Telling Multiple Truths of Youth Disengagement: A study of low youth voter turnout in Canada

by

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B.A., University of British Columbia, 2006

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Abstract

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In recent times, young Canadians have become both subject and object of electoral promotion strategies. These strategies, effected by both state and extra-state organizations, respond to social concerns about the failure of younger cohorts to engage with the political system through the formal channels provided—particularly, voting in elections. These concerns, taken with the increasing popularity of information communications technologies, have propelled some organizations to reach out online, with the goal of increasing voter turnout rates. The main focus in this research is the range of approaches taken by different groups in response to the perceived problems related to young people and their disengagement from electoral processes.

Using a multi-method research design, this study examines the relationships between young peoples’ interests in, and understandings of, Canadian politics, and the online electoral promotion strategies attempting to address them. By triangulating Critical Discourse Analysis with focused group interviews with youth and interviews with communications representatives of several non-partisan organizations, I analyze the extended communicative encounter between state, extra-state organization, and citizen, as framed by the issue of ‘youth and electoral disengagement’. My research problem is to explore the communicative cycle of electoral promotional discourses, their production, dissemination and consumption. I ask how these various understandings relate to each other, and what this might mean for the democratic public sphere. By focusing on the way the dominant outreach strategies ‘speak to’ and engage with youth, I unravel a paradox whereby the framework of communication in some of these materials, meant to help people who are alienated from the political process, in fact functions to reiterate the exclusionary tendencies of democratic politics that necessitate the engagement strategies in the first place.
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Chapter 1. Introduction to the Research

1.1 Contextualizing the Research

I write this introductory paragraph in the summer of 2010, two years in the shadow of Canada’s 40th general election, which at 58.8% had the lowest voter turnout in a general election since Confederation (Elections Canada, 2010: 4). And, as Elections Canada’s most current (2010) report on voter turnout states, “the major reason for the decline in Canadian voter turnout over the past two decades can be traced to the continuing drop-off in voting among the youngest cohorts” (4-5). Elections Canada further states that “it is important to add that the underlying causes of the declining youth turnout remain poorly understood” (10). While there is often a surge of op-ed pieces in local newspapers, news stories, and electoral reports about the ‘youth voting problem’ around election time, however, very little critical, qualitative research is being done in this area. This thesis attempts to bridge that gap.

1.2 Conceptualizing the Research

Reflecting on various constructions of the ‘youth voting problem’, it is clear that many of the concerns about young peoples’ lack of political participation stem from real disengagement. Although I sometimes put the ‘youth voting problem’ in scare quotes to indicate my hesitation in reiterating such normatively charged terms, I do appreciate that young people in this country are not voting and that this does indicate a problem for

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1 While it is true that younger Canadians have the lowest voter turnout rates across the country (Elections Canada, 2010: 7), that young people are named as the “reason” for low voting turnout rates give an indication that their focus is on trying to make people fit within structures rather than on making structures work for people.
democracy. Indeed, it appears that many young Canadians have missed out on their ‘chance’, as many electoral promotions campaigns put it, to ‘be heard’ or to ‘speak their minds’ (Elections Canada, online).

While it is true that many young people have not exercised their right to vote, however, there are multiple ways of understanding why this is the case. This is, in fact, a crucial point in how I seek to frame this research. Against dominant research discourses, I argue that the low levels of participation in Canadian elections have less to do with low levels of procedural knowledge, and a great deal more to do with socio-cultural factors than most researchers have hypothesized. Although much work on this topic focuses on a ‘knowledge deficit’ among youth, and conceives of a linear relationship between acquiring procedural knowledge of the political system and the desire to vote, I argue that the picture is more complex. I argue that this particular problem framing ignores the surrounding cultural context (including the language, the design, hierarchies, relations and role structures) of Canadian democracy, and the question of whether it is, at present, even possible for young peoples’ voice to be heard, or for them to, as the promotional discourses cajole, ‘speak their minds’.

In setting up this research project, I wanted to move beyond issues that have been recursively studied with the same methodological tools and to ask different questions that would come up with new answers. Contra to the research that has been done in this area thus far, I am not looking for broad trends or generalizations that will tell definitive truths of why young Canadians are disengaged from electoral processes. Rather, I am seeking to expose the meanings and practices that interact with specific discourses, and tie these forms of social practices to questions about representation and power today.
1.3 Research Questions

This is a qualitative study of electoral promotional materials, with a focus on non-partisan websites geared towards Canadian youth. Electoral promotion websites were chosen as the focus of this research as they represent the emergence of problem-solving strategies identifying different causes of the same ‘social problem’ of non-voting. These solutions mark the interests and relations of power that inhere among certain actors.

Because the political aims of the public sector are to further goals of social justice, and remedy issues of accessibility, equity and inclusion, it is important to evaluate their effectiveness. In evaluating the effectiveness of these texts, I ask a three-pronged question: How, why, and with what effects do different electoral promotions organizations attempt to communicate with youth in the Canadian context?

1) How is youth’s political participation construed and produced by texts? What are the expectations and limits of legitimate democratic participation? How are social relations represented? How do these materials serve to legitimate certain ways of being, norms of acting, and, what do such legitimating practices, as forms of inclusions and exclusion, mean for political action in the democratic political sphere?

2) What are communication and outreach decisions based upon? What ‘regimes of practice’ (Dean, 1999) are operating within different institutional settings, and what impact do they have on youth communication and outreach strategies? What dimensions of low youth voter turn-out rates are made visible, and why? What are
some of the techniques, ways of knowing and regulating agents operating within
the present assemblage of electoral promotional discourses in Canada?
3) How do youth themselves conceive the ‘youth voting problem’? How do they
interpret/make sense of the outreach attempting to address them? Do the
promotion communication strategies serve the needs of their intended audience?
What are the opportunities that might arise from these promotional discourses and
resources? What are the barriers and ambivalences young people might have in
interacting with these resources?
The goal of this research is thus to thicken descriptions of the context in which official
and non-official discursive explanations of low electoral turnout rates among youth
emerge, and to find out how those explanations fit with local accounts.

1.4 Research Approach

1.4.1 What is Discourse?

Discourse is a slippery concept. It has been used differently in many academic
contexts over time, making it difficult to distil its varied meanings. The most popular use
of discourse in social theory today follows the work of Michel Foucault (1972). As
Foucault himself remarked however, this may provide little help: “instead of gradually
reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word ‘discourse’, I believe I have added to
its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements sometimes as
an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that
accounts for a number of statements” (1972: 80). From this starting point it is clear that
Foucault has conceived discourse as a social practice that takes place under certain socio-cultural/historical conditions.

Adopting a Foucauldian approach, Fairclough defines discourse as “language use as social practice” (1989:113). This formulation is not the same as equating language and discourse. Language and discourse overlap greatly, however, discourse can include any form of communicative action, encompassing, as Barthes (1972) wrote of ‘Myths’, “modes of writing or of representations… also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech” (1972:110). Indeed, all forms of social interaction on a certain subject or body of knowledge, all the ways of speaking, of writing about, or capturing, of discussing, explaining, and engaging in any communicative action based around an issue, subject, or theme, are discursive processes.

Fairclough emphasizes that discourse is socially constitutive, and “contributes first of all to the construction of what are variously referred to as “social identities” and “subject positions … [S]econdly, discourse helps construct social relationships between people. And thirdly, discourse contributes to the construction of systems of knowledge and belief” (Fairclough, 1992: 64). It is important to note that the production of a coherent discourse is an interactive process. While text producers use discursive resources to assemble meaning, the social truths they reproduce or co-create can only succeed to the extent that they have an audience capable of picking them up. Indeed, interpreters (and their background knowledge of grammar, form, meaning, as well as cognitive, expressive knowledge) themselves ‘make meaning’ out of discourse — accepting, negotiating, and opposing intended or preferred readings (Hall, 1980).
1.4.2 Significance of discourse within this Thesis

In this study, I am not only concerned with the problem of youth electoral disengagement, but also in the various constructions of this problem, and how these constructions have lead to solutions that may have negative, positive, unintended and/or ambivalent social effects for different actors and social groups. As I have noted, in Canada recently, discourses of youth disengagement have been developed across multiple diverse settings and have involved different groups of people, including academics, journalists, politicians, teachers, government and school board officials, and young people themselves. The discourses of youth electoral disengagement that develop from the interaction of these groups’ constructions are manifested in policy, curriculum documents, media coverage, and opinion pieces, as well as local accounts. Across this accumulated knowledge, the identification of ‘what’s wrong’ with youth and their levels of political participation today feeds into a whole host of solutions imagined to engage them. I am particularly interested in the commonalities and disjunctures of these different solutions and discourses, especially between institutional and local accounts.

1.4.4 Operationalizing ‘Youth’

Academic and cultural definitions of ‘youth’ are varied; and youth studies itself has emerged from varied disciplines and theoretical positions. A traditional approach appears in psychology and developmental studies, which mostly continue to view youth as a series of ‘natural’ biological, moral and cognitive stages that reproduce normative pathways to adulthood.
By contrast, culturalist accounts, like those of Lesko (1996) seek to “de-naturalize adolescence”, and challenge accounts of youth as a progressive set of universal stages (139). The culturalist perspective highlights the ways that subjectivities and signifiers of ‘youth’ (and by extension youthful language, dispositions, and tastes) are tied to socio-cultural, moral, economic, and political relationships. While not denying that cognitive, biological, or behavioural characteristics are involved in ‘constructing youth’, the cultural studies approach emphasizes taking account of the way that age is socio-historically, institutionally and politically constructed, “constituted and indexed through both discursive and non-discursive practices” (Suslack, 2009: 202).

A cultural approach to understanding age has therefore focused upon the changing institutions, such as the mass media, educative programs and the family, which work to define the ways by which children become adults. Today, researchers have been interested in the emergent ways that informational communications technologies have impacted the aging process — enabling youth “unprecedented access to representations of how other young people around the world dress, what they consume, how they speak” (Suslak, 2009: 200).

This underscores that understandings of youth are socio-historically located, and as such, dynamic. As people are born and pass away, historical change is imminent. In other words, the social and economic transformations that are constantly taking place will inevitably mean that young people today are going to experience a world very different from that of their parents, no matter what other categories of ‘sameness’ (i.e., class, gender, sexuality et cetera) that they retain.
As Mannheim (1952) put it, the “sociological phenomenon of generations is ultimately based upon the biological rhythm of birth and death” (290). For Mannheim therefore, a generation is more than a birth cohort; it is an emergent socio-cultural phenomenon. As Holt (1997) similarly notes, "different social contexts and different historical periods produce specific sociocultural configurations of [social] categories. These classificatory regimes … structure cultural understandings” (342).

This is not to say that youth networks, culture and consciousness are in any way integrated or coherent. There are, of course, many intersecting dimensions of experience among youth which establish a differentiated experience of age; for example, youth who live in rural environments will not necessarily become engaged in the same experiences and share the same types of views as youth who live in urban areas, despite being born in the same year and thus sharing a similar historical and socio-cultural milieu. As such, youth appears in a double articulation – both a generational phenomenon (the stage of life) and in specific formations of social relations (in which gender, race and class are articulated with the dimensions of age) (Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, 1978).

This differentiation is perhaps most obvious along lines of race, gender, class and sexuality. As Skeggs (2008) argues, complicating processes of class and gender so significantly influence individual realities so as to trouble the availability of any coherent identity or habitus based on only one strand of experience. Indeed, there is no habitation of any concept as complete and coherent.

Youth are also inflected with difference at the discursive level. Indeed, it is clear that some young people (who are characterized as having a particular social character) become the focus of selective attention, constructed as abnormal, and/or deviant youth. In
discourses of ‘problem youth’, worries converge about a host of behaviours, characterized abstractly as delinquency, sexual deviance, excessive sociability and excessive solitude. The youth to whom these labels are attached then become subject to increased monitoring, surveillance and possible criminalization.

Indeed, in many of the discursive abstractions of youth made available by knowledge practices of various social work, human capital and “psy” disciplines, normal youth agency is contrasted with the abnormal, anti-social, abject and perhaps dangerous (Rose, 1996: 10). As such, the experiences, abilities and moralities associated with any one group are not a common collection of individual traits, but constructions whose contents are formed through differential technologies of truth.

It is clear, in any case, that discourses of youth and the material differences in experience have profound impacts on the formation of subjectivities and the construction of social differences through the processes of inclusion and exclusion, which act in no straightforward (or predictable) way in shaping youth subjectivities. Despite these differences, however, I maintain that the category of age retains significance in this analysis. Youth is understood not as a psychological condition, natural life stage, or coherent identity, but rather as an unstable, historically located articulation of discourse, which has material, social, legal, and subjective effects upon the social relations, psychic and material realities in which it is applied and recognized.

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2 As Rose (1994, 1999) describes the expert knowledge bequeathed by accredited professionals functions to fashion certain individuals, groups and typologies within the population as objects of knowledge; these abstractions then establish a normative scale against which the capacity of individuals to practice their freedom can be measured. And clearly these relationships between subject and object of knowledge is retained in a position of dominance control legitimacy, which, as Bourdieu (1991) describes as ‘the power to be heard, believed and obeyed, along with the ability to silence others or allow them to speak’ (Bourdieu 1991).
1.5 An Overview of this Thesis

In this chapter, I named the conditions of possibility for the current project. I outlined my reasons for taking up this topic, and identified the research focus. The next chapters provide the foundations of the thesis by reviewing the literature, outlining my theoretical framework, and explaining the design and execution of this thesis.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the state of research on this topic, providing a detailed overview of the field of youth and political disengagement. The literature review is necessarily eclectic, pulling together a broad range of research that is inconsistent in style and character. The challenges of integrating these inconsistencies will be discussed. In Chapter 3, I discuss the theoretical frames which structure research agendas on the topic of youth and voter disengagement. I use insights from governmentality theory, and other critical social theory to critique the current state of research on this topic. This review also serves as a basis for Dean Mitchell’s (1999) ‘regimes of practice’, which is used as an analytic framework for the producers’ reports in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 4, I lay out my research design, and bridge the foundational chapters to the data chapters. I outline the construction of my thesis, discussing the considerations that informed the study, the CDA approach that was used, the tools and techniques of data collection, and the analysis of my data. It concludes a discussion of validity.

In Chapter 5 I present my findings. I discuss my interviews with four key representatives who held relevant communications positions in non-partisan organizations addressing the social problem of youth voter disengagement. The data from these interviews prompt a discussion of the ‘fields of visibility’ opened up by the
knowledge practices in different organizations. Here I begin to look at the assemblages of discourses in operation via the ‘youth voting problem’ in Canada.

Chapter 6 provides a Critical Discourse Analysis of two websites that represent highly visible non-partisan responses to the youth voting problem – that is, Apathy is Boring, a grassroots group, and Elections Canada, a national electoral administration agency. Using the linguistic framework provided by Fairclough (1989; 1992; 1995; 2001; 2004), and some additional categories of analysis described in Chapter 4, I analyze how youth are addressed by different organizations, how social relations are constructed in the text, and how democracy and voting are represented. I also question how (and to what extent) these new venues for communication utilize the new, celebrated capabilities of the web for interactive content creation.

Chapter 7 presents the findings of my focus groups with youth. By way of thematic analysis, and comparing and contrasting the results of Chapters 5 and 6, I analyze how different discourses identified in previous chapters are responded to by the intended audience, as framed within a discussion of their own political engagement. At this point, my findings help propel my argument beyond mere critique, and towards formative findings that could inform recommendations for policy or further research. In conclusion, Chapter 8 provides a summary of the findings, and recommendations to various stakeholders and groups involved in addressing this problem and working towards solutions.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a literature review of the field of youth and political disengagement. As this chapter will illustrate, it is a diverse field in which both ‘youth’ and ‘political disengagement’ are operationalized in different and sometimes-conflicting ways. The first part of this chapter begins by surveying the status of the field, and clarifying the different concepts and methodologies that inhere within. After this conceptualization practice, the second part of the chapter explores the literature as divided under three main clusters.

The first grouping, mostly quantitative research, focuses on the effects of the life-course on voter turnout. The second grouping is more methodologically diverse and investigates the cultural effects of generational change. I have partitioned the generational-effects research into 5 sub-categories: (1) delayed/de-standardized transitions to adulthood; (2) globalization; (3) impacts of neo-liberalism; (4) non-traditional politics; (5) intergenerational communication break-downs. In the following overviews I favor Canadian research, but draw upon relevant international studies. The last area of research relevant to this topic is the education research, which is the most popular research area in Canada. This section concludes my empirical literature review and leads into Chapter 3.

2.2. Explaining Low Youth Voter Turnout Rates

2.2.1 Current Status of the Field
Over the past decade, low voter turnout has been flagged as a concern across all age groups in many industrialized democratic countries, and Canada is no exception. The voter turnout in the October 14th, 2008 Canadian Federal election was estimated at 58.8%, breaking the record low of 61% in 2004 (Elections Canada, 2010: 4). In the last election, like others, youth voting rates were about 10-20% lower than average (ibid.). Approximately 37% of youth between the ages of 18-24, and 48% between the ages of 25-34 voted in the 2008 federal election (ibid). In British Columbia, where this research was conducted, the 2005 election showed a 58% turnout overall, with a 35% turnout of all eligible voters between the ages of 18-24, and 43% of all eligible 25-34 year olds (Elections BC, online).

Despite the turnout statistics, the issue of youth and their relationship to electoral processes has not yet attracted the attention it deserves, from academics, governing officials, or political representatives. Surface discussion of low youth voter turnout rates can be found in a number of Elections agencies’ strategic plans and policy documents, where young voters are identified as a target outreach group; nevertheless electoral promotional policy seems to remain in the formative stages, where it paradoxically continues to lag behind the needs of upcoming generations persistently disengaged from formal democratic systems.

The research that has been commissioned by Elections Canada focuses centrally on demographic trends, and their attitudinal and behavioural surveys tend to homogenize the reasons why younger people are electorally disengaged. Only very occasionally do the studies commissioned by Elections Canada highlight the wider socio-cultural context
in which low levels of interest or motivation occur, or foreground the importance of socio-cultural symbols (like language) and representation practices. Although quantitative analyses are necessary for identifying large-scale trends and demographic inequities, different methodologies are needed to answer why those inequities exist and what might be done to address them. Despite the longitudinal downtrend of participation in formal processes of democracy however, critical, hermeneutic, and interpretive research into young voter abstention is surprisingly limited.

2.2.2 Defining and conceptualizing the field

An investigation into the topic of ‘youth and political disengagement’ requires some understanding of the conceptual practices that are in use, and, relatedly, the difficulties of comparing studies that have utilized different definitions for political disengagement. In a time of shifting socio-cultural norms, values, and practices, attempts to quantify political disengagement have proved difficult. While low voter turnout rates are, of course, one manner with which to highlight the levels of engagement among different groups, there are myriad indicators to consider.

Previous studies have operationalized political participation as a range of activities, encompassing ‘civic mindedness’, social capital, voter turnout, membership in political parties, and civic associations, and volunteerism (Milner, 2002). Across most of these indicators, the story remains the same ─ youth today are politically disengaged.

More recently, however, the focus has turned away from identifying political identities primarily in terms of their relationship to the state, and has been supplemented
with a growing interest in young peoples’ attitudes towards political participation, subjective experiences of citizenship, all of which have mounted towards arguments for a critical revision of the concept of ‘political participation’ itself (i.e., Gauthier, 2003; Hil and Bessant, 1999; Norris, 2002; Vromen, 2007). Against this story of disengagement and democratic deficit among youth, a ‘new engagements’ research approach has emerged, influenced by participant-centered approaches and qualitative methodologies.

Scholars in this ‘new engagements’ field argue that the conditions of late modern society have changed so sufficiently as to require new questions, methods, and perspectives for analyzing youth and political experience. A related subset of this field explores the way political participation may be extended or transformed by new information communication technologies, like the internet (Bennett, 2008; Levine, 2008; Rhinegold, 2008; Xenos and Foot, 2008). In many of these studies, youth participation is defined loosely, and the state has been replaced by identity, life-style and networks as primary influences on political identity.

As I will argue in a later section, however, there are problems with these studies. Although these studies point to real aspects of social change, and, in so doing have merit, the influence of the state does not disappear because some researchers choose to omit it from their analysis. The state continues to play a significant governing role in shaping the structures of symbolic and material resources, which are unequally distributed. Unfortunately, very little research connects the emergent ways that young people imagine

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3 Thank you to Dennis Pilon for suggesting this name and leading me to a productive discussion on this issue.
politics to what degree they are able to influence and exercise actual, substantive, decision-making power.

Thus, where the first school of research emphasizes the traditional politics of the ordinary, the second overvalues the ability of these ‘new engagements’ to mobilize resources and challenge enduring inequalities. In short, both have an inadequate understanding of power. These two approaches to the topic currently hold the greatest influence over academic inquiry and policy development. In this thesis, I will attempt to build a third, which is critically focused on participation in electoral processes, and in holding democratic processes themselves open to criticism, contestation and change.

2.2.3 Clarifying my use of terms in the current research

While I align myself with the position that the conceptual coordinates of being political are contestable, and may need to be re-defined, this is not the main focus of my study. I do not believe that concentrating on electoral participation is irreconcilable with a more critical, fluid manner of conceptualizing what is political action today. In this study I purposefully chose to concentrate on electoral turnout rates because, although this may not represent the only (or even the best) way, for citizens to have a voice in governance and social change, it is a potentially powerful avenue for collective action. Although much critical contemporary work seems to have abandoned hope for the institutions of modern liberalism (like representative democracy), the political system remains a powerful and legitimated venue for enacting social realities and should thus continue to be interrogated for the ways it can contribute to social justice, and critiqued for the ways
it reproduces inequalities and works to naturalize hegemonies in both the cultural/symbolic realm.

2.3 Research into Low Youth Voter Turnout Rates

As previously indicated, Canadian research into youth voter turnout rates has been surprisingly limited, even though there is evidence that youth voter turnout rates are at a low level and show very little sign of ‘catching up’. Consequently, the field I draw from to inform the literature review that follows is historically and geographically varied.

2.3.1 Life-Cycle Effects

Traditionally, low youth voter-turnout has been explained with references to life-cycle events, which are said to have differential attributes that motivate people to vote. Life-cycle explanations focus on the consistent or ostensibly predictable stages of development seen as relevant to gaining a stake in the political system, and consequently, the motivation to participate in it. As such, life-cycle variables aim to expose the underlying motivations where age might affect one’s political behaviour as that behaviour varies with age. Indicators of such life stages are generally related to the roles and responsibilities of adulthood; moving out of the parental home, starting a career, getting married, having kids, buying a home (Verba & Nie 1972). Politics is said to become more relevant as one experiences certain primary life events, like the ones just mentioned, and secondary ones, like joining political associations and community organizations.

Life-cycle effects are also said to be a result of gaining ‘life experience’, making it easier for individuals to locate themselves on a political map and align their interests
with particular political ideologies and parties (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Life-cycle theories sometimes intersect with work in developmental psychology that assumes good judgment is learned, that as we age, the brain develops progressive functions for controlling judgment and risk assessment\(^4\). For this reason ‘life-cycle’ proponents generally seek to quell concern about the low turnout rates among youth, focusing on the assumption (and built-in solution) that as youth age, and develop more mature judgment abilities, politics will naturally become more relevant to them, and their voting rates will ‘catch up’. As some researchers have noticed however, they may not ‘catch up’, if they form a habit of non-voting (Cutts, Fieldhouse, and John, 2009; Franklin 1996).

A number of studies, however, have indicated that this expectation no longer holds to the same extent as it has in the past. In Canada, Blais et al. (2009) recently explored the continuing relevance of life-cycle theory. Using longitudinal data sets, they show that electoral turnout rates do increase by 15% as individuals traverse the ages of 20 to 50 (224). They also find, however, that people today begin their ‘life-cycle’ at a lower level of electoral turnout than past generations, a factor accounting for 20% less turnout for those born in the 1970s over the 1960s and 1950s (ibid, 225). This suggests that while life-cycle effects may continue to provide some explanatory value, there are more factors to explore\(^5\).

\(^4\) According to the cognitive-development theories of Piaget and Kohlberg, for example, youth universally pass through stages in which they develop progressively more mature moral (and thus political) judgment. Both developmental psychologists hypothesized that with aging youth naturally (though not inevitably) reach the stage of moral development where one develops objective logic, abstract thinking, and rationality.

\(^5\) Even if electoral rates do increase as younger citizens age, however, these questions still fail to answer the normative question: “is it legitimate for us to accept democratic inequalities as they co-vary with age? In other words, in a free and democratic society, why should we accept that age so directly corresponds to decreased decision-making power at the state level?
Furthermore, the explanatory purchase of life-cycle theories depends, of course, on the assumption that there are characteristics of cohorts that are stable and predictable over time, and that those characteristics are relevant to voting patterns. In other words, the life-cycle theories of voter turnout ask us to assume that young people will follow the same general trajectory of participation as those in the past. While treating young people as statistical artefacts on the basis of equal interval birth cohorts has obvious advantages in terms of operationalizing age, it leaves out the context of socio-historical processes, and thereby limits the questions that can be asked. The necessary assumption made in life-cycle effect theories, namely, that generational identities are constant and unchanging, is not a safe one for a number of reasons as the next section will lay out. Foremost among these mis-conceptions is that the concept of ‘adult maturation’ is tied to a socio-economic context many young people today are not experiencing, and social roles they are not enacting.

2.3.2 The Cultural Effects of Generational Change

In opposition to life-cycle theory, where generations are defined as age intervals, generational effect theories define generations as groups having common exposure to certain socio-historical events and trends during their most intense period of socialization. This school thus focuses on the importance of looking at the socio-historical context in which engagement or disengagement occurs.

Generational effects research sits well beside the growing body of social theory which, since the 1990s, has emphasized the impacts of our so-called epochal change. As argued by many prominent social theorists, the contents and dynamics of contemporary
life have been marked by changing conditions, labelled differently (though sometimes interchangeably) ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000), ‘reflexive modernity’ (Beck, 1994), late modernity (Giddens, 1991), and post-modernity (Lyotard, 1979; Jameson, 1991). What these different terms have in common is the contention that modern systems (and subjectivities) are becoming de-traditionalized as we figure new relationships and experiences with our physical, biological, mechanical and socio-cultural worlds.

Described with key words like ‘chaos’, ‘complexity’, ‘flexible’, ‘fluid’, ‘dynamic’ ‘adaptive’, and ‘networks’, the contents and dynamics of these apparent epochal shifts are said to have brought about a vastly new opportunity/risk structure, new lines of allegiance, and new values. As this new context differentially socializes individuals, and groups, it is implied that these features render traditional lines of political infrastructure increasingly irrelevant, or out of line.

For this thesis, 5 points are particularly pertinent: (1) youth transitions to adulthood have become both prolonged and de-standardized; (2) national governments are having difficulty freighting the political concerns of increasingly globalized generations; (3) Canadian neo-liberal policies have depoliticized ‘youth issues’; (4) in an increasingly individualistic atmosphere, today’s youth may be forgoing elections in favour of ‘direct-action’ and other forms of non-traditional politics, and; (5) these factors tie into creating a fractured conceptual field that is reflected in and amplified by a communicative break-down between youth and (older) political agents.

