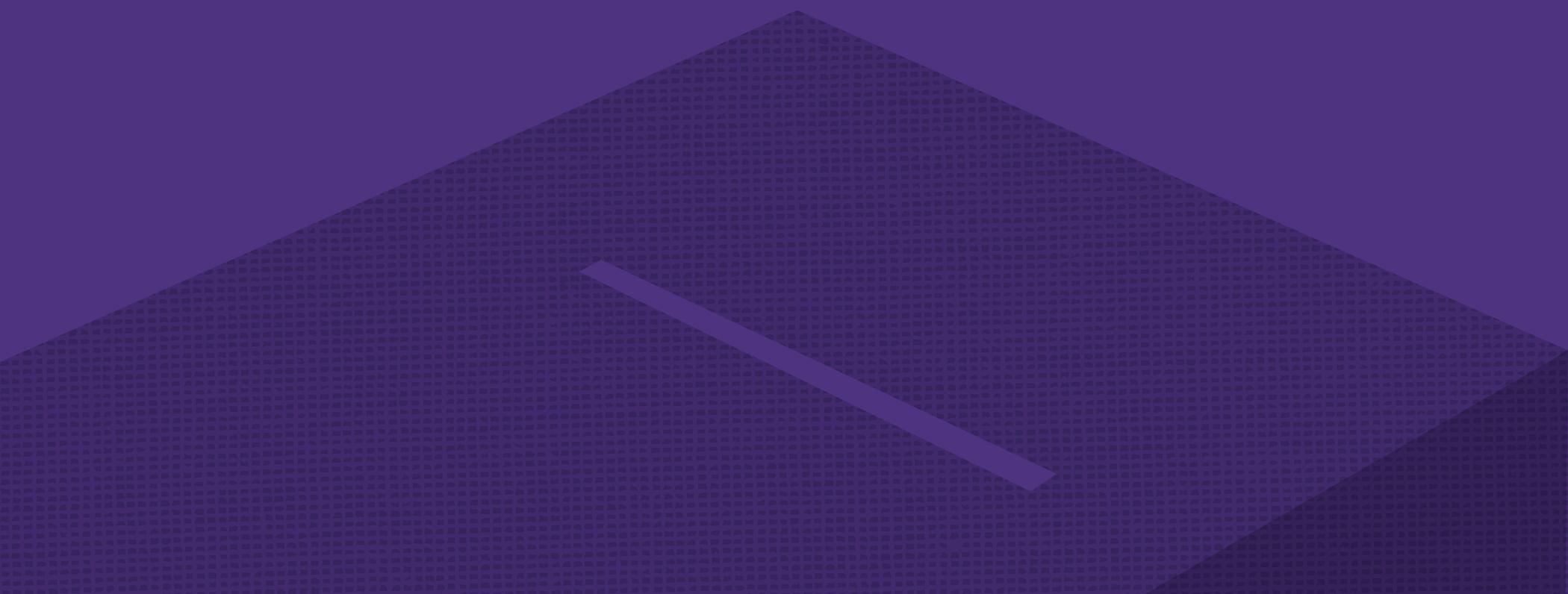


Lowering the Voting Age in Canada



Executive Summary

The bottom half of the page features a dark blue background with a subtle grid pattern. Overlaid on this are several large, light blue geometric shapes: a large triangle pointing upwards, a smaller triangle pointing downwards, and a long, thin parallelogram pointing downwards, all arranged in a layered, overlapping fashion.

