

Youth Turnout: Adolescents' Attitudes in Ontario

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Introduction

Declining voter turnout has been most pronounced among young adults. While antidotes remain elusive, we know that voting and abstention are habit-forming (for example, Blais, 2000; Campbell, 2006; Franklin, 2004; Gerber et al., 2003; Johnston et al., 2007; Plutzer, 2002). Initial turnout decisions made by those aged 18–30, approximately, set a course for their political engagement in adulthood. By implication, the immediate pre-adult years may offer important insight into why young people do or do not vote when they become eligible. Opportunities to examine this segment of the population are rare, because studies tend not to analyze individuals who are under the age of 18.

Our data come from a survey of high school students in Grades 10 to 12 conducted by the Ontario Students' Assembly on Electoral Reform. Our primary research question is whether people in the years immediately prior to the voting age—adolescents—see themselves as future voters. To explain variation in turnout views, particular attention is paid to four types of variables: socio-demographic, socialization, attitudinal and political knowledge. Findings suggest that socialization experiences and

Acknowledgments: An earlier version was presented at the 2007 conference of the Canadian Political Science Association in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. We gratefully acknowledge the valuable comments on earlier drafts provided by Keith Archer and André Blais. We wish to thank the organizers of the Ontario Students' Assembly on Electoral Reform who collected the data used in the article as well as Catherine Slakmon for the French abstract. Finally, we thank the *Journal's* anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

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Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique

41:3 (September/septembre 2008) 697–718 doi:10.1017/S0008423908080773

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some political attitudes have profound impacts on expected political involvement among teenage youth.

Youth and Turnout

In this section, we have two tasks. First, we provide a brief overview of the factors scholars tend to associate with declining youth turnout. Our second goal for this section of the paper is to evaluate collective efforts toward understanding of youth turnout decline given that the voting behaviour literature tends to ignore the pre-adult years.

Scholars estimate that turnout among young Canadians born since 1970 is 20 per cent lower than turnout among baby boomers (born 1945–1959) at the same age (Blais et al., 2004: 225). Similar patterns have been reported cross-nationally (for example, Blais, 2000; Franklin, 2004). Explanations for declining turnout among the youngest age group have tended to be framed in terms of a debate between life-cycle, generational and/or period effects (and principally between the former two effects). Within this, there are a number of variables known to correlate with the pronounced youth turnout decline: singlehood (Stoker and Jennings, 1995); greater mobility (Squire et al., 1987); lower political knowledge (Gidengil et al., 2004; Howe, 2006; Milner, 2002); reaching political adulthood in an atmosphere of political uncompetitiveness (Franklin et al., 2004; Johnston et al., 2007); declining levels of civic duty (Blais, 2000); a preference for non-electoral political participation (for example, Norris, 2002; but see Gidengil et al., 2004; Young and Everitt, 2004); value change associated with a “decline of deference” (Nevitte, 1996); and, relatedly, greater partisan de-alignment (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000).

Singlehood and increased mobility tend to be classified as life-cycle effects. Lower political knowledge, electoral uncompetitiveness,¹ declining civic duty, preference for unconventional participation, value change and partisan dealignment can be grouped under the heading of generational effects. While lower turnout and other forms of participation decline among youth tend to be linked with pronounced political cynicism, particularly in popular discussion, youth are actually no more cynical than other cohorts. In fact, youth may be *less* cynical than older generations (for example, Blais et al., 2002; Nevitte et al., 2000; O’Neill, 2001; Pammett and LeDuc, 2003). The point here is that there have been a variety of factors linked with declining youth turnout.

Our contribution to the youth turnout decline debate is uncommon in its focus on adolescents. Aside from notable exceptions (for example, Hooghe and Stolle, 2004; Campbell, 2006), work on turnout decline tends to exclude those in the pre-adult years. It is worth questioning how our tendency to study people who have already reached the voting age affects

Abstract. The last two decades have witnessed dramatic downswings in voter turnout. Turnout decline among the youngest voters has been particularly pronounced, even discounting for normal life-cycle effects. Voting and abstention are habitual, so initial turnout decisions set the course for the life span. Consequently, greater attention to the immediate pre-adult years is necessary. This is the task we undertake using survey data on Ontario adolescents' attitudes toward voting.

Résumé. Les deux dernières décennies témoignent d'un déclin dramatique de la participation électorale. Chez les plus jeunes électeurs, cette tendance s'avère particulièrement prononcée, même en tenant compte des effets habituels du cycle de vie. Le fait de voter ou de s'en abstenir sont une question d'habitude, de sorte que la décision initiale de participer ou non tend à déterminer le comportement pour la vie. Il importe donc d'accorder plus d'attention aux années précédant immédiatement l'âge adulte. C'est la tâche que nous entreprenons en nous appuyant sur les données de sondages portant sur l'attitude des adolescents de l'Ontario à l'égard du vote.

our thinking about youth and participation. As Niemi so astutely observes, “political ideas—like the consumption of cigarettes and hard liquor—do not suddenly begin with one’s eighteenth birthday” (1973: 117). Political socialization—how individuals become part of their political communities and acquire attitudes toward political actors, symbols and behaviours—is a process that starts in early childhood and continues into adulthood. Understanding young adults’ political behaviour requires more serious attention to the pre-adult years.

