



# Creating A Sustainable Dialogue Around Elections

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Election Readiness Toolkit Manual

# Introduction

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This manual has been developed to help community organizations, like yours support youth engagement and involvement when an election is called.

This is because youth 18-25 have the lowest voter turnout when compared to all other aged persons, especially in Alberta; and, we believe that this is the result of youth not being asked to participate in their community or in electoral events.

We instead wish to see youth gain the support they need to become involved. We also wish to see youth engage within the democratic process, on their own terms. This is where community organizations, like yours come in. Your involvement plays a vital role in increasing a sense of community and civic engagement for the youth you serve.

Moreover, we're interested in what young Albertans have to contribute. Youth have a unique perspective on policy, primarily because the concerns they have can be different from older citizens, but also because policies may affect them differently than they might affect older Canadians.

This means that younger people have important, policy-relevant viewpoints that are typically excluded from the democratic process. This exclusion can weaken policy as a result, especially given the significant youth population in Alberta.

If we are truly serious about creating fair, equitable, high-quality public policy, then we should be serious about engaging young Canadians.

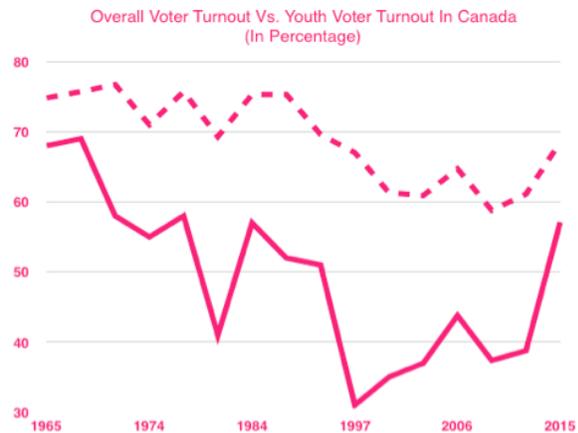
A first, feasible step in this engagement process is to encourage young people outside of the post-secondary school system to vote. This manual will therefore provide you with all the basic information you need to support the youth in your area during an election.

We hope that organizations like yours will use this manual as a resource to start the conversation.

## The Current Situation

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In the 1960s, about 70% of the eligible first-time voters cast a ballot in their first election. Since then, youth voter turnout has dropped significantly year-over-year. In 2004, turnout was near the lowest, at only slightly over 30%. (Elections Canada, 2016). 2015 saw an impressive spike in youth voter engagement, and we want this momentum to be built upon in coming elections. To effectively build on this momentum, however, we have to involve and integrate youth in the democratic process as early as possible.



The fact that youth have felt disconnected doesn't necessarily mean that they are disinterested and don't care about particular issues. Youth are far from being apathetic about society, politics, and democracy. It's about engaging with them in a meaningful way about the issues they care about.

Research shows that education is the most significant factor contributing to electoral engagement. Parental education is a key influencer on the likelihood of youth engaging in the democratic process (Plutzer, 2002). If the parents vote, then their children are more likely to vote, too.

Another factor is that the majority of young Canadians have not been contacted by parties or candidates during an election. In the 2011 federal election, only 40% of young Canadians were contacted directly by a political party or candidate. Results from a 2011 Elections Canada survey demonstrate that being contacted by a party or a candidate will significantly increase the likelihood of a youth casting a ballot.

Post-secondary education also plays a significant role in reinforcing the habit of voting. Attending a post-secondary institution reduces the effects of being young and rapidly increases the probability of a youth becoming a consistent voter (Flanagan and Levine, 2010).

However, many young Canadians have never sought a post-secondary education, and many of their parents never vote. Knowing this, we need to find alternative ways to support and educate youth to engage with our democracy. Community organizations can play a vital role in filling this gap.

## What's specific about Alberta? Youth are not voting.

Alberta routinely has some of the lowest rates of electoral participation in Canada.

Recent data indicates that Alberta's youth are the least likely to cast a ballot federally or provincially (Statistics Canada, 2015; Elections Canada, 2012). In the 2015 provincial election, overall voter turnout was 53%; youth voter turnout was much lower, at only 25% (Elections Alberta, 2015).



There are a few factors that could explain Alberta's lower levels of voter turnout:

Alberta is the youngest province with a median age of 36.1 years (Statistics Canada, 2012), has the lowest levels of post-secondary enrolment in Canada, and the highest dropout rate for both university and college (Statistics Canada, 2008a). Alberta also has a higher proportion of youth that drop out of high school than do other provinces, especially in rural areas and small towns (Statistics Canada, 2008b).

Because education and environment are such key factors in explaining rates of voter turnout and civic engagement, dropout rates may be important signifiers in exploring Alberta's voter turnout. This further indicates the need for resources and alternative spaces for education when it comes to democratic participation.

# Community Engagement Best Practices

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The better we are at engaging youth, the more everyone benefits. Here are some tips that could help you access and engage young people in your work (Apathy is Boring, 2016):

1

**Build trust** - Let people get to know you and your organization; involve the people, give them something to do; ask them for advice; celebrate their involvement and ask them to share their experience.