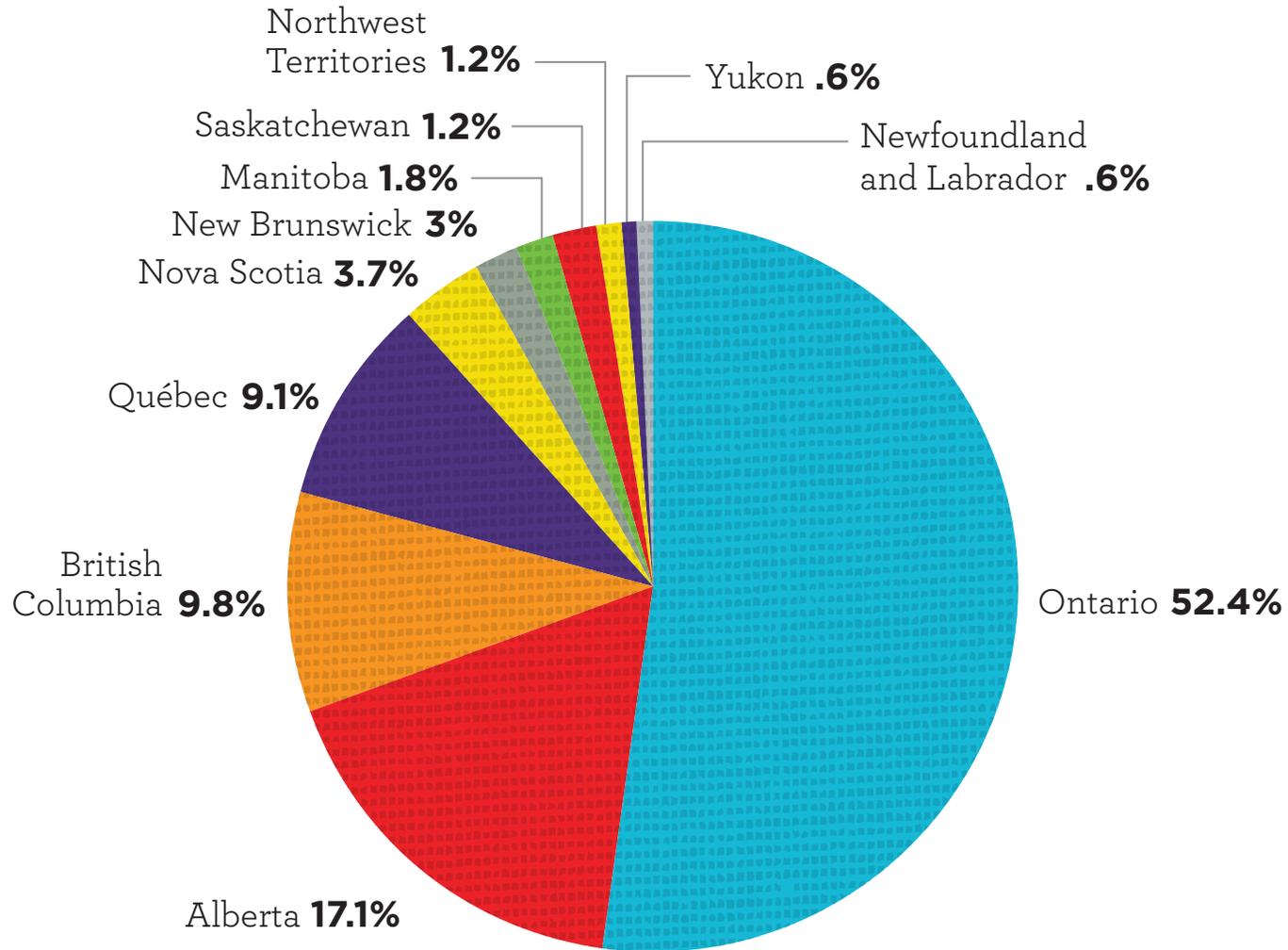
From March - April 2020, Children First Canada led a national consultation in partnership with Wisdom2Action and Youth Central to understand better how young Canadians feel about lowering the voting age. A total 180 children and youth from across Canada provided their feedback on a range of issues related to the right to vote.

An online survey in French and English was promoted nationally through social media and through organizational networks. A total of 164 eligible responses were received (two responses were omitted from respondents older than 25.) A prize draw was attached to the survey to encourage participation. Young people aged 10-24 completed the survey, with an average age of 15.3 years old.

Four online “in-person” consultations were held: two facilitated by Youth Central (based in Calgary), and two facilitated by Wisdom2Action (based in Halifax). The consultations facilitated by Wisdom2Action were promoted as bilingual sessions.

During the consultation, youth were provided with background information on the right to vote in Canada and that this right has expanded over time to include different groups of citizens. The background information noted that while the Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the right to vote for all citizens, youth as citizens remain excluded. The consultations then provided the opportunity for youth to reflect on what democracy means to them, if they would support lowering the voting age, and what concerns they would have, or thought others may have about this idea.

Survey respondents were from across Canada



Many youth support the idea of lowering the voting age. They connected their interest in gaining this right with their belief that voting is an inherent citizen's right, and as citizens, youth have a stake in the governance of Canada. They also noted that at 16, Canadians hold both rights and responsibilities that seem equivalent to the responsibility of voting, such as working and paying taxes. Youth also expressed that they and their peers are engaged in diverse local and national issues and are informed and capable enough to vote.