(a) Transitions to Adulthood
It should be noted that low electoral turnout rates among youth are said to co-vary with shifting cultural definitions of ‘youth’ itself. Youth, as defined by the Canadian government, refers to the age group between 18-30. This high categorical end point seems to reflect the cultural and institution acceptance of adolescence as a prolonged life course stage.

The thesis of extended adolescence is given empirical weight by Furstenberg, Rumbaut and Settersten Jr. (2005), who assemble an impressive set of data, tracing the historical construction of adolescence in conjunction with economic and socio-cultural developments. In this book-length study, they find that the transition to adulthood (vis-à-vis leaving the parental home, securing stable employment, forming a family, becoming civically involved) is more complicated now than in previous eras. Using 14 longitudinal data sets of mostly official U.S. and cross-national data, they argue that a new life-course stage has appeared (“early adulthood” defined as ages 18 to 34), as markers of a successful transition to adulthood have begun to dissolve (2005: 5). Among other things, they find that jobs have become less permanent and more competitive in the ‘information-driven society’, overall structuring less time for leisure pursuits than in the past. In an era where upper class youth find adolescent protracted by the ‘trickle down’ from parental wealth, youth of lower socio-economic status find it prolonged because of declining low and medium-skill economic opportunity. Their work challenges established

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6 ‘Extended adolescence’ is reflected in pop culture as ‘Adultescence’, defined in the Webster’s New World College Dictionary (2004) as “an adult who has not achieved expected intellectual maturity or who indulges in the tastes and attitudes of youth. Synonyms: kidult and rejuvenile”.

7 Time constraints emerged as a significant theme in a 2003 Canadian survey of 960 non-voters (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003). When questioned about their reasons for electoral abstention, the 18-24 age bracket overwhelmingly (42%) responded they were "too busy" (4) to vote.
narratives of youth as a period of transition into adult stability, suggesting that transitions today are prolonged and quite possibly de-standardized.

Ulrich Beck (1998) and Anthony Giddens (1991) take up similar observations at a theoretical/phenomenological level, describing current epochal shifts leading into processes of ‘individualization’ in ‘reflexive modernity’. Beck and Giddens highlight the changing conceptual coordinates of society: namely, the pluralization of lifestyles, increasingly de-nationalized labor markets and mobile economies, technological advancements which ‘compress’ time and space, and consequently, the restructuring of responsibilities and dependencies in which individual lives are now embedded.

Giddens claims that in the shift from a politics of life chances to a politics of lifestyle we see an increased influence on individual action, disembeddedness from time and space, both of which come from changes in the field of knowledge and technology today. The current context is described by Beck and Giddens as one in which a flurry of neo-liberal state and consumer discourses advise young people to choose to follow their own desires, aspirations, inspirations and beliefs. These discourses, centered upon youth as ‘subjects of choice’, occur in the context of making populations fit for a so-called information age. In this ‘DIY’ manner of building their own lifestyles, the current generation has been made up as entrepreneurs of the self. Relative to the past, possibilities and lifestyle choices are multiplied; and in what Beck calls the ‘biographization of youth’, individuals are expected to design lives of their own, a project

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9 As te Reile (2004) points out, however, the concept of choice biographies can be hazardous, and “perhaps unintentionally” feed into “a misleading discourse around individual responsibility, which ignores the constraints on the choices available to young people (246).
that holds as many precarious possibilities as it does genuine emancipatory valences (1998: 78, 1999:9). As Harris, Wyn and Youness (2007) point out, young people today “have new and significant pressures upon them to create futures for themselves without predictable pathways or safety nets and this means their personal concerns are very focused” (25).

(b) Globalization

As youth are urged to deal with problems at the individual level, the world they live in, their communities and affinity networks exist far beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. As mobility and communication technologies bring together previously unconnected individuals and communities, they amplify and enable political concerns that span borders. In a global society where international trade agreements (i.e., the World Trade Organization, the North American Free Trade Association, the Free Tariffs of the Americas) preside over national governments, the complexities of science and technology (i.e., Bio-ethics, genetically modified foods, stem cell research) reach unprecedented levels of moral uncertainty, and environmental disasters and epidemiological pandemics know no state boundaries, individuals seem to have limited efficacy as purely national political subjects (Bauman, 2000). The world today may indeed be smaller, but from the micro and meso levels, it seems more and more out of our control (Beck, 1998). Confronted with the characteristics of the ‘runaway world’ (vis-à-vis emerging post-Fordist production methods, biotechnology and world-wide
communication and transport networks), national sovereignty faces conceptual ambivalence.

It should be recognized that as young people are increasingly cajoled to accept their civic and political responsibilities, they are inheriting a world faced by ever-more complex environmental, social and ethical problems. Youth participating in a conference organized by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) in 2006 echoed this feeling of being burdened from past mistakes, especially with regards to global environmental issues and the health care system (CPRN). As one participant noted: "we're told to fix things but the tools we get are a few nails and no hammer" (ibid). While they may be realistic, such comments highlight the potentially intense feelings of political inefficacy today.

(c) Neo-liberalism

Canadian society has undergone a number of changes over the last thirty years, including a significant decline in political participation, an increasingly global economy that has affected a significant shift in labour opportunities (from manufacturing to service work), and a slow but steady dismantling of the welfare state (Armstong, 2010). These changes can be understood with reference to neo-liberalism, defined here as a highly mobile set of economic, political and policy practices that seek to liberalize markets, through economic deregulation, elimination of tariffs, privatization of common resources, and cuts to social and health services (Brown, 2005). Over the past thirty years, starting most noticeably in Canada with Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservatives, such policy has been embraced in both Canadian politics and politics abroad.
At the most basic level, neo-liberalism prescribes minimal roles and responsibilities for the nation-state, claiming we are best served to efficiency by maximum market freedom. As such, the role of government should be confined to opening and protecting markets as well as defending private property. All other functions, including essential services, are better provided by private enterprise, which will be prompted to maximum efficiency by the profit motive.

The neo-liberal context described above is the political orientation through which many young Canadians have come of voting age and is therefore important to understanding the political habitus\(^\text{10}\) of younger Canadians. As Brenda O’Neill points out, “more than 10 years of Canadian governments highlighting the need for fiscal restraint and balanced budgets might have left many young Canadians with less than a clear sense of what exactly governments do for them to deserve their duty in return” (O’Neill, 2003). The dominant message, whether through direct party lines, or through the elimination of government assistance, is that citizens are to rely upon themselves for their future and well-being. In the context of low electoral turnout rates among youth, the sense that politics has very little to offer them, may well be the “very success of government in reducing their perceived responsibility towards citizens” (idid.).

Margarett Adsett (2003) insinuates similar logic. Using historical demographic analysis, she illustrates how issues in Canada have been politicized and de-politicized in tandem with the interests of the dominant demographics. She argues that the demographic weight of the post-war 1970’s generation created a fertile ground for Pierre Trudeau to ‘capture the imagination of youth’ (255) – through the state creation of wide

\(^{10}\) Habitus refers to the socialized structure of the mind, with a particular focus on acquired subjectivity, including the conceptual frameworks and schemas, structured affective responses, habitualizations, cultural patterns and norms as they manifest in taste.
opportunity structures, and undertaking policies more generally representative of youth interests and attitudes, such as human rights and justice causes. As she notes, at that time, youth voting percentages were over 70% (259). As the baby boomers aged, however, the government adjusted its priorities and issues accordingly. Not only have governments today ignored youth issues, they have, in many ways, stood in opposition to them. To this Adsett states that “[a]sking youth to participate in electoral politics in the post-Trudeau era would be like asking them to engage in: (a) the dismantling of the welfare state (b) the cutting off of social programs which would help get them established” (254).

Together, processes of globalization and neo-liberal politics have contributed to a number of changes in the socio-economic context of youth — most strikingly, the shift from industrial and manufacturing work, into service sector jobs. This shift, notably documented by Tannock (2001) in Youth at Work: The Unionized Fast-food and Grocery Workplace, details the employment context for young people in the United States and Canada. He finds that young people work in the lowest-paying, lowest-status jobs there are — dead-end or "McJobs" in the retail, food and entertainment service sectors (4-5). Employed youth receive lower wages, benefits, and less job security than any other age group in the workforce (ibid). Five years after this book was published, a Statistics Canada report showed little improvement on this issue. In 2006, minimum wage workers in Canada numbered about 587,000 or 4.3 % of the total Canadian workforce, however, of those minimum wage workers, youth (ages 15-24) accounted for 68 % (Statistics Canada, 2006: 13). In total, nearly 70% of minimum-wage workers were under 25,
compared with only 17% of all other employees. This translates into an incidence rate eight times that of those 25 and older—15.5% versus 1.9% (12).

And as previously pointed out, despite their importance to the ‘flexible’ service economy, researchers, policymakers, and trade unions often ignore the concerns of young workers (Tannock, 2001: 6; Adsett, 2003). As Tannock documents through the statements of right wing think tanks, politicians, journalists, marketers and others, youth are generally seen as undeserving of living wages, health benefits and other standard working conditions (2). To unravel the logic behind such statements, Tannock traces the discourses of youth spending, finding that youth’s earnings are seen as largely ‘disposable income’, essentially pocket money for luxury purchases. Tannock’s work showcases the ways that this discourse mostly misrepresents and works against young workers. He points out that even assumptions that ‘affluent teens’ only need employment to attain “disposable income” ignore the dynamics of power in families in which young people “‘have minimal say in how family income is divided, so even teenagers from well-off families need to earn money’” (Esther Reither as qtd in Tannock: 3). Young people have neither the practical ability nor the legal status to take family wealth into their own hands, and as such, conflating their incomes is problematic. These discourses of ‘disposable income’ are even more problematic for the youth and families who live at or below the poverty level. There is a great many more for whom no support system is even imaginable.

When these economic/labour findings are situated within the glut of knowledge of structural barriers to voting, there seems an even greater justification to focus on the issue
of youth disengagement. Indeed, after age and education, income is related to turnout; having a higher income has positive effects on turnout, making it more likely for those with higher income to vote than those without (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980: 20, 26). Indeed, the weight of evidence indicates that greater access to particular resources, such as higher levels of income or education, facilitates participation (Nevitte et. al., 2000; Verba et. al., 1995). Conversely, those without these kinds of resources are less likely to participate in politics.

There are also indirect and reciprocal effects associated with high Socioeconomic status — a higher aggregation of resources (whether that be time, money, access to media) as well as access to specialized knowledge and social networks as well. On other hand, voters who are insecure in their basic needs are less able to participate in politics; they have more pressing concerns (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980).

(d) Non-traditional Politics/New Engagements

In the context of epochal change – the de-traditionalization of social roles, and new precarious freedoms ushered in by neo-liberal policies and globalization - if youth are not participating in traditional politics, does it follow that they are doing nothing political? While it true that they are not voting, there is no clear consensus that they are, in fact, politically disengaged. As Pippa Norris, the forerunner of the ‘new engagement’s thesis, states:

[I]f studies are limited to comparing memberships in the traditional agencies of political participation .. then they will present only a partial perspective which underestimates engagement through modern agencies characterized by fuzzier boundaries and more informal forms of belonging.

(Norris, 2003: 4)
Inglehart (1999) and Norris (1999) argue that the thesis of youth disengagement can be fully turned on its head; that in fact young people today are more democratically minded than their predecessors, and are thus turning away from what they see as hierarchical and authoritarian institutions. This viewpoint troubles the notion of youth outreach strategies in the first place, for as Lance Bennett (2008) notes, “telling young people to participate in bad institutions is mere propaganda” (4). This hypothesis poses that as a new generation of ‘critical citizens’ becomes more and more frustrated with the performance of traditional political institutions, they are increasingly turning towards non-traditional political acts (like protests, internet-politics and consumer activism). In Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism, Norris argues that:

[Political activism has been reinvented in recent decades by a diversification in the agencies (the collective organizations structuring political activity), the repertoires (the actions commonly used for political expression), and the targets (the political actors that participants seek to influence).]

(Norris, 2002: 215-216)

So, are there new functional logics for Canadian politics today? Should markers of political participation be confined to electoral rates? Are there other ways of ‘being political’ (for example, boycotting products, participating in rallies and demonstrations) that are being excluded? Examining cross-organizational data from Quebec, Madeline Gauthier (2003) suggests so, challenging traditional participation indicators, and arguing for a broader conceptualization of political participation.
In her paper, Gauthier gives us an impressive list of political youth organizations in Quebec. This list (especially when situated among the countless media images of youth shown resisting arrest at WTO protests, or occupying the streets of peace marches) appears as a convincing thesis; however, there are a number of reasons why we should not be convinced. Her list of organizations, in and of itself, does not equate to proving we have an inclusive democracy in Canada.

First, it is not a new insight that even when organizations, both formal and informal involve younger members, criteria for participation in these situations and processes quite often do little to challenge the dominant norms or hegemonies of inclusion. This is because adults who are looking for youth representatives often mirror the inequalities of the broader system, favouring the inclusion of high achievers who come from privileged backgrounds, having higher levels of education, demonstrated experiences in positions of ‘responsibility’ or decision-making, and an ability to articulate the norms of the organization. Unfortunately, these issues are unaddressed, and trouble the optimism we might receive from Gauthier’s research.

Second, it is not clear that her findings can be extrapolated to the national level. Gauthier’s analysis, with its focus on Quebec, conflicts with national data indicating that people born since 1970 have the lowest awareness of political, party and economic globalization issues (Gidengil et al. 2003: 11-12). The same study also found that young Canadians are the least likely sector of the population to have participated in a community group or voluntary association (12).

The most convincingly generalized example of non-traditional ‘political activity’ Gauthier offers is of young activists who vote with their dollars: "there are things we do
every day that are very political, like taking the subway instead of a car, or buying coffee that hasn't been fairly traded...-They're all political acts" (Gauthier, 2003: 271). Indeed, many other studies have confirmed that ‘consumer citizenship’ is common among youth (Pattie, Syed and Whiteley, 2004 in O’Neill, 2007) and has become common to claim that ‘Generation Y’ is so obsessed with instant gratification and commodity fetishism they see only business as a site of ‘idealism and energy’ (Mattson, 2003: 17) whereas political elections are not viewed of much import or relevance (Bishop and Low, 2004: 6-8).

Indeed, across the media-sphere, it would seem that corporations, and not governments that have unveiled themselves as a part of the 'youth revolution' (Haid, 2003). Pepsi, Apple, Nike and other companies have built whole campaigns around the supposed ‘youth rebellion’ while Labatts, Canadian Beer and Roots have become symbols for national identity (Klein, 2000: 28, 49). Voting or joining a political party however, is said to lack relevance and appeal (Haid, 2003).

Unfortunately, many of these writers, (including Gauthier) do not spend adequate time discussing how conflating the marketplace and democratic processes is problematic, especially as wealth inequality and increasingly precarious employment opportunities (Furstenberg et al., 2005) render marketplace voting an unacceptable solution to the problem of democratic disengagement.

Not surprisingly, it is difficult to categorize what emergent activities should be considered political. This is particularly evident in a recent article by Harris, Wyn, and Youness (2007) who call into question the ‘civics deficit’ thesis, which, as we will see in the education section of this chapter, focuses on the “concern that young people are not
sufficiently engaged with politics and are not well informed about the role of citizens” (ibid.). They call for researchers to consider that “it may also be necessary to break the adult-centric views of what engagement means and explore the everyday ways in which young people experience and express their place in society” (22).

Like Gauthier, they argue that young people are active political participants, though not through the formal institutions – “unions, political parties or political organizations” – that are traditionally used as indicators of political participation: “they do not feel they have a say in their local councils, in their electorates or in the media, but, importantly, they don’t especially want to have more of a say in these forums” (2007: 24). In line with another ‘new engagements’ article by Hil and Bessant (1999) young peoples’ ‘active resistance’ is documented through a somewhat obvious list of ‘youthful’ activities (i.e., raving, skateboarding, shocking fashion, loud musical forms, personal sound systems and cyberspace). It is unclear, however, what political effect these activities have.

While the activities identified in these studies may indeed demonstrate youth agency, they raise unanswered questions about the necessarily political quality, effectiveness, and accessibility\(^\text{11}\) of these forms of (sub)cultural resistance. By spotlighting such new and exciting forms of participation and not their causal effect, these researchers obscure the more radical political question of how those activities, connections, associations, and the subjects participating in and within them have

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\(^{11}\) Dalton et al. (2003) consider the implications of three democratic reform trends —direct, advocacy and representative democracy (2-4). They find that while there are some valuable opportunities (in terms of participants being able to contribute to political discourse) provided by new engagements trends, the political impact and access of such initiatives are limited: “These new forms of action provide citizens and public groups with valuable and politically significant new access to politics, but it is also clear that this access is very unevenly used” (13). They therefore conclude that “[e]quality of access is not sufficient if equality of usage is grossly lacking, particularly if usage is highly biased by the skill and resource variables that predict such participation” (13).
differential access to the resource structures that frame their engagement with the social and political.

For these reasons, understanding the ‘new engagements’ thesis as evidence that ‘the kids are alright’ (and that we therefore do not have a democratic disengagement problem) would be a premature conclusion. Many proponents of the ‘new engagements theses’ have yet to seriously consider to what extent the forms of such new engagements they identify and promote; boycotts or ethical consumption, alternative music, and fashion choices, global online networks might in fact work in alignment with a liberal capitalist power that operates through the “regulated choices of individual citizens” (Rose, 1996: 41). It would be helpful for such work to consider the way that authority today may be increasingly detached from political rule and re-located “within a market governed by rationalities of competition, accountability and consumer demand” (ibid). In such a framework, political action might be analyzed against neo-liberal discourses of meritocracy, individualism and consumerism, and alongside a focus on the resource mobilization capabilities of such ‘political’ action. Unfortunately, much of the work within the vein of ‘new engagements’ tends to celebrate agency and resistance at the behest of considering how effective this resistance actually is in restructuring young people’s access to causal decision-making power, access to resources and the ability to make meaningful decisions.

Overall, the new engagement studies do have redeeming qualities. Usefully, from studies like this, we find out how young people negotiate social structures and actively make meaning out of their circumstances. These studies tend to open the door to new ways of conceiving and preforming politics, providing some level of legitimation to the
re-signification of political practice. While challenging stereotypical or pejorative judgments about young people and their apparent political apathy is a potentially worthy goal, it is a serious limitation of social research to attempt to re-code or re-conceptualize ‘politics’ without an understanding of how to access the *effectiveness* of these supposedly new political forms, and what discursive networks they operate within.

(e) Communication and Language Use

In the context of changing values, methods and modes of communication, that a communication gap has been posited between politicians and youth is not surprising. On this point, Averill (2002) conceptualizes a ‘cycle of neglect’ whereby politicians (with limited time and budgets) have little incentive to tailor platforms towards citizens they consider to be unreliable voters or as estranged from the polls (as cited in Adsett, 2003: 247). Echoing this sentiment from the position of youth, a symposium organized by the Canadian Policy Research Networks in 2007 found that the only issue youth felt was targeted towards them at election times was the issue of youth not voting (CPRN).

In 2003, a large-scale Canadian survey found that 62% of young Canadians did not believe the federal government was doing a good job of communicating with them (Haid, 2003: 32). Political parties were similarly criticized as being “out of touch” with young people and neglectful of youth issues in their campaigns (ibid). Indeed, the voting decline has been frequently linked to a lack of communication between parties and young people (Adsett, 2003; Averill, 2002; Haid, 2003; Pammett and LeDuc, 2003).

But it does not necessarily follow that younger Canadians don’t care about politics or democracy, broadly conceived. In 2006 ‘The Democracy Project’, (a study prepared for CBC), brought forth some surprising results: 86% of youth surveyed were
concerned with the current low voter turnout; 73% cited that they had not been asked to participate in politics directly by a politician to a political party; 68% disagreed that they did not have time to think about politics (Innovative Research, online).

Added to these perhaps surprising results, is the issue of shifting modes of communication today. Recent data from Statistics Canada (2003) showed that searching for information is the most common form of non-voting political activity (Keown, online). And most information seeking done by youth is, of course, online (Xenos and Foot, 49: 2008). As such, new media communication is becoming a quickly-growing area of interest within a number of genres in the academic field. While the claims about advancing digital democracies has often been overstated, it remains true that Web 2.0 rectifies—to a significant extent - the extreme asymmetry in communication that plagued earlier reports of television, radio, newspapers and other media affiliates of the ‘cultural industries’12. As Xenos and Foot (2008) point out, “interactivity” is the web’s “signature feature” – and it is a feature that has the potential to shift traditional norms with regard to “turn-taking”, information “customization” and “shared control” of content. (55).

It remains true, however, as dannah boyd (2008) points out, that, “technology’s majestic luster makes it easy to fool people into believing that its structure determines practice” (113). The potential for online political deliberation and decision-making is obviously often-overstated, and boyd fleshes this out: “most people are not looking to

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12 While the World Wide Web has been touted as a powerful resource in an emerging information age, claims of a “digital divide” have dampened the enthusiasm of some based on lack of access (particularly among those youth with parents with low socio-economic status, females, and Indigenous youth). Findings from studies on access to ICT however, have come to conflicting conclusions, likely due to variations in year and country of research. The most recent Canadian study (while at present 8 years old) suggests that access to ICT has greatly levelled out (Thiessen and Looker, 2003). The authors find that while rural youth, female youth, and those from families with low levels of parental education are less likely to have access to computers in the home, frequency of use and perceived competency levels are not strongly compromised (Thiessen and Looker, 2003:1).
meet new people, but to gather with friends when physical co-presence is impossible or impractical ... if you can't grab a beer at a pub with friends or hang out in a public setting without being banned or shooed away for loitering, where else can you gather with friends? Online of course” (114).

boyd’s ethnographic research stresses that online venues do not often perform the bridge into other social networks as is theorized. She finds that online sociability most frequently takes place within an actor’s existing network; and even when new connections are forged, it is usually because of shared interests. While this finding decreases the hope of conceiving the web as a highly heterogeneous and differentiated public sphere, Peter Levine points out that this mobilization/coordination function of affinity networks (their rapid formation, the ability for one to one, many to one, one to many, many to many communicative lines) remains both an economic and political feature (2008: 100).

But even when online venues are set up for explicitly political purposes, like campaigning, Xenos and Foot’s (2008) work demonstrates that much of such campaigning is only a slightly adapted version of traditional campaign materials, which takes no real advantage of these ‘levelling’ features (of control over the interaction or creation of party content) nor of the opportunities for more ‘authentic’ (in other words less managed) interaction. Even more depressingly for SNS (social networking sites) enthusiasts, boyd finds that most political campaigners “are talking about leveraging it [the World Wide Web] as a spamming device” (2008: 114). As with other forms of communication, there seem to be important differences in the quality and character of
communication on the web, and what type of performative (casual) response individuals residing in different subject positions can expect and demand.

Peter Levine (2008) identifies this issue in his article “A Public Voice for Youth”, where he argues that youth have to be taught to use a “public, not private voice” in the ‘blogosphere’ if the web is to live up to its democratic promise: “we communicate in a public voice in order to address someone and it matters who listens” (129). The crux of his argument centers upon the character or quality of the ‘voices’ that populate the public sphere. According to Levine, public voice (as opposed to a personal one) is the way by which young people can connect and persuade others: “to speak publicly entails a set of obligations”, and as such the public speaker is a kind of “ethical and rational legislator” (120). On this point Howard Rhinegold suggests generating a political communication ‘skill-set’ in which ‘literacy’ is defined as “the ability to encode as well as decode with contextual knowledge of how communication can attain desired ends” (2008: 101).

Vromen (2008) contests this, arguing that “setting up a normative ideal of youth-led Internet spaces as a democratic public sphere is possibly another benchmark that will interpret young people’s political engagement and behaviours as deficient” (Vromen, 2008: 95). While her research showed that the internet does play an important role in facilitating information sourcing, individual-led and group led communication in which young people are able to explore and express political views and take action, these positive outcomes happened within non-hierarchical, non-adult led spaces. Considerations like these emphasize the challenges in creating venues for an idealized democratic experience or socio-political change.
2.3.2 Education Strategies

The last area of empirical research to consider in this chapter is education-based work. Perhaps not surprisingly, education has long been a key theme in discussions of increasing youth’s civic and political engagement. Whether one is convinced by the life-cycle or generational effects theory of youth voter disengagement, ‘education’ often ends up as the final recommendation on the table\textsuperscript{13}. Generally acclaimed as the great equalizer, access to education is said to open opportunities to increased income, social status, and access to political life for disadvantaged groups (Thomas and Young, 2006: 4). Education in this sense is generally seen as the acquisition of neutral and transferable information and/or skills which supply the mental scaffolding for both politically-relevant knowledge and practice. As Gidengil et al. state: “it provides the cognitive skills needed to cope with the complexities of politics and … seems to foster norms of civic engagement” (Gidnegil et al., 2003: 10; Gidnegil et al., 2004: 49-50).

A wide variety of scholars from different disciplines confirm that “education socializes citizens into norms of civic engagement and equips them with the cognitive skills that active engagement requires”\textsuperscript{14} (Blais et al. 2002). Civic or citizenship education is said to set out the norms and knowledge for participating in the political system, and teaches the “patterns and processes by which individuals engage in political development and learning” (Pammet and LeDuc, 2003: 2-3). This would include promoting “civic literacy” so citizens will naturally stay informed and engaged in politics (Milner, 2002, especially Chapters 7, 8 and 9). Research to date also shows that the

\textsuperscript{13} This is especially true of Canadian research, which is likely an effect of being strongly funded by governmental bodies which require ‘practical’ policy recommendations.
higher degree of education a person has, the higher chance they will show up to the polls; in fact, since 1993 university graduates are the only portion of the population within which voter turnout has not declined (O'Neill, 2003: 17). On this point Gidengil et al (2003) argue that, “[f]or the longer term the single most important step would be to find ways to keep more young people in school (13)\textsuperscript{15}.

So, in the context of low voter-turnout among Canadian youth, the consensus is largely that engaging youth in democratic politics should be achieved by educating them vis-à-vis procedural political knowledge and civic literacy, thereby enabling them to make good choices. Once skilled by civic education programs (that empower youth to speak in ways that will be valued and acted upon), they can then engage in democratic debates, (perhaps through mock elections\textsuperscript{16} or student government programs) electoral processes, and as such, democratic ideals – such as freedom and equality among citizens, can be achieved.

But there is an interesting inconsistency in much of the education-based research. The proponents of education strategies, as cited here, consistently link generational effects to the low voter turnout rates among youth; however, curiously, they spend little time discussing the implications of this generational effect aside from this generation’s ostensible lack of political knowledge. This move has the effect of positioning ‘education’ as the end-point solution without interrogating the deeper issue of what the content of such education should actually entail. Indeed, in their papers, Howe (2003),

\textsuperscript{15} It is somewhat confusing that education is so strongly linked as a predictor of electoral turnout and that, as Blais and Loewen (2009) have pointed out, Canadian youth today attain higher levels of education than any previous generation. As they point out, “over half (58%) of Canadians aged 18-24 report having some post-secondary education. This share climbs to 72% among Canadians aged 25-30” (4).

\textsuperscript{16} Hannam describes this humorously: “Learning about democracy and citizenship when I was at school was a bit like reading holiday brochures in prison. Unless you were about to be let out or escape, it was quite frustrating and seemed pointless” (Hannam, 2000).
O’Neill (2003), Milner (2007) and Gidengil et al. (2003) follow the same trajectory: citing ‘generational effects’ as the cause of low voter turnout among youth, but then proceed to either ignore or dismiss the possibility that there is a ‘mis-match’, incongruence or problem of any serious or systemic kind with the values and goals of the next generation and the current political institutions and cultural representation of politics.