It is during the adolescent years that we can identify “empirically founded hints at developmental risks” (Krampen, 2000: 278) that may result in lower political participation in adulthood. For reform minded scholars and policy makers, this means that extending our analytical lens to examine youth (younger than 18), not just young adults (18 and above), holds purchase for devising methods for encouraging turnout. Our article is informed by recent work on the “developmental theory of turnout” (Plutzer, 2002), for we ascribe to the claim that turnout is a function of both “starting point” and “inertia” (41), that is, the likelihood one will vote in the first eligible election and the tendency for initial turnout decisions to become habitual. Our contribution in this article is to sort out the factors related to the “starting point” —specifically, what types of Canadian adolescents see themselves as future voters—and to draw out the implications for understanding turnout decline among young adults.

The Ontario Students’ Assembly Survey

Our data come from a survey conducted by the Ontario Students’ Assembly on Electoral Reform,² a process parallel to the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform. Among other activities, the organizers of the Students’ Assembly developed curricula for Ontario secondary

school teachers to use for teaching modules on electoral reform to high school students. For each classroom that opted to participate, the unit on electoral reform was meant to culminate in a Classroom Assembly on Electoral Reform. The data we analyze in this article come from a survey that was designed by the authors of this paper and then supplied by the Students' Assembly organizers to high school teachers as part of the in-school unit on electoral reform. For the most part, students completed the questionnaire at the end of the unit on electoral reform. Over 800 high school students representing 21 Ontario ridings completed the survey.³

These data have limitations. First, the sample is not a representative cross-section of Ontario high school students. The participation of classes in the survey was at the discretion of individual teachers.⁴ Second, the context in which the survey was conducted may have differed from one classroom to another. While the Students' Assembly organizers provided recommendations for conducting the survey, there was no central oversight to ensure uniformity in survey administration.⁵ As a result, we exercise caution about the extent to which our results can be generalized to the high school population at large.

Our dependent variable for these analyses is anticipated turnout to vote. The survey question used to measure this intention among respondents asked, "If there was a provincial or federal election tomorrow and you were eligible to vote, would you vote?" While general and hypothetical given its forward-looking nature, this question provides a picture of whether adolescent respondents see themselves as future voters. The anticipated turnout question provided three response categories: "yes," "no" and "don't know." The "don't know" option was included due to the possibility that students may not have previously considered whether they would vote and, therefore, may have no opinion on the matter. We exclude the "don't know" respondents from our regression estimations, opting to include only those respondents who had clear answers about whether they would vote if they were eligible.⁶

Theory and Methods

To account for expected turnout decisions, we begin with a set of background characteristics: gender (male or female), grade (10, 11, or 12) and religion (Catholic or not).⁷ We expect no difference in anticipated vote turnout between adolescent boys and girls. There have been no gender gaps in turnout for decades either in Canada or in most advanced democracies (for example, Everitt, 1998; Schlozman et al., 1995). If there is any gender difference in turnout, girls may be slightly more likely to view themselves as future voters (Hooghe and Stolle, 2004), a finding that is also reflected in the actual turnout of adult populations (for exam-

ple, Carroll, 2006; Pattie and Johnston, 2001). In their analysis of the attitudes toward future participation among fourteen-year-old Americans, Hooghe and Stolle speculate that gender gaps are less likely to occur in the adolescent population because political resources such as “time, money, and cognitive skills” are more equitably distributed among individuals in this age group (2004: 3).

The survey was administered to students in Grades 10 to 12, so our grade variable is ordinal with one category per grade level. We expect a positive relationship between grade and turnout. Students in more senior grades are quickly approaching political adulthood, and some have already reached eligible voting age.⁸ Therefore, voting may be more relevant to this group. Additionally, senior students will have completed the Grade 10 civics course that is compulsory in Ontario. These students may possess both stronger attitudes of civic duty, as well as the knowledge of how to vote due to this learning experience in the classroom.

Our last socio-demographic variable is a dichotomous variable representing whether a respondent is Catholic or not. The growing secularization of society may render the religious component of Catholicism (or any other religion, for that matter) less relevant for today's youth compared to youth of past generations, yet there appears to be something influential in the cultural legacy of Catholicism that makes Catholics more deferential to hierarchy and authority than their Protestant and other counterparts, even today. In addition, there is also evidence that Catholics are particularly collectivist or communal compared to their Protestant counterparts, an insight noted famously by Weber (1930) and which continues to comport with current realities (for example, Cohen and Hill, 2007; Cohen et al., 2005; van Kersbergen, 1999).⁹ Applied to turnout, the implication is that Catholics may be more likely to vote (or see themselves as future voters) than Protestants because of a greater sense of duty to fellow citizens to participate in collective political decision making. After all, “the core element of collectivism is the assumption that groups bind and mutually obligate individuals” (Oyserman et al., 2002: 5).¹⁰ In this sense, one might say that Catholicism is fertile ground for the development of civic duty, which tends to have a powerful positive effect on turnout (Blais, 2000).

