

## Disenfranchised youth voters ditch polling stations

Canada's 41<sup>st</sup> general election was one of the most exhilarating elections in recent years and the result is unprecedented change in the political landscape. The obliteration of the Bloc, decimation of the Liberal party and surge of the NDP had even the most seasoned political observers in shock. With a total of 167 seats, Stephen Harper's Conservative government has found the elusive majority his party has been chasing for years. That Conservative majority has lead many to call for a unification of the political parties of the left, namely the NDP and Liberals. The entrenched interests in both parties have effectively put these calls to rest for the time being. However, the debate around how to stop future Conservative majorities, possibly through a party merger, ignores the important reality that only 61.4 percent of the voting population bothered to cast a vote in this election.

In the weeks leading up to voting day, observers and pundits were projecting voter turnout increases due to the heightened engagement and excitement of the campaign period. Stu-

dent-led 'vote mobs' swept across the country and social media was buzzing with youth-created videos and election debate. Elections Canada reports that 14.7 million, or 61.4%, of 23.9 million Canadians voted this year. This is just slightly up from the lowest ever voter turnout in Canadian history during the 2008 election where only 59.1 percent or 13.8 million Canadians voted. Although youth turnout for the 2011 election has not yet been reported, based on previous trends the results do not look promising. In 2004 only 43.8 percent of youth between the ages of 18 to 24 voted. In 2008 that number dropped to 37.4 percent.

It's likely that youth numbers stayed relatively the same with only a slight increase in 2011. So what happened?

Cynics will be quick to suggest that youth are apathetic, unengaged and uninformed. But myself and many of my peers see the results as a reflec-

tion of something else. The results show that many Canadians, especially young people, are disenfranchised by the electoral system itself. In my many conversations with young people I hear the same response over and over: they didn't vote because they believe their vote wouldn't make a difference or count.

So would a merger between the so-called political parties of the left solve these problems? Absolutely not. The idea completely disregards

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the existence of the Green Party and the many other smaller left of centre political movements and ignores the fact that many pro-

gressive people view the Liberal party as a right-of-centre governing party. As concerning as consecutive majority Conservative governments are, the real issue lies within the electoral system itself.



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CANADIAN CENTRE  
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES  
MANITOBA OFFICE

309 - 323 Portage Avenue  
Winnipeg, MB R3B 2C1  
T 204.927.3200 F 204.927.3201  
ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca  
www.policyalternatives.ca

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Across the ocean, a debate on electoral reform has been raging within the United Kingdom. In early May, 2011, a referendum was held to move away from the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, the system that Canada is currently modeled upon, to the Alternative Vote (AV) system that Australia has been using since 1918. The referendum ultimately failed with around 68 percent of UK voters rejecting the proposed AV system. During the campaign the anti-AV and pro-FPTP status quo campaign gained considerable support. Many progressive voices ignored the campaign altogether and criticized the AV model as being nothing more than a hybrid of the FPTP system. Criticisms of the system aside, the UK debate is at least focused on the right topic: electoral reform.

Fair Vote Canada, the leading voice on electoral reform in Canada, analyzed a report by political scientist Arend Lijphart that studied democratic models of political systems across the world. The study split the systems into two groups: the majoritarian model, the kind the Canadian system is based upon; and consensus democracies, the kind that countries including the Netherlands are based upon, which use proportional representation.

Lijphart's study found that the consensus democracies have a diverse and increased range of political parties, increased voter turnouts and create an overall greater satisfaction with democratic systems compared to those countries that use majoritar-

ian models. It was also notable that Lijphart found that the consensus democracies had higher percentages of women elected and represented within the governing systems.

The electoral reform movement is nothing new to Canada but it hasn't received the attention and support it deserves. A referendum on scrapping the FPTP system in exchange for a Single Transferable Vote System was held and defeated in British Columbia in 2009. That same year, Fair Vote Canada launched a new initiative called Students and Youth for Fair Voting. SYFV is a self-directed and democratically governed campaign working with Fair Vote Canada to push for electoral reform. Following the recent election results, Fair Vote Canada held a national day of action on May 14, 2011. The event received little attention from both the mainstream press and from progressive movements across the country. Whether this can be attributed to a lack of excitement around the issue, election burnout and fatigue or general lack of vision or knowledge of an alternative system is hard to say.

So this election leaves progressives and young people with few options: we invest our energies in electing an NDP-led government, we admit defeat and boycott the system, or we work to change it. We cannot rely on the entrenched interests and mainstream political parties to start that conversation. If we cannot mobilize youth to participate in the existing system we need start engaging them in conversations and campaigns

on electoral reform. It's time for progressives to shift the debate and for youth to lead the charge. Whether the solution is a new system based on AV, proportional representation or some other model needs to be explored. But in the meantime, any solution that falls short of electoral reform is no solution at all.

*Jonny Sopotniuk is a full-time student activist and artist living between Winnipeg and Vancouver. You can follow his writings and work at [jonnysopotniuk.ca](http://jonnysopotniuk.ca).*



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