Paul Howe (2003), for instance, addresses the hypothetical counter-claim that “the knowledge deficit is but a symptom of a more pervasive malaise, namely the whole-scale disengagement of young Canadians from politics” (21). He responds to this by stating that: “when the various pieces of information are pulled together and plugged into a model of electoral participation over time the conclusions are reinforced: political interest has it’s greatest impact on the life-cycle patterns in electoral participation whereas political knowledge principally explains cohort differences” (22). In other words, the generational effect is low knowledge, while disinterest or lack of motivation is a lifecycle effect- the upshot of this being that the problem to address is political knowledge, not restructuring democratic politics (in content or process) in any way.

Howe then goes on to argue that the “causal linkages” between knowledge and interest also “undermines the notion that motivation must be the prime mover … likely the two are linked in a virtuous circle” (22) Still, he contends, “common sense would suggest that an injection of knowledge could be especially effective at an early age – adolescence say – when interests are still relatively fluid and malleable” (ibid.). Essentially, he is arguing for better (more effective) tools of socialization: “[p]ractical considerations also suggest that emphasizing knowledge is the sounder strategy- it seems
a less daunting task to teach teenagers something about politics than to cajole them into
caring about a subject they find categorically boring” (ibid.).

That is is “less daunting” to ‘inject’ young people with procedural and formal
facts than to make connections between politics and the things that young people care
about reveals a rather constricted vision of democracy. It is clear that the focus here is on
“installing the appropriate habits” (23) in young people, as opposed to focusing on
developing/deepening democratic procedures for the appropriate socio-historical context
in which we live. This conception of youth’s political engagement is not very generous in
tapping into the possibilities that democratic ideas entail; in fact, this conception seems to
be heavily imbued with visions of participation in normative organizations and official
processes, those which do not generally include oppositional positions to the nation-state.

Henry Milner (2007) follows a similar trajectory in ‘Are Young People Becoming
Political Dropouts?’ To begin, Milner names young people as the “key factor” in
Canada’s voting decline (2) and he fears if this trend is not met with interventions that
young people will become “set in their non-voting ways” (3). Like Howe, the focus is on
creating citizens with “good habits” who can govern themselves through the appropriate
existing electoral structures (ibid).

Milner’s main point in this paper is to insist that an analytic distinction be made
between informed and non-informed voters. “The real threat to democracy”, he says,
“lies not in young citizens choosing not to vote, but in their lack of the basic knowledge
and skills required to make that choice on an informed basis” (3). The former group
(those choosing not to vote) can thus be conceptualized as “political protestors”, the later
“uninformed and inattentive”, are “political dropouts” (4).
He argues that this distinction is not frequently made in research, and, as a result, many analyses come to overtly lenient answers that absolve young people from being judged “politically lazy” on the grounds that “politics is something that is done to them not something they can influence” (ibid). Studies like this are flawed, he argues, because many of the respondents do not have even “minimal knowledge” of the parties or process and therefore cannot be trusted to give accurate answers to the questions like “no one party stands for me”. He says: “when respondents are given the costless choice of blaming others, or, in effect, admitting to being apathetic or politically lazy, the result is certain… We accept a response of “I’m interested in politics” at face value, seldom probing to see whether that interest was actually invested in any effort to gain political information” (5).

In other words, Milner believes “political inattentiveness” is something entirely different from political alienation, and it is clear that he believes Canadian youth are in the former category. As such, he claims that even if feelings of alienation, or cynicism among young people are indicated in research, they are unwarranted, for young Canadians simply do not have the appropriate information and mental tools to understand how to align themselves with parties that (supposedly) represent their interests and to therefore be able to participate in the democratic system. Like other researchers in this area, Milner rejects the idea that voter apathy and discontent have more to do with a wider rejection of the current system by non-voters, based on “civic literacy” rather than ignorance and lack of information as he suggests.

Unfortunately, the manner with which ‘lack of political knowledge’ is treated as a prior condition of political interest leads towards a particularly conservative analysis,
especially when ‘political knowledge’ is consistently defined by way of quizzes on party platforms and names of political leaders. This framing effectively forecloses understanding ‘youth’ as carrying political values or interests if they aren’t ‘tuned in’ to electoral politics. Furthermore, the manner in which political knowledge is defined effectively delimits ‘politics’ to institutionalized political institutions/apparatuses and this limits the concepts of ‘the political’ that might be vying to emerge. It also quells the notion that there may be systemic political alienation among youth, thus absolving the system itself of deeper scrutiny.

The current education focused research promotes and legitimizes state interventions, like ‘citizenship education’, which are often taken to be desirable political end in themselves. I argue that these education programs cannot be thought of in such a straightforward manner. Because of the ways this research is framed, the knowledge that young people do have regarding politics is made totally invisible to these researchers. This, unfortunately, leads into constructing youth via marginalizing discourses which perpetuate rather than remove inequalities in the political sphere. It is therefore especially important to contest this work, as this research makes up the main policy directives for Elections Canada.

2.4 Summary

This chapter has reviewed the major schools of research with regards to the phenomenon of youth political disengagement. Recent empirical studies show that life-cycle theories offer little explanatory purchase today. The generational effects literature offers some promising directions but requires more empirical research that is directly
related to the question of youth and electoral disengagement. Finally, this review showed that although many Canadian researchers identify generational effects as the root cause of low voter turnout rates, most bypass a discussion of system revitalization for a conclusion that recommends civic education as the end-point solution. The problems with this approach will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 3. Theoretical Orientation

3.1 Introduction

Building on my concluding argument in Chapter 2, this chapter provides a critical investigation of the epistemological and theoretical positions that structure dominant research agendas on the topic of youth and political disengagement. I begin by reviewing the main theoretical and epistemological trends in Canadian research on youth and political disengagement. Next, using insights from Bourdieu’s (1992) Reflexive Sociology, Governmentality theory, and work from the domain of Critical Pedagogy, I provide a three-pronged theoretical critique of the current research practice in this field.

I focus my critique on the disjunctures between how citizen choice and autonomy are framed in liberal democratic discourse, and how the structure of choice and autonomy may exist in actual practice. I argue that the insights governmentality theory brings forth work in this regard, work to unravel justifications for increased civic education interventions, and segue instead into a deeper discussion about the role of research in creating social and theoretical change.

After discussing the limitations of the current approach to knowledge production and research practice in this field, I briefly discuss how Bourdieu’s Reflexive Sociology (as supplemented with by Fairclough’s (1992) approach to Critical Discourse Analysis) can generate a research approach that moves beyond these limitations.

3.2 Liberal Democratic Discourse and Civic Education

As detailed in the previous chapter, in Canada today, research on young voter disengagement tends to follow a similar general trajectory. The factors implicated within
the cultural effects of generational change are identified as the primary cause of low voting levels among youth, and the low levels of political knowledge among youth are then quickly flagged as the most important difference between the generations. In praxis, this logic has led into increased calls for education-based programs and intervention strategies as a primary policy response to raise voting rates. These calls, often housing recommendations for state-sponsored programmes, are largely underpinned by a liberal democratic philosophy which, perhaps unsurprisingly, mirrors the dominant Canadian political episteme.

Under such liberal democratic philosophy, individual liberty and equality of opportunity are the key political goals, which are to be achieved through the ‘great motifs’ of liberal decision-making procedures: “contract, consultation, participation, empowerment” (Dean, 1994: 163). These ideals, and the procedures that are said to produce them, are refracted across a variety of institutional channels in Canada. The tagline of our provincial electoral agency (Elections BC), for example, states that “[e]lections are about deciding what’s important to us. When we vote in an election, we participate in democracy. It’s a chance for each of us to have a say” (http://www.elections.bc.ca/index.php/youth-participation/). Elections Canada has similar thoughts; “[c]asting your ballot lets you speak your mind. It lets you be heard” (http://www.elections.ca/content_youth). Indeed, elections are considered the sine qua non of representative democracy, the key event by which the state recognizes citizens as free and equal, and simultaneously, the event in which citizens choose freedom for themselves vis-à-vis consensual, collective self-rule.
The philosophy can also be found in the educational sphere, where continued calls for ‘good citizenship’ to be exercised by young people come appended to concerns about fostering cognitive and moral development. Fostering such development is, of course, thought to enable youth to make good choices. As detailed in Chapter 2, in research and policy, citizenship education is said to set out the procedural knowledge, and formal practices for participating in the political system, while at the micro-level it teaches the “patterns and processes by which individuals engage in political development and learning” (Pammet and LeDuc, 2003: 2-3). In many accounts of how to engage youth, education is singled out as the key variable (Miller, 2005; Blais et al., 2002; Dalton, 1996; Franklin 1996; Verba et al. 1995).

In the context of low levels of procedural knowledge and low voter-turnout among Canadian youth, the solution is then clear: engaging youth in politics should be achieved through skilling them via ‘communicative competency’ and ‘civic literacy’, again, enabling them to make good choices (Milner, 2002). Once skilled by civic education programs, it is then assumed that youth can participate in elections, and that in so doing, freedom and equality can be achieved.

While this is obviously a truncated discussion of a very large body of work, there are some serious problems with the approach that can be identified at this level, and that are suitable for my purposes here. First, and crucially, these works rarely (if ever) interrogate the substantive practice of democracy itself. Instead, the ideals and concepts of democracy are conflated with the enacted, contextually contingent performances of it.

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17 Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) argue for increased attention on education as it is seems to create “moral pressure” to vote (18).
This research practice is inadequate for capturing the complex relationships between concepts and the (ever-changing) social world.

Because, in these works, the local experiences and practices of democracy are continually conflated the concept of it, potentially defunct, ‘zombie’ concepts\textsuperscript{18} can be reinstalled as matter-of-fact descriptions of social reality. In praxis, these conceptualization practices may well function to reiterate (rather than challenge) the dominance of outmoded or even oppressive ways of thinking, by ignoring the emergence of new understanding as well as contestations or resistances to the concepts in use.

As discursive practice, this manner of conceptualizing ‘the social’ (and conducting social research) works to reify and restrict our conceptions of the social world. In some ways, it may even function to limit our political opportunities and freedoms, as such research often informs policy reform. Without re-interrogation, outmoded or hegemonic understandings have the potential to mystify the ways that oppressive conditions may be reproduced through the very systems that researchers assume produce conditions of equality and freedom. By limiting concepts of democracy and politics that may be vying to emerge, this research practice may also inadvertently reinforce the assumption that young people are ill-equipped for legitimate political action, rather than opening up space for it.

Furthermore by recursively guiding our attention towards the population and individual as the locus of change and intervention, the research practice described here draws attention away from gaps that may exist between the institutional/theoretical rhetoric of democracy on one hand, and lived social experience on the other.

\textsuperscript{18} Ulrich Beck uses this term to refer to concepts in use that are no-longer representative of social reality.
Unfortunately, this research practice is quite inadequate for detecting emerging dimensions of the social and mechanisms that may reproduce inequality. In short, this mode of research is not theoretically or conceptually generative, and may even be misleading.

On the point of research practice, Bourdieu gives particularly salient advice: the “first and most pressing scientific priority”, he states, is “to take as one’s object the social work of construction of the pre-constructed object” (Bourdieu & Wacquant as qtd in Fairclough et al., 2006: 101). This would entail, as Fairclough et al. (2006) state, recognizing ontologically the dialectic between the pre-construction and performance of democracy within lived social practices, and recognizing epistemologically the dialectic between theoretical insights on democracy and empirical research practice (100). In other words, it is essential for the social researcher to analyze the theoretical posture in and of itself, and this requires an understanding of the social conditions of possibility which allowed the object of research itself to emerge (as a social problem). It also requires understanding how the theories we use impact the research questions we ask, or fail to ask, what types of data we construct, and how we interpret and disseminate our findings.

In research practice, therefore, there would seem a real need to look beyond admonitions to simply increase levels of education or cognitive development in target populations, and turn our attention towards the network of relations and discourses though which democratic engagement is enacted and given meaning. As such, social research on democracy must consider how democracy is conceptualized, practiced, resisted by social actors. This would require an openness to multiple standpoints and an
analysis attentive to the differential political resources that might work to enforce or to hinder each perceptive.

3.3 Governmentality and Liberal Democratic Discourse

The consequences of taking a more reflexive research approach are obviously far-reaching, however, a key place to begin unpacking the implications and how they may be played out is at the level of discourse.

At the level of discourse, we find that the theoretical and practical debates about the rights, roles, and responsibilities of the liberal state are fixed in a very specific form of language use that entitifies power in liberal democracies through the positing of certain oppositions, for example, ‘between state and civil society, public and private, government and market, coercion and consent, sovereignty and autonomy’ (Rose and Miller, 1992: 174). These oppositions help to define the nature and context of the legitimate use of power.

With regards to youth and electoral participation, we see that voting is – as Elections Canada frames it – a “chance for each of us to have a say” (Elections Canada, online). This ‘chance’ is codified in legal and institutional discourse which describes (and delimits) the opportunities that can be ‘normally’ expected to ‘have a say’ within the political sphere. This discourse constructs certain expectations, aspirations and behaviours legitimate and politically actionable (while obscuring others [i.e., Anarchy, ]).

In the grand theoretical discourse of democratic freedom then, the ‘right’ or ‘chance’ to vote cannot be disattached from the political systems and networks of action
which frame it. In other words, the ‘chance to have a say’ (coded as freedom) must be recognized as already greatly constricted within pre-given, systemic parameters (form) and spectrum of choice (content).

In this sense, ‘voting’ could be seen less a personal act of freedom and more a symbolic act conferring governmental legitimacy. Indeed, Putnam (2000) iterates this re-reading without critical examination, likening voting levels to “a canary in the mining pit” – in other words, a barometer of a society’s “health and cohesion” (37). In Putnam’s formulation however, ‘low voting rates’ are made to stand in for the apathetic or failed character of today’s citizenry rather than the failing or faltering project of democracy in need of revision.

Furthermore, the often unquestioned logic of this approach to political research practice tends to lead us away from thinking about changing structures and systems to suit people, to focus instead on changing persons to suit structures. This can be readily witnessed in academic work and policy planning, where the tendency is to identify in youth indicators of political disengagement (like feelings of ‘political efficacy’), and then attempt to alter those indictors (without addressing the structural context). This move enables researchers and other experts to justify a number of corrective pedagogic interventions in the name of promoting freedom and democracy.

This rationality is clearly sifted out by Kahne and Westheimer’s (2006) study of programs aiming to instill ‘democratic values’ in youth and young adults. The programs, relying on political science findings that indicated a positive correlation between ‘feelings of efficacy’ and political engagement, emphasized service learning curriculum in an effort to promote political efficacy. Kahne and Westheimer’s study found that the
experiences of students who encountered some authentic community dynamics (i.e., conflict) did diminish students' sense of internal efficacy, and in the process functioned to limit their commitment to future civic or political involvement.

The crucial point in their analysis, however, was that students appeared to report low external efficacy be “[w]e are reluctant to reject the value of these authentic experiences even though they diminished a sense of efficacy… emphasizing only efficacious acts because they permit students to experience success while helping others without confronting constraints on their external efficacy can advance a limited understanding of civic and political engagement” (2006: 294-295). Indeed, insofar as governmental institutions are less responsive to disempowered groups, the issue to be tackled is surely not to try to convince a disempowered group that dominant institutions want to respond to their concerns, for to do so would be “to alter indicators of a healthy democracy without challenging the underlying ills” (ibid. 292-293).

We see that while education programs and public schools remain the site celebre for many researchers attempting to solve the problem of youth disengagement (see Milner, 2004), its constitutive curriculum and pedagogy remain a confounding question, for within this project lurks another: what kind of education or knowledge is adequate to what kind of political ethic? Is civic education, as Ronald Regan's secretary of education stated in 1985, meant to foster “a kind of character which respects the law and … respects the value of the individual”, or to mobilize oppressed groups to develop political determination? (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004: 1)
Returning to voter disengagement, it seems misguided at this point to say that addressing the democratic deficit\(^\text{19}\) in Canada simply involves capacity building vis-à-vis educating youth about politics, and move on. There is a need to think more complexly, to look in detail at precisely how, for example, democratic participatory initiatives function, and to consider what type of subjects those initiatives require.

3.4 Social Research Practice and Subjects of Governance

As noted above, social research practice is itself deeply intermeshed in creating and maintaining regulating discourses, which operate in association with strategies to redirect the behavior of certain groups who are framed as social problems (Fairclough, 2004: 4). This can be quickly evidenced by looking towards the vast number of categories of abstraction (i.e., ‘students’, ‘juvenile delinquents’, ‘at-risk teens’) and fields of conduct under which ‘youth’ today are constructed as knowable and governable. As Kelly (2000) argues, “[t]he question of youth, of what to do with them, how to school them, police them, regulate them, house them, employ them, or to prevent them from becoming involved in any number of ‘risky’ situations” (whether in the context of fashion, sexual, eating or drug habits) has continued to be a profitable area of debate for intellectuals, youth workers, cultural critics, moral crusaders, psychologists, criminologists, sociologists, educators, market researchers, politicians, bureaucrats and religious groups” (463).

Indeed, the social practice of academic research is dominated with discourses which seek to represent the complexity of being in the world as more or less calculable,

\(^{19}\) This is a common term used in the field, comprising a category of studies by Elections Canada about increasing voter participation.
quantifiable, predictable and knowable. As a form of socio-discursive practice, the production of academic knowledge holds a privileged position to ‘nominalize’, in prominent ways, the behaviour and practices of certain populations; for example, ‘apathy’, ‘lack of knowledge’, and other indicators of political disengagement can function as true (Henriquest et al. 1984: 101) within certain institutions, held in hierarchical relations to legitimate ‘power to mean’ (Watts, 1993). The expert knowledge that is produced and circulated though institutions, policy documents, academic texts, and common sense, thus work to enforce certain understandings of reality, determining which statements and questions may be regarded as reasonable, obvious and true, and, on the other hand, which statements and questions are considered banal, absurd, illogical, and irrelevant. The fields of visibility opened by various treatments of any given topic are thus intimately tied to the political/hegemonic process of securing plausibility and consent.

It is also worthy to note that discourses settle into non-discursive, material elements of reality; for example, the outcomes of elections have far-reaching consequences on social policy, funding for public programs, and other resource structures that frame citizens engagement with the social. Creating and gaining legitimacy for new meanings, categories, evidence and justifications is therefore an important part of constructing new material realities.
3.5 Towards a Reflexive Social Research Practice

In order to properly capture the multiple dimensions of any given social phenomenon and the relations that comprise it, we need a reflexive social research practice that can account for language and representation as a determining yet indeterminate part of the struggle for resource distribution and power. When appended to concerns about youth and political disengagement, a reflexive, critical perspective would not only be interested in the practices, behaviours, and dispositions of young people. It would also be intimately interested in the ways that research constructs youth and political disengagement, and what effects the knowledge outputs of such practice may have.

This would require shifting away from trite and misguided debates about how to better interpellate young people into existing structures, and having the critical audacity to consistently rethink the fundamental basis and legitimacy of the concepts we use (especially with regards to democracy). A responsible method must therefore undertake deconstruction and reconstruction, explaining existing concepts while making space for emerging ones. Researchers must begin to consider a way to open space in research that does not work to reify pre-formulated conception of democracy, but is rather concentrated on opening up the ability to resignify and reframe it. This resignificaiton however, cannot be divorced from material relations: for the ability to resignify means little if it is not causal.
Chapter 4. Research Design

4.1 Focus of Study

This study explores the low electoral turnout rates among youth in Canada. In counter-distinction to the dominant research approach that has taken this problem as self-evident, I trace how it has been constructed, from multiple perspectives by various social groups. My research process involved exploring four aspects of the discourse surrounding the ‘youth voting problem’, including: (i) the discourses evident in outreach materials attempting to promote electoral engagement among youth; (ii) the processes of production of the texts; (iii) the consumptive practices of the texts (how they are read); and (iv) the contextual social and cultural practices that influenced the development of the text and the processes of consumption. I use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to answer the question: How, why, and with what effects do democratic promotional discourses attempt to communicate with youth in the Canadian context?

4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA has been described as not so much a method, but rather a repertoire of theoretical, methodological and analytical ‘sensitizing tools’\textsuperscript{20} that can be put to work in destabilizing discourses. CDA studies are often concerned with analyzing some group, category or genre of texts, however, various tools and techniques of data collection are loaned from qualitative research traditions (interviews, group discussions). CDA practitioners are generally held together by viewing language use as a form of social

\textsuperscript{20} Thank you to Sean Hier for this term.
practice. They are concerned with how power relations and inequalities are reproduced and sustained through discourse.

4.3 Critical Discourse Analysis Data Gathering Techniques

CDA begins by identifying documents, or ‘texts’ from which a corpus is collected. Fairclough suggests sampling texts at “moments in the discourse where there is evidence that things are going wrong” or there is “a misunderstanding which requires the participants to ‘repair’ a communicative problem” (Fairclough, 1992: 230). These moments show the problematization of practice.

For this study, texts are not the sole or even central focus. While I do analyze electoral outreach websites as ‘found’ texts, additionally, I collected audience reception data, using the websites as elicitation devices. I did this in an effort to attempt to show the multiplicity of interpretations (including negotiated or oppositional interpretations) that might be gleaned from a single text.

I also conducted in-depth interviews with key representatives involved in producing what websites which promote democratic engagement to youth in Canada. The interviews were crucial to gain an understanding of the technologies, techniques and rationalities of text producers. Together, these three forms of data gave me a particularly rich data set to begin decoding the meanings of texts for audiences, and the underlying goals of text producers. Using interviews with people involved in producing the websites was helpful for drawing attention to the institutional conditions that frame their engagement in producing discourse, just as interviews with textual consumers added important insights about the social context that frame processes of interpretation.
While Fairclough’s version of CDA allows the researcher to examine all ‘texts’ under one conceptual framework, for the purposes of clarity, in the next sections I will discuss the forms of primary data (i.e., individual interviews, websites, focus groups) I pulled together for this study separately.

4.3.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews constitute a signification portion of the data for this study. I interviewed four communications/public outreach representatives of non-partisan agencies or organizations in an attempt to better understand the discursive logic of their communicative outreach choices with regards to the ‘problem of youth disengagement’.

In attempting to explain how representatives from different organizations conceptualized the ‘youth voting problem’ I realize that interviews with only four people might seem fairly limited. My aim, however, is not to provide a definitive picture of exactly how these texts were produced, but rather to map out some of the institutionally specific strategies, techniques, and political rationalities that might be operating behind the texts.  

21 As further explained in Section 4.4.2, and in Chapter 5, political rationalities are understood as the ways in which “thought seek[s] to render particular issues, domains and problems governable” (Dean, 1999: 31).

4.3.2 Focus Groups

I chose to use focus groups for this project because, like interviews, they may expose new and unsuspected issues of interest. Group interviews, however, are said to have the added advantage of making young respondents more comfortable than one-on-one interviewing, which is often considered intimidating (Madriz, 1998). It seemed to
ring true, as Glesne and Peshkin observe, that “some young people need company to be emboldened to talk” (Glesne and Peshkin: 1992: 63-64). I facilitated these focus groups myself and used the two websites selected for CDA as elicitation devices.

a) Sampling

I started sampling for the focus groups from the pool of resources I had online. Like many young people nowadays I have a large and diverse online social network (of over 500 contacts). This meant that I could easily make a list of potential participants that would not know each other, were not in the same socio-economic group, and had different levels of past political experience. I also intentionally selected acquaintances (people I met one or two times before), rather than people I would consider ‘friends’ to try to limit bias and researcher reactivity. While I put up flyers to solicit participants outside my ‘network’ for this research online, at cafés, community centers and laundry mats, this strategy yielded no participants. This lends to the notion that people are generally unwilling to talk politics with strangers. For this reason, I believe in the end, the strategy of recruiting from my social network gave me an advantage in building rapport, making participants more willing and comfortable in coming to the group.

b) Participants

Each focus group was made up of 4-5 participants who represented potentially sociologically relevant characteristics to this study- gender, level of past political activity, employment status/sector, and visible minority status. This is consistent with Stewart and Shamdasani’s suggestion to build focus groups by convenience sampling that is, the group must consist of representative members of the larger population (1990: 53).
The age range was 19-30 years, with the average age of all participants being 24. 6 participants were female, 8 were male. Because all participants came from my networks, some loosely knew of each other, only once had two participants in the same group met in person. My participants had a very diverse range of occupational statuses: computer programmer (1), carpentry apprentice (1), apprentice engineer (1), bank teller (1), youth outreach worker (1), graphic/communications designer (1), tree planter/surveyor (1), drug and alcohol counsellor (1), food and beverage service worker (2), construction worker/odd jobs worker (1), unemployed (2), masters student (1). Using tacit knowledge of my participants’ backgrounds, I also made some informed inferences about parental class status. This strategy however, is limited.

4.3.3 Websites

a) Sampling

To avoid complicating partisan ideologies, I selected non-partisan websites. I was also aiming to select websites that might be interpreted by the largest number of Canadian youth. Because this is only an emergent area of policy concern, finding a manageable sample of websites was not difficult. In the end I used those that had the highest visibility federally. I determined this through Google searches (those that are most highly linked appear first) within various media, celebrity, journalist, musician and artist networks and is created by youth/for youth. I chose Elections Canada and Apathy Is Boring, which also fit my analysis in terms of representing divergent

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22 In web 2.0, ‘networks’ and ‘links’ are key mechanisms by which people discover, share and collectively evaluate information. This can be evidenced by the popularity of socially dispersed information/news sites like digg, Delicious, Stumbleupon et cetera.
institutional locations – one governmental (electoral administration agencies) and the other non-governmental/grassroots.

4.4 Critical Discourse Analysis Data Analysis Techniques

In this research, a range of data (websites, focus group and interview transcripts) were collected. While Fairclough’s model provides an overarching methodological orientation, thereby allowing for blending textual, discursive and social analysis, I ended up interrogating the data sets using three different, albeit complementary analytical frameworks to explicate as specifically, deeply, and holistically as possible, how these specific types of data forms related to each other. I used Fairclough’s (1992; 1989; 1995) method of linguistic analysis (built on Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics) for the Website CDA, Dean Mitchell’s (1999) ‘regimes of practice’ for the producers’ reports (interviews), and critical thematic analysis for the focus groups, all of which are described below. As I moved back and forth across the dimensions of analysis, I focused on the ways that official and academic discourse positioned ‘young Canadians’ in relation to the ‘voting problem’ and how young people themselves conceptualized the way they were being spoken to, and experienced encounters with democracy in Canada.

4.4.1 Websites

a) Systemic Functional Linguistic Analysis

Following Fairclough, I used the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistic Analysis to achieve an in-depth textual analysis of the selected websites. This form of linguistic analysis is under-girded with the understanding that language involves lexical
and grammatical choices in order to realize meaning and achieve its social purposes. Therefore, textual analysis requires the researcher to describe the formal properties of the text. Fairclough suggests using three steps for analysis: descriptive, meta-functional, and discursive.

In descriptive phase, texts are described by their component parts: vocabulary, meaning, grammar and cohesion, and text structure (Fairclough, 1992: 75). I also looked at the representation of agency, the types of pronouns used, the types of processes represented, as well as features like metaphor, ambiguity, personification and modality. Describing the texts in this way fed into the secondary analysis of interpreting the three ‘meta-functions’ of language Fairclough describes. These include the ideational, interpersonal and textual function of languages as described below.

