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After three elections in five years, students are tuned in, but turned off

By JAMES BRADSHAW, OLIVER MOORE, RHÉAL SÉGUIN and WENDY STUECK
From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Growing up with three federal election contests in five years makes students even more leery of politics

Most Canadians who grew up in the era of majority governments expect a federal vote every four or five years. But university students who have come of voting age amid three elections in that same span may feel they have stumbled into some sort of electoral *Groundhog Day*, marching to the same ballot boxes to choose the same leader.

But is this democratic dÃ©jÃ vu making them more aware? Are they turned off by the partisanship and tuning out? Or are they simply detached from the machinations of Parliament Hill?

Unlike the 2006 and 2008 elections, which were held in the new year and the fall respectively, this campaign falls squarely in the university exam season. And as McMaster Students Union vice-president Joe Finkle put it, a looming exam worth 40 per cent of one's mark "takes top of mind."

Still, students can be among the most engaged citizens: they form their own governments on campuses, organize, rally and hold politicians to account through social media: large, student-led demonstrations against tuition hikes in Quebec, the lively daily Twitter conversation or the recently launched Students Need to Vote campaign, which allows visitors to upload their own videos talking about the importance of voting to a "digital soap box."

Yet on the whole, Canada's youngest voters have earned a reputation for apathy. According to Elections Canada, only 37.4 per cent of eligible 18 to 24-year-olds voted in the 2008 election, by far the lowest percentage of any age group and substantially fewer than the 43.8 per cent who voted in 2006.

The only silver lining to these unflattering statistics is that those with higher levels of education have traditionally been more likely to vote, offering hope that students may be helping prop up the youth turnout, not dragging it down.

Perhaps the Liberal Party's \$1-billion Canadian Learning Passport initiative, a hotly debated plan for universal up-front grants proposed Tuesday, might distract students from their labours, at least briefly. But who is addressing the pervasive issue of crippling college debt or even the massive legacy costs of baby boomer health care?

Leading up to the election call, Conservative Leader Stephen Harper asserted that Canadians did not want an "unnecessary" election, and some might be feeling a measure of poll fatigue. Some students said they find most of their disengaged peers simply never took an interest in federal politics in the first place.

Even so, students of all stripes routinely express strong ideals about the decorum of politics. Sensing that frequent elections have made nasty attack ads more common, they routinely dismiss them as disingenuous, juvenile and overly focused on what governments should or should not have done, and not on what they could do.

The May 2 vote comes after most students have finished their terms, but there remain concerns that many will feel they were under too much pressure to follow

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the campaign, and will pass on their chance to vote.

"I don't disagree, but really, going out to exercise your right to cast your ballot is important," said Zachary Dayler, national director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations. "It's like that essay you have due: the night before, you don't not do it, you get it done."

Click on the photo gallery in the middle of the article to read what the students had to say about the upcoming election

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