Young Canadians in the 2008 Federal Election Campaign: Using Facebook to Probe Perceptions of Citizenship and Participation

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The declining participation of citizens in electoral politics has been a phenomenon observed in many western democracies over the past two decades. Voter turnout in Canada in particular has dropped systematically from a relatively consistent level of 75 per cent of registered voters in the 1970s and 1980s to a historic low of 59 per cent in the 2008 federal election. Continuing studies of this long-term process of decline have made it increasingly clear that the underlying dynamics of the phenomenon are largely demographic (Gidengil et al., 2004; Pammett and LeDuc, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Rubenson et al., 2004). While the gradual withdrawal over time of young voters from the active electorate is not the sole cause of the turnout decline in Canada, it is increasingly evident that generational replacement is both the strongest and the most important factor in accounting for changing turnout patterns. These findings have also emerged in other countries (Franklin et al., 2004; Wass, 2007; Wattenberg, 2002a, 2002b, 2008).

These declines in participation can be understood in several ways or from different perspectives. One relevant explanation takes a rational approach to explaining voting behaviour. From this perspective voting is

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Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique
44:4 (December/décembre 2011) 859–881 doi:10.1017/S0008423911000783

considered paradoxical, given that the sheer number of votes in an election makes the probability of casting a decisive ballot very small. Amendments to this theory show that people can be motivated to vote primarily because of a sense of civic responsibility, or to maintain democracy (Blais, 2000). However, if the sense of civic duty is weak then the rational decision *not* to vote rises. It could be that as the duty to vote wanes in the minds of young people, the rational part of the voting calculus is taking over. Although voting has historically been more of a paradox for older people than younger citizens, it may also be that it is more of a paradox today than it was a few decades ago.

Another point of view attributes declines in electoral participation to changes in political values and beliefs among young people. There is considerable evidence suggesting that long-term processes of social change have been transforming values in a number of ways, including those touching upon citizenship norms (Dalton, 2008a, 2008b; Inglehart, 1990; Nevitte, 1996). Perceptions of voting as a "civic duty" continue to be an important part of the explanation for high turnout rates among older generations of voters and younger voters alike, but evidence suggests that the norm of a civic duty to vote may be perceived differently among younger generations (Berdahl and Raney, 2009; Zukin et al., 2006). A growing body of literature sees changes both in the perception of rights and in the sense of obligation toward being a "good citizen" and suggests that this value change may help to explain declining turnout patterns among the young (Isin and Turner, 2002; Dalton, 2008a; Pammett, 2009). While turnout is a concern, there is also a need to understand the motivation(s) behind political involvement more generally.

We are not well informed about what contemporary conceptions of citizenship look like in the minds of young people and how these notions of citizenship affect their participation. While we know that the level and scope of people's engagement is typically reflective of their citizenship perspective (Theiss-Morse, 1993) and that attitudes toward citizenship can correlate with different avenues of participation or can affect obligation and behaviour in an electoral context (Dalton 2008a, 2008b; Pammett, 2009), existing research is limited in that it fails to address within-cohort differences in obligation and citizenship norms, particularly among those who report being less engaged and less committed to voting. A better understanding of the relationship between civic attitudes and turnout may help to explain both the paradox of voting and reasons for political engagement more generally.[1]

In this article, we hypothesize that there is a more diversified picture with respect to the extent and nature of engagement, conceptions of citizenship and perceptions of the duty to vote among contemporary young Canadians than has emerged in previous research. We do not expect young people to fall neatly into voting and non-voting clusters

Abstract. The gradual withdrawal of young voters from the active electorate is one of the strongest and most important factors in accounting for declining voter turnout in Canada and other western democracies. Because qualitative approaches may be better able to probe the reasons underlying these changing values and attitudes than traditional mass surveys, we used the popular social media site Facebook during the 2008 federal election campaign to collect data on young people's perceptions of electoral politics in the context of their civic obligations. This medium proved to be a valuable and productive research tool. Based on this project, we argue that non-voting tends to be seen as a more socially acceptable behaviour to young voters than is typically found in the thinking of older cohorts, and that this may be connected to changing concepts of the obligations of citizenship.

Résumé. Le désengagement graduel des jeunes électeurs est un des facteurs les plus importants pour expliquer le déclin de la participation électorale au Canada et dans les démocraties occidentales. Afin de mieux comprendre les causes de ce changement de valeurs et d'attitudes, nous avons utilisé le média social *Facebook* afin de collecter des données qualitatives sur la perception des jeunes électeurs durant l'élection fédérale de 2008. Cette approche nous apparaît mieux adapter que l'approche traditionnelle caractérisée par l'utilisation de sondages d'opinion. Au terme de l'analyse, la collecte de données via *Facebook* s'est avérée être une stratégie de recherche productive. En nous basant sur ces données, nous concluons que l'abstention électorale est un comportement plus socialement acceptable pour les jeunes électeurs que pour les électeurs plus âgés. Cette attitude pourrait être liée un changement conceptuel quant aux obligations associées à la citoyenneté.

but rather predict a range of civic attitudes and reported levels of political engagement. With respect to perceptions of engagement and obligation more specifically, it is hypothesized that non-voting youth will be less likely than their voting counterparts to communicate fuller conceptions of citizenship. To better understand the relationship between civic attitudes and participation we isolate three groups of young citizens: those who report strong intentions to vote, those who indicate weak or non-existent inclinations to do so and those who report mixed, or what could be considered middle-range, voting records based on inconsistent patterns of electoral behaviour. This strategy attempts to shed light on how differing perceptions of engagement, citizenship and civic duty are affecting the political behaviour of young people in Canada.

