

# Youth and Democracy

Engaging Young New Brunswickers  
in the Political Process

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## Engaging Young New Brunswickers in the Political Process

*New Brunswick  
Advisory Council  
on Youth*



*Conseil consultatif  
de la jeunesse  
du Nouveau-Brunswick*

New  Nouveau  
**Brunswick**  
C A N A D A

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## Table of Contents

<b>Message from the Chair</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>2</b>
Education .....	2
Relating Better to Youth .....	3
Improving the Electoral Process .....	3
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Introduction .....	4
Provincial Tour .....	4
<b>Developing a Partnership</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Developing a Process</b> .....	<b>6</b>
The First Steps .....	6
The Dialogue Design .....	7
Main Themes .....	8
<b>Youth and Democracy Forum</b> .....	<b>10</b>
The Dialogue Design .....	11
Main Themes .....	12
Next Steps .....	12

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## Message from the Chair

*Dear friends,*

*A number of concerns have been raised lately on the subject of civic engagement among youth. How do you get youth more involved in the democratic process? What can be done to make politics more appealing to youth so they will get informed and participate?*

*Governments throughout the country are grappling with these questions, faced with the decreasing rate of voter turnout in general and its potential effects on our democratic system. Among youth, the numbers are even more bleak, with less than one in five youth eligible to vote in the 2000 federal election exercising that privilege.*

*Recognizing the impact of these statistics, the New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth (NBACY) partnered with the Commission on Legislative Democracy (CLD) to consult with the youth of New Brunswick on democratic reform and ways to increase civic engagement among youth. To accomplish this, NBACY used a consultative process, organizing 15 youth forums in communities throughout New Brunswick. Participants discussed why fewer youth are voting, and what would encourage them and their friends to become more involved.*

*These forums were completely youth organized and driven, and provided each participant an opportunity to be heard and to learn from others. NBACY members and staff were on hand at each gathering to facilitate discussion and record the conversations. Youth and Democracy is a brief examination of the recommendations, process and outcomes from N.B. Tour 2004, which took place throughout the month of March, and the Youth and Democracy Forum that culminated from the tour, held in May of the same year.*

*The New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth looks forward to holding further discussions on the issues of youth engagement and encourages all youth in the province to contact us to get involved and let their voices be heard.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ryan Sullivan  
Chair*

## Introduction

The New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth welcomes the opportunity to present its views on the issues examined by the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy.

Youth was the only segment of the population mentioned in the terms of reference outlined for the commission. This focus on young people highlights the need for increased youth engagement in the political process.

Recent statistics from the 2000 federal election indicate that youth are voting in record low numbers. According to Elections Canada, the voter turnout among youth aged 18-20 years old was 22.4 per cent or one in five, while older generations exceed 80 per cent voter turnout. Recognizing these statistics, the

New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth (NBACY) partnered with the Commission on Legislative Democracy (CLD) to consult with the youth of New Brunswick on democratic reform and ways to increase civic engagement among youth.

The information contained in this document comes directly from youth living in the province of New Brunswick. They indicate a desire to become involved in civic engagement, and provide a prescription from a youth perspective for changes that help ensure increased participation and interest.

The New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth looks forward to continuing in its efforts to help involve youth in the political process.

## Recommendations

Recommendations are categorized under three themes that emerged following the New Brunswick Tour 2004 and the subsequent Youth and Democracy Forum held in May.

### Education

Participants in both the community forums and the Youth and Democracy forum voiced concern over their knowledge level of our electoral system, its mechanisms, and how it functions.

The New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth Recommends that:

- The voting process be thoroughly taught in school through existing curriculums by utilizing a combination of theory and practical hands on learning techniques such as, debates and mock elections.
- Educators demonstrate the value of the democratic process and the right to vote by exemplifying other countries that may not enjoy the same privilege.
- Celebrity endorsements marketing the message of education and voting be further enhanced through youth friendly mediums.

