

Courting young, progressive voters

By: **David McGrane**

Winnipeg Free Press print edition, April 4, 2015 A15

Young voters are more supportive of activist governments that create jobs and protect the environment.

Several studies have established that young Canadians have lower rates of voting compared with older Canadians. But little research has looked at the question: Do young Canadians display different political attitudes than older Canadians?

I recently authored a study published by the Broadbent Institute that analyzed a data set of 8,121 Canadians, compiled using polling done after each provincial election held since 2011. The study looked at 19 different survey questions that explored voters' political values and priorities.

The study illustrated Canadians are broadly progressive on most issues. For instance, only 12 per cent of all Canadians believed corporate taxes should be decreased, and only 38 per cent thought personal taxes should be cut. At the same time, there was strong support for increased spending on health care and other social programs. When I divided the sample between young Canadians (those 35 or younger) and older Canadians (those over 35), it was clear young Canadians are even more progressive than their older counterparts on most political issues.

Young Canadians were more likely than older Canadians to want an activist government that creates jobs, ensures a decent standard for all citizens, protects the environment and adapts its moral views to changes within society. More so than older Canadians, young Canadians are willing to pay higher individual taxes to finance more spending on health care and education.

The only exception to this finding was young Canadians were found to be slightly less likely to recognize the existence of systematic discrimination against racial minorities and patriarchy (i.e. a male-dominated society) compared with older Canadians. This may be due to young people growing up in a world where racism and sexism were less explicit and overt.

While it may be expected young people are more idealistic and left-leaning, there was a surprising uniformity to the responses of young Canadians. As I drilled deep down in the data, I was struck by how young people from a large variety of socio-demographic groups and provinces lined up to the left of the national average on nearly all indicators of political values and priorities. No matter who they were and where they lived, young Canadians were generally to the left of older Canadians, and they were almost always to the left of average Canadians.

Manitoba proved to be an interesting and complex case. Similar to elsewhere in Canada, young Manitobans were to the left of older Manitobans on most issues. However, young Manitobans also fell closer to the Canadian average than youth from other provinces. In short, young Manitobans appear to be slightly less progressive than other young Canadians but still somewhat more progressive than older Manitobans.

Given that this survey was administered immediately following the 2011 Manitoba election where the NDP achieved a large share of the popular vote, these results speak to the strength of a practical and moderate social democracy in the province. According to our poll, 48 per cent of young Manitobans supported the NDP compared with 43 per cent who supported the PCs and six per cent who supported the Liberals. The numbers for older Manitobans were nearly the same (48 per cent, NDP; 41 per cent, PC; eight per cent Liberal). Overall, the key finding of the study is that young people are a pan-Canadian progressive bloc that could be a formidable political force in the next federal election. If young people voted at the same rate as older people, politics in Canada could be radically transformed.

The challenge for progressive groups and political parties is how to inspire young people to vote. I would argue progressives have to

follow two strategies.

First, young people may not be voting because they do not see their political priorities front and centre during election campaigns. Progressives need to use election campaigns to articulate policies that speak to young Canadians. My study identified education and the environment as high priorities for young Canadians, but lower priorities for older Canadians. Policies in these two areas may be good starting points for campaigns aimed at galvanizing the youth vote.

Second, progressive policies aimed at young people need to be communicated well and framed well. If a policy can't be hashtagged, it simply won't reach young voters on a large scale. Policies need to be easily digestible as opposed to long manifestos. Policies need to be framed as inspiring and hopeful, and they must speak toward both the present and the future.

Given that youth form a large, progressive and pan-Canadian bloc of voters, there is considerable electoral payoff for the political party that can motivate them to vote. One of the defining trends of upcoming federal and provincial campaigns could be the extent to which young people engage in the political process. If they do so in large numbers, watch out.

David McGrane is an associate professor at St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan. He is the principal investigator of the Canadian Social Democracy Study (canadiansocialdemocracy.ca).