

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark up the text with questions and/or comments.
3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

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Voting-mob mentality has young people running amok

By GLORIA GALLOWAY

Globe and Mail Update

*With vote mobs and vote socials, this could be the year younger voters finally get to the polls*

When Canadian television celebrity Rick Mercer challenged young Canadians to get themselves to the polling station on election day, he had no clue what he had started.

"In the back of my mind I was thinking perhaps some of them would write a nasty letter to the local paper," Mr. Mercer said Sunday on CTV's *Question Period* [<http://watch.ctv.ca/news/ctvs-question-period/april-17/#clip451835>]. "But no, they've started these vote mobs."

The vote mob - a video, posted to the internet, of a huge and upbeat crowd of students running around a campus, or onto a field, or down a city street, with signs saying they plan to vote - started at the University of Guelph, west of Toronto. It was a direct response to Mr. Mercer's rant, with the overriding message: "Surprise, we're voting."

The Guelph vote-mob team obtained the support of a group called LeadNow.ca [<http://www.leadnow.ca>] an independent, youth-led advocacy organization that wanted to bring generations of Canadians together to build a stronger voice for people in Ottawa. They challenged students at other universities to follow their lead by having their own vote mobs.

And they did. At last count, there were 35 vote mobs organized across Canada. Other videos have been made in places like McGill and Ottawa and Victoria and Calgary and many more vote-mob gatherings are scheduled for this week.

"They are just such great viewing. every time you watch one of these things you come away with the feeling that the kids are all right, the country is all right, people are engaged, you just feel good," said Mr. Mercer. "They have now proven that they are certainly engaged and we'll see if they show up at the polls."

Which is the big question. Will seemingly unprecedented democratic engagement at the universities persuade young people to head to the polls on election day?

Statistics Canada says just 37 per cent of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 24 voted in 2008. But research suggests university students are no less likely to vote than the general population. It's their peers who are not at school who are staying home.

At the same time, young people would seem to have more at stake in the democratic process than any other age group. Not only will they have longer to live with the political decisions of today, they remain disproportionately disadvantaged by the recent economic downturn. Unemployment in the 15-24 age group remains at 14.4 per cent, well above the national average of 7.7 per cent.

So will the vote mobs resonate beyond the youth who are already politically active?

Ilona Dougherty is the co-founder of a group called Apathy is Boring [<http://www.apathyisboring.com/en>], which was started just before the 2004 federal election to mobilize youth who weren't engaged in the democratic process.

"The vote mobs are a new phenomenon. And I think it's fantastic. Anything that mobilizes youth is great. But I have seen it before, what we are seeing in this election," said Ms. Dougherty.

Young people don't vote because candidates don't go to places where young people live to shake their hands and persuade them to cast a ballot, she said.

And many young Canadians say they don't have the information they need to cast an informed ballot, said Ms. Dougherty. To that end, Apathy is Boring will be posting platforms, free from partisan rhetoric, on its website this week.

Ms. Dougherty said she is "hopeful, with reservations" that more young people will be voting in this election but "Apathy is Boring is committed to a long-term process."

Still, there is something in the air this time around. It's not just the vote mobs. It's the huge number of election-oriented messaging that is available on the internet and on social media like Facebook and Twitter that reach students but also the young Canadians who are not actively enrolled in post-secondary education.

Gracen Johnson, one of the organizers of the vote-mob movement in Guelph, said she "definitely" believes the message is getting out to people her age who are not in school. "We all have a lot of non-university friends," she said Sunday. "You can avoid university, you can avoid classes, but you can't really avoid Youtube."

A fourth-year student, Ms. Johnson said she has never seen her peers so engaged in an election before.

"Suddenly everyone's talking about it. It feels much more social this year. I don't know how to put my finger on it," she said. "But it's kind of everywhere. Whereas before it was sort of something that you went home to and watched on CBC."

It was a partisan battle during a special ballot at the Guelph university last week that led Elections Canada to declare that returning officers must refrain from setting up on-campus voting stations that have been used in past years to increase voter participation by young Canadians.

Mr. Mercer said that was the wrong decision. "What they should be saying is, you know what, if there were problems with this we will fix them, but in fact we will have these votes on every single campus in the country."

But Ms. Johnson and her friends are unperturbed. They are adopting an idea suggested by Leadnow.ca: Vote socials.

When advance polls are held on Friday, Saturday and Monday this coming weekend, they say they will head out to the polling stations together and then hit the pubs to celebrate their participation in democracy.

"We are planning having a lot of people go downtown on Friday night and hopefully all go to the same bar afterwards," said Ms. Johnson. "I have been talking to some bartenders to see if they can get us election theme drinks."

Some political parties - particularly those on the centre left - are already working hard to capture what might be a new wellspring of voters.

"I don't think any other party comes close in terms of reaching out to Canada's youth," said Liberal spokeswoman Leslie Church.

That can be seen, she said, in terms of the type of campaign her party has been running, with town halls for youth and online events, as well as a platform that would offer breaks on tuition, youth hiring incentives and debt forgiveness for students who volunteer with the Canada Service Corps that the Liberals are proposing.

Kathleen Monk of the New Democrats said she believes the personal appeal of Leader Jack Layton had helped the NDP reach out to young voters.

The party has a policy designed to appeal to youth, said Ms. Monk, including its support of internet neutrality and its opposition to digital locks on cellphones and usage-based billing. "And certainly our post-secondary policy is stronger than the Conservatives or the Liberals by addressing the key issue faced by students: rising tuition costs," she said.

If young people are going to turn out to vote in larger numbers, their new interest in democracy is impossible to measure in public-opinion polls.

Christopher Waddell, the director of the journalism school at Carleton University, who questions how Elections Canada knows who is voting and who is not given that age is not included on a ballot, said polls largely exclude the youth.

"The majority of young people these days no longer have landlines on their phones, almost all of them have cellphones. Most public-opinion surveys are not calling cellphones," said Prof. Waddell.

And internet polling panels are largely assembled from mailings that have been compiled for other purposes like points plans or credit-card companies. "It's very unlikely that those mailing lists would include a wide variety of young people," he said.

So it won't be until after the election that we will know for certain if young people voted and if their votes had an impact on the outcome.

But Mr. Mercer believes the phenomenon has legs.

"This is the young people of Canada," he said. "This is what they are doing, and it's phenomenal. And it's spreading all across the country. And it is terrifying the political parties."

Points to think about:

1. What can Government do to encourage the "youth vote"? (realistically. Bribery is off the table)0
2. What issues are potentially important to you as a student one year closer to graduation. (if you don't know the issues, find out!)