- Elected officials participate in political fairs, where they would join youth at their high schools and provide non-biased information and examples on their experience and knowledge.



### Relating better to Youth

Participants often discussed the disconnect that exists and the under representation of youth issues and concerns by elected officials.

The New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth recommends:

- Continued and enhanced dialogue opportunities for youth to discuss and present their issues and concerns to elected officials.
- Increased capacity for youth led groups to promote awareness and involvement in the political process.
- The Office of the Chief Electoral Officer ensures better access and more marketing of platforms, including increased youth friendly media exposure.
- Utilizing existing technologies such as the Internet, cellular communication-text messaging to reach youth and provide greater accessibility to information on the democratic process in New Brunswick.

### Improving the electoral process

Participants discussed the mechanisms of our current system and ways it might be improved to make it more youth friendly.

The New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth recommends:

- The Office of the Chief Electoral Officer explores options to offer online voting.
- The Office of the Chief Electoral Officer increases and provide greater mobility for polling stations.
- The Office of the Chief Electoral Officer promotes youth work placements during general elections.
- The Province consider examining the implications of a mixed member proportional system.
- The Province consider examining the implications of legislating mandatory voting.
- That the Province consider examining the implications of referendums.

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

In 2004, the New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth (NBACY) partnered with the Commission on Legislative Democracy (CLD) to consult with the youth of New Brunswick on democratic reform and ways to increase civic engagement among youth. To begin the consultation process NBACY organized 15 forums throughout the province to hear directly from the youth.

### Provincial Tour

Participants were invited to attend the forum and discuss two general questions:

1. "Based on current statistics, there is a trend that shows fewer youth are voting. Why do you think this is the case in New Brunswick?"
2. "Based on the conversation from the previous question, what would encourage you and your friends to participate more?"

The forum began with an icebreaker to establish a comfort level for the participants. Following the icebreaker exercise, the participants reviewed the agenda and established a set of guidelines that would be used to govern their discussions. When necessary, large groups of 12 or more were divided into smaller working groups. This division maintained the desired atmosphere and provided each individual participant ample opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Each group was guided by a facilitator, while another individual

transcribed their discussion onto a flip chart. To ensure the integrity of the notes taken, comments were not summarized.

Consulting with over 200 youth in 15 forums and 13 different communities, dominant themes were categorized as:

- 1. Education** - Participants frequently referred to their lack of knowledge as a barrier to civic engagement.
- 2. Relating to youth** - Politicians do not reflect their issues and concerns; therefore, youth are disengaged from the process.
- 3. Accountability and involvement in the electoral system** - Electoral campaigns and related activities were not seen as targeting youth. Participants also felt that the structure of the current system is out of date. Electronic voting, easier access to polls, and possibly a Proportional Representative system were some of the suggestions made by the participants.

As a follow-up to the community forums, the participants were invited to attend a Youth and Democracy forum in Fredericton May 1-2, 2004. Topics that were discussed included:

1. The HOW of educating New Brunswick youth about the electoral process - what is the best way to go about educating youth about the process - how do we increase knowledge? Overview presentation - what is happening here and in other areas (past/present/future trends), ideas for change, etc.
2. The HOW of relating to youth - how do politicians and elections officials reach



out and relate to youth before, during and after campaigns - are messages directed at them - how do youth see things are being done?

3. The HOW of accountability and involvement in the electoral system in New Brunswick - this includes how/where you vote; perceptions, methods and access to voting (e-democracy?); electoral systems/representation, etc.

Participants were divided into three plenary groups based on the topics above. Each participant paired with another to discuss their focus group question. Following this discussion, the paired groups rejoined their larger plenary group to discuss and form their ideas onto flip charts. To conclude their discussions a spokesperson was chosen to present their ideas to the other two large groups. Following the presentations, all participants were given the opportunity to vote on the ideas that they felt were most important.

The afternoon discussion was intended to build on the mornings deliberations, the participants were asked to:

- Identify possible solutions.
- Whose responsibility is it to address these solutions?
- Identify one personal commitment that they would undertake.