The ideational meta-function constitutes systems of knowledge. It focuses on how content, and processes are represented, and used to interpret ourselves and what is happening in the world. This function might serve to ‘name the facts’ and make connections that ‘fix’ the relevant knowledge and/or tools required for participating in politics. The interpersonal function represents social subjects, identities, and the relationship between them. This function aims to explicate how social relationships are constructed, and how the audience is positioned. The textual function creates semantic and textual unity, allowing for the other two functions to be expressed.

The last stage of analysis was to identify the discourses and frameworks of meanings found in the text. The features of the text are covered in the residues of the text producer’s understanding of the world, as well as providing cues for text interpretation.
(Fairclough, 2001), and as such, this stage of analysis incorporates looking at the intertextual linkages and hegemonic assumptions in the text.

Though Fairclough advocates incorporating other analytical features outside of the linguistic tools he provides, he gives little guidance. For this reason, I supplemented his framework with some insights from other research to give a more media-specific analysis.

b) Interactivity: Content Creation and Turn-taking

Vromen (2008) identifies three main ways the internet is used for political participation; as an information source, a communication medium and as a virtual public sphere (Vromen, 2008: 81). As a communication medium, the internet can provide quite different relations of communication than earlier forms of media: conversations may be held between one to one, many to one, many to many and one to many (ibid.). Indeed, as Xenos and Foot (2008) point out, the potential for “interactivity” remains the web’s “signature feature” – and it is a feature that has the potential to shift traditional norms with regard to “turn-taking”, information “customization” and “shared control” of content (55). Interactive functions might include things like “Calls for Submissions,” user-generated site promotion, real-time message-boards, chat rooms, live web-cams, email address listings/mass-mailings, featured prompts and submissions from readers, screen names, live journals, advice columns. These interactive features offer increased analytic potential of the nature of the online medium for communicative encounters, and as such, comprised an analytical category in my analysis.
4.4.2 Producers Reports

a) Regimes of Practice

The conceptual framework of “regimes of practice”, as described by Mitchell Dean (1999), provided useful analytical considerations for the interview with textual producers. Undergirded by the Foucauldian governmentality paradigm, Dean describes a regime as the mobilization of a particular discourse. As Dean describes, each regime is comprised of logics, intents and projects that accomplish governmental goals. Regimes of practice can often be identified within specific organizations, as they comprise relatively systematic ways of going about, and thinking about things. This analytic framework therefore helps to draw attention to the organized ways that, as intermeshed in various social institutions, we think about social practice (Dean, 1999: 26). This analytic framework is described in greater detail in Chapter 5.

4.4.3 Focus Groups

a) Critical Thematic Analysis

Comparing personal, practical accounts with the theoretical paradigms that had emerged in the thesis was a productive strategy to detail the complexity and semiosis of these networked practices of engagement, democracy, and power. I attempted a critical thematic analysis of the narratives in the focus groups, with a focus on how participants, as social subjects, have the power to construct alternative practices, just as they are being constructed by surrounding practices. This “bottom up” approach, which values participants’ own accounts of supposed disengagement, served to temper the “top-down” approach that could be identified in the two preceding analyses. By comparing and
contrasting the local accounts of youth’s barriers to engagement with the multiple discourses, it was clear that a struggle of meaning was taking place. By framing the research from multiple perspectives, I was able to capture this struggle in a way that neither obscured nor minimized the dual and reflexive nature of social phenomenon under study (youth disengagement).

As a precursor to this comparative, intertextual analysis, however, I also looked for more ‘traditional’ criteria of thematic analysis: recurrence, repetition, or forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Recurrence is when the analyst can identify the same thread of meaning (ibid, 275). Repetition is when certain words are reiterated multiple times; and, forcefulness is when there is some obvious emphasis on some aspect (ibid). Through repeated readings of the data, comparing my data sources, and asking of the data my research questions, patterns and themes quickly became evident. Specialized terminology, the modalities used to accompany truth claims, and, of course, issues were discussed, were all indicators of an emergent discourse or theme. Through this process I created word files of compiled data for emergent codes, and kept memos of each theme as it emerged.

4.5 Validity

4.5.1 Validity

Among other things, research is a rhetorical performance set within a “regime of truth” (Lather, 1993 as qtd. in Aguinaldo, 2004: 130). Research findings offer a partial glimpse into the lives of others, “constructing the social world which an interpretation itself in need of interpretation” (Aguinaldo, 2004: 128). Social science research can
therefore tell us as much about the topic it seeks to explain as it can about the social, psychological, political concerns of researchers and society; as such, it should be deconstructed not only for its realist account, but also for its critical, and reflexive narrative functions (ibid).

In order to satisfy these goals, and enhance rigor throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I have triangulated my data, and attempted to achieve a high level of researcher/conceptual reflexivity. I have also attempted to provide rich descriptions of the research process which can allow the reader to make their own decisions regarding “shared characteristics” and thus the “transferability” of the insights in my study (Erlandson et al., 1993: 32 in Creswell, 1998). My research, however, is not intended as a generalizable representation that can definitively account for why ‘Canadian youth’ are electorally disengaged. Given my methodology and related sampling techniques, I acknowledge that the representations of youth, of outreach websites, and of organizational patterns that will be advanced in my research will inevitably reflect the realities of only some youth, websites and organizational patterns — certainly not of all. By couching the experience of the youth in my study within a broader social, cultural historical and political context, however, I can build upon understandings of youth and communication trends that might be relevant to addressing some barriers to participating in the democratic political sphere.

4.5.2 Triangulation

Traditionally, triangulation in research is favoured, for it allows the researcher to combine analysis at multiple sites, strengthening the validity or ‘richness’ of the work
through the expansion of perspectives and the added weight of multiple evidences. By collecting data from focused group discussions, interviews and online political outreach materials it becomes possible to see what is “said and done and written”, and how these things are intertextually interrelated (Fairclough et al., 2006: 8).

Combining qualitative methods with CDA had the additional benefit of being able to provide direction for reconstruction after deconstruction. All too often work in the critical paradigm that takes on the task of problematizing the categories with which we relate to ourselves and others is reticent to provide any answers for moving forward. Combining CDA with local accounts helps to highlight rhetoric and reality gaps in discourse and practice, thereby bringing to light contradictions and contestations that can be used to hold individuals and institutions accountable, potentially aiding in social contestation, re-signification practices and social change. It can also make visible marginalized realities and add legitimacy to local accounts which have hitherto been excluded from dominant discourses.

4.6 Ethics

As this research involves human participants, obtaining HREB ethical approval was necessary. By securing HREB approval, researchers demonstrate their responsibility to ensure that the interests of those participants are protected. This is achieved through securing informed consent (i.e. "information, comprehension and voluntariness") by which researchers have the obligation to make clear to subjects how their material will be used, protected, stored and destroyed. Informed consent – defined as an ongoing agreement by a person to participate in research, after risks, benefits and alternatives have
been adequately explained to them -- is vital part of this process (See informed consent form attached as Appendix A and B). As of December 10, 2009, I received ethical clearance as per university requirements for this study, and abided by the protocols regarding consent forms, safe storage of data, and participant confidentiality.

4.7 Summary

This chapter has provided an outline of the research methods undertaken in this thesis. It has covered the research questions, the selected methods of analysis, data gathering and analysis techniques, and validity. The next chapter begins an exploration of the research.
Chapter 5. Producers Reports

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I explain the analytical approach which guides this chapter, Mitchell Dean’s “regimes of practice” (1999: 30-32). Second, I describe my sampling strategy and provide details about the organizations and participants involved in this stage of the research. Third, I identify some common concepts used by different institutional representatives, with a special focus on what barriers to electoral participation were made visible through the producers’ reports. Lastly, I link the concepts previously identified to specific discourses of knowledge, and explain, through reference to the wider socio-historical context, the conditions of possibility in which these particular concepts and discourses emerge.

5.2 Regimes of Practice

The conceptual framework of “regimes of practice,” as described by Mitchell Dean (1999), provides useful analytical considerations for this section of the research. Undergirded by the Foucauldian governmentality paradigm (as briefly introduced in Chapter 3), Dean describes a regime as the mobilization of a discourse, which seeks to accomplish governmental goals. Each regime is comprised of logics, intents and projects that attempt to solve or prevent ‘social problems’ from occurring. In Dean’s matrix, there are four defined spheres of thinking and activity. First, the “fields of visibility” create borders around the spaces, or bodies to be governed (30). This stage helps make it possible to see who and what is to be governed. Second, the “techniques and technologies of government” are to delineate the practical strategies by which governing is made
manifest (31); this is exemplified through the use of certain forms of social research and data gathering to gain evidence that will inform interventions on target populations, public education, social marketing campaigns and the like. Third, the “rationalities of government” are the inter-discursive processes by which governing bodies reflect on and justify governance practices (31). Fourth, the “identities and agencies” made manifest through the representations construed in the first, second and third practices, points towards the subjectivities and social relations that are preferred to fit within the border logic of the regime (32).

These four axes of analysis indicate that what is visible, what is logical and how we know it make certain actions more likely than others, and, similarly, make certain populations more likely than others to be acted upon23. In applying these analytical tools to this thesis, it is apparent that the first, second and third practices described above are most helpful for understanding the producers’ reports, while the fourth is made manifest through the websites themselves.

5.3 Details of the Sample

5.3.1 Participant Characteristics

Because my research questions ask how and why certain aspects of the selected texts are formulated as they are, the selection criterion for participants was employment in a outreach and/or communications position at a non-partisan organization that played a role in Canada’s youth electoral promotion presence on the web. These selection criteria

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23 An analysis like this must therefore “incorporate the idea of mentalities and the associations that go along with that concept [governing]” for governing also implies “an attitude towards something” (Dean, 1999: 16) and therefore indicates drawing out the culture-specific ways of seeing and forms of thought.
led to a very small pool of potential participants, who I stratified by region and sector. Two participants worked for electoral administration agencies and two worked for what might be called grassroots or peer-run organizations\textsuperscript{24}. Regionally, two representatives within both ‘type’ of organization (administrative and grassroots) worked at the provincial (British Columbian) level and the other two federally (Canada-wide)\textsuperscript{25}.

5.3.2 Organizational Characteristics

In sampling the organizations for this phase of the research, I thought it would be important to include representation from extra-state or grassroots organizations. I wanted to do this in an effort to move beyond questions of how we govern and are governed that confine the answers we receive to the sphere of the state. If, as Dean states, “government is accomplished through multiple actors and activities” (26), it is important to show how conduct is governed not only by governments, but by various actors and groups with different interests as well. Doing this also highlights the multiplicity, complexity and the potential points of resistance in empirical research practice.

The characteristics of the sample – namely, that each representative was professionally embedded in the routines and ways of seeing rooted within specific

\textsuperscript{24} I realize that ‘grassroots organization’ might be a confusing or contestable term; for this research it is being used to describe and refer to organizations that have been started by youth and driven by youth to respond to youth’s democratic disengagement.

\textsuperscript{25} Although I refer to the participants according to two generic monikers, the “administrative representatives” and the “grassroots representatives”, I recognize that clumping these reports into such crude categories may homogenize the diversity in their answers. Because the salient sampling feature of participants were their profession and institutional location however, I chose to group and generalize the data in this way. Nevertheless, it bears acknowledging that doing this masks some of the complexity of participant’s answers.
institutional positions\textsuperscript{26} (crudely, state and extra state)—allowed me to elaborate on the variation that existed within reports that addressed common themes. This was a productive strategy for comparing the types of knowledge practices (including the preferred techniques, technologies and rationalities) that were represented in various perspectives of youth disengagement. Moreover, it was clear from the interviews that different types of knowledge were valued by representatives across socio-institutional groups. The way that organizational representatives reflected on and justified these practices highlighted the dual function of governance as described by Dean:

> On the one hand, we govern others and ourselves according to what we take to be true about who we are, what aspects of our existence should be worked upon, with what means and to what ends. On the other hand, the ways in which we govern and conduct ourselves gives rise to different ways of producing truth.

(Dean: 1999: 18)

These practices, in turn, impacted representational practices of identity, agency and social relations that will be discussed in Chapter 6.

\textit{5.3.3 Organizational Mandates}

It was not always clear what skills and resources text producers thought could be built upon or resourced from their websites alone. Calls to ‘make your voice heard’ were often accompanied by only a few links to external (and sometimes expired) websites, or abstract admonitions to ‘get involved’ and/or ‘contact your MP.’ From the interviews, however, it became obvious that as vehicles of service provision, the websites were

\textsuperscript{26} It seemed very likely that interview participants saw the interview not as a reflection on practice but rather as a site of professional practice. This was beneficial for attempting to gain access to the professional rather than personal viewpoints.
undergirded by quite different organizational visions and mandates\textsuperscript{27}. Among other things, how the websites’ participation initiatives were conceptualized could be traced alongside other vehicles for service delivery.

In the grassroots organizations, services and programs focused on bridging cultural barriers, and positioning outreach and information at “low risk entry points” (i.e., concerts with political outreach, all-candidates debates in pubs, ‘speed dating’ with politicians) (Interview transcript, G2: 01.24.2010). They also gave public workshops; one focused on democracy, corporatization, and global issues, and the other focused on educating adults (especially politicians, government and NGO workers) on how to work with young people on a non-hierarchical plane.

In contrast, the electoral administrative bodies were primarily set upon meeting legislated mandates; examples include providing administrative information through different mediums like print media (newspapers, campus mail-outs) Television advertisements, and the website. Electoral administrative agencies were also involved in creating electoral simulation activities and educational toolkits for capillary institutions like public schools.

5.3.4 Youth’s Role in Organization

Significant variation existed within institutional visions of how young people were or should be able to participate within the organization, and, relatedly, the extent

\textsuperscript{27} All four organizational representatives involved in this research had \textit{three} overlapping goals relevant to the ‘youth voting problem’ in Canada: to educate youth about democracy, to reduce barriers to participating in democratic/electoral processes, and to promote democratic/electoral participation. While these organizations, at least peripherally, had multiple overlapping goals related to youth electoral disengagement, the way they understood such disengagement, and formulated responses to it, were very different.
they were involved in organizational decision-making processes. From the electoral agencies’ representatives’ reports, it was clear that the extent to which young people could contribute to program development on youth engagement issues was contingent on adults inviting young people to contribute, and then other adults within the organization translating these ideas into appropriate programs or policy. More commonly, however, it seemed the case that young people were not asked for any input at all, except perhaps through the proxy of being survey participants in research programmes about youth disengagement ²⁸.

In contrast to the formal, hierarchical structure of the electoral administrative agencies, the grassroots organizations (mostly comprised of youth workers themselves) seemed to offer many horizontal engagement opportunities to involve youth. Young people were encouraged to join existing programs and campaigns, or to use the organizational resources to start their own projects. This collaborative ethos seemed to come out the focus on not only inserting young people into existing government structures, but also in supporting the creation of alternative spaces for political action.

5.4 Discursive Conceptualization Practices

²⁸ While it seemed clear from one electoral administrative representative in particular that she genuinely wanted to encourage youth participation, there were limited opportunities she could provide. Even from her institutional position as director of communications (which could be easily read off as carrying the power to implement highly visible federal communications and outreach programs), it became obvious that the major message systems were claimed by the organizational vision, which set out and centralized the parameters in which decisions could be made. In other words, due to the norms and internal structures of value within the organization itself, there were very few (if any) openings for her to resource the knowledge of young people for service delivery or design, or delegate any substantive decision-making power to young people on issues that might affect them. This will be discussed further in an upcoming section.
As Dean details, the key starting point to an analytics of government is the “identification and examination of specific situations in which the activity of governing comes to be questioned” (1999: 23). As noted in Chapter 2, questioning about the ‘youth voting problem,’ has been dominantly framed in one of two ways: either by identifying youth as a “cause” of low voter turnout, or, alternatively, problematizing the democratic system (which seems to be failing to engage large numbers of its electorate)\textsuperscript{29}. From the representatives’ reports, it seemed these dynamics played a structuring role in the identification and construction of the ‘youth voting problem,’ and, consequently, the outreach strategies (including the websites), proffered as solutions\textsuperscript{30}.

In this sense, each organization opened up different ‘fields of visibility,’ in the multidimensional problem of youth disengagement. While (understandably) the electoral agency representatives were mainly concerned about administrative barriers and thus focused their attention to things like online registration or identification requirements, youth organizations identified much less easily classifiable barriers. These less evident, less easily perceptible barriers could be pieced together implicitly, often from rationales given in their outreach strategies; for example, one grassroots group justified their ‘speed dating with politicians’ event on the basis of a perceived need to create and sustain a dialogue between youth and politicians.

\textsuperscript{29} In other words, the discourse of blame or causality in the context of the youth voting problem was quite generally located in either the deficiencies of individuals, or the deficiencies of the system.

\textsuperscript{30} What was identified as a legitimate (and remediable) barrier to participation was differentially conceptualized and acted upon by institutionally specific representatives. In other words, the core ‘problematization’ of youth disengagement was not reducible to a single, uniformly understood phenomenon; rather, it was presented as an assemblage of multiple elements with diverse trajectories and justifications for being.
The fields of visibility opened up by different actors and organizations were also linked to particular forms of knowing and knowledge practice. This could also be pieced together by following the inter-discursive chains to locate how participants’ claims were supported. The inter-discursive chains linked into by representatives in different institutional settings seemed to have significant bearings (as rationales, justification, expectation) upon the understandings and outreach strategies offered. By privileging certain types of knowledge (i.e., expert, academic, interpersonal) about youth disengagement, and drawing on particular theoretical discourses of participatory equality as justification for particular intervening strategies, representatives’ reports revealed complex and variable relations to the different ways the truths about youth disengagement were problematized and made actionable.

Indeed, as this chapter will describe, the knowledge practices engaged in by key representatives linked into and justified differential youth engagement strategies. The valuation of different aspects of knowledge, how and what different social groups know of the truth of a particular problem, was tied up with the question of what to research and what to act upon (and, the flip side of what to neither research nor act upon). This is indicative of priorities of governance. It is also indicative of the tensions between different discourses of youth disengagement, and the stakes of perception in social research.

5.5 Barriers to Access

Equality of access to participating in democratic processes is central to the principle of fairness that underpins liberal democracy. It is pivotal to how government
justifies its legitimacy to the governed. As such, visible evidence (backed by legitimate truth-telling technologies) of pervasive, systemic barriers to participation could work to undermine the legitimacy (and popularity) of the system. Accordingly, equality of opportunity, barriers to participation, and accessibility are important words in this research, as they provide portals into understanding how interviewees conceptualized the ‘youth voting problem’ and to what extent this conceptualization challenged their ideas of justice. What were conceived of as ‘common-sense’ barriers to participation also impacted what kind of solutions and participation initiatives were strategized.

5.5.1 Administrative Barriers

When asked about the organizational goals with regard to accessibility, electoral administration representatives consistently discussed two areas, the first being administrative barriers. Administrative barriers included things like voter registration procedures and identification requirements at polling stations. University students in particular were identified as having systemic and recurring difficulties proving their identities at polling stations. Voter registration was also discussed at length, and improving registration procedures and developing a system of online registration was considered a top priority.\textsuperscript{31}

5.5.2 Physical Barriers: Lack of Will and Lack of Mobility

While not named as a barrier for youth \textit{per se}, there was a particularly interesting discussion in one interview which centered on dividing “genuine reasons” for non-voting

\textsuperscript{31} It was somewhat surprising for registration to be identified as such a serious barrier to electoral participation, because voter registration can be done on Election Day at electoral polling stations.
(such as lack of physical mobility) from apparently non-genuine ones (like lack of will).

Conceived as discursive practice, this discussion revealed some discursive boundaries of the ‘equality of opportunity’ discourse, particularly its difficulties in incorporating critical analysis of cultural barriers to democratic disengagement.

The discussion began when I suggested that even non-partisan aspects of the electoral system speak more to older voters. I brought up my training at mobile polling stations where I recounted that “the one rule was: ‘everybody votes’” (Interview transcript, ER2: 12. 21. 2009). The response of one electoral representative on this point was particularly interesting. In the answer below both a “lack of will” and “lack of mobility” are discussed as potential barriers to electoral participation, but only the latter is charted as an instance of non-participation that justifies (indeed, requires) state intervention.

ER: Well, those respond to a very specific problem, you know with older people, especially those living in long-term care; their issue is mobility, right. So the issue isn’t a lack of will. You don’t really need to craft campaigns to convince them to vote but they do face real physical barriers, so that’s what the mobile polls are intended to do. I don’t think that anybody is suggesting that we need mobile polls for young people. Ah,
AC: Oh no
ER: You’d have a pretty hard time [laughs]
AC: Oh no, absolutely not [laughs]
ER: But you know, you do point to one, a type of problem and that is, sort of addressing you know, making voting more convenient. Um, one of the things we hear back in our surveys is that young people, slightly more than older generation, not a lot more, but they will say, “I just didn’t have the time”, you know, they were too busy, this and that, um,
AC: Yeah that,
ER: Personally I think a lot of that is sort of post-talk rationalization.
AC: Mhmm
ER: You know, the things they find important, they find the time for. But to the extent it is real, and that it is a genuine reason for not voting I guess we need to look at ways of making the voting process as easy as possible and as, and as sort
of as cost-free as possible in terms of thinking of costs being, you know, maybe the time costs, so that’s one of the reasons we’re looking at electronic voting.

(Interview Transcript, ER2: 12. 21. 2009)

The points here are easily acceptable. Certainly, the presence of physical barriers to participation can be understood as an infringement upon the principle of equal access without much debate. It is easy to picture who mobility issues might affect, who they might apply to, how they might be addressed, and what objectives and principles addressing them may serve. In other words, the justifications, conceptual systems, categories and terms are already in place for this answer to ‘ring true’. However, while physical barriers are reinstalled as a legitimate and, indeed, common-sense case for creating equal access, a few issues are sidelined.

Explicitly, electoral participation depends on physical ability (specifically, mobility) and will. In absence of physical limitations, then, participation depends on individual motivation (and, perhaps, the ability to make good choices). Unconvinced that time costs are a legitimate reason for non-voting, the representative reasons that if voting were important to young people they would find time for it. While this indicates that young people may not find voting important, the implications of this are not explored. Instead, the reasons behind non-voting are channelled back into the familiar territory of administrative concerns about reducing time costs.

Conceived as discursive practice, the talk of potential barriers to participation are limited to obvious items congruent with a liberal frame. This relatively systematic way of thinking about equal access, unfortunately, limits from focus emergent concerns, and keeps the discussion of equity bounded. In this move democracy itself is also
essentialized, its language and procedures assumed to be fair and neutral, when they may be in fact hegemonic. With democracy now appearing beyond critique, non-participation can be construed as a lack of motivation on the part of the individual. In other words, non-participation (“lack of will”) can now become a matter of personal deficit.

5.5.3 Knowledge Barriers

A point of global convergence in all representatives’ reports was identifying education as a key issue involved in youth voter disengagement. This is not surprising. As discussed in Chapter 3, in Western societies ‘youth’ and ‘education’ have long been fused together (Rose, 1999: 134). As liberal discourses continue to point to the free individual as the site of choice and autonomy, the role of education has always remained an important point of theoretical concern (Gillespie, 1990: 65). Electoral representatives considered raising rates of (procedural and thus unbiased) political knowledge a very important task; this is illustrated in the excerpt below, where quantitative research is mobilized to prove that low levels of political knowledge are both a characteristic of youth, and a cause of low voter turnout:

ER: We can, we do have a fairly good idea as to why ah, youth vote less than old people, older people at this point in time
AC: Right
ER: So, we have sort of single cross-sectional data, and, you know, these, you know, these [organization name] studies in particular, have been quite good about, even over the last 4 or 5 elections, quite good, at, um, repeating questions, and asking the kind of behavioural and attitudinal questions that, you know, can tell us quite a bit about some of the correlates and the factors explaining non-voting. Not a 100%, there’s still a lot of questions about that, but. So what those studies have pointed to and others have confirmed this is that, two of the major factors that seem to be explaining the low participation rates are, um, lack of knowledge and lack of interest. So, lower levels of political knowledge generally have been observed again and again. And when you conduct regression analysis it seems to be one of the factors that comes out the strongest even when controlling for all
kinds of other competing variables. So it seems pretty clear that young people today compared to older generations, know a lot less about the political process in general and in particular, um, how elections relate to the process and how the political process affects their lives. So there’s sort of a lack of relevancy. I guess that’s based on lower levels of knowledge.

(Interview Transcript, ER2: 12. 21. 2009)

The main focus here is on highlighting low levels of knowledge among youth as a “matter of fact” (Latour, 2004: 245). A number of key words—‘regression analysis,’ ‘cross-sectional data,’ ‘controlling for competing variables’—situate this answer within the language of statistics, a field which renders populations knowable with reference to certain data, methods, and explanatory themes. In this excerpt, the truth of low voting rates among youth is tied to survey data that proves, through the correct or incorrect answering of written test questions, that youth today lack political knowledge. The lack of political relevancy for youth is then assumed to be based on lower levels of knowledge.

This statistically generated understanding of youth’s lack of ‘political knowledge’ can be contrasted against grassroots representatives’ understandings. Grassroots representatives saw a need for education opportunities more as a “matter of concern” (Latour, 2004). Their visions of education were less about ‘proving’ a lack of formal, procedural knowledge exists among youth, and a great deal more about attempting to provide culturally relevant entry points from which to translate the things that already interest youth into political agendas.

In fact, it was clear that both grassroots representatives saw the problem not as a lack of knowledge among youth per se, but as rather a disconnect or divide between what young people know and value, and the ability to translate those things into action in the
political sphere. For these reasons, educational initiatives were focused on bridging the fault-line between people’s issues and people’s perceptions of those issues as politically actionable.

GR: So once again, coming back to like, what we need to do with that then, is link these issues, that are like, here's my issue, this is, it's the problem, here's the solution, how can you make sure this solution happens when you finally get to like, when get to like finally get to talk to your mayor or something like that. So that's where we have to take it from now. Because everybody knows what the issues are but they don't even understand how the political system works so that they can change those issues, it's sort of like this big divide in peoples' brains.

(Interview transcript, GR1: 11.22.2008)

Another grassroots representative made similar points. When asked about the most popular youth response to outreach campaigns, she said that many people do not feel they are informed enough. Against this, however, she argued that youth “do actually know a lot” but they do not see the way their knowledge could link into politics.

(Interview transcript, GR2: 01.24.2010). In a context of encountering circulating discourses of themselves constructed as uninformed and non-political, this is perhaps unsurprising:

GR: I mean, I hear a lot of “Ooooh”, kind of being embarrassed (laughs) that they don’t vote, like, “Oh I don’t do that” you know it’s like, slightly embarrassed but kind of non-committal about it and kind of not uh, ah, making the connection between their lives and voting. It’s like, something that other people do, mmm, there’s also a really “Oh I’m not informed enough” is a very popular response.

AC: Right

GR: Uhmm, and I don’t think it’s actually accurate, when you start probing more, young people actually know a lot about politics, but they don’t realize that that they know a lot about politics and they also don’t make the connection between what they know and ah, and making an informed vote.

