



For immediate release

## Media Release

# Change of attitude needed to re-engage youth in the political process

## Young people interested in 'personal' issues, not national ones, says researcher

**ST CATHARINES, Ontario — May 28, 2014** — A Queen's University researcher says young people today are interested in political issues – they're just not interested in the same one older people are interested in.

And she argues that unless politicians (and the media) tune in to those things that interest youth, that demographic will not engage politically.

Heather Bastedo is the Skelton-Clark Post-Doctoral Fellow in Canadian Politics at Queen's University. She is the co-author, with Carleton University's Christopher Waddell, of a study that examines why young people are not engaged in politics. She is presenting the results of the study at the 2014 Congress of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Voter turnout has been declining in Canada for some years, and part of the reason is the fact that people under the age of 30 are disengaging from politics. For example, says Bastedo, about three-quarters of them don't vote.

While that doesn't represent an immediate threat to the legitimacy of our elected governments, she says it does threaten the longer-term health of our democracy.

Bastedo says a survey of young people in various parts of Canada shows there are issues they care strongly about – even if they don't care so much about politics.

The catch, she says, is that those issues are what she calls 'personal' and are generally local or provincial, not national.



For example, in St. John’s young people who were surveyed cared about public transit and the cost of food. In Scarborough, they were worried about police harassment, and in Montreal they were upset about the quality of secondary education.

“I found that seven out of 10 young people feel strongly about an issue that is not federally based,” she said, “compared to those over 30, where 60 per cent of the people have concerns that are national.”

Yet, she says, in recent decades the way politics is done and covered in Canada has changed – and that change has coincided with the decline in youth voting.

For example, she says appeals to voters are now based on what she calls ‘retail politics,’ in which strategists design platforms to woo specific groups voters and aim those platforms only at voters who turn out to cast ballots.

“The strategists don’t focus on young people because they can’t be counted on to vote,” she says.

At the same time, she says, news organizations have since the mid-1990s cut back on covering the activities of local MPs, and focused instead on national issues. So the issues that interest youth are less likely to be visible in the media.

Bastedo says it will be difficult to re-engage young people in the political process.

For example, she cautions against attempting to engage youth politically by focusing on social media. She says it is the young people who are already engaged who are using social media for political reasons. In fact, she says, social media may more accurately be seen as an echo chamber for those already engaged.

She suggests putting more emphasis on local issues in national politics, and getting local media to explain to their readership what goes on in the capital.

And she says she is encouraged by the fact that 40 per cent of youth whose issues are personal also report being at least “somewhat interested” in politics.

“It’s a little too early to give up on this generation, or on democracy,” she says.

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### **About the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences**

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