In summary, the participants felt that a number of measures would have to be taken in order to see any significant change in youth participation, including:

- Ensuring the voting process is thoroughly taught in school.
- Demonstrating how valuable the right to vote is by exemplifying other countries that may not enjoy the same privilege.

- Holding a political fair, where politicians would join youth at their high schools and provide non-biased information and examples on their experience and knowledge.
- Having celebrity endorsements marketing the message of education and voting.

The second group discussed how government and politicians relate to youth, including:

- Having a different system that would better represent the population, such as proportional representation.
- Seeing more influence by youth lobby groups.
- Having the ability to vote on issues or ideas rather than the candidate.
- Seeing better access and more marketing of party platforms, including more youth- friendly media exposure.
- Having more opportunities to hold youth discussion forums.

Finally, the third group who had some overlapping objectives, examined ways at improving the electoral process. Specific objectives emerged such as:

- Making voting obligatory.
- Having proportional representation.
- Having more youth- friendly information available on the Internet.
- Adjusting the process to make it more engaging.

## Developing a Partnership

On January 29, 2004, the New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth (NBACY) and the Commission on Legislative Democracy (CLD) announced the formation of a partnership aimed at hearing the voices of young New Brunswickers on democratic reform in the province.

The purpose of this partnership was to establish mechanisms to:

- Ensure a province-wide youth perspective in the work of the Commission
- Create opportunities for young New Brunswickers to participate in the consultation processes, and
- Share information and research findings on youth issues as they relate

to the mandate and terms of reference of the commission.

In order to achieve these goals, NBACY organized community forums throughout the province to discuss democratic institutions and the electoral process with the youth of New Brunswick. Culminating from the community forums, CLD and NBACY partnered to hold a public forum on Youth and Democracy on May 1 - 2, 2004 at St. Thomas University in Fredericton. The purpose of this forum was to invite interested young New Brunswickers and participants from the regional forums to Fredericton to discuss the findings of the tour and explore ways to increase civic engagement for youth in the province.

## Developing a Process

### The First Steps

NBACY felt that consultation through group discussion was the most appropriate and effective approach to engage youth of New Brunswick on the topic of civic engagement. In an effort to produce a mutually beneficial experience for the NBACY, as well as the youth who were to participate, personal contact at the community level was deemed a priority. Both parties involved would gain a mutual understanding of one another while building a lasting relationship. There was also a great desire by members of the NBACY to connect with

the youth in their communities and gain a better understanding of their local issues and concerns. NBACY members then began planning dates and securing facilities. The result was a geographically and linguistically representative itinerary for touring New Brunswick:

- Fredericton (NBACY Members), February 28, 2004
- Grand-Bay Westfield, March 10, 2004
- Fredericton, March 11, 2004
- Dalhousie, March 15, 2004
- Sussex, March 15, 2004
- Edmunston, March 16, 2004

- Shippagan, March 17, 2004
- Bathurst, March 18, 2004
- Chipman, March 22, 2004
- Nackawic, March 23, 2004
- Grand Manan, March 24, 2004
- St. Stephen, March 25, 2004
- Moncton, March 29, 2004
- Miramichi, March 30, 2004  
(2 separate forums held)

### The Dialogue Design

Engaging youth in their communities requires a well thought out process of consultation and engagement. An ideal process creates an open and supportive dialogue, where each participant feels respected and comfortable to speak his or her mind freely. Keeping this in mind, NBACY identified questions and concerns before deciding on the structure of the dialogue:

- What would be an ideal size for the group without jeopardizing the comfort level of the participants?
- What questions should be asked of the participants?
- How long should the forums be?
- What will be the role for facilitators at the community forums?
- How will facilitators deal with varying behaviours and participation levels?
- How will we populate the community forums?
- What age groups will attend?
- What venues will be most accessible to the participants?

To begin formulating a structure for the community forums, the NBACY established a demographic for which they were going to consult. In keeping

with the mandate of the NBACY the consultation process was structured to be inclusive of youth from various backgrounds ranging in age from 15-24.