We expect socialization agents (including family, peers and school) to have strong effects on adolescents' expectations about their future turnout (for example, Hyman, 1969; Krampen, 2000).¹¹ In line with the bulk of scholarship on socialization, we expect family to have a significant influence on whether students see themselves as future voters. Presumably, the actions, attitudes and conversations within students' home environments have important effects on their views about politics and on their expectations about future political involvement. We operationalize family political socialization experiences using a variable that asks respon-

dents the extent to which politics is discussed in the home, which is relatively common in the literature (for example, Meadowcroft, 1986; Valentino and Sears, 1998; Westholm, 1999). This is a four-category ordinal variable that ranges from “never” to “regularly.” Greater exposure to political discussion at home may instill in young people the idea that politics is relevant to their lives (for example, Meadowcroft, 1986; Westholm, 1999). Political discussion with parents may also stimulate political interest and generate new knowledge for young people, both of which create affective and cognitive engagement with the political system, consistent predictors of turnout in the literature on the adult population. Even when political discussion is initiated by children, not parents—a possibility rarely acknowledged in the political socialization literature—parents’ creation of a home environment where discussion and open debate are encouraged and where children’s political viewpoints are not trivialized are important components of the socialization process for adolescents.

This brings us to an important point. We do not conceptualize political discussion or political socialization, for that matter, in singular terms. Recent work emphasizes that political socialization is an active process that includes young people’s participation (for example, McDevitt and Chaffee, 2002). Consequently, we cannot assume that all family political discussion is initiated by parents. Children can and do initiate political discussion, sometimes as a consequence of exposure to politics in news media or in school-based civics courses (McDevitt and Chaffee, 2002, 2000). Socialization is a multi-faceted, multi-directional process, and we are cognizant of the fact that parsimonious indicators necessarily simplify the complexity of the process. In the end, we expect that respondents who report more frequent home-based political discussion will, for a variety of reasons, be more likely to see themselves as future voters than adolescents who are rarely exposed to (or feel uncomfortable initiating) political conversation in the home.

Our peer socialization variable is operationalized using a survey question that asks respondents about the nature of their group involvements. Respondents were asked about their participation in a variety of groups from student council to ethnic associations to organized sports. We are concerned only with those involvements where peer interaction can be assumed to occur regularly. Thus, we make an analytical distinction between four involvements that are focused quite obviously on adolescent peer interaction (sports/recreation involvements; community youth group; student council; other school group) and five involvements that are not (music/arts/literary groups; religious groups; environmental groups; ethnic associations; other community groups). In other words, with this latter group of involvements, we have no way of knowing whether respondents’ interactions in these groups are primarily with peers or with adults. The peer involvement variable is coded dichotomously:

respondents who are involved in one or more of the four peer-interaction groups receive a score of 1, and those who are not involved in at least one of these peer groups receive scores of 0.

While group involvement, even in seemingly apolitical groups, has important linkages with political participation for all age groups (for example, Erickson and Nosanchuk, 1990; Putnam, 2000), our interest in group memberships is narrower. We focus on group involvement as an opportunity for organized and goal-oriented peer socialization. We expect that adolescents who are particularly involved in groups with their peers are more likely to see themselves as future voters. Indeed, these active teens are likely embedded within peer cultures that emphasize achievement and motivation, and they may also have greater confidence and efficacy gleaned from their mobilization with other adolescents. Adolescents who are involved in peer-based groups have also probably acquired skills that can be transferred to the political sphere when they reach adulthood (for example, Hanks, 1981; Verba et al., 1995).¹²

Another important socialization influence is school political learning experiences. While high schools in Ontario have a mandatory Grade 10 civics course, other courses such as history, law and social studies may also have political relevance. As such, the school socialization argument suggests that the impressions students form of politics within these learning environments may have lasting effects on future political behaviour. To what extent do these courses pique the interest of the students in politics? To what degree do these learning experiences shape expectations of future voting? While these effects may not be definitive, our expectation is that students who have positive feelings about political learning in school will be more likely to see themselves as future voters. The variable we use to represent respondents' attitudes toward in-school political instruction is based on their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement "On the whole, learning about politics in school has been enjoyable."

It is important to note that school-based political socialization experiences extend beyond formal curricula, as well as beyond the confines of the classroom. While our focus in this article is on students' attitudes toward formal politics instruction in the classroom, the high school experience provides far more in the way of political socialization than is represented by this variable. Adolescents learn politically relevant lessons about power, hierarchy, and social class both in and outside the classroom, for example. These experiences comprise an important element of political socialization, broadly understood, a point made aptly by work on the so-called "hidden curriculum" (for example, Bhavnani, 1991; Gordon et al., 2000).

The third set of factors that we consider deals with political attitudes, specifically, the effect of adolescents' political interest and cyni-

cism on the likelihood of seeing themselves as future voters. We expect higher levels of political interest to be associated with greater levels of anticipated voting, similar to adult populations across the industrialized West (Franklin, 2004). Cynicism has received a lot of attention in recent years, particularly in light of dramatic downswings in turnout. While findings suggest that youth are no more cynical than adults and may even be less so (Blais et al., 2002; Gidengil et al., 2004; Nevitte et al., 2000; O'Neill, 2001; Pammett and LeDuc, 2003; Rubenson et al., 2004), there is an important strain of cynicism pervading youth attitudes toward politics. We expect that the most cynical youths will be least likely to anticipate turning out to vote once they become eligible. Our models include two types of political disaffection: cynicism toward political parties and cynicism toward politicians. Cynical attitudes towards parties are measured by responses to the statement, "all parties are basically the same; there isn't really a choice"; for politicians, respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement, "politicians are ready to lie to get elected."¹³ For both variables, response options comprise a scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Given that cynicism toward politics and politicians is relatively widespread, it is likely that intentions to become a voter will be lower among the more cynical adolescents compared to the less cynical.

