



Executive Summary

Youth Engagement

In the summer of 2021, the Rideau Hall Foundation commissioned a comprehensive consultation for the Forum for Young Canadians (Forum) program to better understand the youth engagement space and to build a fulsome picture of youth civic engagement for the future.

The consultation spoke with over 2,700 individuals who have ties to youth engagement (or were youth themselves), to understand their perceptions of youth civic engagement, where civic engagement fits within youth engagement more generally, and how young people see the future of youth civic engagement.

Key Findings

Right now, most young people are interested in civic engagement and are eager to know how to become involved. When converting their interest to engagement, language is key.

When asked if they want to be involved in specific civic engagement activities, 87% of children and 89% of youth are interested in at least one form of civic engagement. However, when asking them if they want to participate in “civic engagement” more generally, interest drops to just 69%. 42% of children don’t know what civic engagement means. [survey of n=1,750 16-24 year-olds in Canada, survey of n=700 12-15 year-olds in Canada].

To convert interest to engagement, youth need to receive an invitation that has a genuine approach, uses accessible language, is relatable and respectful, and showcases ‘people like them’. Careful attention should also be paid to recruiting youth who don’t raise their hands themselves and to those who are otherwise uninvited.

Not all young people in Canada have an opportunity to participate in civic engagement, even at a local level, and even if they feel it is important.

Three quarters of youth believe it's important for them to be involved in solving problems in their community, but only 42% say they are currently involved in something that allows them to make their community a better place 87% of children are interested in community problem solving, but only 66% have the chance to participate. [survey of n=1,750 16-24 year-olds in Canada, survey of n=700 12-15 year-olds in Canada].

The biggest barriers for youth civic engagement are time and costs, often exacerbated by youth that face these pressures on a daily basis. Youth who are from lower-income families, those who need to work part-time jobs, who do not have the funds to pay for involvement or ancillary expenses (i.e. lack funds to meet appearance expectations), and those who lack access to required technology face the biggest challenges.

“Finances are the most pervasive visible barrier. But it’s not just about the cost of a programs. Equity deserving youth (i.e., youth who are held back by barriers) often don’t even get to the point where they have to turn down an opportunity due to its cost because civic engagement or programs like it aren’t even on their radar - they’re busy trying to support their family as best they can.”

– Youth Online Community Participant



The idea that young people need to be ready for civic engagement opportunities before they even begin, leads three-quarters of youth and two thirds of children to say they don't feel qualified for the opportunities they know about [survey of n=1,750 16-24 year-olds in Canada, survey of n=700 12-15 year-olds in Canada].

The most impactful and transformative aspects of an in-person learning experience are:

Engaging in hands-on, up close and personal opportunities.

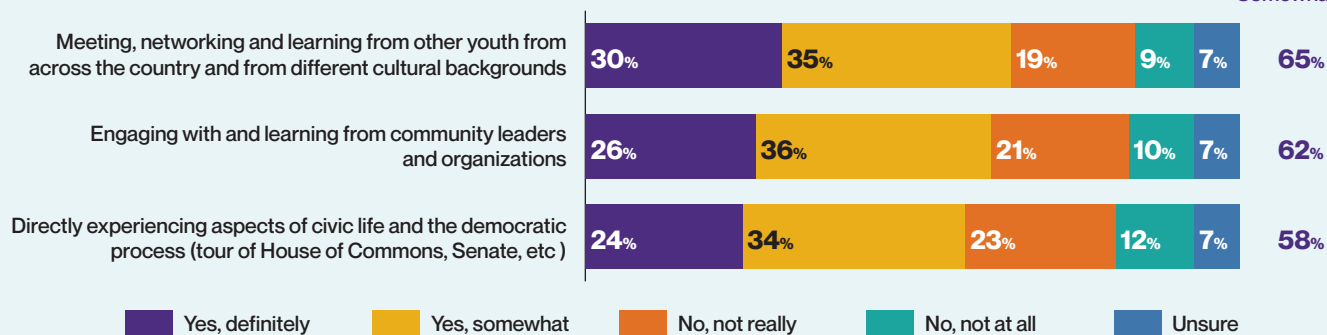
This includes exposure to unique spaces, groups, or individuals connected to a particular program. When participating in an in-person experience, young people want to take advantage of being in a new setting and get exposure to an assortment of simulations with real time face-to-face interactions, meetings with individuals, and hands-on experiences they wouldn't otherwise have access to without the in-person setting.

Bringing together young people.

A facilitated, in-person opportunity to meet other young people gives youth the chance to make new connections, develop a new, broadened sense of community and Canadian identity, and develop a network that they can continue to engage even after the experience has come to an end. Exposure to a new city or part of the country for the first time, meeting someone from another province or territory, or just simply being exposed to new cultures, lived experiences and a diversity of perspectives are equally transformative. These opportunities allow young people to build and develop soft skills like understanding, empathy, and trust in a neutral setting.