“Younger people certainly have the capacity to comprehend the impacts of their vote. We learn calculus, we learn physics, and when armed with the proper tools and education, we can learn how to make informed decisions when voting. We are constantly working towards a better world, which is in large part improving the world for the next generations. Who better to join the discussion than the next generation themselves? More young people voting means more young voices heard.”

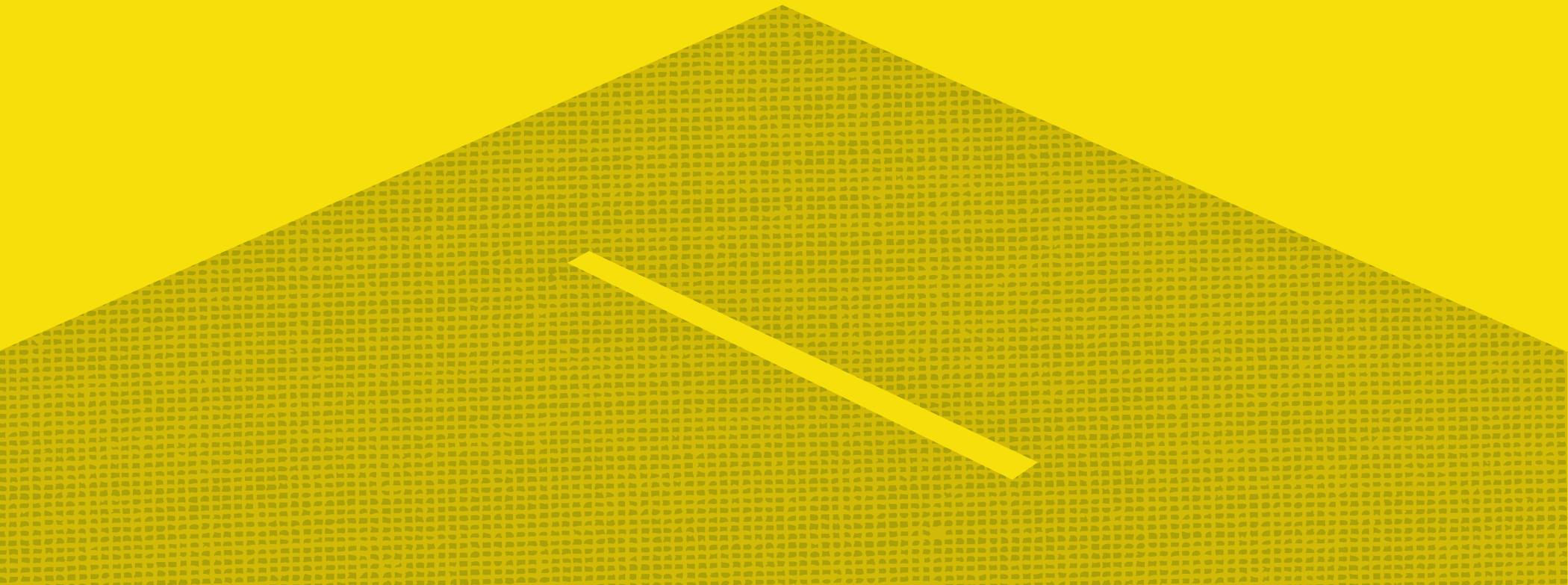
Some youth were not certain that they or their peers had the capacity to vote, in terms of awareness of key issues and also the capability to understand how to translate an issue into a voting choice. Youth concerned about lowering the voting age also felt that young people may not take the right seriously enough.

It was striking that both youth in favour of lowering the voting age or those who are uncertain shared concerns about the perceived need for competency in voting, and lingering concerns that youth may not be as competent as adults. This is interesting because the competency of adults is not measured as a precondition for voting. In addition, many youth were surprised to learn of the history of voting exclusion and often noted that they and their peers did not receive very much rights-based civic engagement education and/or training in schools or other settings.

“If we understand the possible consequences of our votes (more taxes as an example), we would be more careful in our choices and reconsider. I also think that adults don’t think we know a lot about the world, so that may play a role in their criticisms.”

Overall, this national consultation demonstrated a keen interest amongst youth in understanding more about their rights and how to be engaged in the governance of their country.