Facebook as a Research Tool

To date, survey methodology has been the predominant method used to study attitudes and orientations to voting. The 2004 ISSP citizenship survey, for example, asks whether it is essential to vote in all elections. National election studies in Canada, the US and Britain all measure civic duty by probing the degree of importance that a respondent assigns to voting per se. These survey questions conceptualize duty one-dimensionally and do not offer a means of probing whether the obligation to vote in elections has perhaps altered or shifted along with changes in citizenship norms. Furthermore, these question sequences do not allow for analysis

and comparison of voters, non-voters and those with more mixed patterns of electoral behaviour. Nor do they allow respondents an opportunity to expand on how they feel about citizenship and voting more broadly. Instead they force choice between voters and non-voters and inhibit a deeper or more nuanced interpretation, painting a picture of youth who are either tuned in or tuned out, engaged or disengaged, dutiful or not dutiful (Gidengil et al., 2003).[2]

Qualitative approaches, such as traditional focus groups, may be better able to probe the reasons underlying these responses, but often these experimental groups occur in laboratory-type settings which may not be entirely comfortable for respondents, and are therefore a less-than-ideal setting for obtaining unguarded and candid opinions, particularly from the young (LeDuc, Pammett and Bastedo, 2008). In order to gain a more reflective understanding of how young people today conceive of citizenship more broadly, we designed an online study using the popular social networking site, Facebook.

Facebook is an online networking site where young people connect socially and share information and ideas. It is also a place in which they feel comfortable, allowing for more genuine and reflective responses. Aside from its familiarity among the young, Facebook has many benefits from a research perspective as well. For one, it is convenient and allows respondents the opportunity to participate as many times and at any time of day they desire. Facebook also enables participation from home or other locations, further enhancing accessibility for respondents. It provides access for young people who are less inclined to pick up the home phone or sign up, and as a result are less available for surveys or focus groups. For the researcher, using Facebook is less costly, less time-consuming and makes it easier to target appropriate participants. It also logs the entire discussion, eliminating the need for transcripts and allowing multiple research questions to be addressed at the same time. Furthermore, it allows for easy follow-up or clarification with participants over time.

There are also some limitations associated with the Facebook interface. For one, it attracts better educated and affluent people and is therefore not representative of the entire population. Further, Facebook is not a political medium; it is a social medium, and participants are self-selected as a consequence.

These drawbacks aside, however, the responses obtained from this study suggest that Facebook may be a useful tool for researchers to generate additional knowledge and understanding in a virtual group setting, particularly with respect to young people. Although not wholly representative, many people in the general population share qualities with these Facebook users and many of them are not participating politically. Also, while this type of study does not allow us to generalize to the electorate

as a whole, it does help us to better understand what lies beneath these trends of non-involvement that have been documented in other studies.

Research examining turnout decline and all the phenomena associated with it rely primarily on survey data, which is limited in terms of the explanatory insight it can provide, or on small focus groups. This research design represents an extension of the traditional focus group, which helps us to better understand the civic attitudes of young people in relation to turnout. The Facebook group is larger and potentially more diverse than a traditional focus group. There are also more opportunities for contact over a longer period of time and so there is greater opportunity for depth. Finally, given that many people do not think about political issues until an election occurs, by engaging youth during the campaign we hoped to gain greater explanatory insight than more traditional styles of data collection (quantitative or qualitative) permit.

Research Design

The study was conducted on Facebook for four weeks during the 2008 federal election campaign (the three weeks leading up to the election and the week following). The project began when a call for participants (young people aged 18 to 26 in the Toronto or Ottawa area)[3] was posted on the Facebook Marketplace, a popular section of the website that resembles the classified section of a newspaper—advertising jobs, items for sale and items needed. Subjects were offered $50 remuneration for completing four sets of open and closed-ended questions in a private Facebook forum. Potential participants were required to complete a questionnaire that gauged their interest in politics, future intention to vote and, if eligible, past voting behaviour.[4] Based on this information participants were arranged into groups defined by low, moderate or high levels of engagement. By placing participants into these groups we hoped to minimize over-reporting and to reduce the potential of cross-respondent influences within conversations. Though over-reporting is a common problem in surveys and, while we cannot rule it out in this context, it is reassuring that many of the young people in our study had no problem being very candid about their lack of participation.

The first group consisted of self-identified probable voters, the second group of likely non-voters, and the final group included those young people who reported no consistent pattern or a range of behaviours (such as irregular history of participation; inconsistent levels of engagement, and so forth). Although ideally these groups would be controlled for level of education and gender, more female college or university students volunteered to participate in the study. The groups were subsequently balanced by gender as much as possible but do reflect a greater number of

females and higher level of education than is found in the general population.[5] Another limitation specific to this study is that no direct comparisons with other groups of older electors are possible, given that all of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 26.

Each week two sets of questions were made available to participants. Open-ended questions were posted within the Facebook discussion groups so that group members were able to post their individual responses as well as read and reflect on one another's responses.[6] In addition, closed-ended questions were sent to participants via private message and these responses were treated as confidential. Both techniques were useful in combination, as the first allows for continual interaction among the group members (as in focus groups), whereas the second provided an opportunity to obtain more sensitive information that respondents may have preferred to keep private. The nature of the Facebook group allowed participants to engage at any time during the week, giving them opportunity to reflect on the questions and their responses. The setting also allowed for follow-up questions the subsequent week in instances where responses contained conflicting messages or were not clear.[7]

The data obtained from these discussion groups was organized by constructing a number of measures designed to reflect respondents' feelings and attitudes about engagement and participation, the meaning of citizenship, and the role of a citizen in the electoral context. To evaluate the impact of citizenship attitudes on participation, we plotted these characteristics of the respondents on the X axes of a series of matrices. This format allowed for the exposition of differences between likely voting and non-voting participants along the response dimensions while also providing the opportunity to compare the individual response patterns across the different matrices.

All matrices have the same Y axis, which represents voting intention. Participants are arranged along this axis using a 5-point scale. These scores were calculated based upon respondents' reported voting behaviour, if eligible, in the 2004 and 2006 federal elections, the 2007 Ontario provincial election, intention to vote in the 2008 federal election, and whether or not participants actually voted.[8]

The scale for the engagement variable was constructed based on responses to four questions (two closed-ended and two open-ended). These questions probed respondents' reported levels of interest in politics, attention paid to the election campaign, discussion about politics, information seeking, and political informedness. All closed-ended questions used a 4-point Likert scale. Responses to open-ended questions were given a score between 1 and 4 based on their content. Once coded, the values from all four questions were totaled and divided by 4 to produce an overall *engagement* value for each respondent that could be plotted on the matrix.