The last factor we incorporate in our analyses is political knowledge. The positive relationship between knowledge and turnout is one of the most robust and enduring in the political behaviour literature (for example, Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Gidengil et al., 2004; Popkin, 1991; Popkin and Dimock, 1999). As such, we expect that the highly knowledgeable will be much more likely than the least knowledgeable to see themselves as future voters. Our political knowledge variable is an index; scores are assigned based on respondents' answers to 10 political knowledge questions.¹⁴ Each additional knowledge question answered correctly increases a respondent's score by one point to a maximum of 10 points for a perfect score.

While a variety of additional explanatory variables have potential relevance for our central research question, exclusions were necessary based on the focus of the paper and the availability of appropriate indicators. For example, data on parents' and teachers' own attitudes and political engagement could add richness to the analysis through permitting us to tease out the effect of various agents of socialization. In line with recent work by Johnston and his colleagues (2007), the inclusion of survey questions about respondents' perceptions of political competitiveness (or uncompetitiveness) would have likewise permitted us to test the theory that the nature of political competition during one's youth affects attitudes toward turnout.¹⁵

We model the effects of these variables on future turnout in a sequential manner.¹⁶ The future voter model is estimated first as a baseline model

that includes only socio-demographic variables. Variables representing socialization, political attitudes and political knowledge are introduced in subsequent estimations. We proceed in this fashion based on the theoretical assumption that there is a temporal logic to factors affecting anticipated turnout. In this sense, we suggest that there is a causal ordering of effects on anticipated turnout and some variables are both further from the turnout decision (for example, gender) and work through variables introduced later in the models. By contrast, we contend that other variables (such as cynicism or political interest) are closer to the turnout decision and are a function of the prior variables included in the model (such as various agents of socialization).¹⁷ Models are estimated using logistic regression because the dependent variable is dichotomous.

Results

Distribution of Dependent Variable

Starting with a distribution of the dependent variable, expected future turnout, a large portion of adolescents would vote if an election were held tomorrow and they were eligible. As Table 1 indicates, among those students who had clear intentions about future turnout, almost 78 per cent would vote, and about 22 per cent would not vote. This distribution is nearly identical to future turnout reported by 14-year old Americans (Hooghe and Stolle, 2004).

While one reading of this distribution could be optimism for ameliorating turnout decline among youth, caution is warranted. Over-reporting of turnout is perennial (for example, Karp and Brockington, 2005). Among respondents to the 2006 Canadian Election Study, about 90 per cent claimed they voted in the federal election, while actual turnout was just under 65 per cent.¹⁸ Over-reporting of turnout is due to self-selection of survey respondents and social desirability bias. Predictably,

TABLE 1

If there was a provincial or federal election tomorrow and you were eligible to vote, would you vote?

Yes	78% (508)
No	22% (140)
Total	100% (648)

Source: *The Students' Assembly Survey on Youth Attitudes to Democracy and Political Participation*

people who vote are more likely to participate in political surveys due to interest in politics or feelings of duty to contribute to political life. Additionally, because voting is a socially desirable behaviour, there are always non-voters in a sample who do not want to reveal their abstention.

A second reason to be cautious about the high rates of future turnout concerns the context in which the survey was conducted. For the most part, students completed the survey after a unit of classroom instruction about electoral reform. It is possible that students were primed to think about political participation, and the unit on electoral reform may have stimulated political interest that would not otherwise exist in the sample. While this potential bias is important to bear in mind for our data analyses, in the larger scenario, if political instruction stimulates participatory attitudes among adolescents, civic education may help reverse youth turnout decline. Indeed, this has been part of the rationale behind the (re)introduction of high school civics classes in Ontario and other provinces in the last few years.

Future Voter Models

Results from regression analyses are presented in Table 2. As previously discussed, estimations proceeded in four stages whereby socio-demographic variables, socialization variables, attitudinal and cognitive variables were introduced sequentially as blocs. Starting with the impact of grade level, model 1 suggests that our prediction is correct. An increase of one grade level (from Grade 10 to Grade 11, for instance) is associated with a 40 per cent increase in the likelihood of future voting. This result may reflect the fact that politics may be more relevant to adolescents nearing voting age. In addition, the senior students had completed the mandatory Grade 10 civics course by the time our survey was administered, and this course may have boosted feelings of civic duty among these older students, which is an important predictor of turnout (Blais, 2000). Results from model 1 also suggest that Catholic youth are 85 points more likely to vote than their non-Catholic counterparts. This suggests an enduring influence of Catholicism on turnout, even among the most secular segment of the population. Gender has no significant effect on future turnout, as predicted. Finally, the very small pseudo- R^2 (0.03) indicates that the model explains little variance in the dependent variable. Clearly, there are other factors at work.