(Interview transcript, GR2: 01.24.2010)
5.5.4 Quality of Relationship

While survey research has suggested that negativity and cynicism about elections is no higher among youth than any other demographic (Pammet and LeDuc, 2003), the related finding that feelings of cynicism and negativity about electoral politics are relatively high for both age groups has not seen as much attention. Grassroots representatives’ reports indicated that returning to issues of relationship-quality may be pertinent. Indeed, a frequently-cited barrier involved the negative interactions young people had with the political system and the people in it. This was frequently characterized as a lack of trust and connection:

**AC:** So when you talk to youth about politics what are some common things that you hear?

**GR:** Uhm, well the first thing that we usually hear is that they don’t trust the system, or they don’t connect with the system, um, they don’t trust the politicians. They don’t know who the politicians are, um, they don’t really have the time to, like, learn about what’s going on because they have all these pressing issues, and there’s lots of distraction, and um, they don’t feel like the, whoever their community leader is, that’s like their elected officials, um, don’t listen to them anyways.

(Interview transcript, GR2: 01.24.2010)

Attempting to remedy what they saw as a lack of connection between citizens and politicians in the political sphere, grassroots groups accorded high importance to building interpersonal relationships and community partnerships. This was spoken of explicitly, as above, and implicitly, as evidenced through the organizational goals:

**GR:** I do lots of work with like, building community partnerships. And we do this for like, a number of reasons. One of them is to find out like what different communities need and what they're asking for in as far as like, policy changes and what issues are mattering to them. And we reach out to lots of different community organizations 'cause we realize that lots of marginalized communities don't have the time to like, organize all their issues into one place and be like: "these are our asks" and “this is what's important to us.
For both grassroots groups, finding out about the needs of younger Canadians required going to the places where their lives were taking place. While offering universal programs pitched at the level of the general Canadian youth population, the grassroots groups acknowledged and responded to diversity by resourcing youth from diverse groups. According to the grassroots representatives in this research, being able to effectively meet the needs of young people required that the organization ask, listen and respond to young people. As one representative noted: “We also have to do some of the work. Ah, to find them, so to speak” (Interview transcript, GR2: 01.24.2010). By making partnerships and recruiting widely from community groups, the grassroots organizations felt they could better address the needs of diverse youth who might not have the time or resources to seek out and connect to political realities that only marginally address and interest them.

Although open to different possibilities and mechanisms for youth involvement depending on the context, grassroots groups very rarely spoke of tropes such as ‘youth leadership’ or formalized positions for youth, focusing instead on the need for the organization to be looking towards where young people are already acting in their daily lives. They did this mainly by avoiding formal internal processes (like ‘youth advisory boards’) and being more project-based. This seemed to be an important strategy for engaging a more diverse-range of younger people who might not necessarily be comfortable engaging in ‘youth participation opportunities.’
Electoral agencies did not explicitly mention relationship-building as a concern or issue related to youth disengagement; however, implicit in their own activities and knowledge practices, the question of relationship building did not seem to occupy much consideration. While grassroots groups built upon and resourced youth as subjects of expertise, electoral administrative resourced the knowledge of experts on youth. This distinction will be further discussed in Section 5.5.

5.5.5 Design Barriers

a) Symbolic Design

The issue of ‘design’ as a barrier to youth participation became apparent in grassroots reports in two distinct ways: via symbolic design, and design as process. The first concept, symbolic design, was focused upon language and aesthetics preferences. This represents a slightly marginalized discourse which has been often been dismissed as a trivial issue. Especially when discussed with reference to such weighty issues as democracy and politics, being overly concerned with design features is seen as trite, shallow, and potentially consumerist — as Latour states, “there is always something slightly superficial in design, something clearly and explicitly transitory, something linked to fashion and thus to shifts in fashions, something tied to tastes and therefore somewhat relative” (2008:5).

However, that language and other symbols of communication come to use not as neutral carriers of meaning, but rather reflect and sustain unequal relations of power, is not a new claim—neither in this thesis, nor in critical sociology more generally. In fact, it is critical how I have framed this thesis that “language and/or semiosis feature in unequal
relations of power, in processes of exploitation and domination of some people by others” (Fairclough, 2001: 25).

Bourdieu (1984) in particular, held open the door to thinking about cultural symbols, knowledge, and skills as kinds of capital that mediate social relations. As he describes, cultural symbols operate within a system that confers differential levels of power and status. The symbols that reflect and maintain these inequitable relations, of course, are not freely chosen but rather come attached to certain social positions, roles, norms and desires which are inculcated and reproduced along socio-institutional networks. Understanding symbols in this way gestures towards the social networks and fields within which language and design features are embedded.

And indeed, as was pointed out in the focus groups, electoral campaigns have a generally recognizable aesthetic: stock imagery of smiling faces, harmonious, two-tone pamphlets without much serious typographic consideration or attempt at visual stimulation. This approach has an advantage of keeping within the genre and thus aligning with tradition and legitimacy – reiterating the dominant aesthetic (the unmarked, the pervasive, ‘no aesthetic’ aesthetic). But, as the grassroots representatives and one electoral representative pointed out, such an approach also has a downside. Many people will have already ‘typified’ (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 54) the experience that they will have with such materials, and predict from the tone and aesthetics of the materials that its contents will not be of much interest to them. Indeed, the attributes that participants in the focus groups identified as barriers to getting informed or involved in politics — "stuffy", "dry" and "boring" — point to the significance of perception and the
power of design to enhance or stimulate it. One grassroots representative talks specifically about the need to create more appealing opportunities in the political sphere:

**GR:** Um. Opportunities. And, yeah, I think we just need to make things seem a bit more appealing, which means make things more fun to youth, like what would a fun way, what would a fun thing be to get youth to come to a council meeting. Like, that doesn't sound attractive at all. But if there's like, I don't know, music or something. And people that you know. And people fight this right now, because they think it, like, dilutes the political decisions that are made, or like, because they are trying to make politics fun. But obviously like, nobody is staying engaged because we, we live really busy lives, and so a lot of people in their downtime, don't wanna feel like they have to go back to work so they can feel engaged in the city that they live in, they'd rather just go party or something. So if we can like, blend the two together a bit more, and like, have it as a way to meet your community and meet your neighbors, um and like mix music in with it or art or something like that I think that would be a good opportunity to encourage youth to get involved.

(Interview transcript, GR1: 11.22.2008)

Grassroots representatives brought up a number of issues indicating they saw a cultural disjuncture between the ‘look’ and ‘feel’ of electoral politics and the youthful life-world. As described by the representative above, this disjuncture was reinforced by discourses that assume “making politics fun” would “dilute the political decisions that are made” (ibid.). Certainly, moral discourses have a long history of emphasizing the value of deferred pleasure and restraint from trivial embellishment, and, interestingly, this was echoed to some extent across all representatives reports, where the virtues of maturity and patience were contrasted with youth’s “desire to have immediate reactions to things” and need for “instant gratification” (Interview Transcript, ER2: 12. 21. 2009). In the other electoral representative’s report youthful qualities were seen to be incongruent with democratic processes:

**AC:** What do you think are the strategies that are most like effective in reaching young people?

**ER:** Well, I think some of the things I mentioned Amy, clever, edgy advertizing […] we sent two young folks up to [schools] do voter registration and they
brought back some posters that some of the youth or some of the students had put up. And they were really funny. Very edgy, very naughty, I think in some ways, bawdy. One was talking about, ahm, ‘electile dysfunction’ I mean it was clever, it was, had an edginess that I think really appeals to young people.

AC: Right

ER: But we can't, I mean, we can't do that. We are tax-payer funded and again we have to have some, decorum, um, taste and whatnot. So you have to get things out and reach them in ways that they like to be reached. So the social networking, if you can text message. There are some ah, people in the American campaigns who were doing, harvesting ah, cell phone numbers so that they could text message, you have to reach young people through the communication tools that they are using. That's the only way it's gonna to work.

(Interview Transcript, ER1: 11.25: 2008)

In this excerpt, we get a glance at the explicit behavioural expectations associated with the formal democratic field, which have, up until this point, been rather innocuous. There is a definite tension that can be identified between the belief that a different (new, innovative) communication strategy may be needed to engage youth participation, and the institutional standards of value, which require the actors within it to conform to the limits of tradition, and, in this case, what the ‘tax-payers’ are comfortable with. This answer therefore is also indicative of the institutional normalization connected to the performance of certain subjectivities (necessary, in this case, to maintain employment).

As Fairclough notes, “doing one’s job entails ‘playing the game’ (or various connected games), and what may feel like a mere rhetoric to get things done quickly and easily becomes a part of one’s professional identity” (Fairclough, 1995b: 150). This works to reinforce the concept of ‘conduct of conduct,’ understood in the multiple senses of “conducting oneself,” of direction and guidance appropriate to certain situations, and “professional conduct,” all of which presume that the realm of human action is entangled

32 As a function of normalization these types of judgments can be expected to become more ‘true’ as more people adopt these languages and logics for thinking about youth and democratic engagement.
within multiple set of standards and values (Dean, 1999: 10). Acknowledging the organizational and discursive constraints set upon changing such representations (of youth participation, of elections, of democracy) serves to trouble any straightforward analysis of what power might inhere in the occupation of various positions in a socio-institutional hierarchy.

\[\text{b) Design as Process}\]

As previously indicated, the issue of design emerged in two ways: first, as related to the symbols used in political outreach, and second, within the design of the democratic system itself. The issue of designing people-centered processes for increased responsiveness was a recurring theme in grassroots reports. The idea here was to make democratic processes themselves more democratic, thereby shifting the dynamics of the political and institutional regimes of participation. As such, the issue was connected to both the content of the design and also to the idea that a process of designing itself could be a participatory process, that democracy could be embedded in policy formation and implementation, and that people could contribute their knowledge more confidently if the design makes the thought more attractive and tangible to them. They indicated a need to build infrastructure that invites not only citizen participation but system-responsiveness.

**GR:** We had a massive text messaging campaign last time and like registered 20 000 voters by getting the word out that way so, and that was like, 3 years ago and text messaging still seems to work but, and, then like, You-tube, um, yeah I just think we need to like, "wake up" the civic engagement system because right now it's still like, "talking heads" and that's like, what youth, we went to school seeing was just "talking heads" and like it needs to be a more engaging exciting process, that's faster and quicker and, they can see change and, like, hear change. Like if you go to a meeting you don't want to just like hear a whole bunch of requests and then the government talk about it for a long time, and then 4 years later you see a
change in that tree, that you asked to not get cut down, finally, it's not going to get cut down, so that's great, but that was like 4 years ago, like we see change happen really slow,

AC: Right

GR: And I think a lot of us want to find a way to make it faster.

(Interview transcript, GR1: 11.22.2008)

This excerpt illustrates what became a major theme in the focus groups — that is, the current democratic system does not seem to leave much space for citizen involvement or social change. While democracy is generally held to provide an ideal socio-political arrangement under which people collectively determine the rules and practices of government, grassroots groups found this idea ambivalent, for the political choices available are greatly constrained, and change is seen to happen slowly, if at all.

Grassroots groups also pointed to the historical context, in which they argued that young people have seen relatively little rapid, visible social change occur through electoral politics. This lived experience was said to become yet another factor adding to the impression that electoral politics is not worth the perceived time investment. Illustrating this, one representative says:

GR: They haven’t seen change happen within their lifetime that’s been significant enough to make um, it worth it for them to vote ‘cause they haven’t seen enough policy change. And um, yup, that’s, that’s, some of them.

AC: Right. So, how do you think young people want to connect to politics nowadays?

GR: Um, I think that they just need to see a radical change with the way that our political system and the people who happen to be running it, um, engage with youth. Um, I think that, yeah, I just think that they don’t see enough change, um, or enough reaching out to them, I think they are

AC: Yep

GR: So I think they’re disengaged with the system, and they’re not disengaged with like, life or anything, they’re just disengaged with the voting system, completely. And also I just wanted to point out that like, voter turnout was low across the board, and it’s not just youth anymore, it’s like a lot of people that aren’t interested because they don’t see their views represented.
As will be discussed in Chapter 7, many participants in the focus groups said their disinterest in elections stemmed from not seeing their views represented. Like grassroots representatives, they also spoke of electoral structures as inflexible, disempowering, and unresponsive to their needs. In general, formal democratic structures were not seen to provide opportunities for youth to be represented, make decisions that would be valued and acted upon, and these factors inevitably compounded the exclusionary effects of structured inequality rather than alleviate them:

**GR:** I think [...] that there is systemic issues, there’s issues around how the system works, and how we engage people, and how we talk about politics, how politicians act, who politicians are I mean, I think it’s there’s a lot of different pieces to the puzzle.

(Interview Transcript, GR2: 01.24.2010).

### 5.6 Knowledge Practices

The previous sections of this chapter explored some convergent and divergent ways of conceptualizing “barriers” to low youth voter turnout rates in Canada. Taking into account the wider socio-cultural context of knowledge practice, this section now attempts to draw out some of the institutionally specific reasons that particular discursive choices appeared in the reports.

In the interviews, one elections administration representative consistently linked into the voice of research (and, particularly into the research sponsored by her organization). Throughout the interview, the modality related to claims and statements

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33 Modality refers to the specific use of words which convey the degree of certainty and authority the speaker uses (i.e., “maybe”, “without a doubt”, “could”).
were strongly related to the available research (eg. “some research has pointed to that as
being a hypothesis” or “some of them have fairly good evidence and based in research
and others are more, you know again, hypothesis that need to be tested” (Interview
transcript, ER2: 12.21. 2009)). It was also clear that particular methodologies were
valued higher than others for telling accurate truths of youth disengagement. In some
sense, this strict adherence to having ‘evidence-based’ opinions and beliefs put quite
noticable limits upon what it was possible to think or say.

This particular interview was also interesting for the rhetorical strategies that were
used to re-direct my interview questions, mainly focused on asking ‘why’ youth were
disengaged, to answers which focused on ‘what’ was happening, statistically. This
practice served to underscore the way that “rhetorical strategies and linguistic
conventions are not just decorative devices or conduits containing information” (Barrett
et al., as qtd in Lease, McConnell, Renee and Nord, 1999: 357), but rather filter,
structure, and guide the ways in which people interpret the world and construct versions
of experiences. The excerpt below illustrates the process of misdirection:

**AC:** Right, with specific regards to the ‘voting’ problem with youth in Canada,
what are your thoughts on that, like, why do you think it’s happening?
**ER:** Um, well, [pause] we don’t yet know what is happening. We have some
ideas, but one of the things, a couple of the things to um, keep in mind, is that the,
the decline in youth voting is something that has been taking place over a fairly
extended period of time. So it hasn’t just been in the last two or three elections.
That it’s happened, and this is where the I think you’ve probably seen all the
research on our website, but the latest piece by [researcher names], which came
out in April this year.

(Interview transcript, ER2: 12. 21. 2009)

As this excerpt and others throughout the chapter indicate, an external inter-
discursive chain of quantitative research informed most of what this representative
‘knew’ or ‘believed’ about the youth disengagement problem. In this sense, it was clear
the relationships between electoral representatives and youth were highly mediated. In fact, on the question of how often she talks to young people about voting, one representative said:

**ER:** Um, well, I have been, I mean, a lot of our outreach has been conducted externally, either by you know, professional research firms or academics, so I don’t necessarily talk to those folks with this project.

(Interview transcript, ER2: 12. 21. 2009)

Similarly, another elections representative told me their communications campaigns outsource youth-targeted projects to experts:

**ER:** We are just working on our ad campaign so we have a fellow that's very knowledgeable about young people and using the internet, just a wonderful guy who assists us at our ad agency, so we're going to talk further to him about that [regarding plans to attract the 19-30 year old age range to the polls]

(Interview transcript, ER1: 11.25: 2008)

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that electoral administration representatives generally understood and interacted with youth as a conceptual category. By tracing the interdiscursive chain of knowledge in the interviews, it was clear that electoral representatives were not connected to youth per se, but rather to a network of external, non-governmental researchers, conceived as authorities on certain social problems. For the most part, these expert researchers were affiliated with universities (rather than community organizations, etc.) and with quantitative methods (rather than qualitative, interpretive or critical ones). This practice of aligning expertise added

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34 The emphasis given to statistical research by electoral representatives is also congruent with requirements for accountability in the liberal democratic state, which is to rely on research and evidence to most efficiently tackle social ills. To this end, the focus or nexus of outreach and policy planning for elections agencies’ outreach and interventions can then be justified to the state and public.
legitimacy to the organizational practice of problem identification, assessment and analysis. After describing the conclusions from the study cited above, she continued:

**ER:** So we know what’s been happening, we can see the numbers but what we can’t fully understand is why it’s been happening and the reason for that is that the longitudinal data that you would need to do that just don’t exist. Um, so Canadian elections studies are great for identifying certain things but because they haven’t been asking a consistent set of questions over the years it’s very difficult to be able to test the hypotheses, to say exactly why youth turnout has been going down.

*(Interview Transcript, ER2: 12. 21. 2009)*

In this answer, we see that the practice of delineating requirements of knowing functions to set up particular limits, which codify what can be known about a social phenomenon. In fact, the way she has set up truth requirements for answering why youth are disengaged from electoral politics, it is now impossible. By setting the limit on what is considered an acceptable answer - in this case, a large scale, comparative, historical quantitative research study—answering the question is now foreclosed.\(^{35}\)

On the other hand, grassroots representatives drew on largely interpersonal, essentially qualitative understandings to articulate truths of youth and their ‘democratic disengagement’. Accessing this localized knowledge-base seemed to lend to more talk of democracy and youth culture in more elusive terms of collective building and support:

**GR:** The interesting thing is that a lot of the young people that come to work with [organization name] actually aren’t political geeks, so to speak. And that’s very

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\(^{35}\) These truth requirements can now also function to limit responsibility for the agency to commission any further research – especially qualitative, community-based, or critical research, as these types of methodologies are not considered adequate science.
much a conscious choice, it’s like they’re at the beginning of identifying as an, um, engaged citizen and so we really, we’re made up of the people we are trying to reach. So I think that the people we’re trying to reach don’t want to be preached to, they don’t um, want to feel like, ‘you have to do this’ what they want is the information, if they want to do it, how do you do it, and that’s really a part of our kind of our organizational philosophy, you know, we’re not here to force people to vote. What we’re here to do is to provide that roadmap to provide low risk entry points into civic engagement, um, and kind of support people in their, kind of, you know, “civic engagement journey”

AC and GR: Laughter

GR: For lack of a better phrase. Rather than kind of force it down their throats

(Interview transcript, GR2: 01.24.2010)

Through collaborating and building relationships in the organizations, young people could be accorded with power to influence policy, program development and representational practice. This ethos and practice was seen to help the organization ensure the relevance and practicality of the opportunities, resources and projects on offer. In this sense, being explicitly youth, and not adult-led, thus became a source of expertise in the lived experiences, needs and preferences of the target population:

GR: So I think in terms of outreach strategy it is really critical and that’s something that we really try to adhere to in a sense, um, the fact that I’m the oldest one in the [organization name] office, at 29. You know, the fact that it’s young people that work here, that develop our content, who really develop the visioning um, for the organization is really important and I think that really comes through in terms of the tone and the way that our, our site looks and feels uh, and I think that’s really critical, that we kind of go where youth are, whether that’s online or offline and really, uh, really make sure that they don’t have to do all the work, we have to do some of the work, so to speak.

(Interview transcript, GR2: 01.24.2010)

Conceptualizing youth as subjects (rather than objects) of expertise meant that it would seem entirely logical that the experiences and reactions of the people using the services would have the most useful suggestions for designing them. This required that
the organization remain open to the idea that other people would know more than them about certain things. This anti-authoritative ethos seemed to come along with being accountable to the youth who comprise the organization rather than the state\textsuperscript{36}.

5.7 Summary

The differences in understanding youth disengagement documented in this chapter were shown to be tied up with differential repertoires of perception, and truth-telling practices that were relatively structured along organizational lines. Different organizational truths of youth disengagement also led into very different strategies formulated to engage them. When the problems identified by various groups are held up against the problems identified by the youth in the focus groups, it is clear that grassroots groups had the most overlap. It seemed that a liberal lens of equity and perhaps an over-reliance on quantitative data helped to mask a great deal of complexity in the story of youth’s non-participation, and, in effect, lent towards solutions to engage them that are highly removed from the real experiences of younger people.

Rather than condemning electoral administration representatives for a reliance on what might be considered rather one-sided and alienating knowledge practices, it is important to recognize that the discourses and rationalities reflected in their reports reflect the common-sense (hegemonic) processes of governmental problem-solving today. The prevalence of dominant discourses of youth disengagement, of sound social

\textsuperscript{36} It bears mentioning that in the current matrix of knowledge and power, the impressionistic character of grassroots representatives’ (and youth) claims could be thought to undermine the legitimacy of their insights. Their views could be challenged on the grounds of lack of objectivity, lack of quantification or a need for confirmation, for their claims to special knowledge of youth disengagement is grounded substantially in their personal authority.
science research and citizenship education, however, are propped up by historical relationships that are confirmed across wide socio-cultural and political spheres, making it difficult for producers of these websites (or texts) to step outside or against them.

As previously stated, occupying an institutional position of power cannot be read off in any simple or straightforward way. Being employed, for example, as an executive in a resource-rich organization, cannot be automatically equated to having more freedom to implement more ‘emancipatory’ or democratic policies. Normative discourses, as well as defined institutional frameworks, require individual actors to tow a fine line between innovation and tradition. In other words, it is clear that the executives, communications managers, policy and outreach workers who co-operatively produce a particular discourse of the “youth voting problem” are not involved in a cloak and dagger conspiracy to oppress youth. Rather, as historical subjects, they help to reiterate the dominant discourse, adapting common-sense understandings, practices and conventions that render a social phenomenon like ‘youth disengagement’ intelligible. As Hall says, "[i]deology is a function of the discourse and of the logic of social processes, rather than an intention of the agent" (Hall 1982: 88). Furthermore, the highly abstracted relationships that electoral administrative representatives have to youth likely made it very difficult for them to understand the harms that may be incurred through their constructions. Indeed, it can be difficult for anyone to gain enough distance and perspective on the norms of our everyday lives to appreciate how they may be linked up to wider cultural and social pressures to behave in particular ways.
That being said, the electoral agencies’ knowledge practices, youth participation policies, and communication strategies, themselves, clearly have very little to do with the ideals of democracy. Young people are not represented or involved in the policies and resources set out for them, and it is unclear how, if at all, their ideas might affect official agenda setting.

Perhaps not surprisingly, youth grassroots representatives (youth themselves) had better success in identifying problems that other youth identified as barriers to participating in Canadian elections. In both the website and the interview transcripts, the grassroots groups spoke very strongly of a commitment to a participatory approach. This is likely a consequence of being youth-led and taking an internal approach that emphasizes democracy. By being involved in determining projects, goals, and strategies for youth engagement, young people could be valued for who they are, and what they offer, as opposed to a focus on what they might become. There are, of course, limitations to this as well. Any outreach strategy will not be all things to all people. Within the design of these promotional strategies, like any other social process, there is bound to contain compromises and contestation; however, the question of how youth are conceived, as stakeholders, objects of knowledge, or program recipients, seemed to have significant bearings on the effectiveness of the strategies for engaging them.
Chapter 6. A Critical Discourse Analysis of 2 Canadian Electoral Promotional Websites

6.1 Introduction

Using Fairclough’s framework as described in Chapter 4, this chapter reports on the ideational, interpersonal and textual realities constructed in two federal electoral outreach websites for youth. In this analysis, I pay particular attention to the construction of the youth disengagement ‘problem’, ‘solution’, and ‘ideal outcome’ that is represented through social relations and language choices.

6.2 Social Marketing and Public Education

The texts I have chosen to analyze here can be understood as instances of public education and social marketing. While public education aims to increase in knowledge or awareness of a certain issue, the aim of social marketing is behavioural change in target publics. Often packaged as a public good, social marketing is intended to benefit society by normalizing sub-groups of the population who have been identified as problematic in some way.

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37 Social marketing is aligned with the governmental tendencies of the modern liberal state. As Rose (1999) states, the shaping of “the private self” or the interior lives of citizens is a key consideration for an analysis of power with links to socio-political strategies and techniques of administration.

38 Like any other texts, however, these promotional materials may not be understood as anticipated. The messaging may not resonate with target publics and, instead of achieving the desired effect (i.e., raising voting rates among youth), might result in a lack of understanding, engagement, or, worse, may re-inscribe problems that necessitated the strategy in the first place. For instance, the messaging that is intended to help a marginalized group integrate into the dominant one may be experienced as alienating or disempowering. It is therefore important to evaluate the effectiveness of these projects. This would include not only assessing the impact of the marketing program in achieving the desired outcome, but also analyzing the extent to which target populations are involved in defining the desired outcomes. This is particularly crucial to evaluating these projects, which are often stated as democratic and social-justice related pursuits, and justified on the basis of ‘giving voice’ to the ‘voiceless.’
6.3 Elections Canada

6.3.1 Site Description/ Text Structure

The Elections Canada website for young voters can be found as one of 5 subsections on the left side of Elections Canada’s home page, which also includes Voters, Aboriginal Voters, Media and Political Parties. The color palate of the site is based on harmonious shades of white, subdued red, and gold, all colors which have been associated with nationalism and stability. Clicking on the ‘young voters’ tab links the web browser to a new page where a collaged image of young people are jumping up and down and wearing 1990s style clothing. On the right side, a group of youth stand together with crossed arms, jeering at the camera and looking defiant. On the left side, a young, non-white man is upside down and juxtaposed over a shadowy, urban backdrop. The tagline “You have ideas. You have plans. You have beliefs” cuts across the image-collage.

The images, both in this homepage collage and on the other pages, conform to a considerably tokenistic version of multicultural ‘political correctness,’ as the homogeny of every rotating image-set of white/Caucasian youth is interrupted by one darker skinned person.

The tagline and images described above frame the introductory paragraph that is found below. The word choices here seem to illustrate Fairclough’s description of the ‘easification’ of text, a process that indicates a “manipulation of aspects of the contents of the text” and in this, as in other cases of easification in bureaucratic discourse, “it is accompanied by manipulation of relations and of subjects, by synthetic personalization” (1989: 221). Using simple sentences, graphic features, colloquial language, short
paragraphs and key words in bold all seem to be choices made with the intent to ‘ease’
the way for the ‘digestibility’ of such apparently dry or challenging content.

The site visitor is also addressed personally, invited to “have a look around, and
remember – next time you have a chance, get involved and make sure your voice is
heard!” The rhetorical schema used here corresponds to a common Public Service
Advisement (PSA) structure (“get fit, have fun,” “stay alert, stay safe”), and may alert
the reader to the genre of text, as a public education or social marketing piece. The entry
text indicates that it will provide the site visitor with valuable resources, by labeling tabs
as such, and describing itself as being ‘loaded’ with information. It urges the young voter
to ‘get involved’ by learning about the voting process, ostensibly through the activities,
cross word puzzles and circle-a-word games provided.

6.3.1 Ideational Themes

As outlined in Chapter 4, the ideational (or experiential) function of a text refers
to the way it represents the world and thus constructs a view of social reality
(Fairclough, 1992: 169). It realizes this through representing objects, events, and
processes in certain ways, as will be illustrated in this section.