The scales used to construct the conceptions of citizenship and citizen's role matrix followed a similar process. The conceptions of citizenship variable was developed based on responses to two open-ended questions that focused on probing respondents' attitudes about what it means to be a citizen today and their own personal expectations and actions as Canadian citizens. Responses were coded and assigned a value between 1 and 4 based on their content, then added and divided by 2 to obtain an overall value for each participant. The citizen's role variable was computed using responses to three closed-ended questions and one open-ended question that probed how citizens should act in an election campaign. Scores for each question were added and divided by 4 to produce a value that could be plotted along the X axis.[9]

Citizen Engagement

We hypothesize that young people's likelihood of voting reflects, at least in part, their general orientations toward citizen engagement. To explore this relationship, the matrix displayed in Figure 1 demonstrates the connection between voting record and other elements of engagement. At one end, for example, Sam, John and Catherine report being almost completely disengaged and not voting, whereas at the other end Iris is fully engaged and more committed to voting.[10] The quadrants capturing the non-engaged voters and the engaged non-voters remain mostly vacant, Ben and Debbie being the only exceptions.

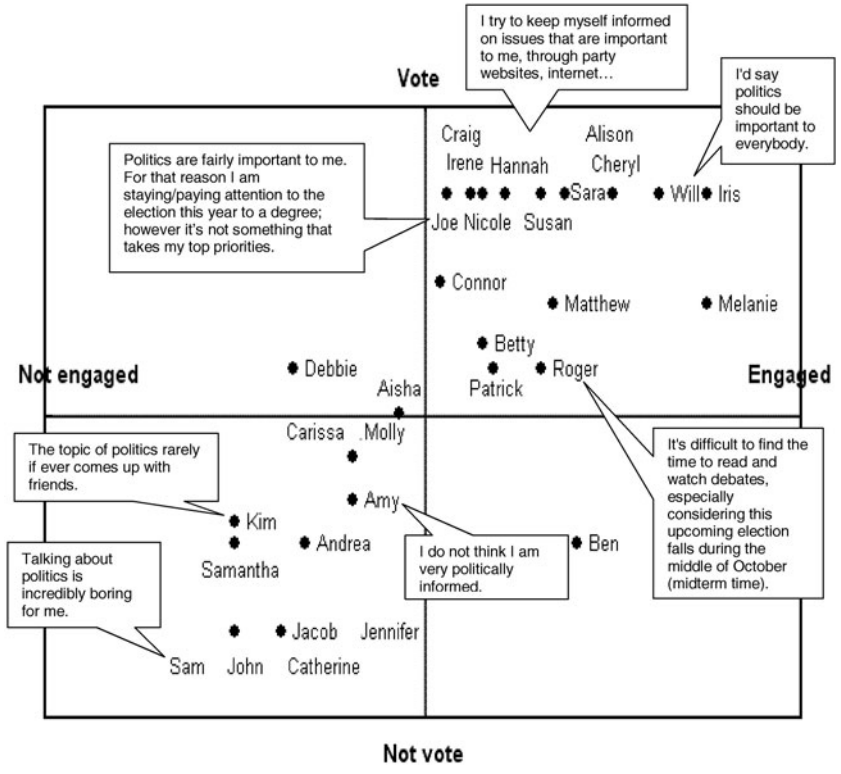
Those who report not being engaged and not having voted or intending to vote (at the bottom of the far left hand corner, for example, Sam, John, Catherine, Jacob and Jennifer) express a lack of importance of politics in their lives. These young people do not discuss politics and have little if any commitment to seeking out information about the campaign. This group is disengaged and content with politics not being a part of their lives. As 22-year-old John says, "I only really pay attention to the stuff that's shoved in my face." Or similarly from college student Jacob, "I am not politically informed at all. I just have no interest in that area at all. I rarely read the newspaper, nor am I in a social circle that cares about those things." And finally, from Jennifer we hear:

> As far as Canadian politics are concerned ... none of us pays attention and none of us really cares. We don't talk about politics any more than the occasional "Harper is creepy-looking" or "Maybe we shouldn't be in Afghanistan. Yeah. Hmmm. How about sushi tonight?.." I don't know who many people are, and I don't investigate platforms so I don't really know where anyone stands on any given issue, or what the debates are surrounding them (except for the obvious, controversial, "sexy" points that are so all over the media that they're more or less unavoidable).

This group appears to be virtually "tuned out," a pattern not unlike that found in other studies which focus on Canadian youth (Gidengil et al. 2003, 2005).

This sense of detachment and lack of interest does not describe all of those found in the non-engaged, non-voting quadrant. Moving up toward the centre of the grid there are somewhat mixed responses from Aisha, Amy, Carissa and Molly. This cluster cannot be considered entirely disconnected, since in some cases respondents' express interest during elections as a result of discussions in their peer group. This is reflected in Amy's comments: "Politics isn't very important to me in my day to day life, but when an election or specific issue comes along, then I get a bit more interested in it. Some of my friends are pretty into it, support specific parties." In other cases, these young people are engaged themselves but turned off politics, which they view negatively, and do not enjoy peer group discussions as a consequence. As Molly, a 26-year-old drama student notes:

FIGURE 1
Engagement and Orientations to Voting, with Illustrative Comments



> To me politics is a necessary evil ... I pay attention to what the various sides have to say, and watch election coverage on TV. I tend to not discuss politics, because I end up in heated debates which just end up in hurt feelings and anger. I do not trust politicians and find it best not to discuss with friends I'd like to keep. I could be better informed, but I do feel like the public only gets part of the story. I don't go to party websites, because I don't like being lied to in an attempt to gain votes.

Travelling closer to the centre of the matrix we see a mixed and inconsistent pattern of engagement. Some respondents appear to be more engaged and likely to vote than others found in the same quadrant, as they have friends who are more committed and sometimes talk about politics. But this engagement has not produced positive feelings, and there is little commitment to become more involved as a result. As Aisha says, "Honestly, I don't really plan to pay much attention to this election because I don't think anything special will change."