Model 2 introduces variables associated with socialization experiences: family political discussion, involvement in peer groups and experiences with political instruction in the classroom. Each of the socialization measures has a significant and positive correlation with anticipated turnout. Predictably, habitual political discussion in the family has the strongest effect on whether students see themselves as future voters, which is

TABLE 2
Logistic Regression of Anticipated Turnout among Adolescents

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Socio-Demographics	Female	-0.17 (.20) <i>.84</i>	0.01 (.23) <i>1.01</i>	0.15 (.28) <i>1.16</i>	0.13 (.29) <i>1.14</i>
	Catholic	0.62 (.20) ^a <i>1.85</i>	0.71 (.23) ^a <i>2.03</i>	1.01 (.29) ^a <i>2.76</i>	1.02 (.29) ^a <i>2.76</i>
	Grade	0.34 (.14) ^b <i>1.40</i>	0.17 (.16) <i>1.19</i>	0.06 (.20) <i>1.06</i>	-0.06 (.20) <i>1.06</i>
Socialization	Peer group		0.67 (.23) ^a <i>1.95</i>	0.91 (.28) ^a <i>2.49</i>	0.92 (.28) ^a <i>2.50</i>
	Family discuss		0.84 (.14) ^a <i>2.31</i>	0.61 (.18) ^a <i>1.85</i>	0.65 (.19) ^a <i>1.92</i>
	Like learning		0.46 (.12) ^a <i>1.58</i>	0.39 (.17) ^b <i>1.47</i>	0.39 (.17) ^b <i>1.47</i>
Attitudinal	Parties same			-0.54 (.15) ^a <i>.58</i>	-0.57 (.15) ^a <i>.56</i>
	Politicians lie			0.12 (.16) <i>1.12</i>	0.13 (.16) <i>1.14</i>
	Interest			0.25 (.07) ^a <i>1.28</i>	0.27 (.07) ^a <i>1.31</i>
Cognitive	Knowledge				-0.08 (.08) <i>.92</i>
	Constant	0.55 (.29) ^c	-1.08 (.40) ^a	-1.35 (.65) ^b	-1.05 (.72)
	(n)	(633)	(605)	(502)	(502)
pseudo R ²		0.03	0.17	0.26	0.27

Source: *The Students' Assembly Survey on Youth Attitudes to Democracy and Political Participation*

Note: Dependent variable is whether adolescents would vote in a hypothetical provincial or federal election if they were eligible. Cells contain binary logistic regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses, and odds ratios in italics.

^ap < .01; ^bp < .05; ^cp < .1.

in line with the notion that family is the earliest and most influential agent of political socialization (for example, Hyman, 1969).

The family is not the only important agent of political socialization. Students who are involved in at least one peer group are 75 per cent more likely to see themselves as future voters than those not involved in at least one peer group. This result indicates the potential importance of associational activities for fostering participation in political life, a finding consistent with work on social capital and the potential for ostensibly apolitical organizations to politicize (Putnam, 2000; Erickson and Nosanchuk, 1990).

A final component of socialization included in the model measures adolescents' experiences learning about politics in school. Presumably, all things being equal, an enjoyable experience with political learning in school should (hopefully) dispose one to becoming politically involved when reaching adulthood. For each one-unit increase (on the four-point scale) in learning enjoyment, the likelihood of seeing oneself as a future voter increases by about 58 per cent.¹⁹ This result is interesting for a few reasons. First, it demonstrates the importance of school experiences on the development of political attitudes and behaviours. When students enjoy learning about politics, they become more inclined toward political participation. From a public policy perspective, this result suggests that addressing the quality and nature of high school political learning experiences may be a means for increasing future turnout among today's youth.

The third model incorporates a bloc of attitudinal variables. Popular discussion of turnout decline tends to lay the blame on disaffection and cynicism toward politics. Our results partially support this logic. For each one-unit increase in cynicism towards political parties, the likelihood of future turnout declines by 42 per cent.²⁰ By contrast, cynicism toward politicians has no independent effect on anticipated turnout among students. These contrasting results are interesting and deserve further discussion.

To start, general cynicism towards political parties is not greater than cynicism toward politicians. On a 0 to 3 scale where 3 is most cynical, the mean score for cynicism towards parties is 1.03, and the mean for cynicism towards politicians is 2.14. These adolescents are much more cynical toward politicians than they are of parties. However, what appears to drive declining intentions to vote is not cynicism writ large or cynicism toward politicians, but rather cynicism towards parties. As such, the youth who are most cynical toward parties are also the least likely see themselves as future voters. Why do cynical attitudes toward parties, but not politicians, play such an influential role in anticipated turnout among youth? Perhaps youth feel that none of the parties adequately addresses the issues most important to youth, giving youth a sense that parties are "all the same" in their relative neglect of young people.

Unsurprisingly, politically interested youth are more likely to see themselves at the ballot box in the future. Moving up one unit on the political interest scale (coded 1 to 10, representing ascending levels of interest), the likelihood of seeing oneself as a future voter increases by about 28 per cent. While socialization likely precedes political interest (particularly among youth), higher levels of political interest increase anticipated voting, controlling for all other variables in the model and independent of prior socialization effects.²¹

Finally, the addition of political knowledge in the final model produces unexpected and perplexing results. Most work demonstrates that knowledge has a dramatic influence on political behaviours, and boosting turnout is one of the most consistent effects of higher political knowledge (for example, Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Gidengil et al., 2004; Milner, 2002; Popkin, 1991; Popkin and Dimock, 1999). Results from model 4 suggest, however, that knowledge has no significant effect on whether adolescents would vote in an election if they were eligible.