Key Themes



The majority of youth agreed that democracy is:

- When the government listens to what people want before making decisions.
- Having the chance to vote.
- Standing up for your rights.

Youth also thought that democracy should be:

- From an in-person participant: “All people getting [to have] a say and contributing to the final decision[s] [of government].”
- “[...]About the majority. If kids make up so much of the population and can’t vote or have a say then it really isn’t for the majority. ”

Youth want to take part in democracy and are comfortable lowering the voting age.

71% of youth surveyed agreed that they are comfortable lowering the voting age.

- “I strongly urge [government] to lower the voting age.”

This was echoed by in-person participants.

- “100% on the side of this, the perception that younger people have less capacity to understand is simply incorrect. Youth are often more informed than their parents and other eligible voters.”

16% responded they are not comfortable lowering the voting age

- “I do have some hesitancy with people voting, it’s a right and with a right comes a lot of responsibility.”

12% of the 26 youth who responded “no” said that they would feel more comfortable lowering the voting age if support was in place.

They would feel more comfortable if...

- “Students had more idea of what effect it could have on their families and their everyday lives by either prepping them or even adding it to their curriculum.”
- “The education system did a better job at teaching students about politics.”

Some youth commented that age shouldn’t matter, period.

- “Any age to be eligible to vote is arbitrary so what’s the difference between 15 and 16?”
- “Age doesn’t determine how much knowledge one person can hold.”
- “Some adults are not smart either.”

While the majority of youth agreed they felt comfortable lowering the voting age to under 18, **the majority (54%) of youth also agreed that youth under 18 should not be able to run as Members of Parliament.** Most youth said it was less about being capable and more about the logistics.

- “I’m not sure how that would work? How would teenagers serve as MPs while still attending school?”
- “Maybe having children and youth as full-time MPs is a little risky. Do you need a law degree for that?”
- “People below 18 often have responsibilities to school, which I think should be the main priority. While I want to vote and have a say in the government, I do not think that people under 18 should serve in parliament.”
- “Maybe if there were an all ages parliament and an over 18 parliament, then youth would have a say but it would be in an environment more suited to them.”
- “Well, even though we are capable, we haven’t finished high school and maybe there would be some kids jokingly entering themselves as a party.”

63% of young people felt that politicians would pay more attention to the issues youth care about if they had the right to vote.

- “Lowering the voting age would mean governments needing to focus on the wants and needs of younger voters to gain their vote. Things like global warming, the cost of education, the diminishment of entry level jobs are all special to young people.”

Youth care about issues that they feel they and their peers care more about than governments and adults, issues such as:

Climate change & the environment

- “I think a primary example [of an issue youth care about more] is climate change. This was one of the main issues that pushed me to believe more in a lower voting age. Primarily, the people who are voting now will not experience the effects of climate change, but I, and my peers, will. Therefore, there is a great want and need, specifically for the opinions of the younger generations.”
- “The environment. Only a few politicians have truly focused on this and when we’re forty and have a family I would want my children to see all the wonders [of] nature that I saw. I think that we need to just face the facts that yes it won’t be fun when we shift a lot of money to this problem. Maybe we won’t be able to do as many things but if we leave this to get worse then our earth could become very filthy and we could be losing countless animal lives.”
- “I definitely think there’s a real problem in water shortage. I was talking to my dad about it and he couldn’t care less. He says the world will fix itself. But that’s really not the case.”

Mental health

- “Accessible mental health Care for youth”
- “We should have a say in mental health issues because they are prominent in [the] younger generation.”

- “Support for mental health. [Adults] grew up in a time where that was a taboo subject and it shows.”
- “Children’s rights and issues [regarding] mental health [are] also ones that I feel is often not focused on by older people and politicians.”

Equality and equity

- “Oftentimes I fear the older generation do not care enough about equality. Race, sexuality and gender. I am white, heterosexual girl. Meaning, I do not suffer any social degradation due to my sexuality and race. But, I know that it is NOT okay to degrade others for what they cannot control. I feel that the older generation can oftentimes be very insensitive toward these subjects. “
- “Youth want to be addressed as equals and given more opportunities, no matter our gender, race, culture, religion, or demographics. The following issue pertains specifically to those who have monthly menstruation periods; hygiene products need to be supplied in every public washroom for male, female, and gender-neutral peoples who have monthly cycles.”
- “I feel particularly strongly about equality between men and women because even though there is still a gender gap, the issue is essentially forgotten because people believe that men and women are already equal when they are not.”