Crossing over to the engaged and voting quadrant, this negativity all but disappears. Among Betty, Roger, and Patrick we find a more positive attitude and a recognized sense of the importance of politics. However, there is also some degree of uncertainty and a lack of confidence surrounding their ability to find the time to acquire the necessary political information. This concern is expressed in Patrick's comments:

> I think politics is an important part of everyone's lives that me and many friends around me take for granted. I intend to pay attention to each election, but seeing that elections typically fall at inconvenient times (midterm time), it's difficult for me and my friends to find the time to stay informed.

The concern about being appropriately informed is found without exception in those who vote but remain a little less engaged, such as Hannah, Joe, Nicole, Craig and Irene. This cluster of young people makes the effort to actively seek out information and has a strong sense of commitment to being engaged, but they also feel that they are not as informed as they might like to be, or could be, as a consequence of the complexity of politics. These voters place a great deal of importance on the possession of an "educated opinion" when voting, as described by Irene:

> As much as I would like to think I am politically informed I know in my heart that I am not and that I am in fact fairly naive about politics. I often feel that there are not enough opportunities out there for younger people to learn about politics until they are almost forced to when they decide to vote. For the most part I receive much of my basic political knowledge from TV (such as news casts, debates, interviews, and so forth) and if a topic or policy caught my attention I am likely to do further research online about it.

It appears as though the greater level of importance they place on politics influences not only the level of engagement, but also the expectation

of knowledge about politics and a consistent pattern of voting and commitment to political engagement. Even if these respondents do not consider themselves completely or fully informed, they feel a sense of obligation to be involved and they are more likely to vote consistently.

Finally, as the literature suggests, the view that being an active engaged citizen is important is shared by those who have a strong sense of engagement and also vote consistently. Those who fall into the top right hand corner are deeply invested in being informed, have a strong reported propensity to vote, demonstrate a passion and affection for politics and exhibit a strong sense of civic duty. They consider themselves informed, talk about politics, read widely, consult websites to broaden their knowledge and are sometimes active members of political groups or online forums.

In a majority of cases this highly engaged group is influenced by traditional socialization agents and their current circumstances (such as parents, friends, job, and so forth), and yet in some cases this commitment is newfound and driven by an awareness of how politics impacts their lives. Will explains the influence of his parents when saying, "I think I'm slightly above average when it comes to political informedness, because my parents really care a lot, so it rubs off on me." Melanie connects her political passion to a recent trip abroad where politics could not be taken for granted, and her job which is also inherently political. In contrast, Iris has become more zealous as a result of seeing the effect that politics has on her everyday life. These respondents all share an emotive sense of attachment to politics and a sense of duty to be informed, which is less evident or completely absent in those who report being less engaged or have weaker inclinations toward voting.

Conceptions of Citizenship

Orientations toward engagement tend to be embedded in a larger conception of citizenship (Theiss-Morse, 1993). They reflect general thoughts about the connections between rights and obligations. Overall, two broad conceptions of citizenship are found in the responses of the young people studied here. On the one hand, some express relatively one-dimensional conceptions of citizenship, describing it as a contract of rights conceived of in legalistic terms. Others communicate more multidimensional conceptions, in which citizenship has not only legalistic elements, but also components involving duties on the part of the citizen. A few conceptions are even more complex and abstract.

The presence and intensity of attachment to broader citizenship norms and the degree of fullness in a respondent's conception of citizenship appear to be linked to voting orientation. Virtually all of the non-voters

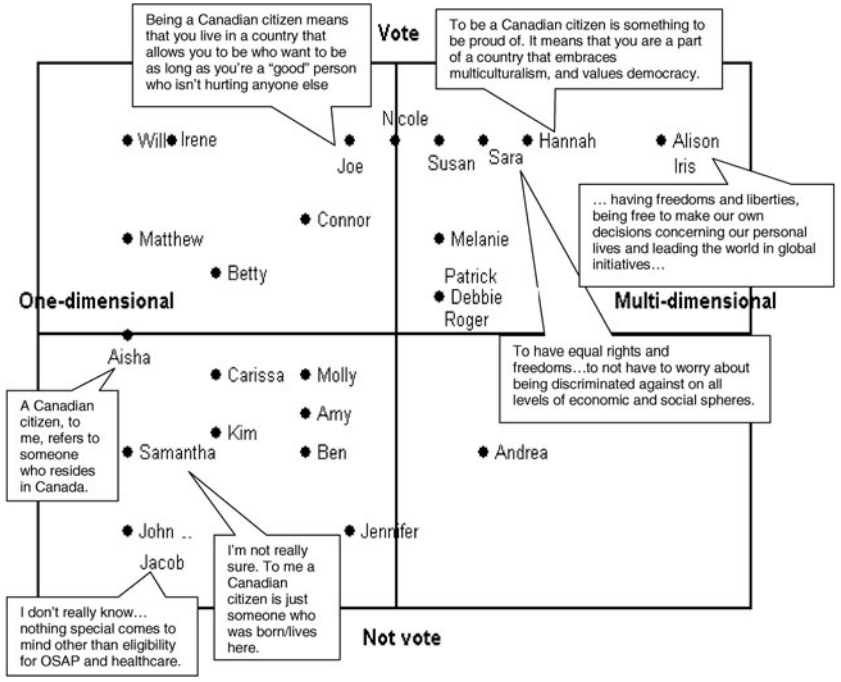
studied articulate a one-dimensional or thin[11] conception of citizenship, which usually excludes any feelings of emotional attachment to being a citizen. While there are several non-voters (such as Molly, Ben, Amy and Jennifer) who express some emotion in their comments and acknowledge dimensions of citizenship beyond a legal status and entitlements to rights and privileges, they do not explore what this might involve. Confirmed voters, by contrast, report either one-dimensional or multidimensional conceptions of what it means to be a citizen, and these descriptions are laced with varying degrees of commitment to citizenship in Canada.