Based on the age of the participants, it was necessary to structure the forum setting in such a way that it would not be intimidating, technical or uninteresting. To address these concerns, each forum began with the youth participating in an icebreaker to set the tone and better acquaint themselves with other members of the group. Following the icebreaker, participants gathered in a large circle where the facilitators reviewed the agenda for the forum proceedings. This process was intended to address any suggestions, comments or concerns and to be inclusive of all the youth.

Once the participants were comfortable with the agenda, the lead facilitator asked the group to develop a set of guidelines that would be used to govern discussions held during the forum. This exercise proved to be very successful, as the guidelines were developed by the youth; therefore, they were playing by their own rules and not by the rules that had been dictated to them. This provided a sense of ownership in each forum, as the participants were self-governing, rather than being governed by an imposed authority.

The establishment of the forum guidelines was followed by a short presentation on the Commission on Legislative Democracy. The presentation outlined the commission's mission and mandate, its purpose for consulting with youth as well as an overview and explanation of current statistics, which demonstrate the decline in participation by youth in the democratic process.

When necessary, large groups of 12 or more were divided into smaller working groups. Each working group had its own facilitator to keep discussions focused. This division maintained the desired atmosphere and gave participants ample opportunity to contribute to the discussion.

A significant portion of the forum was allotted to discussing two general questions that were posed to the youth.

- “Based on current statistics, there is a trend that shows fewer youth are voting. Why do you think this is the case in New Brunswick?”

The second question was designed to provoke solutions to problems identified in the first:

- “Based on the conversation from the previous question, what would encourage you and your friends to participate more?”

A facilitator guided the discussions while another individual transcribed the discussion onto a flip chart. To ensure the integrity of the notes taken, comments were not summarized. The words the participants chose to express themselves with were the ones that were written down. As the discussions progressed, the participants were able to ensure that their thoughts and opinions were being captured correctly by reviewing the flip chart notes and clarifying when necessary.

### **Main themes**

Discussions often focused on education and the level of understanding that youth in New Brunswick have concerning civic engagement and democratic institutions. This was echoed by many participants who said they were not informed enough

to be able to make important political decisions such as voting.

Participants also discussed their lifestyles and busy schedules as barriers to civic engagement. Taken into context with other activities and involvements, many of the participants felt that civic engagement and voting are not a dominant priority. Many also felt their issues and concerns are not reflected by elected officials.

Electoral campaigns and related activities were not seen as targeting youth; rather, much of the focus was seen to be adult-related. The voting system also emerged as a popular topic. The participants specifically cited the voting process, including voting times and methods, as out of date and in need of change. Participants also indicated that a new system might be necessary, one that would be more representative of the votes cast in the general election.

Below is a list of quotes that sample what the participants had to say:

- “Youth are not educated. We don’t know what parties stand for, or how the system works.” (Sussex)
- “Not enough courses at school about the topic.” (Shippagan)
- “When you get 18 it would be nice to know more about the system, but other things are more important.” (St. Stephen)
- “[Youth are] Unprepared for voting...so they feel they don’t know enough to vote.” (Grand Manan)
- Less interest because of a lack of knowledge. (Edmundston and Madawaska Maliseet First Nation)