University tuition

- “Providing more education opportunities (i.e. lower tuition).”

In-person participants also reflected on their concerns related to post-secondary education:

- “I have been worried about university tuition since I was 13 and I still have 2 years to graduate but it is so expensive you have to be worried now.”
- “University tuition: adults are content with it, they don’t have an issue with it because they completed school and don’t worry about it any more. They are removed from it”

Education System

- “Currently we feel that the government does not care about our education. In the end, we have no say over our education and what we should or should not learn. My friends and I feel that the curriculum is too repetitive, and we are not being prepared enough for highschool.”
- “Changes in the education system so that every student can learn well and be stimulated.”
- “Although older people, especially parents, do care about this topic, youth are the ones that are directly affected by it and therefore there would be no reason not to contribute to the decisions being made regarding it”

Indigenous issues

- “I also believe that taking the steps to better the quality of life for First Nations people is incredibly important, especially here in Canada.”
- From an in-person participant: “Indigenous issues. Education now is different about Indigenous issues from when my parents went to school. So adults can be less knowledgeable and these issues are often overlooked (i.e. Missing and murdered indigenous women). There hasn’t been much progress on these issues and they are important. Opinions between generations have changed on this topic and youth are educated on Indigenous issues.”

Youth employment opportunities

- “Jobs, Creating Jobs.”
- From an in-person participant: “During the pandemic so many job losses, many of which were youth jobs”

So, why would adults not want youth to vote?

87% of youth said it is because adults think people under 18 are too immature.

- “Oftentimes I feel the older generations have this misconception that all people under the age of 18 are irresponsible, immature and [misinformed]. While in reality, every generation has people that are all those things. But, the young adults are still a member of society and equally deserve to voice their opinions.”

74% of youth said it is because adults think that young people aren’t informed enough to vote.

- From an in-person participant: “There has been stigma and implicit bias adopted by many adults that young people have the inability to make effective decisions.”
- “Some might think we are not informed enough and I agree that some are not informed enough. However, that is not true in both youth cases and adult cases depending on who you are talking to. Uninformed adults vote, that shouldn’t be a factor of holding the voting age back from lowering.”

Some youth agreed with the statement that **young people aren’t informed enough to vote**. However, most felt it was true **because youth are not being informed because of gaps in civic education in Canada**.

- “As for “because young people aren’t informed enough to vote”, I believe that statement to be true for a lot of kids. And the problem [isn’t with] kids minds as they would love to [be informed], I think the problem lies at school. I think that if we were to learn more about the way the government actually works at school, older people would feel much more comfortable with us voting.”

56% of youth said it is because they are afraid kids will just vote for who their parents vote for.

16% of youth did agree with the criticism that adults have for why youth under 18 should not vote, some stated that any youth under 18 just aren’t capable.

Why youth under 18 should get to vote:

“We are capable”

- “I think that youth are just as knowledgeable as the average voter because not every adult does their research but some do and it would be the same for youth”

‘It’s our right as citizens’

- “Adults think we do not understand politics because we are not old enough however, we are the future of Canada and have every right to vote.”

“It’s our future”

- From an in-person Calgary participant: “A good example [of why youth should get to vote] was the Calgary Olympic bid, it impacted youth because the Olympics would have taken place during a time when many would have been adults, paying taxes, etc..”