2

**Set out clear expectations and honest limitations** - People need realistic timelines and clearly defined responsibilities. Be honest about the time and resources that your organization has available. Voices must be included, participation must be recognized, and work that people do must be attributed to them.

3

**Encourage creativity and diversity** - When setting up partnerships, organizations need to take into account the reality of different cultures, demographics, and lifestyles. Regardless of appearance or personal style and skills, everyone needs to be respected for their abilities, knowledge, and the diversity that they bring to the process.

4

**Create safe spaces to deal with concerns** - Organizations must ensure that there are effective mechanisms in place to deal with concerns or difficulties that people may have. It is crucial to empower people to speak out and provide a safe environment when they encounter discrimination within your organization.

5

**Flexibility is key** - Remember that people often have other commitments and responsibilities. They might not be able to participate because of personal or financial constraints.

6

**Good communication** - This means being patient and listening to all of what someone has to say, even if you don't agree. People must feel that their opinions and contributions count. That means actively listening to them, treating them as equals, and allowing their ideas and suggestions to lead to action. Good communication also includes following up after the fact. This helps everyone understand the link between input and outcomes.

7

**Digital strategy can't replace personal connections** - Make info accessible online via social media, email, and a well-organized website. These are necessary to reach out to people and keep them informed, but remember that even the best digital strategy can't replace the personal connections that come from face-to-face conversations.

8

**Create a buddy system** - Recruiting people in groups, as well as allowing friends to volunteer and participate together, results in more resilient and longer-term commitments.

9

**Make connections between generations** - Partnerships work best when connections are made between different generations who have parallel experiences, interests, resources, and networks to share. Youth and adults have different skills to bring to the table, and it is important that the two recognize the assets in each other. Once youth and adults are engaged in a true partnership, understanding and empathy develops.

10

**Peer-to-peer contact** - The most effective recruitment strategy is a direct, in-person request. Research has shown that peer-to-peer contact is the best method for mobilization, and the more personalized and authentic the message is, the more effective it becomes. Studies have also suggested that personal appeals and pressures coming from people we actually know has a greater effect on deciding to get involved.

## What can you do?

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It's really quite simple. We know that youth are not being reached effectively, and we know that **peer-to-peer** and **face-to-face** contact is the best strategy for engagement.

You play an important role supporting the youth you work with in your organization. We want to help you have the conversations that matter about our democracy with the youth you work with.

Download, use and share the toolkit, which includes this manual, a video and a game.

- ▶ Read this manual, as it will provide you with context, best practices and tips.
- ▶ Watch and share the video, as it provides educational information about how the electoral process works.
- ▶ Play and share the game, as it allows youth to connect their everyday lives living in Alberta, to the different levels of government.

Continue reading to get inspired by the case studies of other fellow organizations working across the province on youth civic engagement initiatives.

If you want to go even further, reach out to Apathy is Boring ([info@apathyisboring.com](mailto:info@apathyisboring.com)) and we can support you with workshops, activities and other civic engagement resources. Contact Apathy is Boring or Elections Alberta if you need more information or have questions, especially when an election comes around!

## Case Studies from Organizations in Alberta

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CIWA  
Calgary Immigrant Women's Association

### Calgary Immigrant Women's Association

*Empower Immigrant Women. Enrich Canadian society.*

<http://www.ciwa-online.com/>

The Calgary Immigrant Women's Association runs regular workshops about civic engagement, helping to educate new Canadians about Canada's political system. Workshop presentations focus on voting rights and logistics, Canadian humour, rights and freedoms, and advocacy. Because of existing language barriers, the organization presents in two different levels of English, as not all of the new Canadians in attendance have the same grasp of English. They have also found that interactive teaching methods, like games and humorous videos have encouraged their youth to want to learn and enter into broader discussions.

*"If I just do a one off workshop, it's hard to assess whether or not someone will become civically engaged. But I would say (the clients I serve) do become civically engaged because I have had people come back, thank me, get their citizenship and ask for advice later. Our leadership training for kids is also successful in getting them engaged. When you have civic engagement clubs that aren't called civic engagement, it works really well!" - Shannon Edeonu*



Centre for  
**Newcomers**  
*Welcoming People from Around the World*

### The Centre for Newcomers in Calgary

*Our vision is the ultimate goal, the world we imagine for Calgary: A community that values diversity, in which people of all backgrounds find and create opportunities to fulfill dreams and participate fully as citizens.*

<http://centrefornewcomers.ca/>

Some of the Centre for Newcomers' clients have taken the initiative to create a volunteer group that shares videos and resources among their peers, with the aim of getting them acquainted with the Canadian political landscape. The resources are educational with a special focus on the Canadian political process and how to become engaged.