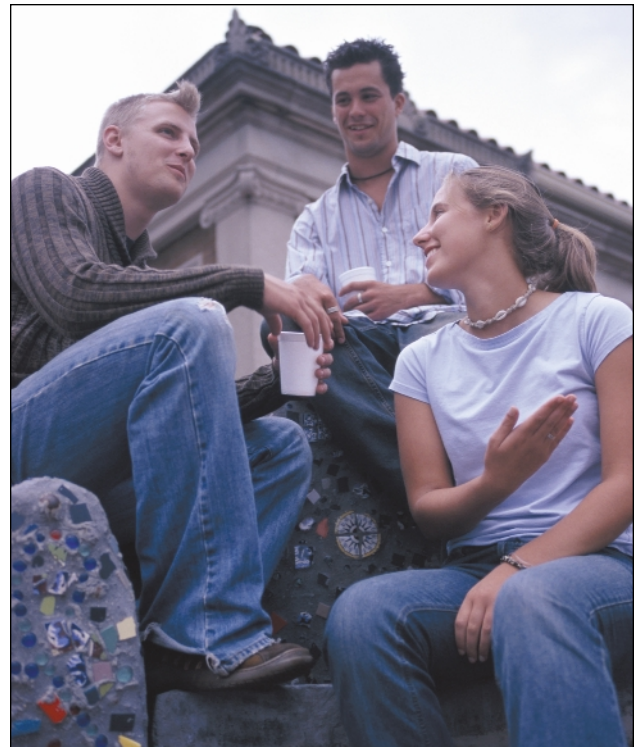
- “Should be more info given on the process and you should be able to vote in any polling station.” (Nackawic)
- “Politicians don’t ask for our opinion.” (Edmundston and Madawaska Maliseet First Nation)
- “Make politics more appealing to youth, get more younger people involved. If you don’t know about it why vote?” (Grand Manan)
- “Issues don’t involve youth.” (Dalhousie)
- “Youth don’t think it’s cool to vote, like my mother said, ‘Why are you going to that forum?’” (Sussex)
- “Words are too complicated too long.” (Edmundston and Madawaska Maliseet First Nation)
- “Politicians don’t care about us. The community does more than the government.” (Chipman)
- “Politics: old guys with suits.” (Dalhousie)
- “Youth are not treated as people, lack of respect for youth.” (Miramichi)
- “Politics are not fun for youth.” (Edmundston and Madawaska Maliseet First Nation)

- “Young people don’t see themselves in politics.” (Shippagan)
- “Politicians don’t make an effort with youth. Vicious circle as youth don’t vote so why would politicians bother?” (Fredericton)

Consulting with over 200 youth in 15 forums and 13 different communities, dominant themes were categorized as:

- (1) Educating New Brunswick’s youth about the electoral process;
- (2) Relating to youth;
- (3) Having accountability and involvement in the electoral system in New Brunswick.

These three themes would form the foundation for continued discussion at the Youth and Democracy Forum.





## Youth and Democracy Forum

As a continuation of the consultation process, New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth (NBACY) and the Commission on Legislative Democracy (CLD) co-sponsored a provincial Youth and Democracy Forum in Fredericton, May 1 - 2, 2004.

The forum was designed to bring youth together from all over New Brunswick to build upon the preceding community youth forums and to continue their dialogue on youth civic engagement. It also provided an opportunity for members of the CLD to hear first-hand the concerns and solutions put forth by participants. To accomplish these objectives, the participants were divided into three plenary groups, where they discussed the following topics;

- The HOW of educating New Brunswick youth about the electoral process - what is the best way to go about educating youth about the process - how do we increase knowledge? Overview presentation - what is happening here and in other areas (past/present/future trends), ideas for change, etc.
- The HOW of relating to youth - how do politicians, elections people reach out and relate to youth before, during and after campaigns - are messages directed at them - how do youth see things are being done?
- The HOW of accountability and involvement in the electoral system in New Brunswick - this includes how/where you vote; perceptions, methods and access to voting

(e-democracy?); electoral systems/representation, etc.

As a supplement to the group discussions, the participants were also given the opportunity to hear from five guest speakers.

Dr. Rick Myers, who is Vice President Academic at St. Thomas University, gave two presentations. In the first, Myers led a discussion on effecting change, government policies and ways of getting involved. His second presentation was a brief description of proportional representation, and the current 'first past the post' system that exists in New Brunswick. Myers continued his presentation by examining the strengths and weakness of each electoral system.