(a) Voting is Communicating

Elections Canada’s website is remarkable for the amount of metaphors that are
found in the text. Metaphor, a linguistic trope in which one aspect of experience is
represented as another, functions to reinforce experiential or ideational similarities
between different things, events or processes (Fairclough, 2003: 141-142). In Elections Canada’s website, the metaphors predominantly link voting and the opportunity for successful communication.

A majority of the sentences on the home page link “casting your ballot” with “speaking your mind” and “being heard.” Through the use of these metaphors, voting is construed as a communicative process by which an individual uses their cognitive-
evaluative faculties to decide what is “important” in relation to “us,” presumably the nation. The links between voting and communicating can also be evidenced in the process types that are chosen to signify experience (Fairclough, 1992: 178). In this text, the two main types of processes are relational (being/having/becoming) and action (agent acts upon a goal) (ibid). The relational processes in the text strongly emphasize the ‘voting is communicating’ theme: “you” is identified as the possessor of ideas, plans, and beliefs, and “[c]asting your ballot” is thus the subject, and enabler of the object ‘you,’ to ‘be heard.’

(b) Voting Requires Learning

The aim of developing this website seems to be to ensure that young citizens learn how to participate in elections, and are encouraged do so. The link between ‘learning about the political system’ and voting is marked in two ways: implicitly, by the introduction of activities for learning in the website, and explicitly, in the relationships between voting and learning built in the text. Voting is associated with acquiring a range of knowledge of (rather obscure) elections-related terminology, such as ‘scrutineers’ and ‘enumeration,’ as well as working knowledge of electoral procedures, the role of parliament, and even the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In the text, the process of learning takes place through the textual information provided, and the activities found in the ‘Games Corner.’

The links between voting and learning can be also be evidenced in the process types chosen to signify experience. The action processes especially confirm the ‘voting requires learning’ theme; “you” is the agent of “looking up answers,” “wanting to know,” and “going deeper to find information.” The mental process of ‘knowing’ about the
‘electoral system’ is favoured as a precondition of ‘speaking your mind’ or ‘being heard.’ As such, while the cohesive structure and modality of permission and possibility is dominant in this text, the schooled, regulated, and “docile body” (Foucault, 1977) is legitimated and made manifest.

(c) Voting is a Powerful Action

Elections Canada has no actual power to compel citizens to vote, and, as such, as evidenced here, needs to perform some work to make voting seem important and desirable. The text attempts to accomplish this by representing voting as an active and powerful way to exert influence and individual expression: “voting is a powerful way to send a message to governments and politicians”. Elections are constructed as an opportunity to “make sure your voice is heard,” and, in so doing, presumably contribute to social change.

Voting is represented as a purposeful activity in the first three sentences of the homepage, which are transitive clauses (subject-verb-object). “You” is the agent of action; however, this action is expressed in explicitly delimited ways. The parameters of agency, and causality associated with it, take place mainly through ‘voting’ and sometimes through ‘learning.’

6.3.2 Interpersonal Themes

The interpersonal function of language works to establish identities and relations among language users. As all instances of language use are dialogical, all communication implies the recognition of the presence—real or imagined—of an audience who may become text producers themselves (Fairclough and Chouliaraki 1999:
Often unconsciously, the way language is used structured by the roles implicit in the interaction, and this process of repetition of roles and genres can work to maintain dominant power relations.

Figure 3. Election Canada’s Game’s Corner for ‘Young Voters’.

(a) Individual Responsibility and Empowerment

The subject relations in this text are typical of the ‘synthetic personalization’ Fairclough describes. This is made manifest in the frequent use of ‘you’ as an individualized audience address. ‘You’ is the main theme of 4 clauses and the agent of: 

*getting involved; being provided within important information; having issues matter; and*
believing in (something). The attribution of responsibility, causality, and agency is attributed to “you” and “each of us.” In line with liberal democratic discourse, the (young) voting subject is positioned as a governed and governing participant.

Connected to the “voting requires learning” theme, self-directed learning is the preferred entry-point for young people to “get involved” and certainly a value for good citizens. If youth know what the right thing to do is (i.e., educate oneself about the parliamentary system), then the responsibility for educating oneself and adopting the duties of a good citizen can then be directed onto the individual. Clearly, the underlying message in this text has to do with an obligation modality; however, as noted in the themes above, this is hedged with a well-sustained modality of desirability. Instead of being told to vote, the audience is told how to make their voice heard. This message is reinforced by a sustained modality of permission which centers upon the individual: you can look up answers; you can get involved; you can express your beliefs.

This individualist discourse of empowerment, in which ‘you’ effect change through an individual vote, echoes the assumptions of liberal individualism, raising expectations of individual, autonomous political efficacy over the power of collectives. Franklin’s (2004) work elaborates the shortfalls of this approach, finding that the calculus of voting is maximized via social connections. He notes, “[i]f each vote has a motivating impact on other members of a group, then each vote effectively counts more than once. People in social networks would also incur costs of nonvoting because other members of their group care whether they vote or not. By contrast, for those not involved in social networks, their vote is only worth one single vote, and, furthermore, they incur no social costs from freeloading. [...] So, the benefits of voting and the costs of nonvoting are
higher for socially connected people (51). Election Canada’s focus on individual efficacy and action here therefore does little to lower the ‘costs of voting’ for new voters.

(b) Conversationalization

As previously discussed, the ‘easefication’ of the text is realized in the non-complexity of syntax, non-technical language, and use of simple sentences. In fact, the process of Elections Canada translating this information for youth seems to involve a shift from a “written-language” terminology to a spoken one. Fairclough (2003) calls this “conversationalization” (224). Conversationalization is a form of linguistic mediation used to discuss topics that are considered formal or specialized, and therefore indicates an interface between specialist knowledge and non-specialist audiences. As such, this shift can be taken as indicative of the producers’ assumptions or projections of the audience. As Fairclough explains, there is no way for text producer to know what the interpreter’s actual experience is, and, as such, she or he must then construct an “ideal audience with particular experiences” (Fairclough, 1992: 84). This semiotic meaning communicates the social relations and status to social actors just as the lexical meaning delivered by the words.

(c) Condescension

The prose of the text is relatively simple and extremely vague; however, it implies that if the reader complies with the activities presented, he or she can ‘be heard.’ The verb structure (lets you/lets you/shows you/you can/get involved) gives a strong impression that the reader will be enabled by the ‘resources’ the site provides; and this meaning is intensified by self-descriptions of the site as being ‘loaded’ with information
and an excess of exclamation points. While the audience is constructed to be in need of empowerment, and encouraged to play the circle-a-word games provided, it is questionable how this will be interpreted by the audience. The dominant reading from the focus groups in this research, however, is that it is highly condescending.

As described by Bourdieu (1991), condescension occurs when someone at the top of a social hierarchy adopts the speech or style of those at the bottom. With such a move, the dominant actor seeks to profit from the inequality that he or she ostensibly negates. Describing condescension, Bourdieu gives the example of a French/Bearnais Mayor who, in a speech to assembled Bearnais, chooses to speak in the provincial language rather than ‘official’ French. Bourdieu describes this as a strategy that achieves its value through a dual motion which both negates and reinforces dominant power structures. Bourdieu states:

In order for an audience of people whose mother tongue is Bearnais to perceive as a ‘thoughtful gesture’ the fact that a Bearnais mayor should speak to them in Bearnais, they must tacitly recognize the unwritten law which prescribes French as the only acceptable language for formal speeches in formal situations ….. whenever the objective disparity between the persons present (that is, between their social properties) is sufficiently known and recognized by everyone (particularly those involved in the interaction, as agents or spectators) so that the symbolic negation of the hierarchy (by using the ‘common touch’ for instance) enables the speaker to combine the profits linked to the undiminished hierarchy with those derived from the distinctly symbolic negation of the hierarchy – not the least of which is the strengthening of the hierarchy implied by the recognition accorded to the way of using the hierarchical relation.

(1991:68)

Bourdieu’s example can be paralleled against the semantic processes in Elections Canada’s text. While the word and grammar choices might be viewed by text producers
as an attempt to formulate youthful appeal and linguistic simplicity, my research indicates that it is not decoded by the audience in that way. The disjuncture between the visions of what youth think youth are like and what adults think youth are like was readily apparent; as such, the extent to which this text is ‘slanged’ in the attempt to speak in ‘youth’ vernacular functions as a tool of intergenerational tension rather than alleviation.

(d) Governing and Being Governed

In Elections Canada’s website, having first portrayed voting as a ‘chance to have your say’ and then as a responsibility, the text goes on to show how learning formal, procedural knowledge of the electoral system is also key to good citizenship. As noted, there is an assumption that these learning resources will be used by good citizens, such as members of the text’s audience. Readers will be flattered to know that they are “the future of this country” and, as such, the state of the nation will somehow depend on them. By voting, youth will apparently be able to actively participate in governance. Ultimately, however, the inclusive and participatory theme created by the metaphorical and process-driven language of the text is contradicted by the one-way flow of information, and the authority of the text producer, who retains the ability to speak for others, most notably ‘young voters.’ This text is particularly interesting because it positions readers in two contradictory ways.

First, the relationship between officials and the (young, voting) public is characterized by unequal levels of authority. Elections Canada, as an authority and representative of the state, communicates official information (perhaps regulations or
rules), and therefore delineates “appropriate” knowledge. At the same time, however, in the text young voters are represented as participants whose voice will be heard as they participate in governance through participating in elections.39 The language used in this text focuses on the opportunities for young people to ‘be heard.’ Opportunities presented in this text, however, are mostly limited to learning about procedural electoral knowledge and the somewhat abstract opportunity to ‘have a say.’ The commitment to listen and respond to (younger) peoples’ views, however, is held by political elites, and, as such, while democratic forms of governance are promoted, old hierarchies of government reinforce the notion that young people must be apprenticed into participation. This apprenticeship process has a high potential to homogenize young peoples’ entry into politics and does little to erode the dominant structures of value that serve to place youth in positions with inequitable access to power. It also continues to privilege those high achievers (often from elite families) who have already become articulate in the speech, style and mannerisms of the formal political field, and thus works to reproduce both material inequality and hegemonies in the cultural and political realms40.

Indeed, while young people are encouraged to have a say at the ‘low’ level of politics (Marsh et al., 2007: 221), they will most likely continue to be excluded at the

39 In a third, unspoken, yet necessary relation, as a ‘public service’ (via administering elections, and implementing ‘democracy’) and being tax-payer funded, the administrative agency is indeed ‘subject’ to (accountable to) the citizens. Unsurprisingly the third relation is not overtly represented in this text, and there is a careful avoidance of words/meanings that might suggest this, or, threaten (by way of problematizing any concepts, hedging or ambivalence) the legitimacy of the system (electoral democracy) Elections Canada works to uphold. This is accomplished largely by delimiting ‘youth politics’ in such a narrow way.

40 Paradoxically, this is achieved with a ‘value-free’ or non-partisan position; indeed, the public requires Elections Canada to present the materials as such. Because there is, and cannot be, any overt recognition of the overarching pervasive power relations and inequalities, it mystifies and reinforces them.
‘high level.’ In this text we find a fairly tight definition of political involvement and of ‘speaking one’s mind’ in the context of democracy. Although in many ways voting is spoken of as powerful, the normative idea of appropriate communication with the state tends to reinforce the idea of minimal, hierarchical citizenship by citizens, and, as Coleman (2008) describes, more managed (as opposed to autonomous) forms of democratic politics. Further, although the ideals of ‘being heard’ by one’s government may be important to the general public – perhaps the target audience of this text – the reality of being heard through voting may be dubious in a political system that fails to give youth (as many other individuals and groups) space for their voices in the political sphere.

6.3.4 Interactivity

As noted in Chapter 2 and 4, have been many questions raised about the possible social consequences of the recent shift from offline media communications technologies to online ones. Elections Canada’s website however, provides little opportunity to explore the apparent shifts. In fact, their websites is little more than a revised presentation of the centralized, text-based political outreach common to bureaucratic pamphlets. While participation is emphasized in the text, this website is mainly utilized as a tool for extending information and promoting narrowly defined, government-led processes to younger people. In other words, Elections Canada provides a space where information can be read, and site visitors can be cajoled to vote, but it is not a setting in which anything can actually happen –via content creation or decision-making. Site visitors are also denied creative functions that would allow them to use the site to as a way to
network, connect with and mobilize others. In this sense, the website’s self-construction as a “resource” is ambivalent -- its placing words and ideas seem to present opportunities, but in the first step towards those activities, the ‘resources’ and supportive framework vanishes away.

The asymmetrical properties of this exchange framework should not be seen as arbitrary, but as rather stemming from the very nature of governmental administration-public relations in our society. Indeed, this site is a part of those relations, and should these relations change, for example, if youth were elected by members of the public or their social group to create content for this site, public relations would change as well.

While this asymmetrical framework of administration facilitates the continued marginalization of contesting discourse of citizen engagement that focus attention on systemic (rather than individual) inadequacies, it should not be expected to change much from within, or on its own accord.

6.4 Apathy is Boring

6.4.1 Site Description

The Apathy is Boring (AIB) website has a relatively advanced web-design, using a splash page, a hyper-mediated logo that changes with each refreshed page, personalized logins, online quizzes, links to other social media, news updates and the capacity to integrate user-generated content in real time. There is little structure and hierarchy within the content, making it confusing, even a bit hysterical, especially with the bold color selection and excess of texture, icons, and patterns. This also makes it difficult to skim over and organize blocks of text. The uneasy color palate of neon pink attracts attention
immediately and goes against the dominant aesthetic choices of most politically oriented websites, which is appropriate since the site is trying to attract people who are not interested in politics.

After clicking past the introductory portal, the home page quickly establishes the mood of the site. AIB uses a stylized cartoonish logo with shadowed bodies that have clear cues and markers of youthful style, seen through hairstyles and accessories. The text is written in a blunt rhetorical style, all of which seem to draw on an articulation of younger values. The text makes a number of demands on the audience — to register and engage with the material — but in return it offers a promise of help, information and connection. The multi-page layout and interactive features style suggests that visiting the site is not a passive activity (like sitting in front of a computer screen) and creates a feel of movement and discovery.

6.4.2 Ideational Theme

(a) Participation is Fun

The AIB site challenges the audience to make some non-normative presuppositions. This begins at the organization name itself. ‘Apathy is Boring’, which is a post-modifier adjective metaphor, describes one state as another. Apathy, a personal quality of showing little feeling, interest or concern, is recoded from the situational perspective as ‘boring,’ which describes something as un-stimulating, or generating no interest or enthusiasm. Because politics is often seen as boring, this seems like an attempt to recode the experience and evaluation of politics. This re-coding and word play is
paradigmatic of the non-traditional relationships built between word meanings and conceptual fields in the websites.

Figure 4. Apathy is Boring’s home page

(b) Politics is Relevant to Youth Culture

At the level of text structure, AIB comes off as a mash-up of discursive differences, register shifts, and multiple intercut “voices” (eg. Journalism/news media, Parliamentary, Non-Governmental Organization, Canadian Music and promotional discourse) and functions (i.e., photo-galleries, biographies, quotes, news, vocabulary glossary). In the context of this multi-voiced platform it is evident that asking: “What is
seen as relevant to politics?” here begets a very different answer than asking the same question of Elections Canada. What is presented as connected to democracy and politics is not only more diverse, it is also non-traditional; these connections are often underscored by the frequent use of high epistimetic (probability) modalities.

(c) Democracy Can Be Sexy

A prominent tag line in the site states: “Democracy can’t be sexy until we understand what it means”. This is a clearly non-normative proposition, undergirded by at least two presuppositions that push the boundaries of ‘common-sense.’ The first is that ‘we,’ the audience, do not understand what democracy means, and, second, that if we find out, it can be sexy. In a context where politics has long been proscribed as a detached, impersonal, and dispassionate field, AIB’s confident and un-defensive delivery of such a statement requires some analysis.

One potential interpretation is that AIB is insinuating that sex is needed in order to market politics. This approach certainly might alienate some people, if not making them uncomfortable or nervous. However, it may excite others, which may be the intended effect. These dual interpretations were seen in the focus groups. Given the context of the website, which does not seem to be advertising a “strip-politics” web-application or anything of the like, it seems more likely AIB’s intent is to challenge the audience to experiment with the idea of a politics that, rather than denying the split between the public/private, rational/emotional, engages the body and restores passion,
sensuousness and affect to politics. A number of grassroots representatives and focus-group participations spoke of these themes, though in less provoking terms.41

Figure 5. Apathy is Boring’s ‘The Facts’ page

6.4.3 Interpersonal Themes

(a) Youth as Subjects of Expertise (on Youth)

As discussed in previous sections, in discursive relations, producers and interpreters are very rarely on equal terms. Multiple hierarchies of power intervene upon the relations between the represented and the representing, the producer and reader, and

41 In attempting to describe the possibility of a integrating a more affective draw in politics, it is clear that there are very few legitimate discourses to speak with.
these relations often mirror other power inequities in society. As previously indicated, in Elections Canada’s website, the relations of power uncovered could be said to reflect fairly ‘typical’ relations of power between adults and young adults, state and citizen in this society. In this regard, AIB is quite different, and this difference is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the ‘Youth Friendly’ section of the site where semantically it shifts these relationships.

In the ‘Youth Friendly’ section, ‘youth’ is the subject and head word of the title, and in the synthetic personalization that follows, ‘you’ now refers to an adult who “wants to make sure that the next generation takes up the mission of your organization.” This represents a significant shift of address from the rest of the site.

Mimicking a common rhetorical schema of advertising, the section opens with a question/answer sequence which hails a subject who is predicted ‘wants to work with youth’. This initiating structure also predicts that the adult ‘you’ knows that the “long meetings and 70s décor” will not attract youth participation. Whether or not they do, in fact, realize these things, AIB inevitably positions themselves as the ‘experts’ who ostensibly do know the ‘vibe young people are into,’ and are ready to offer a solution for adults to find out ‘where to start.”

As evidenced, the initiating move structure here is constraining, and limits the responding moves that can be taken up by the audience. As Suzanne Eggins points out, “[o]ur choice of responding moves is constrained by the initiating move that has just been made. Every time I take on a role I assign to you a role as well. Every time I initiate an interaction I put you into a role of responding if you want to interact with me” (1994:}
In this text, the terms set up leave very little opportunity for the addressed (adult) audience to soften or hedge the social relations constructed.

Cohesively, there are two presuppositions in this section that work to shift the typical social relations represented between adults and youth. First, the text assumes that including youth will be a de facto advantage for the organization, “making it vibrant … for many years to come.” Here, youth participation is packaged as a good for the organization, which is, of course, very different from conceiving youth participation as a mandate to fill, or as a goodwill gesture on the part of adults, that youth will find personally empowering.

Second, the text assumes that adults need to be taught to engage with youth, and that specifically they need to be taught to make young people feel important and needed. This suggests something of the current context. In the scenario set up by AIB, the addressed adult outsider needs to be taught by youth about a number of things — from contemporary decor and music trends to interpersonal skills. These suppositions thus not only represent a significant repositioning of the burden of translation but also gesture towards the value of youth inclusion.

6.4.4 Interactivity

Interactivity can be experienced at AIB in a number of ways: firstly, via polls. While this feature has little potential for content creation (the answers are predetermined) it does offer the audience some capability for instant and immediate impact. For owners of websites and blogs, AIB has downloadable banners and buttons, a feature that attends to the personalization function young people tend to expect from social media. Indeed,
through this, and the many social media applications placed in prominent positions throughout the pages, users can easily disseminate and collectively evaluative AIB information. The ability to post links and news stories, to evaluate material and resources through social media applications like digg, may help to challenge information monopolies, and offers the ability for users to collectively evaluate and recommend information to their peer group.

The ‘community’ page helps to create a feel of a potentially “connected present” (McPherson: 2008: 462). As Tara McPherson notes, the availability of multiple, non-linear links give a sense of causality in relation to “liveness” (ibid.), which is complemented by the textual focus on the importance of community building and solidarity. This is also implicitly and explicitly emphasized through the collective networking function, which helps to work within everyday and non-traditional forms of participation.

Users can access and create content in three main ways: creating events, petitions or posting links to news stories and information. Whereas the state websites are focused on bringing younger people into adult-led decision-making structures and processes, in AIB, engagement can be focused issues that are cause oriented and project-based. It thus has a greater potential to facilitate autonomous citizenship (Coleman, 2008: 192), which offers greater control over agenda setting and the flexibility of working on discrete and diverse projects.

While certainly not exhausting the possibilities of interactivity and user-content creation that could be achieved, AIB does provide some examples of how the much-
celebrated ‘democratization’ features of the web might be used to generate political interest, dialogue and mobilization.

6.5 Summary

While Elections Canada’s website may meet the political aims of the public sector, showing that they are “doing something” about youth voter disengagement, paradoxically, the website serves — in a very large way — as a testament to many of the problems that (according to the focus groups in this research) necessitate its existence in the first place. Unfortunately, based on rather limited understandings of youth disengagement, Election Canada’s website serves to replicate the lack of human connection and non-representation the youth in this study found alienating in the political sphere. In its interpersonal function, the text contributes to producing and sustaining damaging relations between youth and adults, and public administration and the public, as they are intermeshed in unequal, uncaring, and unresponsive processes which do little to serve anyone’s needs.

Furthermore, despite the forceful admonitions to “make sure your voice is heard,” Elections Canada does not provide much in terms of resources for youth engagement. There is no framework provided to ‘get involved,’ no effective mechanisms with which to open up opportunities that would enable young people to have a say, participate in content creation, or anything else for that matter. Because of this, even were young people to ‘have a say,’ there is a looming question about how their concerns would be
recognized and responded to, and little discussion of the challenges or opportunities that youth involvement and participation might propose to government.

Elections Canada’s website essentially extends (rather than transforms or opens up) dominant power relations which work to ensure the alignment of individuals with the norms, goals and aims of the particular formation of power that is mobilizing this strategy. In other words, this text produces individuals already oriented to the needs of a particular liberal power. The work of power, although liberalized by its ‘choices’ (via voting), requires the individual to instantiate the governed freedom that is offered. This is thus the paradox of ‘speaking your mind’; it is in fact discipline, in the sense that it seeks to fix the relations of power between institutions and individual and is thus more a technique of governance than democracy.

That the liberal democratic freedom of choice is promoted within fine and arguably ineffective parameters is, however, consistent with theories of Bourdieu, Foucault and Rose, who argue that ideas of autonomy and freedom are constitutively connected with hegemonic modes of subjectivation in Western, capitalist societies. In other words, it is no surprise that on the one hand, the stated aim of governing institutions is to empower the less powerful, while on the other hand, the empowering programs that are offered are governing regimes that normalize participants. This functions as a way for the nation-state to protect itself from what is constructed as a problem.

AIB is culturally performative, if only in the sense that it helps to identify and represent a range of non-traditional ways of being political; these ways are likely more
tied into the life-world of youth today. By attempting to code democracy as sexy, and political apathy as un-cool, AIB helps to open up and destabilize discursive assemblages.

While some aspects of AIB’s mission to mix politics and fun could be considered a positive goal, there are some issues with the project that should be flushed out. The main point AIB seems to convey is at present, politics may be boring and take a lot of effort to get involved in, but what matters is that it is that we make it ‘cool.’ This represents a particularly ambivalent goal, for ‘cool’ is itself a symbolic labelling process, not inherent or natural to any (youthful) lifestyle. Indeed, cool must be identified as such, and often is, along profoundly consumerist lines. Thus, how well AIB’s symbolic connections captivate young people to participate in politics is, in some sense, tied to how well they are able to identify and capitalize on the current trends and styles that interpellate a subject in a youthful life-world. These trends and styles themselves have been convincingly understood as new forms of knowledge work (in an unpaid symbolic economy), which rotate enormously upon fantasies of self-definition and empowerment, and through connecting with others as and through symbols, as cool (Beller, 2006).

As seen in the youth friendly section, AIB clearly positions themselves as cultural ‘experts’ who have the knowledge to enchant youth, to generate emotional responses in them as target audiences. In this sense, AIB materials seem to be founded more upon learning about the value of symbols and exhibiting them, and less upon monitoring and deconstructing them. As such, intentionally or not, to the extent to which AIB is successful, they may become complicit with a system in which value hinges on the ideas, knowledge, and preferences of elite cultural producers and may not actually be geared towards producing new structures of inclusion and participation in politics.
The structure and content of AIB, however, speaks of a commitment to a youth-led, participatory approach, and offers another take on the “conduct of conduct.” Their attempts to shift the cultural performance of politics and democracy push boundaries in ways that seem more congruent with the youth life-world. This is likely, a consequence of being youth-led and taking an approach that emphasizes democratic practice over procedure. While, as the focus groups showed, one approach will not be all things to all people, there seems to be value in attempting to interact with young people on their terms, combining in-depth information with colloquial language, and attempting to grow a culture of collaboration by allowing user-generated content and offering project-based activities that integrate things that already interest youth into political action.
Chapter 7. Focus Groups

7.1 Introduction

Using data collected in focus groups with British Columbians aged 21-30\(^{42}\), this chapter provides another perspective on the ‘youth turnout problem’ explored in earlier chapters. It provides first-hand perspectives on the circumstances leading to low voter turnout rates among youth in Canada.

The first part of this chapter begins with a discussion of six themes that emerged from a discussion\(^{43}\) about the importance and experience of voting. The second part of this chapter details how the sampled websites (used as elicitation devices) were received by the focus group participants. Throughout, I attempt to match these local accounts against the discourses previously identified in the websites and producers’ reports.

7.2 General Themes

7.2.1 Voting is Important

Although participants generally expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with campaigning, representation, and other aspects of electoral politics, most spoke strongly

\(^{42}\) Three focus groups of five young British Columbians aged 21-30 participated in this part of the research. Each group was stratified according to class, past political experience, ethnicity and gender. Each group was asked some general questions about politics and were shown two non-partisan electoral promotional websites and asked for their comments and evaluations. More specific information about sampling and location and participant information is detailed in Chapter 5.

\(^{43}\) By grouping and schematizing the data, it is inevitable that I reduce and flatten the meanings conveyed to me by my participants. While I make general claims about the trends in this data, clearly all youth cannot possibly apply similar levels of sophistication, cultural knowledge, or symbolic capital when interpreting texts (Bourdieu 1984). Further, although youth share similar cultural knowledge, they differ profoundly on the bases of their experiences, which are stratified by inequalities. For space and time constraints however, not all views can be adequately represented.
of the value of voting. Even those who did not vote and/or identified what they perceived as serious problems with the electoral system often continued to view voting as an important channel of democracy. This sometimes had to be pieced together in protracted ways. One participant, for example, answered the opening question “is voting important?” with “to me, not” (Interview transcript, FG1: 02.01.2010); however, a few moments later in the discussion, he said, “Yeah, I correct myself, I, well, it’s probably important. [Laughter from group] it’s very important, but I find it very un-engaging” (ibid.). Many participants echoed this ambivalent view, that while voting might be important, even necessary, it was not experienced as enjoyable.

From the focus groups, democratic engagement seemed to be mostly conceived of as a proxy or identification-based activity. Perhaps not surprisingly, participants spoke of themselves less as contributors in democratic processes, and more as having personal opinions on certain issues that could be occasionally and tangentially applied to supporting certain candidates and parties. This rather thin lived version of democracy was sometimes narrated implicitly and sometimes reflexively44; when it was talked about reflexively, it was negatively appraised as such.