*“We have young people who are really supporting civic education. We have young newcomers who have formed a group to educate the newest newcomers. If they don’t understand the political system, they can’t be engaged. These youth are educating people through social media and video. They are showing people how the system works and it demonstrates hope for youth political engagement in the future.” - Ayotunde Kayode*



### **Peer Mediation and Skills Training**

*Simply, we teach the core skills necessary to create respectfully engaged citizens for the future.*

**<http://pmast.org/>**

PMAST youth took it upon themselves to partner with seniors in their community to clean up and breathe new life into a run-down public park in the area that had been taken over by gang activity. PMAST stressed that getting youth involved and teaching them about ownership and accountability is key when it comes to long-term youth engagement. This is an example of how having a shared goal and being a community stakeholder can encourage young people to take action, and how that action can yield tangible results.

*“A great example of leadership is a young person who voiced a concern about the relationship between young people and seniors at the local mall. His awareness that there was a tension caused the workers to find out why that is the case. They recognized that one common concern was a park between the residences and school. The seniors could see everything that was happening in that park and they were blaming the young people. So young people decided to work with the seniors and do a safety audit to make the park a better place. They then went and raised money to revitalize the park. The seniors and the students had a bake sale and they got enough money to make the park better. That’s all youth engagement. We focus on those kinds of things because if you can teach accountability and teach them to practice leadership, those assets are built up to give them tangible life experiences.”- Winston Blake*



### **iHuman**

*iHuman is all about creating workable pathways for Edmonton youth to live healthy lives. Through these pathways, iHuman staff work with youth to establish a support system and build trust relationships.*

**<http://ihumanyouthsociety.org/>**

Knowledge is Pow wow is a civic engagement program at iHuman that is spearheaded by Cory Nicotine, who was once a homeless Alberta youth. A group of young adults from Edmonton's downtown communities hear from leaders representing Indigenous, Catholic, Jewish and Muslim faiths and culture. Over four meetings, 12-30 year-olds shared food, stories, culture and personal stories to break down barriers of suspicion or misunderstanding. The series culminated in a performance showcasing the learning with hip hop as a vehicle to creatively express identity.

*"We have a program called knowledge is pow wow, which one of our youth started a few years ago, where the role of that program is to engage youth in civics and to encourage leadership, especially with the indigenous youth that we serve. [...] We have done focus groups and panels where candidates were able to come in and explain their platforms and the youth have been able to engage in conversations with those candidates at the municipal level." - **Catherine Broomfield***



### **Youth Central**

*Inspiring, engaging and celebrating youth through community participation.*

**<http://www.youthcentral.com/>**

Youth central often integrates civics and "how to vote" material into their programming. They also run mock elections, with the aim of getting youth to get a solid understanding of voting logistics. Many participants have trouble taking the activity seriously, and Youth Central organizers have pointed to a lack of understanding as to the connection between voting and everyday life when explaining why mock elections are not effective in creating habitual voters.

*"We need to explain in plain language, why politics are relevant to youth. Games that are interactive and engaging work best when it comes to accessing young people. You know you are on the right track when learning feels more like playing than being taught" - **Ros Doi***

## Thank you for reading this.

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Like all of us, youth are looking to belong and feel connected to their community. They are looking for opportunities to build community, gain skills, and contribute to something meaningful. Voting is one method in which youth can connect with their community and influence the issues that they care about. You play an important role in making this possible.

These resources wouldn't be possible without the work and help of many awesome individuals. Thank you to our team at Apathy is Boring: Caro Loutfi, Sophie Babinski, David Herbert, Grant Rummel, Alex Cole, Micaela Cayer-Rodman and Sajdeep Soomal.

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And thank you to all of the hard-working organizations who took the time to interview with us: Calgary Public Library, Alberta Council for Global Cooperation, Youth Central, Communitywise Resource Centre, Old Strathcona Youth Society, Beltline Youth Centre, iHuman, Calgary Immigrant Women's Association, YMCA Calgary, Centre for Newcomers, Pride Centre of Edmonton, Next Up, Peer Mediation and Skills Training, Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, Edmonton Youth Council, and Next Gen.

## About Apathy is Boring

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Apathy is Boring was founded in 2004, when a choreographer, a filmmaker, and a fashion photographer met at a party. Troubled by how few of their friends were actively participating in Canada's democracy, they started an online campaign to mobilize youth to vote during the 2004 federal election.

Since 2004, they have grown into a leading national, non-partisan, youth-led charitable organization that uses art and technology to educate youth about democracy, with the aim of increasing youth voter turnout, increasing youth engagement in the democratic process, and building a sustainable dialogue between youth and decision-makers.

The organization has distinguished itself as a credible leader by reaching millions of young Canadians since 2004 and working with partners as diverse as Elections Canada, the Office of the Secretary to the Governor General, MTV/MuchMusic, and many more to engage youth across Canada.

## About Elections Alberta

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The Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* gives Canadian citizens the right to vote in provincial elections. Elections Alberta is the official steward of that right on behalf of Albertans.

Elections Alberta is an independent, non-partisan office of the Legislative Assembly responsible for administering provincial elections, by-elections, referenda and Senate Nominee elections. Elections Alberta administers the Election Act and the provincial electoral process in this province. They are responsible for administering elections at the provincial level specifically. Elections Alberta actively engages in ongoing citizen outreach programs in order to insure that every Albertan feels their voice is heard. Initiatives like this one and others are part of Elections Alberta proactive approach to civic engagement.

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