Dr. Patrick Malcolmson, who teaches political science at St. Thomas University, provided the participants with a presentation on civic engagement, society and ways of effecting change. Emphasizing the importance of looking at the larger picture, Malcolmson discussed various factors that may contribute to increasing civic engagement among youth, and the importance of developing a comprehensive approach to this issue.

Members of the Legislative Assembly, Kelly Lamrock and Trevor Holder also presented on their personal experiences as young politicians currently involved in New Brunswick politics. They spoke of the need to be involved and the sense of effecting change through political involvement.

They discussed the influence and opportunity that political parties afford youth, as well as engaging other opportunities such as voluntary groups or community agencies.

Paul Kemp, producer and author with the Underground Royal Commission, gave a presentation about the work of this organization and his view on the current state of democracy in Canada. He followed his presentation with a video, which highlighted the challenges faced by Members of Parliament in Ottawa, and the diminishing powers of elected representatives.

### The Dialogue Design

The plenary groups were divided into small working groups, where each participant paired with another to discuss the focus group question. Following this discussion, the paired groups rejoined their larger plenary group to discuss and form their ideas onto flip charts. After the groups had completed their discussions, they chose a spokesperson to present their ideas to the other two large groups. Following the presentations, the groups posted their flip chart notes around the room, and in turn all the participants were given stickers to vote on the ideas they felt were most important.

This process ensured that all participants at the forum could be involved and informed with each focus group discussion.

The second half of the day was designed to build upon the morning's deliberations. The participants were asked:



Based on the priorities identified in the first discussion group:

- Identify possible solutions.
- Whose responsibility is it to address these solutions? (E.g., government, community, specific department etc.).
- Identify one personal commitment that you will undertake.

To complete their work in the afternoon, the three groups were asked to present their findings the following day through whatever creative mechanisms that they could envision. This allowed the participants to express themselves creatively, and gave the commissioners the opportunity to hear solutions in a unique and informative fashion, while maintaining a youth perspective.

An important element of the forum deliberations included frequent energizers and fun activities. Content and group work was anticipated to be involved and detailed. Given the demographic of the participants, it was important to ensure their comfort level was addressed. Energizers proved effective and amusing for the participants, while providing the necessary breaks to guard against boredom or fatigue.

## Main themes

Discussions in each of the three groups were captured on flip chart notes and later prioritized through a voting process which all the participants took part in. Concluding from this process, clear priorities were identified.

The first group discussed education as it relates to youth and civic engagement. Specific objectives emerged such as:

- Ensuring the voting process is thoroughly taught in school - Specifically:
  - Introducing a model on civic education into a course that is already offered.
  - Holding mock elections where students learn first-hand the process and outcomes of elections.
  - Encouraging more debate and discussion in the school setting.
  - Promoting the knowledge of political parties before the knowledge of the voting process.
- Demonstrating how valuable the right to vote is by exemplifying other countries that may not enjoy that same privilege.
- Holding a political fair, where politicians would join youth at their high schools and provide non-biased information and examples on their experience and knowledge.
- Having celebrity endorsements marketing the message of education and voting.

The second group discussed how government and politicians relate to youth. Specific objectives emerged such as:

- Having a different system that would better represent the population, such as proportional representation.
- Seeing more influence by youth lobby groups.
- Having the ability to vote on issues or ideas rather than the candidate.
- Seeing better access and more marketing of party platforms, including more youth-friendly media exposure.
- Having more opportunities to hold youth discussion forums.

Finally, the third group, who had some overlapping objectives, examined ways to improve the electoral process. Specific objectives emerged such as:

- Making voting obligatory.
- Having proportional representation.
- Having more youth-friendly information available on the Internet.
- Adjusting the process to make it more engaging with measures like:
  - Online voting.
  - Increasing the number of polling stations.
  - Making the polling stations more mobile and less intimidating.
  - Having more youth working at the polling stations.
  - Ensure that the voting hours are the most convenient possible.

## Next Steps

The New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth will make formal recommendations to the Commission on Legislative Democracy based on the qualitative data that has been obtained through the community forums and the Youth and Democracy forum in May 2004.