Connected to this discussion were multiple references to the interplay between the economy of choice and democracy; however, this was not spoken of in neo-liberal terms of ‘voting through the marketplace’, as other research has found (Gauthier, 2003). Instead, democracy was discussed in relation to corporate power. One participant stated

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44 I am using reflexive here to refer to the capacity of individuals to recognize and respond to aspects of socialization and social structure.
that voting has so much potential power that dominant groups have a stake in representing it to the public as powerless.

\textbf{J}: Yeah, you know, personally, I’m of the opinion that it’s not coincidental that people are made to feel their vote is powerless. You know, it’s like, uh, like, it would be chaos for corporate rule if Joe Butthead working for minimum wage over at McDonalds suddenly started going, “Wait a minute, I should actually start investigating and understanding my basic human rights and start uh, start voting uh huh according to what I believe” you know, instead of it’s just like, “Oh your vote doesn’t matter anyways, just keep not voting”, so it’s just like really, what can you do? Because we live in a society that is based around money and uh, corporations have all the money, so they have all the power!

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16.2010)

This participant identifies a definite tension between conceptualizing voting as a powerful avenue of democratic governance (as Election Canada’s website describes it), and conceptualizing voting as a highly constrained form of participation in a socio-economic context of advanced capitalism and corporate power.

7.2.1 “Canadian Politics Can be Pretty Boring”

Perhaps not surprisingly, many participants in the focus groups described Canadian politics as boring. Considerable talk about a lack of outreach by political candidates or parties commented negatively for participants on how politics were not meant for them. As a whole, politicians and electoral politics were described as “stuffy”, “bland” “stale” “dry”. The cultural performance of Canadian politics — its aesthetics, language, and symbols were difficult for participants to digest.

\textbf{M}: I find that Canadian politics can be pretty boring, like if you are just watching the CBC or you know, what’s the parliament channel, C-Span?
\textbf{J}: Yeah, yeah
J: I don’t even know, I’d just skip it, like, ohhh that looks boring
(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16. 2010)

Often, the language participants used to describe politics was particularly reflexive and troubles a straightforward analysis that might describe them as simply ‘not interested in politics’. As illustrated below, one participant makes special reference to the process of politics being “made boring”. This particular phrasing is interesting, for it implies that he see politics not as inherently boring but as something that has, in some way, become so.

J: Well, it’s just like, really, it’s made boring to you so long before you are of the age to vote that by the time you’re 18
C: Yup
J: You’re just like, “Whatever”
C: Yep
J: “Get off my back, I gotta get a job now, it’s right out of high school, uhhh”

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16. 2010)

Not only is politics “made boring,” but the timing of the entry point into it was said to occur at a poor lifecycle stage. This is congruent with other research that advocates changing the voting age (whether lowering or raising it). Given that the transition from high school is often a particularly intense period of decision-making, being cajoled into another boring adult led-process seemed to present itself as an unattractive prospect.

Even though elections were boring, they were seen as important, and as such, some participants relayed experiences of trying to get informed and involved. Because for some, however, this process was experienced as individualizing and sometimes
alienating, it did not always sustain their interest or commitment. The participant’s comment below illustrates this:

C: Um, I think that it [voting] definitely, now it is [a priority], I remember reading last year, I think it was maybe Monday magazine, or somewhere about how low the voting numbers and about being so shocked. And I didn’t vote, and I just remembered thinking, just, that that was stupid. And then when it came time to vote, I wanted to, but I felt that I didn’t know enough and I felt that I didn’t even really know how the structure of the system worked. And years ago I didn’t really care, it just wasn’t you know, it wasn’t a priority to me. But now it is I mean, the politics itself I don’t find all that interesting but I feel that I should know, so I guess that’s probably why I’m here

Everyone: Laughs

C: I mean, I know, even just to find people. You know, and not that this is like, why I didn’t vote or anything but it’s because you know, none of my friends did and nobody knew anything and I felt like I shouldn’t vote if I didn’t know what I was voting for. But you know it’s sort of a vicious cycle, because it’s just, you don’t know and I was trying to read up on things on the internet but I just felt foolish and kind of stupid and I just, ukk, I don’t know, stopped. But myself is really the problem really. I don’t find it boring but I find it a little boring

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16. 2010)

Initially, mixed feelings of guilt and surprise about the low voter turnout and her own lack of political knowledge prompted this participant seek out information about the structure of the system, presumably in order to participate; however, as she describes, the information seeking process (and perhaps the information she finds) is alienating, and impacted quite negatively on her desire to take part.

7.2.3 “Media Framing”

While there are occasional, well-known instances of politicians attempting to deceive the public by saying things they know are not true, it is more common for them to ‘spin’ or ‘frame’ political discussion. Framing refers to a process in which “communicators consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that
encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner” (Kuipers, 2009: 8), particularly in ways fit with the producer’s value system and political platform (Lakoff, 2004: 3).

In the focus groups, participants seemed to be particularly concerned about the various causes and effects of such framing; and these types of concerns were highlighted in interrelated ways. As illustrated by the expert below, the inability to see all sides or perspectives of political events and issues cautioned some participants from forming solid opinions.

C: I think too, like, how you were talking about CBC, and a lot of our media, there’s so much that we don’t know, and there’s so much that’s not on the CBC and that we sort of, like, I would sort of think of CBC as sort of the news source, and they’re honest and they are good, but there’s a lot of things that aren’t shown and no matter what, all sorts of mainstream media is just sort of you know, it’s all controlled. So, I find it really hard to know what to research or where to look or what to believe unless it’s like, you see it with your own eyes you know.

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16. 2010)

Beyond judging the representational practices of news media as indicative of a simple, malicious intent to deceive the public, this participant describes the nature of mediated knowledge as unavoidably selective. And in the context of a political competition, the issue framing already prevalent in the media was seen to be amplified. Looking at a summary of the Conservative party’s platform, one participant illustrates this:

M: Um, I wonder if people are just going to look at this though you know, like they will just see the basic facts. Like it says for the Conservative Party that they will give away 12 thousand dollars in tax cuts to mother of children under 6, but it doesn’t say that it completely scrapped the program that the Liberal Party was
trying to do before that, and that like, 100 dollars per month is like peanuts, it’s kind of like [trails off]

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16. 2010)

In addition to having to answer the ethical questions inherent in politics, participants regularly expressed a lack of confidence in trying to ascertain as to what level the information they receive from the media fairly and accurately represented the issues at stake. This uncertainty precluded participants from making confident judgments, and consequently, made navigating the political field very difficult. In addition, most group participants did not identify with any candidates, parties or particular political ideologies, which made voting a more difficult, confusing process. Because they lack a ‘go-to’ position (an ideological shorthand), finding a political position with which to identify was particularly time-consuming.\(^{45}\)

Another concern for participants involved the funding structures of political campaigning. Because the political parties with the most money were seen to be able to better afford campaign presences, the political debate was seen as unbalanced.

\textbf{K:} Another thing that I don’t really like that much about the system is that um, all the advertizing that is done by each of the parties it’s sort of based on their own ability to fundraise, and sort of generate their own revenue for advertizing and uh, I think that sort of creates a bad situation where like you know, the party that has already grown to become the biggest now has the most influence and can sort of get at the voters without them really, you know maybe someone who is not that motivated to go out on their own and dig a little deeper and do their own research their just going to be bombarded by the biggest billboard by the party that can afford it so maybe if there is just some way that the government can involve themselves some way in maybe levelling out that playing field a little bit and helping all the other parties sort of get the message out equally. I think that would be a healthy thing

\(^{45}\) While the idea of de-solidified political alignments and critical literacies might be considered encouraging for social theorists of change, it seems to be experienced by the participants in this research as politically disabling.
Participants seemed weary of having to negotiate with marketing and campaign strategies attempting to influence them. As previously mentioned, most participants were particularly adept at decoding text such as the websites used in this research, using cues found in systems of language such as physical gestures, clothing, tropes, and text. They seemed to easily pick up on strategies of persuasion like intentional vagueness, oversimplification, and taking quotes out of context. They evaluated what they perceived as staged or inauthentic performances very negatively, and perceived organizations who attempted to co-opt youth themes in order to market to them in a negative light.

J: I think the whole voting system would have to be reformed, but just like, some other way instead of just trying to like, essentially, trick, younger voters
Everyone: Laughter
J: By like, showing them Britney Spears with a Get Your Vote On wristband or something you know
Everyone: Laughter
M: They try to do that every year
J: And it’s always going to fail, you know
AC: Why is that?
J: Because it’s just like, well maybe then there would have to be some kind of campaign that is like, designed by young people and like, completely totally um, resourced by the federal government. So it’s like, they have the resources and the government is going to use whatever the young people devise, because I mean, otherwise it’s going to be the same, it’s always just going to be the same, like, people, like believing that kids and young people want to see like, crazy, wacky, zany things and like using new technologies

In the context of a multi-billion dollar per year advertising industry, it is perhaps unsurprising that many participants echoed a jaded, discontented view of media. In fact, these findings might be reflective of the extent to which anti-corporate and anti-consumer critiques have entered popular speech, and become integrated into the evolving discourse community (Pollay and Mittal 1993). Certainly, in the late 1990’s and early millennia,
anti-corporate discourses found significant expression in books like Naomi Klien’s *No Logo* (2000), Kalle Lasn’s *Culture Jam* (1999), which were popular among youth and included relatively successful social marketing campaigns themselves.

This state of cynicism and uncertainty was also connected to the multiple media and information sources available today. As the participants quoted below outline, the diversity of news sources, the multiple framings of political issues, the sensationalization of scandals and less than adequate background knowledge about the political process make for a complicated context in which to seek and appraise information.

**J:** So I think that in theory, I mean, yeah it’s [politics/voting] interesting, if you felt like you were able to be informed, but nowadays, yeah you have the option of going with the CBC news, but you also can be going with you know, “the government’s out to get me” dot com, you know? It’s kind of like, well, I dunno what to think. It makes it, kinda, especially I guess if you are somewhere where it’s not really you can’t be going to see these debates or actually seeing them, it’s not something that has been made interesting to you know, regular people

**J:** I felt the same way because, uh, I don’t know, I guess […] as you look into it, the more interesting it gets because you need to know a little bit about it to be interested. I mean, sometimes the media will kind of like, blow some scandal out of proportion so much that that is interesting and it makes you look into it, and look into why that happened, what actually happened and just getting into it that way can at least get you interested enough to research how parliament works and then, after that stage, you kind of like, if it holds your interest, and it did, hold mine for sometime but I’ve fallen out of the loop too, for sure […] I think that’s how it happened for me, I was just reading news or seeing it on TV about some kind of scandal that was like

**K:** Harper got caught drinking and driving

**J:** Something like that, or something like that right

**M:** I think it was Gordon

**J:** or like some other kind of scandal, like some juvenile thing between parties or something, like some kind of ad campaign

**J:** One of them called another one of them a bum bum

**M:** My interest does gravitate towards certain topics, I don’t know what it is, I don’t know why certain topics interest me but it just does

**K:** I’m usually like, “What? We’re giving that to the States?” Like, “Fuck that!” it kinda gets you in there, like, “Good god!” And then I’m like, “When’s that next election coming up? Alright, call me then, call me then”
**J:** Well I know that I get really worked up whenever I see things about teachers losing jobs in like public education getting any kind of cut. That makes me want to vote, that makes me want to go because that should be number one priority. You know, and so I want to try and find a leader that would identify with that but then, you know, they all say that they are for public education.

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16. 2010)

Highlighting the context of interpretation here seems to guard against an oversimplified view of youth disengagement that sees youth as simply apathetic and uneducated; for this would ignore the complex decoding work that weighs in on their decision-making, and the ethical significance of their decision-making processes.

7.2.4 “It Doesn’t Seem to Change Much”

One group in particular, identified serious problems with the electoral system. The critical point in their discussions was that participating in elections did not leave much space for debate, influence or change. Participants’ comments underscored the non- or under-representation of their political views by viable parties, thereby highlighting the lack of real choice.

**L:** Yeah, there hasn’t exactly been a candidate that’s been super out of the norm in Canada, it’s always just the same old, like stuffy old white men, like, it’s always men that get into the office. And there’s no like Obama like that

**C:** Trudeau was like

**L:** And it’s funny because there like, never has been

**C:** Trudeau was our big charismatic leader

**L:** Yeah, but so, what’s the point, you know, what are we getting, it’s like, ‘who cares?’ because it’s going to be the same stuff

**S:** Yeah, if there was going to be an actual radical change and it think that’s going to be the big thing that brings people in. like, yeah, now it’s like a parental figure, it’s a stuffy old man, it’s like hey grandpa, you know

**C:** For me, I’m not really, interested in, sort of, what I consider sort of a stop-gap measure to try to artificially boost voting, or voters or something like that, I would be far more interested in there actually being something at stake in these, not so much just trying to devise different ways of trying to get people to vote but trying to get the effects of that vote to make a difference. And I guess I’m of the mind
that if that were the case, then it wouldn’t matter if it were in stuffy old buildings then people would still go vote you know

**J:** Yes, agreed, if they were talking about the real issue, then I would vote anyways

**S:** Yeah, it’s about seeing results, from those issues, actual results.

(Interview transcript, FG3: 04.04. 2010)

The general viewpoint in this group was that there is not very much at stake because they view the choices that voting offers as largely illusory. Against the liberal democratic discourse which emphasizes citizen empowerment and free choice, some participants explicitly pointed out that this apparent free choice may be compromised by inequities in other realms, especially with regards to class.

**S:** Well it’s like, the whole idea of equal opportunity, it’s like everyone is supposed to have that same power to decide who gets in but how much does it work when every other power system is so, there is so much of a difference between people, like class and their salaries and stuff

(Interview transcript, FG3: 04.04. 2010)

Indeed, some participants in the groups had a very critical analysis of the liberal capital state. While most participants did not contest the liberal democratic discourse of youth engagement explicitly, their critiques of the lack of change enabled by the electoral system often made connections between democracy and structures of economic power. These local accounts indicate that there is a rhetoric/reality gap between Elections Canada’s discourse which equates voting with “speaking your mind”, and “being heard”. In this sense, individually and collectively, participants’ accounts worked to de-legitimize the grand liberal democratic narrative in which dominant discourses of youth disengagement are embedded. By asserting these critical views, participants brought to light the discrepancies between the value of voting declared by the state, and the
motivation supplied by the socio-cultural system. When asked if voting was important, one participant said:

J: I say yes, it’s important because it gives us the illusion of some sort of power or control but it’s important to realize, that for me, to see that it doesn’t work, or that, and for me, it’s important to, um, see as a key of my consent. And if I vote then I consent, um, to what they are doing so I don’t, I have to be aware that my voting is consenting to whatever they’re doing in our society, consenting to whatever they choose to do. Ah, so, so I think it’s really important as like, a symbol. But like, uh, not it doesn’t really seem to affect anything

(Interview transcript, FG3: 04.04. 2010)

7.2.5 “The People Who Represent These Parties Seem Totally Alien to Me”

With regard to politics and voting, it was common for participants to talk about their feelings of frustration from not being adequately represented by political candidates or political parties. For many participants, voting was difficult to conceive of as a real choice in the context of a fairly homogenous political field.

K: For me personally there, ahhh, are a lot of overlap between the main political parties in day-to-day politics, and I don’t really find that one does a really good job of, uh, setting themselves apart from the rest of the field and so that’s what makes it a little bland for me

(Interview transcript, FG1: 01.02. 2010)

Making a choice between two or three representatives with whom one feels little or no connection was generally not compelling for participants. Neither was experiencing politics as a spectator.

G: Yeah, I think they court you during the campaign, and then, it’s a lot less engaging as a layman, or just a citizen, once the parties are in place, nobody watches, do you know what I mean? You pay attention to what goes on but, you
know, you don’t really feel like they are working for you, in, in, anytime other than when they are fighting for the votes

(Interview transcript, FG1: 01.02. 2010)

This polarization of the “layman” and the “politician” seemed to leave little space in between for citizens to be engaged in democratic processes. This was generally linked to a perception that governmental processes are impenetrable for ‘ordinary citizens’ to have any real opportunities for public influence or decision-making power. In this participants narrative, an underlying distrust of politicians seems to be based on a perception that they are essentially insincere elites, who are only interested in appealing to citizens to further their own self-interest (as opposed to serving the public). This sentiment was echoed in other narratives as well.

AC: what could make it [voting] more exciting for you?
J: If somebody cared. If we had anyone that cared about us or anyone that represented the people. Or I could feel represented me. But the fact that I feel like none of them ever seem to represent me, then I never seem to have no one to vote for. I don’t know

(Interview transcript, FG3: 04.04. 2010)

To this participant, the voting process takes place in a context where members of the public are not asked for their opinions, are not listened to, and are not respected as contributors. Other participants also seemed acutely aware of the ways that political institutions could be exclusionary They expressed a strong sense of social distance, of existing outside the borders of politics, and as lacking connection to the social processes inherent in democratic political systems. Later the participant quoted above continued:
J: I guess if everyone was involved in the parties, like if everyone actively used
the system to advance what they felt that their communities needed, then, then I
could see, maybe, but, right now I don’t really know anyone involved in a party.
It makes the people that represent these parties, uh, totally alien to me

(Interview transcript, FG3: 04.04. 2010)

Though this participant had a strong commitment to social change and is
politically active outside electoral politics, he saw influencing change from within formal
channels as disempowering and demoralizing. This was echoed in other discussions as
well; and during parts of the discussions that involved this theme, there was a strong
sense of disillusionment and alienation palpable.

7.3 Elections Canada Website Reception

Elections Canada’s website had almost no positive feedback from the youth in my
focus groups. Although in my initial methodology I had considered tracking page
histories of the time spent on specific sections as a part of my data collection, I soon
found that this would have been an unrealistic measure, as many participants noted things
like “I wouldn’t go to this site” and I had to prompt participants to explore any links on it.
It is a significant finding that the website does not speak to the people who are imagined
to be a key target of their strategy. While it may linguistically identify or call out to an
audience of certain social parameters (i.e., age), it does not mean that this audience has
bought into the strategy it presents.

7.3.1 “It’s pretty stuffy”
As noted in the ‘Design’ section of Chapter 5, the patterns in preference for certain types of language, aesthetics, and symbols can be linked to the cultural habitus of certain social groups or communities. While this has much to do with socio-historical developments (not least of which are marketing discourses) it was clear that these preferences played an important role in how participants received information and decoded texts. In fact, many participants did not pick up on information or engage with the elicited websites simply because of how it was presented: their previous experiences with materials presented in a similar way were frustrating, boring or unrewarding. A few comments which situated Elections Canada within a bureaucratic genre were expressed consistently:

**K:** Looks like Service Canada, Where’s the spot to put in unemployment?
**C:** It’s pretty stuffy
**K:** It’s bad. I haven’t even read a word on there. Yeah, ok, word: young voters, there. I’m done!
**J:** OK, the young voter’s site?
**C:** The upside down picture graphic is [trails off]
**K:** We’re not doing good

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16. 2010)

While the intent of the Elections Canada site was ostensibly for young people to learn about electoral politics and democratic elections, participants did not see it this way. Of those who did not reject the site outright because of its aesthetic presentation, participants saw the extreme vagueness and tone difficult to digest, especially in light of the self-descriptions (as “loaded with information”) which seemed at odds with its apparent purpose.

**AC:** Do you guys like this site? Do you hate it?
L: Well, I think that it’s easy to navigate but it’s lacking in information. Like there is no actual information here or anything interesting. Like there are no links, well I guess there are links, but I think it would be nice to say like, these are the next big issues in the elections
C: I wouldn’t go to this site
L: I wouldn’t because I feel like with all the technology that’s out there you’d think that they could make this actually like, informative, like it’s not really teaching anyone. Like, you have to already know the answers to play this
AC: Right
J: I wouldn’t have even gotten this far to click on the individual game

(Interview transcript, FG3: 04.04. 2010)

7.3.2 “Looks like uneducated people making essentially bad decisions”

When asked for an evaluation of the website, many participants responded by directly denigrating the skills of the text producers. Instead of being seen as a learning resource, most participants in this study saw Election Canada’s website as an indication that the people “running the election” (Interview transcript, FG1: 01.02. 2010) did not understand who they were trying to reach. They felt that the most significant thing that the website communicated to them was that the people who made it were struggling, and failing in their attempts to communicate with youth.

R: Um, looks like uneducated people making essentially bad decisions. It’s not good. It’s poor decision-making. It doesn’t really - I don’t know, it’s a mess
K: Well yeah, I think it, what it communicates to me is that the whole, whatever government branch that is responsible for you know running the election, promoting the election all that, I mean it’s clearly run by, sort of you know, out-of-touch older people that you know, that ahh, there certainly needs to be some change and I don’t know exactly who they have working for them but they need to try to re-do all this outreach stuff. It’s pretty pathetic actually.
V: Maybe it was done last minute or it wasn’t planned out well, or [trails off]
K: But even when you want to you know, have a portion of your website devoted to like, talking about whatever this is, you know, past events that they, where are we? Events achieve that, for young voters, for that, I mean, that’s pretty weak
that they have like 2 events from like 2001, what is it, I mean that’s a decade ago right?

(Interview transcript, FG1: 01.02. 2010)

As noted in Chapter 5 and 6, the stated intent of the Elections Canada’s website is to provide young people with relevant information. As this audience reception research suggests however, participant-viewers may be less likely to learn anything from it except that the organization is failing to engage them. As shown below, participants saw the websites as a source of ridicule more than as a gateway to participating in the electoral system. The excerpt below illustrates how one group assessed Elections Canada’s ‘events’ section.

K: That’s ridiculous
R: And that was their second one
K: Yeah, exactly, right?
G: You expect events, it’s going to, that link is going to take you to something present, possibly future
V: Yeah
G: That you can possibly get excited about that might actually happen
Everyone: Laughter
K: Yeah what’s that, the calendar?
G: Right? Especially that they would call it events, instead of like, past events
K: And even that they would show this, choosing their mascot thing from 2001 that they supposedly chose but then you know, how come we’ve never seen the mascot, no one even knows what this is right? It didn’t work right?
G: Yeah, they’re just showing off their biggest failures right?
Everyone: Laughter
K: Plus they only got 170 people to come out and vote. And 5 of them didn’t even fill out a ballot properly so [trails off]
R: They rejected the options
K: Yeah, so exactly, maybe that means that they just didn’t like either one
A: Yeah
AC: Ok, any, any other comments about this website, before we move on to the next one?
R: It seems very disconnected to the populace who they are targeting, completely
K: Totally
G: Well, and it’s totally ill conceived in that the problem isn’t that people don’t understand the concept of a vote. I mean this doesn’t seem to illustrate anything more than that like, that they were trying to teach people that you know, this is what a vote consists of, there’s two choices and you know, just to put these figureheads, pictures as a stand in for, this is a simulation of voting

(Interview transcript, FG1: 01.02. 2010)

As the group caricatures and parodies the website, some of the conclusions they come to are interesting. The last comment ─ that people already know that voting is akin to making a choice between two figureheads, is especially ironic, because this is very likely not Elections Canada’s intended reading.

Participants’ comments about ‘events’ also underscore the fact that at no point is youth participation solicited or encouraged in creating plans for emerging projects, organizing or even participating in events. At Elections Canada, as with politics at the more general scale, it seems that things just happen, nobody explains why or how, for what purpose. To this end, Elections Canada’s site furthers the notion that the youth community will simply accept what is decided for them ─ and in this sense may have a hand in maintaining a culture of non-participation among youth.

7.3.3 “It’s Really Patronizing”

Patronization refers to inappropriate modifications to communication that are based on stereotypes of others regarding incompetence and dependency (Boich, et al. 1995). Verbal features of patronization might include the inclusive ‘we’ particles, diminutives, exaggerated praise, or tag questions. Patronizing talk and behavior has been frequently explored in studies of aging and communication to the elderly. Not
surprisingly, studies have found that individuals evaluate a patronizing speaker more negatively than a non-patronizing speaker, and, similarly, that both conversational partners are more satisfied when patronizing speech is absent (Harwood et al, 1993: 211). This research suggests similar conclusions.

J: Ok, again, it’s pretty patronizing, it’s cross words and circle a words it’s like, I don’t know, who’s this for?
M: Yeah, they are talking to young people like they are idiots
C: Mhum, yeah
M: It’s really patronizing

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16. 2010)

Overall, Elections Canada’s website ─ the images, the activities offered and ‘the way they are talking to young people’ ─ were received as patronizing. In this sense, the institutionalized relationships perpetuated in this site consolidate some of the problems of engagement already identified in the political field.

AC: What do you guys think of images?
M: They’re a little patronizing
C: Yeah, they’re all the same
J: It’s that same thing, of like, this, “this is youth!!” and then it’s like, ahh none of my friends wear jeans that fit like that, like, come on, where’s the Emo flip [hairstyle], you know what I mean, it’s 2010, beards are in and stuff,
C: Yeah, that’s what I was going to say, it’s like, the Asian person, and the White person, and like, you know what I mean, it’s just too correct, in its, you know, it’s not us, you know, it’s you know
K: It’s not Canada. That is not Canada
J: Yeah, it’s like old school marketing, old school values, I don’t know but I think they’ve just got to get rid of these smiling, running, jumping people, I mean,
K: It’s like a Spanish textbook to me

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16. 2010)
Some participants seized upon the ‘political correctness’ of the images in the website as an cliqued and inauthentic gesture towards Canada’s supposed multiculturalism; one participant characterized the tone of the websites as “a Spanish textbook” (ibid.) and another related it to a “Social 10 class”. (Interview transcript, FG3: 04.04. 2010). For many participants, the website was incompatible with their identities and views of the world.

L: Well the whole point of it is to say “just so you know, aboriginal voters, like, this is what we are doing for you” but it’s like also [unclear]
J: Yeah, and it’s directed to voters. Not non-voters.
C: I just, like, wish that something like this could push beyond a Socials 10 class, where it’s like, ‘make your voice heard!’
S: Yeah

(Interview transcript, FG3: 04.04. 2010)

7.3.4 Humour

An important aspect of the participants’ interactions with the Election Canada’s site, and each other, was the mobilization of humour and play. This is a phenomenon that requires some explanation. There are two main theories of humour that seem to correspond well to the situations that occurred in the focus groups. The first is Freud’s theory of humour, in which he states that the “essence of humour is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and overrides with a jest the possibility of such an emotional display” (as qtd in Berk, 2002: 40). In other words, individuals are said to use humour as a strategy to protect themselves from the negative emotions that certain situations and events would normally bring. Replacing the emotions with a humorous element enables the individual to release the energy or tension building up. The second, related theory is that humour turns on a gap or incongruity between the expected and the actual. It is stated that humour is perceived at the moment
where the subject realizes the difference between a concept and the real thing it represents. In this explanation, the first step is a violation of expectation, and step two is a resolution of the incongruity. The incongruity itself is not the site of humour but rather the resolution of the incongruity.

In the reception of the websites it was clear from participant’s comments that there was quite a difference between their expectations and the reality of the website. Participants expressed a tension between the identities called out to them and their self-identities, which was frequently registered in negative reactions. After being presented with the website, there was often few moments of uncomfortable silence and controrted body language, which then led into passages and vignettes that showed humorous disrespect for the site, and the electoral system, and the infantilizing social relations it represents.