Examining respondents' comments more closely reveals that there are variations within these two broad conceptions of citizenship. Though not always visually obvious in the matrix there are small clusters of participants whose responses correspond closely and that present slightly different images or interpretations of what it means to be a Canadian citizen. In the lower left quadrant of the matrix for example, although respondents describe one-dimensional accounts of citizenship there are three different variations within this pattern. While one group reports being unsure of what citizenship means beyond status and rights (bottom, far left), another views citizenship as a type of status and nothing more (middle, left). Finally, there is a group that recognizes rights and limited citizen responsibilities (bottom left, closer to the middle).

Those with very weak intentions to vote are found closer to the left (such as Jacob, John, Samantha) and recount strictly rights-based notions of citizenship that reflect a degree of ambiguity. John's comments echo the perceptions of the group when he says, "A Canadian citizen, to me, refers to someone who resides in Canada. Outside of that, I don't really know what being a citizen would mean." Similarly, Samantha, a 23-year-old university student from Toronto also remarks, "I'm not really sure. To me a Canadian citizen is just someone who was born/lives here." These descriptions reflect a one-dimensional view of citizenship and uncertainty over what else the concept might involve. These young people focus on rights in their responses and do not identify further components or responsibilities that may be associated with Canadian citizenship. Public life is not something they think about when asked to reflect on what it means to be a citizen. The conception these young people present is also characterized by uncertainty, and comments were accompanied by expressions like "I don't really know" or "I am not sure."

By comparison, those found a bit higher in the bottom left quadrant (for example, Kim, Carissa, Aisha) are clearer about the entitlements of citizenship, describing it as a legal status that entitles residents to rights and privileges but without the expectation of citizen action in return. For example, Aisha from Ottawa comments, "I would describe a Canadian citizen to be someone who legally has Canadian citizenship, lol[12]. I don't see any other way around it or any other types of descriptions" Kim, a

FIGURE 2
Conceptions of Citizenship and Orientations to Voting, with Illustrative Comments



20-year-old university student, echoes, "a Canadian citizen is one who lives and works in Canada." Although found in the same quadrant, these young people are more confident in their ability to define citizenship as a type of status with legal rights. Their depictions revolve around the individual and his or her legal contract with the state, offering no recognition or acknowledgement of the importance of community or sense of obligation, and no allusions to any broader nuances of what it means to be a citizen.

Finally, those a bit further over (such as Ben, Molly, Amy, Jennifer), begin to acknowledge elements of citizenship beyond simple references to legal status. For example, Ben, a 25-year-old college student from Toronto comments, "A Canadian citizen is someone who has citizenship in this country, to be lucky and fortunate to live a country where you can practice your religion and embrace your sexual preference without fear." Molly, who is plotted above Ben, remarks, "Being a citizen in Canada means following the laws set in place to ensure the safety of other citizens, and to respect said citizens despite any differences that there may

be." While Ben and Molly's comments do not reveal an enhanced awareness of obligation, their conceptions of citizenship are slightly more complex and are laced with varying degrees of emotion.

Moving to the upper left quadrant of Figure 2 where voting intention is higher, there continues to be a rights-based vision of citizenship, but respondents (such as Connor, Joe, Irene, Nicole and Betty) begin to offer additional gradations within their responses that demonstrate the belief that there is more to being a Canadian citizen than merely living and working within the nation. These accounts imply an appreciation for citizenship by explaining that being a citizen in Canada is a good thing. Although they do not denote specific citizen responsibilities to the state, the importance of some sort of commitment to the community, even if just "being a good person" is expressed. The closer participants are placed to the centre, the more nuanced their responses.[13]

The top right-hand quadrant of the matrix reveals two other variations or sub-conceptions of citizenship, both recognizing that the notion of citizenship encompasses more than one dimension. One group of respondents (such as Roger, Patrick and Melanie) identify citizenship as a multifaceted concept that should be appreciated but laments that it is not defined more broadly by the general public. These young people evoke a tone of moral authority, even superiority, in their responses, specifically in reference to others not behaving like responsible citizens or the failure of others to recognize what is great about being a citizen of Canada. Roger offers a candid example when commenting:

> Unfortunately, being a citizen of Canada today just means holding a piece of paper that tells you can legally be here and work here. Many ... take it for granted... It's saddening... Being a Canadian citizen (and living here) means it is your civic duty to take part in politics of this country, shape it and defend Canada first.

Melanie, a 21-year-old university student from Ottawa expresses a similar sentiment in her remarks:

> In my opinion citizenship doesn't really mean anything anymore. It means you live in a country and you have certain rights that everyone takes for granted, which has led to a DANGEROUSLY apathetic voting populace. I find that people would much rather turn a blind eye, and manage to epitomize the notion of ignorance being bliss, and then blaming their problems on others, when one of the most fundamental aspects of being a citizen is taking part in ... the political sphere.

Although these respondents identify citizenship as encompassing additional dimensions beyond rights, they express negative judgments regarding the public's perception of citizenship and practical actions as citizens. This group of young people presents two approaches to being a citizen:

a general definition that they believe is commonly accepted and practiced by others, and their own personal conception, which is broader and specifically recognizes the duty to vote. Patrick, a biology student from Hamilton, essentially refers to the distinction between "active versus "passive" citizenship, explaining that a passive citizen meets the minimum requirements of citizenship such as abiding by laws, "[having] basic rights, [and] treating Canada just as a piece of land they happen to live on" whereas a more active citizen seeks to play a role in the community and "want[s] to be involved and committed to society, and therefore, involved and committed to democracy." Patrick's position considers that young people like himself, Melanie and Roger see the validity of both conceptions of citizenship, but mourn the fact that many of their compatriots support the more limited definition. As a consequence of their perceptions of a widely accepted limited definition of citizenship around them, they themselves largely define it in those terms.

Sara, Hannah, Alison, Susan and Iris convey the same message more positively, describing citizenship as a multifaceted concept for others. In fact, the closer we move to the right of the quadrant the broader the conceptions become, and this seems to correspond with intention to vote. Those respondents plotted at the far right of the matrix conceive of citizenship most broadly, their explanations acknowledging various combinations of norms, values, ideology, national identity, national culture, national institutions, rights, freedoms and the importance of community as components of citizenship. In terms of Canadian citizenship more specifically, responses mention community, identity, protection of diversity and liberal values. Hannah, for example, highlights dimensions beyond rights when remarking, "be[ing] a Canadian Citizen ... means that you are a part of a country that embraces multiculturalism, and values democracy." Iris, a marketing student from Toronto, offers an even broader account:

> To be a Canadian citizen ... includes: being a peace-keeping nation, having freedoms and liberties, being free to make our own decisions concerning our personal lives ... and leading the world in global initiatives such as ending poverty and the environment. I think a true Canadian who lives and breathes these values should vote in the election.