The unanticipated result for our knowledge index warrants further investigation. Looking at a cross-tabulation of political knowledge and anticipated turnout, there is an apparent positive relationship between the two. As Table 3 indicates, compared to just under 70 per cent of low knowledge students, 88 per cent of the high knowledge students see themselves as future voters.²²

Since the hypothesized relationship does show up in tabular analysis, what accounts for the non-performance of knowledge in the fully elaborated model? The first issue we address is the possibility of high multicollinearity in the model, and while this does not seem to be a major concern,²³ the fact remains that knowledge is correlated with other variables in the model, which is unavoidable in social and political research. Of the variables included in model 4, knowledge is correlated with fam-

TABLE 3
Cross-tabulation of Knowledge and Expected Turnout

Vote	Low	Moderate	High	Total
	Knowledge	Knowledge	Knowledge	
No	30.3% (40)	24.4% (77)	11.4% (23)	21.6% (140)
Yes	69.7 (92)	75.6 (238)	88.6 (178)	78.4 (508)
Total	100 (132)	100 (315)	100 (201)	100 (648)

Source: *The Students' Assembly Survey on Youth Attitudes to Democracy and Political Participation*

Note: Cells contain percentages with raw frequencies reported in parentheses.

Pearson's Chi Sq = 19.65

p < .001

Cramer's V = 0.17

ily political discussion (0.42), school learning experiences (0.32) and political interest (0.48) (all significant at $p < .001$). These intercorrelations may be sufficiently substantial to obscure a significant relationship between knowledge and future turnout.

In addition, we have to bear in mind that our focus is on a specific sub-group of the population: adolescents in Grades 10 to 12. At this stage of political development, the correlates of political participation may simply be different than those among the general adult population. In this case, other factors may be more important for adolescents' attitudes toward voting than cognitive resources. During this period of political development, levels of respondent knowledge are largely a function of prior factors, in particular, socialization and political interest. As our model ordering suggests, we believe the effects of socialization are causally prior to both political interest and knowledge such that political interest is in part a function of socialization, and knowledge is a function of both socialization and political interest. Stated differently, whether adolescents see themselves as turning out to vote may be driven principally by socialization experiences. In turn, these experiences have prominent effects on political interest and finally knowledge. As a result, the hypothesized independent effects of knowledge fail to materialize when the model includes the range of factors linked to knowledge acquisition.

Discussion and Conclusions

In considering the topic of youth turnout decline more generally, this paper has sought to give heightened attention to the pre-adult years, "the period of maximum change" (Niemi and Hepburn, 1995: 7). We use this final section to situate our findings within the youth turnout literature and consider possible implications for future work.

One central finding suggests that expected turnout among our sample of adolescents is relatively high. In terms of adolescents' overall anticipated turnout levels, our findings are virtually the same as those reported by Hooghe and Stolle (2004); nearly 80 per cent of adolescents who express a clear opinion about their anticipated adult political behaviour see themselves as future voters. By comparison, Elections Canada's estimates of young adults' (age 18–29) turnout in the 2004 Canadian federal election indicate actual turnout to be around 40 per cent, much lower than that anticipated by our adolescent sample.²⁴ This discrepancy, of course, raises the question of why adolescents' anticipated turnout rate is so much higher than the actual turnout of Canada's youngest electors in recent years. The discrepancy suggests that young adults want to vote and, in fact, intend to vote once they become eligible. Yet, when the time comes, young adults have abstained in surprisingly great numbers. One

approach to definitively understanding this puzzle may be to conduct a panel study of Canadian youth whereby they are surveyed in high school and again during their early twenties (after one or more federal or provincial elections). This type of research design would provide greater leverage on understanding why youth turnout declines.

Our findings also raise questions about the correlates of turnout. Indeed, a core finding of the paper is the central role of socialization in shaping attitudes and expectations about future political involvement among youth. Family political discussion, peer group involvement and positive experiences learning about politics in the classroom all boost anticipated turnout among students. If, as findings suggest, socialization variables are key in the formation of political attitudes among youth, future analyses must seek to further understand the nature of these socialization influences. For instance, while the extent of family political discussion is clearly important, other features of the family context—such as whether the parents vote, are members of political parties or are members of other community groups—may also be salient in shaping youth political attitudes. Clearly, there is much work to be done in further sorting out the effects of socialization, including its dynamic nature.

While agents of socialization are important influences on the development of youth political attitudes, a salient point to emphasize is that socialization is a politically neutral concept. While socialization tends to be thought of in normative terms as boosting healthy attitudes toward democracy and participation, it is possible that young people are exposed to negative forms of socialization that encourage apathy and cynicism toward politics (Gimpel et al., 2003: 13). While our socialization variables might be more aptly described as “positive socialization experiences,” negative political socialization experiences are possible and likely discourage anticipated political behaviour among youth. Negative attitudes toward politics can be acquired in homes where politics is discussed frequently, from news that trivializes or criticizes the political system or portrays politics as little more than a horserace, or from peers who send messages that earnest political engagement is “uncool.” As a result, future analyses of socialization must seek to distinguish between the “positive” and “negative” nature of these influences.

The most curious result is the insignificance of political knowledge as a predictor of anticipated turnout. Previous work has clearly established political knowledge as one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of political participation (for example, Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Gidengil et al., 2004; Howe, 2006; Milner, 2002; Popkin, 1991; Popkin and Dimock, 1999). For Delli Carpini and Keeter, “political information is to democratic politics what money is to economics; it is the currency of citizenship” (1996: 8). Therefore, contradicting the conventional wisdom that people with more information are better equipped to

make political decisions, results in this article imply that this may not be the case among adolescents. Since adolescents' political attitudes and knowledge are still at a formative stage, the independent effects of knowledge may be tied too closely to factors that boost knowledge (such as socialization). In fact, this may serve as a caution to researchers against assuming that theoretical and empirical models of adult political behaviour can be automatically applied to adolescents.