Let's say you were given the opportunity to participate in a program about civic engagement for young people in Canada. Would you be interested in a program that focused on...

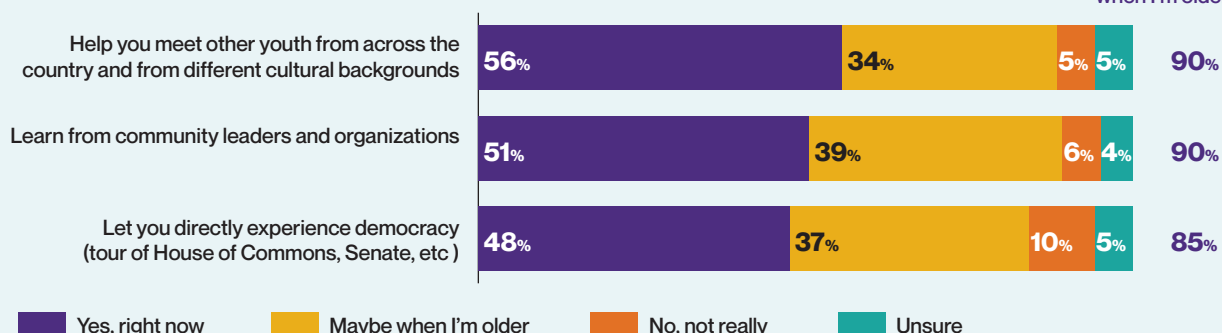
% Yes definitely + Somewhat



[n=1,750 Canadian residents aged 16-24]

Let's say you were given the opportunity to participate in a program about civic engagement for young people in Canada. Would you be interested in a program that focused on...

% Right now + when I'm older



[n=700 Canadian residents aged 12-15]

Online experiences are best suited as a follow up, post-experience tool to maintain community, networks, and a support system.

Using online platforms to facilitate experiences can eliminate barriers associated with location and travel costs, but also introduces new barriers such as access to technology and internet connections. For these reasons, and based on the preferences of young people, online experiences should be used to maintain relationships, experiences, and communities that were built through an in-person experience.

Youth want to be given tools for leadership in an empowering, not prescriptive way.

Young people are looking for:

- In-person learning experiences (like Forum) that provide opportunities for active (not passive) participation to develop new skills and form connections with fellow participants
- Opportunities to practice knowledge informally, such as hands-on activities, to actively test knowledge and develop new skills
- Opportunities to independently learn from each other, allow their peers to be teachers, learn about others' lived experiences and share about their own experiences
- Programs that create room outside a formal curriculum to talk and connect with fellow participants



In any learning experience, young people say it's critical to meet them where they are at rather than assume they have a pre-existing level of knowledge.

The ideal path to civic engagement for youth is to first participate in something that gives them exposure to a wide array of issues and engagement opportunities, by giving them the opportunity to see what being an active citizen looks like and what opportunities are available to them. This ensures an inclusive experience for all.

This first step should then be followed by a sustained community (most preferably online) that furthers their skills, knowledge, and connections that allows them to take action and become engaged in areas that align with their interests and passions.

An area with growth potential within youth civic engagement programming is showcasing the connection between grassroots organizations and institutions.

This is likely due to a combination of three factors. Practically speaking, grassroots experiences feel more familiar, abundant, and unencumbered by rules. Next, youth don't often feel welcomed into institutional experiences, nor do they feel they will be able to see any results of their own individual actions. And finally, there is often a belief amongst young people that institutional engagement = politics, and politics = having a set stance on a range of issues rather than one issue close to their heart.

Yet, 45% of youth say “Making change in government takes a long time, but it's worth it because it will have a bigger impact on my community than work with charities” [survey of n=1,750 16-24 year-olds in Canada].

So given the choice, young people feel it is more important to teach them about how grassroots organizations connect to institutions rather than focusing on these grassroots preferences alone. This would provide a unique and relevant learning opportunity in the space of youth civic engagement.

Creating an inclusive space with youth programming is about setting clear expectations and boundaries from the start.

For youth to feel included and safe to share their thoughts, clear and equal expectations for all are needed. Safe settings aren't intended to build consensus, but instead, create a sense of safety and security for respectful disagreement to take place, and the opportunity to speak about what was learned from listening to others. Boundaries for debates, guidelines for conversations, and rules that are applied equally to everyone involved are key to creating a safe space.

“A welcoming space in any community is one that is safe, respectful, responsive, and co-created.”

– Youth Online Community Participant