure and steady increase in levels of education down the years has failed to materialize. It is also worth contemplating what other factors might be at play serving to undermine the positive influence of education on various forms of public engagement. This is pertinent to a consideration of whether declining voter turnout among the young is an isolated phenomenon or part of a broader pattern of disengagement, for, as becomes clear in the subsequent chapter, some of the *same factors* that have a negative influence on electoral participation also tend to depress other forms of political and civic involvement. There is, then, value in drawing a circle around a broad range of political and civic activities and investigating some of their joint underlying determinants. In the one case, such analysis reveals why young adults vote significantly less than older Canadians and what might be done to close the gap. In the other, it indicates why young people are only holding their own in other realms of public involvement and what might be done to realize the full potential of their considerable educational reserves. The common objective is the enhancement of democracy through more wide-ranging participation by all citizens in different dimensions of the governing process (Barber 2003).

If the foregoing represents one reason to resist treating young people's involvement in other forms of political and civic activity as adequate compensation for shortfalls in the electoral arena, another emerges from closer consideration of who within the younger generation participates in these other ways and who does not. Pertinent here are the patterns of engagement across different categories of electoral participation. Figure 1.6 displays the percentage within each of the relevant categories – habitual non-voters, intermittent voters, and habitual voters – who reported engaging in various extra-electoral activities, for younger and older age categories. One would expect engagement of other varieties to decrease with a diminished propensity to vote, and Figure 1.6 reveals that indeed it does. Moreover, the pattern holds for both the younger and older age groups. There is no indication in these results that younger citizens who fail to vote are instead pouring their civic energies into other forms of public involvement.

There is, however, a more subtle difference between age categories worthy of note. Among older Canadians, the drop-off in electoral engagement is relatively consistent at each of two steps: from habitual voters to intermittent voters and from intermittent voters to habitual non-voters. For the younger group, aged twenty-five to thirty-four, the principal gap in extra-electoral engagement lies between those who vote occasionally and those who never vote; there is relatively little difference between intermittent and habitual voters (indeed in the case of non-traditional political activities and group memberships there is none).

Figure 1.6

## Participation in other political and civic activities by age and voter type



Source: Statistics Canada, GSS 17 (2003).

This pattern has a couple of implications. First, it suggests something about the character of intermittent voting in different age groups. For young Canadians, sporadic participation in elections seems to be consistent with being a relatively involved citizen, whereas for older Canadians it sends a stronger signal of more broad-based disengagement. One possible explanation for this is that conceptions of the “good citizen” (Dalton 2008) have undergone a generational redefinition, in that voting in elections is seen by younger cohorts as an optional element of citizenship, one of a larger array of potential modes of involvement to be taken up as one sees fit, whereas older generations treat consistent electoral participation as more essential. According to Stolle and Hooghe, there has been “a transition [among younger generations] from routine participation to a more reflexive and monitoring form of political involvement” (2005, 164). Yet there may also be a life-cycle dynamic underlying these patterns. It will be recalled from above that the high level of intermittent voting evident among young Canadians of both the past and present was interpreted as a reflection of ephemeral circumstances of young adulthood that impinge on voting, while the lower level among older adults was taken as evidence that intermittent young voters typically become habitual voters as they age and mature. The implication:

to be an intermittent voter at twenty-five is one thing, to still be one at fifty-five, quite another. As intermittent voting diminishes with age, it does become a clearer symptom of a deeper disengagement that goes beyond mere circumstantial non-participation. Early on, however, it does not carry the same significance. Thus the contrast between younger and older Canadians – the fact that young people who vote intermittently are otherwise just as participatory as habitual voters the same age – is not necessarily evidence of a new generational sensibility more inclined to monitorial and sporadic modes of participation.

The other key point that emerges from Figure 1.6 is that habitual non-voting sends a more consistent and unambiguous signal: failure to vote election after election *is* a reliable indicator of a broader disengagement that manifests itself across other forms of political and civic involvement. Some young people nowadays may be participating in alternative ways and keeping levels of participation within their cohorts afloat, but they are *not*, for the most part, the electoral dropouts. It is this segment of the young adult population, a sizable minority, that is more clearly a generational force, their absence from the public arena serving to gradually sap overall levels of democratic participation. These habitual non-voters not only eschew the polling booth, they are also less present across other sectors of political and civic life.

This important general conclusion should not be overstated, however. Habitual non-voters, whether young or old, are not completely absent from other arenas of political and community involvement. While they are relatively thin on the ground compared to more electorally active Canadians, some do volunteer, join community groups, attend public meetings, sign petitions, and so on. To provide a sense of the number who are uninvolved across all sectors, as well as a more encompassing portrait of engagement patterns, a global summary of the participatory dispositions of different age groups is offered in Table 1.5. To create the table, a score of 1 was assigned for engaging in any of the six political activities, for volunteering in the past year, and for participation in any of the six categories of group involvement (thus a scale from 0 to 3). Added to this was another score between 0 and 3 representing the number of most recent elections in which respondents had voted. Thus scores at the extremes of the overall scale (0 or 6) are unambiguous in their meaning, while intermediate categories represent various possible combinations of electoral participation and other forms of political and civic involvement.

