

The youth vote is key for today's Trudeaus

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Justin Trudeau, leader of a Liberal Party that many recent polls have found nudging ahead of the Conservatives, is fond of describing his growing army of young volunteers across the country. This hints at a bold claim: that young people aren't really disengaged; they have simply been waiting for the right leader – and Mr. Trudeau is it.

Maybe.

Environics Research Group's social-values research seeks to measure the orientations that underlie Canadians' attitudes on issues of the day: to probe beyond party preferences and current affairs to examine deeply held convictions about concepts like authority and fairness. Our values surveys find young people to be strong on the "rejection of authority" value and weak on the "duty" value. In short, Millennials are less willing than older Canadians to defer to institutions, parties or leaders. No coincidence, then, that only about a quarter (24 per cent) of Canadians between 18 and 29 say they identify with a political party. By contrast, the proportion among those 60 or older is four in 10 (41 per cent).

To the extent that young Canadians find a leader compelling, it's likely to be because of a sense of affinity or even emotional connection, rather than hail-to-the-chief allegiance. Young people score high on a number of values associated with social and emotional connection, such as "social intimacy," "introspection" and "empathy." These values, combined with a relative aversion to duty and authority, suggest that Millennials' attachment to leaders may be less a matter of dutiful deference and more a matter of simply liking, trusting or relating to another person.

The alchemy of personal connection – whether through mass media, social media or even real-life contact – can be powerful, but it can also be fleeting. As a result, young people's attachment to leaders may be intense but changeable. Idealistic young people who are really turned on by a public figure may be motivated to use their social and online influence to shore up that person's support; 18- to 29-year-olds are slightly more likely than other cohorts to say they have persuaded others how to vote.

But leaders may or may not be able to keep the love alive over the months leading up to election day, let alone in the course of years in government. Indeed, even candidates who seem to hold strong appeal for young people can have trouble getting them out to mark a ballot.

In the 2011 federal election, 39 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds and 45 per cent of 25- to 34-year-olds turned out to vote – rates well below the national average of 61 per cent. And these numbers are by no means anomalous; youth voting is in long-term decline.

Low youth turnout is not equally damaging to all political parties. According to our most recent vote-intention survey, just 16 per cent of Canadians between 18 and 29 would support the Conservative Party if an election were held today, while 34 per cent would support the New Democrats and 32 per cent the Liberals. When young people stay home, Conservatives suffer least. Mr. Trudeau has brought the Liberals into the overall lead in many polls, but in order to convert this support into seats, he must get young people to vote. If not, his party risks meeting the same fate as the B.C. NDP, which showed a steady lead in the polls before getting thumped on election day. One part of the disconnect was that youth “support” evanesced.

One clear area of divergence between the young and others is the extent to which young people view voting as a duty or a personal choice. Most Canadians (57 per cent) see it as their duty to vote. But those between 18 and 29 disagree: A minority (44 per cent) see voting as a duty, as compared to 49 per cent of 30- to 44-year-olds, 58 per cent of 45- to 59-year-olds, and 60 per cent of those 60 and older.

It won't be easy getting young people to the polls, but harnessing the electoral power of the most diverse, socially liberal and world-connected generation in our history is a vital task for centre-left politicians. Part of the recipe will surely be channelling the frustration of the majority in areas such as the environment, justice, inequality, defence and foreign policy. But harnessing public dissatisfaction with a government is not enough; a plurality of voters must be persuaded to choose one of the opposition parties.

Targeted appeals in areas of special concern to the young will help win over the engaged, but for a generation that tends not to parse the news too closely, a grab-bag of specific policy ideas won't work. More promising may be rekindling the sensibility (though not necessarily the policies) of happy Jack Layton.

Right now, it looks like Mr. Trudeau may be the leader to represent the values of openness, empathy and idealism as we head toward Canada's 150th birthday in 2017. As the party approaches, Mr. Trudeau must warmly invite everyone, including boomers and elders – and hope like mad the cool kids show up, too, perhaps bringing a joint for everyone to share.