We believe the findings of this paper are indicative of the value of moving backwards from a focus on initial turnout decisions made by new political adults to consider more seriously the pre-adult roots of participatory attitudes and behaviours. If initial decisions to go to the polls become path dependent behaviours resistant to change later in life (for example, Blais, 2000; Franklin, 2004; Gerber et al., 2003; Johnston et al., 2007; Plutzer, 2002), the years immediately preceding the vote acquire new significance.

Notes

- 1 Uncompetitiveness may also exert a period effect, but in terms of its lasting impression on people who come of age politically in an atmosphere of uncompetitiveness, arguably, it is best classified as a generational effect.
- 2 The Ontario Students' Assembly on Electoral Reform was a project coordinated by Student Vote Canada, The Students Commission and The Planning Desk. This venture had the financial support of the Government of Ontario, the Canadian Council on Learning and the Ontario Trillium Foundation. The complete title of the survey is *The Students' Assembly Survey on Youth Attitudes to Democracy and Political Participation*. For more information, see www.studentsassembly.ca.
- 3 The 103 students who participated in the three-day Student's Assembly also completed the survey. Given that their unique experiences with this process inevitably bias their attitudes, we deemed it reasonable to conduct all analyses on the subset of respondents who did not participate in the Students' Assembly process.
- 4 This raises a potential self-selection bias at the teacher level. The crux of the potential problem is that teachers who are more politicized or engaged in current political debates (such as electoral reform in Ontario over 2006–2007) may have influenced their students in the same direction, heightening political interest and awareness among adolescents on important issues related to electoral reform and democratic governance. Additionally, the fact that students in our sample were exposed to a unit of instruction on electoral reform, while many other Ontario high school students were not, is almost certain to have raised the salience of these issues among our sample compared to the overall target population. We are careful to bear this in mind when we interpret our findings. However, while the overall generalizeability of our results may be weakened, comparing different groups of students within the sample does not raise problems of the same seriousness regarding possible "teacher effects." All the students in our sample had teachers who opted to teach the unit on electoral reform, so if the above hypotheses about the effects of atypically politicized teachers are correct, the effects would be constant across the entire sample.
- 5 Because neither the survey designers nor Students' Assembly organizers were present during the administration of the surveys, there can be no certainty of uniformity in

administration. For example, it is possible that students in different classrooms were given different amounts of time to do the survey. Some teachers may have rushed students, especially if they had another lesson to move on to, and some may have given students as much time as they needed. Additional types of inconsistencies in administration of the survey may have also arisen.

- 6 We experimented with alternative ways of dealing with the “don’t know” responses: 1) coding “don’t know” responses with the “no” responses based on the rationale that both “no” and “don’t know” indicate that the respondent does not see herself as a voter, at least not yet, and 2) coding “don’t know” as a middle category between “no” and “yes.” Alternative codings did not produce markedly different results (not shown).
- 7 With the Students’ Assembly survey, we have one additional piece of information on the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents: region of ethnic origin. Each respondent was asked “What is the region of your cultural or ethnic origin?” For the purposes of explaining differences in turnout, we have no *a priori* reason to predict differences in turnout according to ethnicity. To the extent that adolescents from Africa or Asia, for instance, *may* be recent immigrants, we might predict in such cases that the tendency to see themselves as future voters may be lower due to the fact that they *may* not yet be socialized into the political norms of their new country and/or *may* have never witnessed elections in their home country (for example, Ramakrishnan and Espenshade, 2001). In fact, recent analyses question whether and for how long immigrants face a disadvantage in terms of factors that motivate turnout (for example, White et al., 2006), or whether immigrants are actually any less interested in or knowledgeable about politics compared to Canadian-born populations (for example, Bilodeau and Kanji, 2006). In any case, we do not have information on whether respondents are Canadian-born or foreign-born or, if foreign-born, what specific country they come from and how long they have been in Canada. Likewise, we do not have information on other factors that may influence adolescents’ attitudes toward future voting, such as household income, parental education levels, parental political attitudes, or parental political participation. The survey data used provide no information about the parents or the teachers of respondents.
- 8 Eight per cent of our student respondents were eligible voters (that is, over 18 years old) at the time the survey was administered (November to December 2006). Likely, the bulk of these students was not eligible to vote in the 2006 federal election, and there has not been a provincial election in Ontario since 2003. Thus, of this 8 per cent that is over 18 years old, it is unlikely that any but a small handful of them would have had the chance to exercise their first vote.
- 9 Cohen and his colleagues (Cohen and Hill, 2007; Cohen et al., 2005) note that Catholic-Protestant differences on the collectivism-individualism continuum stem from the evolution and practice of each tradition. Protestant denominations have tended to emphasize personal salvation and a personal relationship with God unmediated by the Church. The relative collectivism of Catholicism, on the other hand, is “reflected in placing greater importance on religious symbols, corporate worship, and communal religious identity” (Cohen and Hill, 2007: 715).
- 10 We tested for the existence of a possible school board effect (Catholic versus public) in which, following the same logic for the Catholic faith, Catholic schools may foster a more community-minded spirit to turnout than public schools. In short, there is no evidence that students in Catholic schools are more likely to expect to turnout (results not shown).
- 11 This is not to suggest that political socialization is entirely encapsulated by these factors, but rather that they are exemplary of the kinds of socialization influences that may shape youth political attitudes and values. Certainly, the family, peers, and