The pattern of responsibility and broader conceptions of citizenship are likely closely linked and reflective of one another. The greater value respondents see in participation, the stronger their sense of obligation toward it and correspondingly, the greater emphasis placed on voting. Both variations in the right-hand quadrant highlight the importance of citizen responsibilities and there is some emphasis that giving back and contributing to society in other ways is also a central dimension of citizenship. All of these respondents report a strong intention to vote, which

is not surprising, given their broader understanding of citizenship and reported commitment to the importance of citizen duty.

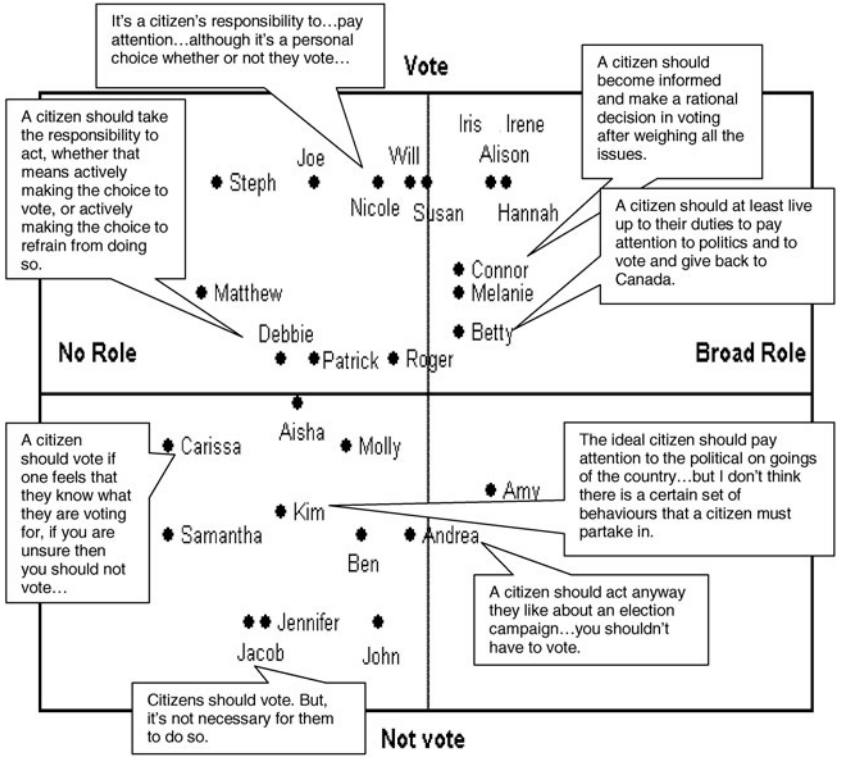
Looking at the matrix as a whole, the variation within the responses points to multiple conceptions of citizenship. Just as youth are not a homogenous group with respect to engagement, they also conceive of citizenship in a myriad of ways. In fact, the responses seem to indicate that these young people's patterns of engagement are partially reflective of their conceptions of citizenship. Generally, youth who identify citizenship as one-dimensional can be voters, but non-voters rarely possess richer conceptions of citizenship. While this matrix highlights how young people commonly conceive of citizenship, it does not systematically address their ideas about citizen action, nor does it offer a detailed account of their senses of civic obligation or duty. The next section explicitly examines their broader feelings toward civic duty.

The Citizen's Role in Electoral Politics: Feelings of Citizen Obligation

Open and closed-ended questions were designed to probe how respondents felt citizens *should* behave in an election, and how they compared this expectation with their own personal actions during a campaign. Responses reveal that while there is clear acknowledgement of the instrumental benefit for society and the normative self-benefit of citizens voting, being informed and involved during an election, there is also a recognition that this is not always the case, and that the citizen may choose *not* to be involved. In fact, an overwhelming majority of the participants expressed the belief that very little, if anything is actually required of the citizen during an election (see Figure 3, left side of the matrix). Only six respondents reported feeling that citizens are *obliged* to participate more fully. Respondents' perceptions of the role of citizens in the electoral context form a different pattern than the conceptions of citizenship or engagement explored above.

Within the quadrants of Figure 3 there is considerable variation in terms of respondents' personal conceptions of their role as citizens. Generally however, two central views of the duty to vote emerge, both of which draw upon the idea of an *ideal* and *practical* citizen. The first conception comes out of responses which recognize that voting is good in an ideal or theoretical sense but explain that in reality a citizen can act any way he or she likes. Many of the young people expressing this view are non-voters themselves and report weaker conceptions of citizen obligation. Interestingly, many of them also express shame when rationalizing who should participate as well as in justifying their own patterns of participation or lack thereof. The overall message among these respon-

FIGURE 3
The Citizen's Role During an Election, by Orientations to Voting, with Illustrative Comments



dents is that while it is good to vote, it is not always necessary. In support of this position, they draw on reasons why they, themselves, did not vote. While some non-voters express regret that they do not know enough to make an informed choice, other non-voters blame politicians, pointing to the unprofessional or combative nature of politics to rationalize their own lack of participation and responsibility.