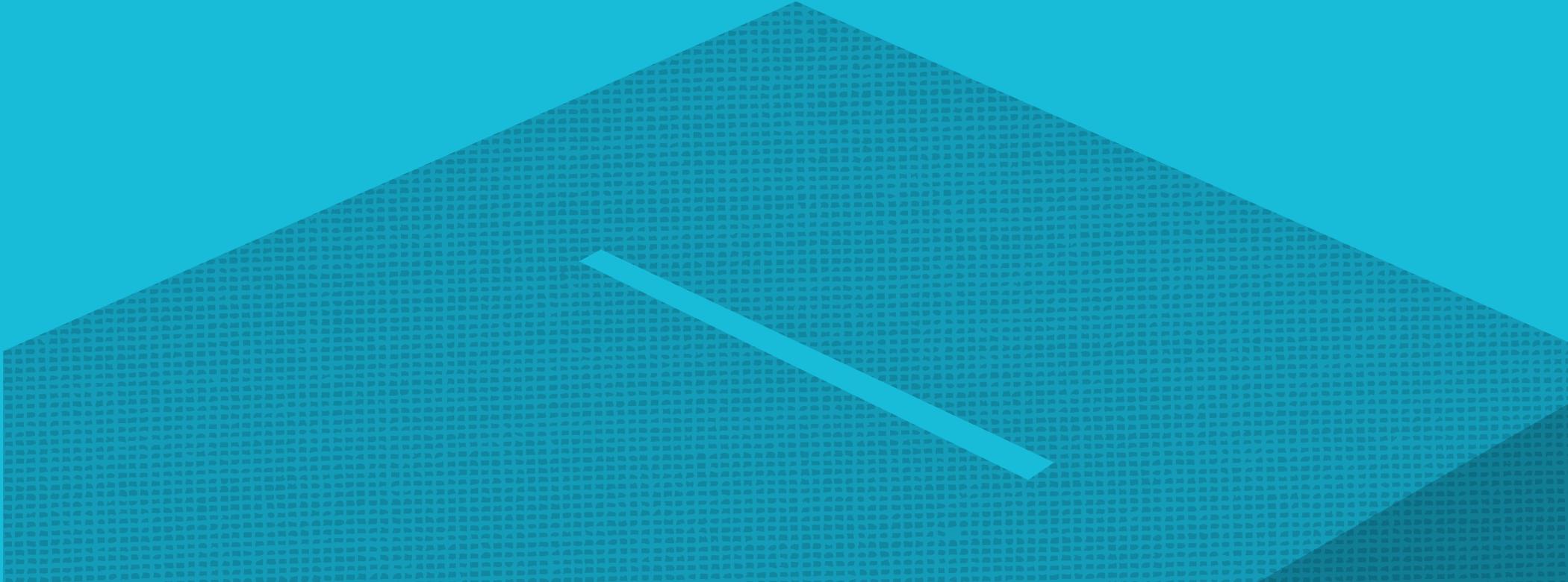
“Youth are already engaged, so why can’t we vote?”

- 88% of youth said that they had thought about who they would vote for in the last election.

“Youth vote unique to their parents/guardian”

- 48% of youth said that they would not vote the same as their parents.

Recommendations

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping triangles in various shades of blue, creating a layered, geometric effect. The triangles are arranged in a way that they appear to be stacked or layered, with some pointing upwards and others downwards, creating a complex, abstract shape.

Based on what we've heard, youth have the following recommendations:

1. Lower the voting age to 16.

- The average age of the people who completed the survey was 15.8.
- 58% of youth said it should be changed to 16.
- “If a 16 year old can drive, have a job, submit taxes and follow the rules of the government, they should have a say in choosing their government”
- “Democracy is the people having authority over political decisions to be made by the government. For example, the right to vote. Yet, the right to vote only pertains to people ages 18+. Over the span of history's timeline, a variety of peoples have been denied the right to vote. At the moment, this includes youth under the age of 18. We are not only leaders of tomorrow; we are leaders at this very moment. Lowering the voting age will improve intergenerational relationships, youth participation, address the disconnection between youth and aspirations, and ensure that our voice is heard.”

2. Increase education for young people on political rights and responsibilities.

- “In order for youth to make an educated vote, we must be given the proper tools and information that allows for an unbiased vote.”
- “[We need to] further educate elementary and secondary students on the functioning of the Canadian political system.”

3. Educate adults to help reduce stigma that youth aren't capable.

- “I don't really understand why [adults] don't want young people to vote. The more minds the better. It's not like [youth] are not fit to vote. Most [youth] already have jobs.”
- “I think adults consistently underestimate the awareness and intelligence of teenagers. Especially with the internet, and the accessibility of so much information, we are aware of a lot of the issues in our society. I do think that a lot of adults I know and a lot of the adults in power are looking to maintain the status quo though, because it benefits them, while those in my generation generally want social change. We (a lot of us) want to see injustices addressed. While some adults may be actively against that, or in denial of the existence of inequities, there are definitely others that have already been advocating for change, and I hope those adults know that most teenagers want the same thing. As for young people being easily influenced, I think that adults too are susceptible to misinformation and biases. From what I have seen, adults can be stuck in their ways and clinging to outdated ideals is counterproductive to progress.”

“Nothing about us,
without us.[...] I don't
just want to have a say,
I want to have power to
make change.”

Special thanks to:



August 2020