- school are regarded widely as primary agents of political socialization (for example, Krampen, 2000).
- 12 While we hypothesize a causal relationship whereby membership in apolitical groups increases the likelihood of seeing oneself as a future voter, a third variable may exist that explains some portion of the co-variation in group involvement and turnout. We call this a “joiner” variable. The hypothetical joiner variable denotes certain types of people who, by reason of personality and/or socialization, may be more likely to participate. Because we do not have the necessary data to assess the actual impact of a joiner variable, we are unable rule it out conclusively as a possible competing explanation for the correlation between group membership and future voting. Future work on youth turnout may be wise to consider the possibility of a joiner effect.
 - 13 While the “politicians lie” question is widely utilized as an indicator of political cynicism, the “all parties the same” measure is somewhat less common. In particular, it is conceivable for one to believe that there is little choice between political parties, but not feel cynical about this lack of choice. However, we argue that this is an unlikely scenario for this indicator. Using a similar indicator, for example, O’Neill (2001: 40) interprets older cohorts’ greater belief that parties do not offer genuine choice as greater cynicism toward parties. Likewise, Rubenson et al. (2004) include a “parties are basically the same” indicator in their political cynicism scale in a recent article on age and turnout.
 - 14 These questions asked respondents about their knowledge of the current number of parties in the Parliament of Canada; whether Canada participated in the Iraq war; what kind of political system Canada is (for example, constitutional monarchy or republic); which level of government has primary responsibility for health, education and social welfare; what the letters “MPP” stand for; which office has the authority to name federal cabinet ministers; select the false statement from five choices about the electoral system in Ontario; name the American President; name the capital city of the United States; select the non-democratic country from a list of four countries. The alpha for this index is 0.72. The mean number of correct answers is 5 out of 10.
 - 15 However, as mentioned by Johnston et al. (2007), electoral competitiveness at the federal level returned with the 2004 election. Additionally, our dependent variable asks about intended voting in federal or provincial elections. At the provincial level in Ontario, electoral competitiveness has not been an issue for at least two decades.
 - 16 The sequential introduction of variables according to their hypothesized temporal proximity to the expected turnout decision follows the logic of Miller and Shanks (1996), as well as others who have adopted this way of estimating predictors of the vote choice calculus (for example, Blais et al., 2002).
 - 17 It may be suggested that an attitudinal variable like political interest is best located prior to some forms of socialization (such as family political discussion or enjoying learning about politics in school), because interest may facilitate the inclination of a student to discuss politics with his/her family and/or take (and enjoy!) politically related courses in school. We would suggest, however, that, in the first instance, the initial generation of political interest in youth is likely a function of various socialization experiences. Upon interest in politics being initially piqued through forms of socialization, it is conceivable that higher levels of interest may additionally serve to engender more positive student responses to socializing experiences with family and school. In this sense, we understand interest to be centrally a function of socialization and that, in the broad process of proceeding to adulthood, interest and socialization may mutually re-enforce one another. The substantive implication of this debate is minimal. In the first instance, if interest is entered as a separate block before the socialization variables, the coefficient of interest is slightly higher and the coefficients of the three socialization variables are slightly lower than that reported in mod-

els 3 and 4 of Table 2 (results not shown). In the second instance, when the fully specified model is assessed the temporal ordering debate becomes irrelevant, because the overall effect of the political interest and socialization variables are as presented in Table 2.

- 18 From Elections Canada web site: <http://www.elections.ca/scripts/OVR2006/default.html>. Accessed May 7, 2007.
- 19 It may be argued that this result is due to another type of "teacher effect" in which a particularly motivating or exciting teacher shapes the political attitudes of students in his/her class. At the same time, for every positive teacher effect there is arguably a corresponding negative one in which students are turned off politics through their schooling experiences. As a result, possible teacher effects in this case likely cancel each other out.
- 20 This result does not mean that youth are particularly disaffected or that cynicism toward politics has a stronger effect on youth turnout attitudes than those of older generations of voters. Ample work demonstrates that Canadian youth are no more cynical than those of older cohorts (Blais et al., 2002; Gidengil et al., 2004; Nevitte et al., 2000; O'Neill, 2001; Rubenson et al., 2004), despite popular assumptions to the contrary.
- 21 Political interest is positively and significantly correlated with each of the socialization measures. In particular, the correlation coefficients of political interest and each of political conversation with family and positive in-school political learning are 0.59 and 0.50, respectively (and highly significant at $p < .001$).
- 22 For ease of presentation, the knowledge index was reduced to three categories: "low knowledge" is coded as 0 to 3 correct answers, "moderate knowledge" is 4 to 6 correct answers and "high knowledge" is 7 to 10 correct answers.
- 23 Chatterjee et al. (2000) suggest that multicollinearity is acceptably low when the largest variance inflation factor (VIF) in a regression model is less than 10 and the mean VIF for the entire model is not substantially greater than 1. Our model's mean VIF is 1.27, and the highest (political interest) is 1.90. Both values are comfortably below common thresholds.
- 24 This discussion of young adults' turnout in the 2004 Canadian federal election is based on Elections Canada, *Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group at the 38th Federal General Election*.

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