More specifically, those non-voters closer to the far left of the matrix (such as Jacob, Jennifer, Kim, Carissa, Aisha and Samantha) report very weak, almost non-existent, senses of traditional duty and associate little value with voting, although they recognize that ideally citizens "*should*" vote. Those closer to the right, who are plotted at the bottom or top of the matrix (some voters and non-voters, such as Nicole, Joe, Molly, John, Ben, Patrick, Andrea, and Debbie) also acknowledge that citizens should actively take part and be involved in politics and though some stress the

importance of information, they emphasize that a citizen's only responsibility during a campaign is to *choose* whether or not to vote. As Debbie comments, "A citizen should take the responsibility to act as they feel they must during a campaign, whether that means actively making the choice to vote, or actively making the choice to refrain from doing so." Joe, a 25-year-old, also highlights this acceptance of not voting: "I think citizens have the right to act however they want in an election campaign. I mean voting would be the ultimate goal, but if someone feels they do not want to vote then I feel that is perfectly fine behaviour." According to this group, voting is a choice and not a necessary duty. These responses reveal that while this cluster of young people recognizes that "ideally" a citizen should vote in elections, on a practical and personal level they have a relatively weak sense of obligation to participate. Since both voters and non-voters communicate similar conceptions of a citizen's role during an election campaign being "optional," it is interesting to look at elements that might help explain what motivates both groups to abstain.

Both voters and non-voters report being "turned off" by politicians, given the unprofessional way they behave and the combative or negative nature of the campaign. However, voters seem to exhibit a sense of pride in their capacity to contribute despite this situation, whereas non-voters do not. For example Samantha remarks, "I believe that a citizen should vote if one feels that they know what they are voting for; if you are unsure then you should not vote because that one vote could decide our future in the wrong way." While she admits she wishes she knew more, she is not really interested, and rationalizes her lack of knowledge by referencing the conduct of parties and politicians:

> The candidates are just bashing each other every chance they get and they are only saying what we want to hear. It seems like whoever is elected never follows thru [sic] with their promises and we end up suffering in the end. In all honesty it reminds me of a high school popularity contest.

Similarly, a 24 year-old college student from Toronto, John, justifies his lack of voting by referring to the conduct of politicians:

> According to TV, "We're better off with Harper," and something about how Jack Layton is good? I don't really like TV spots—they're so stupid, relying on shallow processing. The whole "Yeah, this person is a baby eater, I am pretty much awesome. Don't concern yourself over issues" thing just annoys me.

John offers the following response when asked about how a citizen should act during an election, "A citizen should pay attention to the election campaign (though, really, how many of us really do?), and should vote." Like others with weak intention to vote, John and Samantha recognize

what citizens *ought* to do, but see real life citizen duty as minimal, given either their lack of information and/or dissatisfaction with politicians' behaviour. John's comments in particular illustrate a "why should I care" attitude with respect to obligation. Many of these young people also express little faith in their ability to make a difference. This may be an indication of low political efficacy, which literature has established is also commonly low when senses of civic duty are weak (Turcotte, 2007). Overall, even though the non-voters recognize that they should participate, they place the impetus for change in the hands of the politicians.

Voters with weak but detectible senses of obligation (in the top of the upper left hand quadrant) also point to the conduct of politicians but have greater faith in their personal capacity to have a say. They see themselves as having the potential to contribute. As 23-year-old Will remarks:

> I see a lot of negative finger-pointing by all the parties. As well, most of the things each party says they will do just seem really dishonest. I mean, none of those things will ever actually get done; they're just ways to get more votes. I really don't like that, so I ignore those and look at the parties' history at getting things done.

Susan also comments, "Most of the campaign ads attack one another, and instead of focusing on important issues, situations are being brought up that have nothing to do with the current campaign" but she still believes she is "responsible for remaining informed on all of the issues and voting." Although these voters also have a lack of respect for government, they have a sense of confidence in their ability to contribute.

Looking to the upper right hand quadrant of the matrix (such as Iris, Alison, Hannah, Irene, Connor, Betty and Melanie), the second conception of citizen duty emerges. This is characterized by a much stronger sense of responsibility, as articulated by the position that citizens not only have an obligation to vote, but to also cast an *informed* vote. These respondents not only describe more expansive senses of citizen duty, but are also those who report stronger intentions to vote and define citizenship more broadly.

This group recognizes both ideal and practical conceptions of citizenship, but their personal commitment to being a citizen is couched in a strong sense of obligation to live up to the expectations of ideal citizenship and the duties associated with it. Responses suggest that merely voting is insufficient and that citizens have a moral responsibility to pay attention, be informed, and educate themselves. Some comments stress the importance of representation and voting as a means of "giving back" and renewing democracy. While these young people also dislike government behaviour and campaign unprofessionalism, they express feelings of discontent or moral disdain toward uninformed voters. According to

them, it is a citizen's duty to be informed, and they judge the public accordingly.

For example, Alison's remarks highlight the importance of obligation and duty despite negative perceptions of politicians: "A citizen should be informed of their options before they vote in this election; during the campaign they should be open to all possibilities and not get swept away by the usual white-washing of parties." The importance these young people place on being politically informed is further highlighted by Melanie's comments. "A citizen in a Utopia would be responsible for voting, and doing as much as they possibly can to make an EDUCATED vote. The key word being EDUCATED, not simply following what a bunch of people have told you, or voting based on a 3-minute clip on TV." To these young people, the importance of voting is taken as a given, but being informed and making a responsible, knowledgeable choice takes precedence. They are not only critical of government but also of the public and what they see as a lack of commitment to being a responsible citizen.

Taking the data on citizenship and civic duty into consideration together, we see that this group of young people has delineated two distinct images of what it means to be a citizen and what one *ought* to do during an election. The first image recognizes an ideal type of citizen, with normative implications regarding what a citizen should do during an election and the campaign leading up to it. The second image, by comparison, is a more practical conception that reflects the respondents' *actual* contribution during an election and/or their perceived responsibilities as a citizen. Within this more practical, "real life" conception, there are many who believe citizens have little, if any, duty to participate. This indicates a normative acceptance of not participating, regardless of respondents' own activity. The strong presence of these two themes suggests that young people today conceive of citizenship and citizen duty in elections two-dimensionally—one dimension portrays the actions and expected behaviour of an ideal citizen, while the other explains the respondent's own reality or expectation of a citizen and attempts to justify his/her personal behaviour during an election. On the whole, these young people agree that, while voting is desirable, there are a number of reasons which make non-voting understandable or acceptable and that the choice to vote or not is in the hands of individual citizens.