J: His face being upside-down is weird  
C: It’s like “look what fun we’re having!”  
S: Yeah, I don’t know, I-, it’s just weird  

(Interview transcript, FG3: 04.04. 2010)

Rather than accepting the social relations offered and being made to feel silly or inferior, participants often used humour as a strategy for reasserting and distancing themselves from the text, thus denigrating the potential impact of the depiction. This could be taken as resistance to the texts’ preferred reading.

K: What if you get a bandana that says I’m a voting baby, when you are 18? Make it fun, it’s like, yeah!  
J: Or giving away food? Come vote and you got a free lunch? Dude!  
K: Mhum! Oh, that would really get me out
J: I’m so hungry, budget cuts killed my job and I got no money… “wait a minute!”
Everyone: Laughter
K: Or it was part of a lotto, like you entered
Everyone: Laughter
K: In a lot, a ticket goes into a lot and there’s a fucking prize.
Everyone: Laughter
K: Yeah, now we’re talking! Voting!

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16. 2010)

Humor, laughing openly and pointing out the absurdities in the website worked to
delegitimize the youth participation discourses participants found offensive, while
simultaneously strengthening the groups’ oppositional position. In this sense, humor
seemed to provide participants a dimension of resistance.

7.4 Apathy is Boring Website Reception

7.4.1 “Helvetica, good choice!”

The AIB site received mixed readings, however, it generally appealed to focus
group participants on the basis of 2 main features. The first was that it fit with the
cultural norms and styles of their peer group.

G: Helvetica, good choice
V: Yeah!
A: It’s very tasteful, its sans serif (laughs)
K: Certainly a little more with the times, I mean that’s apparent right away
V: Mhmm,
K: And just even like the choices of color they’re using and
R: Lack of stock art
K: Yeah, exactly

After conducting the focus groups, it became clear that the order by which Elections Canada and Apathy is Boring were presented could have had an impact on the reception of AIB, being presented as perhaps a ‘refreshing alternative’.
**R:** Real people

**K:** Yeah, yeah definitely and uh, and uh, right away when you scroll down you see some current, ah, ah, Canadian personalities in the media that maybe be appealing to younger people right? Well, at least I mean, at least, I know who George is.

(Interview transcript, FG1: 01.02. 2010)

AIB’s typographic choices and use of graphic devices seemed to contextualize the socio-cultural affiliation of the text for participants. In this sense, the design features acted as code choices that went beyond considerations of legibility to express the relation of language use and text design to social identity. This finding draws attention to the multimodal scope of semiotic resources in reflecting and representing the taste, interest and ideology of particular audience communities.

**M:** I like this one.

**AC:** Which one?

**M:** Democracy can’t be sexy until we understand what it means

**J:** Uh, I definitely agree, I really like it, right away I was just like: “intriguing!”

[...]

**J:** Yeah, no, ‘boring’ works, and right away, the beard, the lettering

**K:** Yeah

**J:** The colors flipped up

**Everyone:** Laughter

**K:** We’re having fun!

**Everyone:** Laughter

**J:** Hey, what’s that guy, didn’t I see him at that concert on Friday!? Yeah, heavy metal punk show?

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16. 2010)

In some transcripts, it seems almost possible to perceive the moment when participants’ internalized schemas were activated. Against the evaluations of Elections Canada as “dry” and “stuffy”, AIB was described as “tasteful”, “intriguing” and “more
with the times”. Being able to recognize, interpret, relate to the symbols used in these websites seemed to make the content resonate with participants.

J: Yeah, in terms of the font, and the colors and the images, this is just, this is more, for what I think you can look into marketing, like, there are reasons why this is appealing to me but like, and I don’t particularly know about that, but it just looks like a lot of websites that I frequent, and websites I do trust
AC: Yup
J: And so, it has that like, visual similarity, and so I kind of feel a level of comfort and trust,
K: Yes
C: Mhum
J: I’m already for it
C: Yeah, I would definitely, I would definitely choose this website over the other one, in a heartbeat, because like [participant name] said, it’s, it’s much more, it’s similar to the sites that we are using um, right now, whereas the other site is definitely more obviously it’s geared towards our age group

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16. 2010)

Participants in the focus groups seemed to have a high ability to articulate the reasons why they preferred one site over another. Although some appreciated the appeal of AIB’s aesthetic, however, others distanced themselves from it.

R: It’ll appeal to a certain group
K: Yeah, it’s going to draw in a certain group in, I kinda think it’s a little cheesy, but, I’m kinda one to think that way

(Interview transcript, FG1: 01.02. 2010)

This comment was shared by about one-quarter of the group. While many participants appreciated the look and information available at the AIB site, some were turned off by the “punchy” use of language.
7.4.2 “It makes me feel a little bit patronized”

Elections Canada was not the only solely criticized for talking down to youth; patronization was identified in AIB as well.

AC: Ok, what about the wording like the way it’s worded
J: It’s good, again, it is kinda a little bit lame, and like cheeky, like you go to Caucus and it’s like, “get your mind out of the gutter that’s not what it means”
C: yeah
M: It doesn’t really say that does it?
J: Yeah, you could totally leave that out for sure
AC: How does that make you feel, like, that
J: It makes me feel a little bit, again, like patronized
C: Yeah, it’s equally as patronizing as the crossword puzzle
J: It’s just, that could just, like, for me, that is not at all positive.

(Interview transcript, FG3: 04.04. 2010)

Participants were ambivalent about the way AIB was worded. Some liked it; others found it unappealing and unnecessary.

L: I feel like it’s [the AIB site] actually talking to us as adults. The other one is very childish, like even if you were 19 you are being talked to like you are 5, like
C: See, I kinda get that from this as well, you know, kind of like, a rock star on the front and stuff
S: Yeah, but it’s I think that that’s what people want to see more than like, a crossword
C: Yeah
J: But so is the word ‘sexy’ in there
C: Yeah, in a totally unnecessary way: ‘democracy can’t be sexy until we understand what it means’
AC: How does that make you feel [participant name]?
C: Well, it turns me on a little bit
J: I feel like I can’t be sexy either until I read it
C: Why does democracy need to be sexy! Who cares if it’s not sexy! I mean
J: No
C: It’s not sexy at all! But that’s fine!
Again, these multiple readings serve to confirm the view that not all audiences, even when segmented by socially relevant categories, read texts in the same way. These findings also illustrate how certain appraisals of the textual strategies, like condescension, are not automatically identifiable in texts; rather, seemed to depend on how the audience perceives his or her status relative to that of the producer.

7.4.3 “Take Action”

Mostly, participants gave the AIB site a positive review because they saw it as a space where they could learn about political issues in ways that appealed to them. They appreciated that they could use the site to take action on issues they cared about, or build networks. This finding again, lends weight to Beck’s concept of the DIY self, suggesting that citizens may be expecting different (more active and less hierarchical) sorts of interactions with institutions today than in the past. There is little evidence however, that these needs are having any impact on the roles and relations embedded in the system of democracy.

L: I’m totally with [participant name] on the take action tabs though, it’s pretty great, because you’re not going to find links to petitions on the Canadian elections website, or elections Canada website. They don’t want you to sign petitions because they don’t want to inform you that you can actually, like, rally against things, that’s not really like, good for their business

Generally, the interactive functions described in Chapter 6 were well-received by the participants. They valued the ability to post links and news stories, to join collectives,
sign petitions and share resources through social media applications. By creating infrastructure that link into more direct ways to communicate with the social, cultural and commercial world, participants felt that this website offered more creative, plural ways of engaging with social issues and politics alongside and even against elections.

7.5 Summary

These focus groups confirm theories that suggest young people are not interested in engaging with what they perceive as government-centered, hierarchical and bureaucratic processes. While the cultural characteristics of youth seemed to operate as an axis of their exclusion from politics, participants did not often explicitly connect their age to structural exclusion. They did, however, find various examples of how difficult it was to connect their lived realities to participating in formal politics and elections.

In many respects, it seemed that young people did want to get involved in political projects; however, it appears that there is much more work needed to create a system in which young people can contribute in ways that have meaning for them, and in ways that will be valued and acted upon. As some participants pointed out, there are very few feedback mechanisms by which government and public administration can learn about social change in ways that might help shape their services, representational practices and outreach to targeted social groups. Unfortunately, this lack of inclusivity feeds into and reinforces young peoples’ views that they are not being taken seriously as true stakeholders in processes of governmental decision making.

Furthermore, the media context in which they found and assessed information was not considered a certain or truthful depiction of the world. This, combined with lukewarm
or negative relationships youth had with political candidates and parties, shaped fairly
negative views by participants of what the electoral system is about.

The website review provided additional evidence to support these observations. Elections Canada’s website reiterated many problems that likely necessitated the outreach strategy in the first place. Going to a website for information about voting and being offered instead the chance to conduct mock elections between a polar bear and a walrus, or fill out cross-word puzzles, was seen as an inappropriate gesture towards young people and their potential democratic contributions. Rather than feeling empowered by the information produced and disseminated by state elections agencies, they were confused and offended by it. As a result of their experience with these ‘resources’ youth may feel further disempowered by the experience they have when seeking information from an organization like Elections Canada.

AIB, in contrast, seemed to attempt to capitalize on the aspects of the ‘DIY’ character successfully, as the project-based, “take action” features were considered very attractive by the youth in these groups. AIB gained trust with the participants through taking generally appropriate account of the contexts of their lives, and using conventions of discourse that appealed them. Their ‘risky’ tactics did not always work in the ways they were perhaps intended, however, and again, this underscored the diversity of changes — including new communication styles, system responsiveness improvements and connection-building, that may be needed to engage a broad spectrum of young people.
Chapter 8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary of Findings

This research told multiple stories of youth voter disengagement. From the perspectives of elections administration workers, grassroots youth leaders, and youth themselves, this thesis has teased apart some of the inter-discursivity in discourses of democracy and citizen-engagement as they coalesce in genres of public administration and community action on the issue of youth voter disengagement in Canada.

The data chapters for this thesis began by looking at the regimes of practice in which various explanations, justifications, and discourses of youth disengagement were developed. Analysing data from four representatives from electoral administration agencies, and grassroots youth organizations who focus on the ‘youth voting problem,’ four main themes emerged. These themes can be classified broadly under the umbrella of ‘barriers to access,’ and are listed as follows: (1) administrative barriers, (2) education/knowledge deficit, (3) quality of relationships, and (4) poor design.

In electoral administration discourses, which probably provide the strongest voice on Canadian youth disengagement, the main barrier discussed was the education/knowledge deficit, although at times this was interlaced with other, more behaviourally-based explanations. From the entrance point of naming the knowledge deficit among youth, the aim of interventions was generally to encourage youth education (via information packets on the websites, activities such as circle-a-word games, crossword puzzles, elections simulations to be performed in the class-room, and a few street simulation events) as a primary response. The education function was at least
partially provided for in the organization’s websites, which provided material for a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in this research.47

In the website, the young, voting citizen was represented as a powerful actor engaged in personal expression and purposeful, goal-oriented action. As noted in Chapter 7, the focus in Elections Canada’s website was on ‘speaking your mind’ and channelling political action through appropriate electoral means. The ideal citizen was represented as responsible for educating him or herself about elections, and encouraged to adopt duties of citizenship, like community involvement, organizing elections for the student council, and, of course, voting.

Complimenting the normalizing intents here, the types of processes encouraged worked to enrol young people in their own individualized identification projects, which are prerequisite of participating in representative democracy. In these projects, however, they are encouraged to embody low positions in the political hierarchy (through ‘voter subjectivity’) while speaking of these positions as very powerful.

The technical structure of problem identification and solving engaged in by the administrative agencies indicated an understanding of youth disengagement that was largely unconnected to the subjective or cultural context of young people’s lives. Evidence was compiled on them without taking their own understandings, interests, or values into account, and this resulted in a rather one-sided, (rather ‘common-sense’) understanding of youth disengagement which did nothing to challenge or move beyond any accepted truths of the field.

47 For purposes of anonymity and brevity, I only used the websites of the federal representatives’ organization.
The knowledge practices embedded in these electoral administration organizations, namely the requirement for quantitative evidence and concomitant intervening policy, left truth-telling and solution-finding processes dependant on experts rather than on citizen participation or empowerment. This practice worked to constrain who is able to speak the truth of youth voter disengagement. Significantly, the predominance of these knowledge or education-based solutions is likely to increase the demand for a whole host of experts (statisticians, educators, social marketers, etc) to intervene in the lives of young people. It will not likely increase the demand for more opportunities for youth to be involved in any types of democratic decision-making processes.

In their search for an explanation of the perceived social problem of youth non-voting, certain explanations of youth voter disengagement made it easy for judgments about the cause of social phenomena to slip towards moralizing judgments about individual deficiencies or problematic excess. Such responses were not necessarily because any particular individuals are uncaring or manipulative, but rather that their available discursive resources and the institutional frameworks in which they operate made certain judgments seem commonsensical and others unacceptable or inconceivable. Indeed, such judgments are not unique but are rather part of a wider socio-political discourse that conceals the connections between systemic forms of democracy, representation, cultural and social processes and inequities.

The continued research on the low levels of political knowledge held by today’s youth has buttressed a focus on educational interventions in the present day. Unfortunately, rather than taking advantage of youth’s knowledge as subjects of
expertise, the focus on deficits (of knowledge, of moral character, of dispositions) is likely to result in a continued understanding of youth in deficient terms, while the material and cultural effects of the current context in which they live – including the creative, innovative aspects of today’s much-discussed experiential shifts, which might be integrated into our (faltering) political system – receive little or no attention.

In negating the relevance of the changing contexts of young people’s lives (beyond the levels at which they can recite party platform facts and other electoral trivia), the responsibility for holding democratic systems to evaluation (by asking how well they are designed for the needs of people) is deferred, if not made invisible. This practice thus functions as a fault-line of archaic (yet conventional) ‘youth’ policy that unproblematically equates young people with a need for training and education, that is focused more upon replicating old structures of knowledge and value than in integrating diversity and the new. In this sense, these practice embedded in democratic institutions violate the democratic values they hold out.

Indeed, the regimes of practice engaged in by electoral administrative workers mask a second, related fault line in the accepted line of their problem-solving logic, which is the substitution of individual responsibility over action on systemic inequalities and issues of representation. Again, this serves to draw attention to the deficiencies of individuals and away from deficiencies at the level of structure, effectively depoliticizing disengagement by drawing attention from the possibility that structural concerns should be targets for action.
The grassroots groups representatives, however, comprised of youth themselves, acted on what they saw to be the causes of youth disengagement quite differently. Their identification of the causes of youth disengagement stretched beyond the basic “equality of opportunity” logic often used as a yardstick measure of fairness. Furthermore, while their strategies were in many senses ‘evidence’ based, evidence took on a different meaning in their organizational settings.

Seeing youth themselves as the primary resource on youth, grassroots groups’ main project focused around relationship-building. This relationship-building was seen as both a means and an end for the organization to connect with youth, individually and collectively, to find out what they might find useful. Because of this ethos of treating youth as subjects of expertise, as opposed to a target population to normalize and make “fit” with existing political practices, the organization had to be relatively decentralized and open to change; most roles were not predictable and hierarchy could not be immanently imposed via differential levels or authority and expertise.

The grassroots groups had a highly collaborative ethos, which fit with and reinforced the project-based engagement opportunities both groups offered. Because young people who wanted to get involved were encouraged to take ownership on projects, there seemed to be a lot of space for participants (paid employees, volunteers, event attendees etc.) to develop democratic participation skills within the structure of the organization itself.

From the accumulative local knowledge grassroots representatives gained, they made some generalizations about the barriers youth encountered participating in elections. These barriers, including cultural and interpersonal factors as well as structural
ones, seemed to form a kind of cultural exclusion from the field of politics. They therefore focused organizational efforts towards ‘field configuring’ events in an effort to attract participants who would feel culturally excluded from events like city hall meetings, MP office visits, and all-candidates debates at official sites. With the perception that language, aesthetics, media and art are important drivers of interest, grassroots groups attempted to diversify the settings in which young people could connect, discuss, share and interpret information and ideas. Forming partnerships with other social groups, institutions, and public figures created a network of solidarity, which could offer relevant allies.

By attempting to make their activities enjoyable for participants, grassroots groups felt they could minimize the perceived time barriers to youth participation. By acknowledging youth’s busy lifestyles and remedying what they perceived as inadequate cultural and material draws to participate in a process that falls short of delivering on its rather grand promises of ‘being heard,’ their aim was to support flexible projects people could bringing their friends to, and could be experienced as more than an extended work day or otherwise bland, hollow responsibility. The website reflected these goals, providing a somewhat edgy, interactive space to build knowledge, connect with others over political issues, or to just be entertained.

These projects had many successes, but of course no one event, communication strategy or resource map can be all things to all people. Indeed, as my data show, some of the youth in my study found both websites that were intended to ‘engage’ them condescending, indicating the limits of intent and the difficulty in creating universal strategies for engagement. While participants found many resources in the AIB site,
however, Election Canada’s site was perceived as boring, non-informative, out-of-touch, and patronizing – in essence, many of the barriers that youth and grassroots groups identified in politics itself.

The themes that emerged from the focus groups reflected a great many issues identified by grassroots representatives. When comparing these issues against those identified by electoral administrative representatives, however, it appears that the latter group has a much narrower focus. As was evident through sections of Chapter 5 and 6, electoral administration representatives interpreted barriers to voting as largely administrative, procedural and related to low levels of knowledge. While this made sense in the administrative context where accessibility issues (especially those backed by legal requirements) were paramount, it did not take into account many other issues that impacted youth’s self-reported electoral disengagement. For the administration representatives, the socio-cultural context in which young people decided whether or not to vote was generally invisible. It appears, therefore, that a liberal lens or conception of equal access may have helped to mask from electoral agencies representatives’ view a great range of issues and associated difficulties that concerned youth participation.

Focus group participants in this research were particularly adept at distinguishing between online spaces where they were able to exercise both creativity and influence, and ones where they could not. They unanimously preferred those that gave them the space to ‘take action.’ Although the participants in the focus groups were generally cynical about politics, there was an overriding sense that they wanted to be engaged and to contribute to discussions and action for social change:
K: Maybe there should be some sort of a pre-vote on what we should do, to get people to vote. Send it out, see what feedback they get from people.
J: Yeah, but maybe no one will vote for that.
K: No but that is mandatory, it’s like a survey.
J: Yeah but nobody does surveys.
K: No not a survey, but if it was like, if we had to change the way, you know, we had to get people to get out here to vote, here are some of our ideas, what do you think? What would you choose? What do you think you would choose and we’d get young kids, just do it in school, see what kids say at that age, they might even know what the hell we are talking about. Just see where people are at, there can even be an option: I don’t know what the heck you are talking about, I don’t know, because I mean, see, we’re all here, we’re all talking, putting the input in, see what happens, I wonder what other people think.

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16.2010)

Acting as citizens, participants in this research frequently proposed ways to improve electoral encounters through a greater awareness of specific barriers and cultural practices, the development of respectful and collaborative practices, including the development of social connections between the dominant political community and youth. These local accounts indicate that there is a rhetoric/reality gap between the dominant youth engagement discourse which equates voting with “speaking your mind” and “being heard.” A critical reflection on youth’s own recommendations for increasing their participation in elections may lead researchers to consider how and why youth voices have been (and continue to be) erased from discourses of youth disengagement.

8.2 Recommendations

Concluding this research, I would argue two points. First, the dominant problem formulations that surround youth voter disengagement at present are unlikely to be very successful at raising rates of voting among youth. Strategies for youth engagement that are premised upon young people finding satisfaction in learning about institutional
histories and procedural terminology seem at this point, fundamentally misguided.

However, secondly, I would argue that this research brought forth some insights that could lead to increasing democratic practice. In conclusion therefore, I offer five concluding points that can be taken as recommendations for stakeholder groups and/or suggestions for further research.

First, to increase youth involvement, there is a need to ask, listen and respond to the needs of young people. While this seems an obvious point, this research has show that it is not necessarily a well-practiced one. Organizations aiming to increase youth participation should be willing to resource youth themselves; ideally, this practice of youth involvement would be in a context of binding obligations that can actually shift power relations.

Second, and relatedly, there is a need to build new infrastructure for engagement. Ideally, local citizen engagement processes could be integrated across all phases of service delivery ─ needs assessment, service development and delivery, and processes of evaluation. Implementation of these processes could be made more manageable and potentially meaningful for participant-collaborators through creating positions like youth advisers and youth project partners in relevant organizations and agencies. In creating these types of infrastructures, however, there would ideally be a very concentrated attempt to counter the tendency to involve elite youth, who are already articulate in the norms, languages, etc. of the dominant organizational culture. Indeed, it is clear that, as Coleman (2008) argues, youth participation policies need to be careful about either creating groups of young people who are ‘at-risk’ (and thus in need of regulation), or ‘expert citizens’ who perpetuate existing power structures by assuming roles within
adult/government-lead participatory processes. This often may lead to the co-optation of young citizens through managed forms of participation.

Third, achieving these previously mentioned goals would require a thorough assessment of the resources that youth-involvement projects would require. An explicit assessment might help organizations account for the work that is involved in “getting involved” and counter the trend for organizations to capitalize on privileged youth’s capacity to volunteer through various unpaid positions; and therefore avoid propagating the same elite slice of youth in positions of power, rather than having a diverse involvement - culturally, socially and economically -that can resource the values, preferences and knowledge of youth.48

Fourth, a focus on field configuring activities and events may attract politically excluded or marginalized populations. Democracy requires more diverse settings in which people with diverse purposes can assemble to discuss, develop new policy ideas, construct social networks, define issues, share and interpret information. This is linked into the need to make democracy a part of citizen’s lived experiences. As one participant stated:

A: I think that they should like make all the hockey players vote and make voting seem cool. I also think we should put up those signs on the road to tell, that right now are like, travel 2010, and like ‘Quebec Street Closed’ like we always have those kind of signs out, so I think they should be like, “Go vote today!” to like remind people, because like, people don’t even know it’s voting day, you know I saw like, “Go Canucks Go!” on the buses, they should say ‘it’s voting day” for like, a week in advance so people know because I think it’s really not like front and center, like it’s just not on people’s radar. Like, especially if you are like, there is such a huge online world now that’s like, why even care about voting

48 One way to do this might be through offering micro-grants with an external evaluation team, perhaps utilizing the capacities of the internet for institute frameworks for user-generated information sharing, public forums, and feedback mechanisms to facilitate project evaluation and youth participation in the development and delivery of resources.
when it doesn’t really like, directly affect you … until all your rivers are black.
Because you weren’t paying attention

(Interview transcript, FG2: 02.16.2010)

Lastly, individuals and group aiming to raise ‘youth participation’ should take account of the high levels of persuasive marketing discourses with which young people feel they have to navigate today. This might lead to an attempt to focus more on the inherent value of authenticity and relationship-building and less on the ‘strategy’ of communication or engagement practices with the end goal of targeting behavioural change, which, of course, is not a democratic goal.
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Consent Form

Purpose of the Study

You are invited to participate in a study about Canadian youth and, electoral disengagement and political outreach. This study is being undertaken as part of a Master's thesis on Canadian politics and low electoral turnout rates among youth. It may also be used for future publications, reports and/or conference presentations.

Participation

I am inviting you to participate in this study because as a communications manager for a non-partisan organization aiming to engage youth in politics, your insights are very valuable. If you are willing to participate, you will be invited to share your opinions regarding political outreach in Canada and youth disengagement over the phone. The interview will last about 1 hour. It will cover such topics as your particular reaction and evaluation of the Canadian political outreach materials, with a specific focus on the internet. A summary of the findings will be available to you if you request one. The interview will be audio recorded so that the data may be coded.

Confidentiality
All information you provide will be kept confidential. Only the principal investigator (Amy Cox), the Supervising professor (Dr. Sean Hier) of this study will have access to the responses you provide and no information will be used in any data or reports that might personally identify you. Because the sample size is very small however, it may be possible to identify your organization. Despite this, no direct names will be quoted. All documents associated with your interview and the observations will be identified only by code number. The key to these numbers will be kept only by the student and will not be publicly released under any circumstances. You will never be identified by name in any reports derived from the completed study. Only pseudonyms will be used in any preceding reports. All audio recordings will be electronically deleted and transcripts shredded upon the researcher's completion of the requirements for the Master of Art program.

Remuneration

Your participation in this interview is totally voluntary; and no payment for your participation is offered.

Your rights

We do not believe there are any risks to you associated with your participation in this study. However, your participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to refuse to answer any question or end the interview at any time. If you have any questions or want further information about the study, please contact Dr. Sean Hier at (250) 721-7583 or email him at sphier@uvic.ca. You may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have about your treatment or rights by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at (250) 472-4545 or ovprhe@uvic.ca.

The full address and information of the HREB is included below.

Consent

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy to you. If you choose to withdraw from the study after being interviewed, all information collected in the interview will be destroyed. Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in this study and that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

I do____/do not _____agree to my interview being audio recorded.
Signature…………………………... Date……………………………………

Printed Name: …………………………………………………………………...

Researcher’s Name:

…………………………………………………………………...…….

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Appendix B

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA - DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

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Department of Sociology
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Consent Form

Purpose of the Study
You are invited to participate in a study about Canadian youth and, electoral disengagement and political outreach. This study is being undertaken as part of a Master’s thesis on Canadian politics and low electoral turnout rates among youth. It may also be used for future publications, reports and/or conference presentations.

Participation
You have been invited to participate in this study because you fall under the Canadian government’s definition of youth, between the ages of 19-30. If you are willing to participate, you will be invited to share your opinions in a group setting regarding the political outreach in Canada. The interview will last about 1 hour. It will cover such topics as your particular reaction and evaluation of the Canadian political outreach materials, with a specific focus on the internet. A summary of the findings will be available to you if you request one. The group interview will be audio recorded and notes will be taken.

Confidentiality
Because of the dynamics of group interviews can be no guarantee of anonymity or confidentiality in this research; however, confidentiality will be encouraged, and every effort will be made that information you provide will be kept confidential. No information will be used in any data or reports that might personally identify you or your family members. All audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and transcripts will not contain respondents’ identifying information. All documents associated with your interview and
the observations will be identified only by code number. The key to these numbers will be kept only by the supervisor and the student and will not be publicly released under any circumstances. You will never be identified by name in any reports derived from the completed study. Only pseudonyms will be used in any preceding reports. All audio recordings will be electronically deleted and transcripts shredded upon the researcher’’ completion of the requirements for the Master of Art program.

**Remuneration**
While your participation in this interview is totally voluntary; however, there will be refreshments provided at the group discussion and you will be reimbursed for your transport costs. No monetary compensation is offered.

**Your rights**
We do not believe there are any risks to you associated with your participation in this study. However, your participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to refuse to answer any question or end the interview at any time. If you have any questions or want further information about the study, please contact Dr. Sean Hier at (250) 721-7583 or email him at sphier@uvic.ca. You may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have about your treatment or rights by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at (250) 472-4545 or ovprhe@uvic.ca.

The full address and information of the HREB is included below.

**Consent**
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy to you. If you choose to withdraw from the study after being interviewed, all notes identified with you and sections of transcript with your comments will be removed, destroyed, and will not be used in the analysis. Because of the nature of the data, your comments will remain in the audio recordings until 1 year after the research is complete, and then they will be destroyed. Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in this study and that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

**I AGREE TO MY INTERVIEW BEING AUDIO RECORDED.**

Signature………………………….……… Date……………………………………

Printed Name: …………………………………………………………………...…….

Researcher’s Name: …………………………………………………………………...…….

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