

## Awakening the youth wave

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Tell them why you don't vote.

When young Canadians can't summon the energy or enthusiasm to get to the polls on May 2, a group of McMaster students wants them to explain their inaction to the people of Egypt and Libya.

"These people are dying so they can get a ballot," says Joe Finkle, vice-president of education with McMaster Students Union. "Some youth here won't leave their house (to vote)." The edgy ad campaign, which features the catch phrase IMMA Vote and posters of international protests, is garnering attention on campus and social media sites. Though some have been offended by the concept, Finkle said the majority say it's a good reminder why young people shouldn't slough off their democratic duty.



**beau frigault.** Beau Frigault takes part in the MMA Vote campaign Special to The Hamilton Spectator Source: Special to The Hamilton Spectator

The group's Facebook page tells members to "show everyone that the stereotypes about student voters are false." Past attempts to engage youth in elections have largely failed because they have taken an earnest approach, telling people simply that it's their civic responsibility, said Finkle.

"It's not resonating with students," he said, noting many young people don't vote because they feel their votes don't count or they are cynical about politics.

Voter turnout among youth in the last federal election was abysmal. Just 38.5 per cent of eligible voters age 18 to 24 years old came to the polls, compared to more than 65 per cent for those 55 or older.

Elections Canada continues to try to improve turnout, partnering with Student Vote this year to offer election programs in schools. Elementary and secondary students will have the opportunity to vote in parallel elections, a learning process the agency hopes will inspire the next generation of voters.

Observers note that if young people cast ballots at the same rate as older citizens, they could change the outcome of an election.

Shanthiya Baheerathan and Maddie Tye have been trying to tell their Mac classmates they have the potential to change government, but admit it's not an easy sell.

"I'm frustrated they don't think their vote matters," said Baheerathan.

The pair organized a vote mob on the night Conservative leader Stephen Harper and Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff both appeared in Hamilton, and were disappointed when only 50 students showed up during the exam-time crunch. But they aren't willing to give up and another rally is set for Friday morning on campus.

Baheerathan is confident youth voter turnout will be higher this time, largely because of the impact of social media.

Politicians could help the cause if they discussed the issues that affect younger people, instead of directing their campaign mainly toward middle-aged and senior voters, says Tye. She was pleased to see platforms about student debt load released last week.

"That's grabbed the students' attention."

Burlington Green candidate Graham Mayberry, who at 27 is one of the youngest candidates running in the area, points to the younger generation's role models and idols as a reason for their apathy. Today's youth, he says, look up to actors, athletes and musicians.

"Fewer kids want to grow up and be prime ministers and astronauts," he said by email. "Being influenced so heavily by pop culture, it is really no wonder why they have no interest." Decades ago it used to be a family event to watch the prime minister speak on television, said Mayberry, noting that wouldn't happen today. He cast his vote as soon as he was of age, but says that's because he grew up in a family where voting was

encouraged and expected.

The frequency of elections in recent years means many students are now familiar, if not frustrated, with the process, says Finkle. He predicts that may push more young people to the polls this time.

"I think they've finally reached a breaking point," he said, adding he's optimistic the student union's campaign will have an impact.

"We have to do something ... we can't just ignore it because there haven't been results in the past."

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