Others have taken a more nuanced approach to summary measures of engagement. Zukin et al., for example, use a similar array of survey measures to identify “political specialists” and “civic specialists,” along with those who are both – “dual activists” – and those who are neither (2006, 63-65). However, it is important to underline that there are fairly significant correlations

across different categories of participation: in the General Social Survey data, these range from 0.21 to 0.46 for volunteering, group memberships, and the two types of political activities, traditional and non-traditional. The same concentration of activism has been found in European countries, where party members are more likely to volunteer and be involved in social movements (Whiteley 2007, 19), and those who engage in high levels of political consumerism are more apt to vote, to work in political parties, and to contact politicians (Stolle and Cruz 2005, 96-97). Certainly, we could take the 2003 General Social Survey data and isolate some respondents who are civically but not politically active, and others who are involved politically but not civically. However, the more compelling pattern is that it is the same people, to a significant degree, who participate in a range of different activities in the broadly defined public sphere. A simple summary index reflects this idea that civic and political participation are of a piece.

At the top end of the aggregate engagement scale in Table 1.5 are those Canadians whose engagement runs both wide and deep – habitual voters who were also broadly active in the past year in the political and civic realms. According to the 2003 General Social Survey estimates, about 15 percent of Canadians fifty and over fit this description, compared to 7 percent of those twenty-five to thirty-four. Just behind these civic stalwarts are those Canadians participating in all but one of the relevant activities – that is to say, failing to vote in just one of three elections or not being active in one of the three general categories of extra-electoral involvement in the past year. A further 20 percent of those fifty and over, and another 14 percent of younger adults, fall into this stratum. Adding the two together, just over one-third of older Canadians and just over one-fifth of younger Canadians can be considered relatively deeply engaged by this accounting.

*Table 1.5*

Aggregate engagement score	Age	
	25-34	50+
0	11.4	4.9
1	12.7	4.2
2	14.6	7.1
3	20.3	25.8
4	19.5	23.0
5	14.2	20.2
6	7.3	14.8
(N)	(3,642)	(8,236)

*Note:* See text for method of calculating scores.

*Source:* Statistics Canada, GSS 17 (2003).

At the other end of the aggregate engagement scale are those who are both habitual non-voters and who report no involvement in other activities in the past year, whether political or civic. Just over 10 percent of those aged twenty-five to thirty-four and about 5 percent of those fifty and over qualify as inveterately disengaged by this measure. Next are the minimally engaged with a score of 1, who report voting in just one of three elections *or* indicate involvement in only one of three extra-electoral activities – a further 13 percent of the younger group, but only another 4 percent of the older group. Adding the two bottom categories together, about one-quarter of young Canadian adults can be considered minimally engaged, compared to just under 10 percent of older Canadians, a sharp contrast. When comparisons are drawn within educational categories, starker differences emerge, as before: among those who have not graduated high school, about half (49 percent) of the younger group score 0 or 1, compared to only 13 percent of those fifty and over. Among high school graduates, the minimally engaged comprise 39 percent of the younger group but only 11 percent of the older one. In the higher educational categories, those with some postsecondary education and those with a university degree, the differences between age groups are less dramatic but sizable still: 25 percent versus 7 percent and 12 percent versus 5 percent, respectively. Given the aforementioned concerns about biases in survey-based approaches to measuring public engagement, all these should probably be considered lower-end estimates.

These final categorizations and observations are consistent with the general approach informing much of the analysis in this first chapter. The average incidence of a given behaviour in a particular age category is not always particularly informative and more is revealed by concentrating on subgroups that exhibit more general syndromes of behaviours and characteristics. There are some young people today who vote intermittently, as young people have tended to do in the past as well, and who are engaged at reasonable levels in other ways. This segment of the population is clearly not of principal concern. But there are other young adults who are more profoundly disengaged from public life, and their numbers appear to have increased markedly among rising generations. Rather than despairing of the state of civic and political engagement among young people in general, the focus should fall on the core of the problem: those within younger cohorts who participate substantially less than their peers and their elders across a broad array of potential avenues of political and civic engagement, and whose absence from the public arena, given their concentration in lower socioeconomic categories, is not inconsequential.

Understanding this significant strand of chronic disengagement among younger generations of Canadians is the principal objective of this study. The starting point in the following chapter is a preliminary overview of

possible explanatory factors and an outline of questions raised by these initial observations. This sets the stage for more intensive analysis in later sections of the book that further probe the more critical sources of disengagement.