Conclusion

This study suggests that voting is part of a larger picture of political engagement and that changes in the conceptions of citizenship norms on the part of young people contribute to lower rates of political participation among the group. The findings presented here indicate that those

who are engaged are more likely to vote; while those who are less engaged (or not engaged at all) are less likely to participate electorally. By comparison, young people who are more engaged tend to have a multidimensional view of citizenship—one which not only claims legal rights or asserts that citizenship can be taken for granted by virtue of place of birth or residence but that also involves recognition of broader citizenship obligations. Those with richer conceptions of citizenship are also more likely to be open to adopting a personal role for themselves in political action through voting and other forms of engagement, such as discussing politics in social circles and keeping informed. Many of those who are more engaged in this sense communicate a sense of empowerment and express the feeling that their vote has some meaning, whereas non-voters are less likely to convey a sense of efficacy or to articulate any attachment to the idea of participation. Non-voters or those less likely to vote are also more likely to conceive of citizenship one-dimensionally, placing emphasis on the rights associated with being a citizen rather than the responsibilities that are connected with it. While in general these young people feel that everyone should *consider* voting, it is those who feel that their vote has a personal or social meaning that actually decide to do so consistently.

The limited nature of this study means that broad conclusions should not be drawn from this evidence alone. However, the research presented here suggests that the act of voting can be seen as a culmination of a series of calculations on the part of young people passing the age of eligibility. Those young people possessing a multifaceted view of citizenship are more likely to express some form of pride in a society that fosters a greater commitment to voting. But the electoral aspect of citizen duty is not conceptualized as the necessity of voting as an expressive act, done for its own sake, even for many who are engaged. Young people respect the decisions of others not to vote, and, as a consequence, a large majority of this generation is unlikely to condemn non-voting behaviour as a personal choice. Though the nature of the study does not permit comparisons with older cohorts of electors, based on previous research these findings suggest that non-voting may be seen as a reasonable decision and more acceptable to young voters than is typically found in the thinking of older cohorts (Blais and Rubenson, 2008; Blais et al., 2002; Wattenberg, 2002a).

Conceptions of citizenship vary among youth, and these variances are not readily captured by survey data. To understand the nuanced feelings and political attitudes of young people today, it is necessary to explore and take advantage of qualitative approaches that are capable of drawing out those differences. Although additional use and development of Facebook as a research tool is needed, this study suggests that it is well suited for obtaining insights into young people's attitudes toward the political

world. Overall, the Facebook data revealed that newly eligible potential voters are not a uniform phalanx of uninterested, turned-off people, determined to ignore public affairs. Neither are they, however, eager to join the ranks of those who vote merely because it is the expected thing to do, no matter what the circumstances. Many of these young people take a middle position in the sense that they are prepared to consider an active view of citizenship, involving participative engagement, including voting only if their feelings of empowerment are substantial enough to make them conclude that this action is worthwhile or meaningful. Those who conclude that voting is worthwhile are not prepared to censure or express disapproval of those who come to the opposite conclusion. The large portion of turnout decline attributed to young people may in part be because of changes in citizenship norms and the fact that they do not perceive voting as an essential "civic duty" but instead feel that, in many circumstances, voting is simply not necessary or meaningful.

Notes

1 This article only examines the element of duty as it relates to the paradox of voting and not other variables that make up the turnout decision calculus such as perceptions of electoral competitiveness, attitudes about political parties in an election and the perceived costs of voting.

2 The qualitative nature of this study allows for more exploratory questions, which give more granular detail pertaining to past records of voting behaviour and engagement in other forms of political activities. Existing quantitative surveys probe respondents' attitudes toward a concept or value but do not allow us to obtain additional insight with regards to possible additional dimensions or elements that may exist in the minds of citizens.

3 This age range was selected because we wanted some variation in the age of participants, including some who would have been eligible to vote for the first time in the 2004 federal election as well as newly eligible voters in 2008.

4 Due to the limited size of the study and the risk of unduly skewing the conversation, any respondents who had a political science background were excluded. Each of the three groups was capped at 15 participants. At the outset there were 37 participants in total, only 31 respondents answered most questions and 28 responded to all four weeks' questions. Since we wanted to make each group as balanced by gender as possible, not all applicants were invited to participate.

5 Participants were asked to provide their highest level of education in the selection survey. Facebook users tend to be somewhat higher in level of education because it is a medium that was originally designed for communication between university students. Other social networking media, such as My Space, or Linkedin could be used to target different sectors of the population instead of Facebook. However, it should also be noted that social networking requires access to resources and therefore may not be optimal in capturing those with lower socio-economic means. However, since education and income were not the primary concern of this project, this was not considered a problem for the research reported here.

6 In most instances respondents posted only their own thoughts without commenting on the messages of others. Protocols employed in this study are available on request from the authors.

7 There were only two instances where follow-up questions were used.
8 For each election, respondents were given a score of 1 if they reported voting, a 0 if they reported not voting, and an *n* if they were not eligible. Scores were tallied based on the number of times participants were entitled to vote and this number was divided by 5 to produce a score out of 1. All scores are plotted along the Y axis between the values of 0 and 1. A value of 0 represents a very weak or non-existent intention to vote, while a score of 1 signifies a strong intention to do so.
9 With respect to conceptions of citizenship, the coding of responses was based on their richness and whether participants identified citizenship as being something multi-faceted and nuanced (a thicker conception) or an idea that is one-dimensional and only designates a status and rights (a thin conception). Coding of the citizen's role responses took into account whether a respondent perceived a citizen as having duties during an election campaign (no role constitutes a perception of no duties whereas feelings of obligation to vote or to vote, stay informed, discuss politics, and actively encourage others to participate represented fuller roles) and whether a citizen had any duties in addition to voting (such as keeping informed,)
10 All names have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of the participating subjects.
11 A thin conception lacks richness or recognition of multiple dimensions or nuances that may comprise citizenship. It is a basic account that refers to the rights or legal status citizenship bestows.
12 "Lol" (laughing out loud) is a slang term young people use commonly in writing or text messages. It signifies that something is humorous.
13 Although there is also some uncertainty present in these responses, suggesting respondents may also believe there is more to citizenship than they are able to recount; they offer more detailed accounts of citizenship in spite of this.

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