

Did vote mobs work?

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By Tom Korski

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It was the one new, interesting feature of the Election of 2011 — "a flash phenomenon storming campuses," CTV called it. It was the spectre of "vote mobs" fuelled by a media campaign to raise turnout by Canada's youngest electors.

But did it work?

The question draws a good-hearted laugh from Vancouver's Jamie Biggar, co-founder of Leadnow.ca. "You're actually the first person to ask," he said.

The answer is intriguing, as we'll see.

Leadnow.ca and others drew media focus to poor turnout for voters under 25 — a rate that averages 39 per cent or less. Youth turnout is historically poor, though there is no evidence young Canadians are uniquely repelled by politics. TV ratings show 800,000 more Canadians of all ages watched *The Amazing Race* than tuned in results on election night (see *BBM Canada*, Top Programs May 2-8).

This time the public was told students were "riled up," (*Calgary Herald*); that "students are not political slackers," (*Winnipeg Free Press*); that "this could change everything," (*Ottawa Citizen*).

Media occasionally expressed bewilderment — "Something strange and very different is happening," wrote the *Waterloo Record* — or were merely patronizing. One *Citizen* story on a student rally read like a *National Geographic* account of a pygmy tribe: "The impromptu 'vote mobs' are boisterous, colourful events during which students run around campuses, sing, dance and shout, waving Canadian flags. The events are taped and uploaded on to YouTube, Facebook and other social media sites. The numbers are not always big," (see *Citizen* April 19, "Vote Mob Strikes Carleton").

More typically, activists were dismissed as cheerleaders trying to lure bored teenagers to a ballot booth on the promise of a good time. Michael Taube, a former speechwriter for Prime Minister Stephen Harper, ridiculed the phenomenon in a Postmedia News essay: "A vote mob is simply a silly, feel-good event to put on some music, dress in matching costumes, paint your faces and make pointless YouTube videos saying you're going to vote. Having a 'surprise party' with fellow university students doesn't mean you are going to

make the effort to learn about the candidates, parties and issues. I wouldn't be surprised if most of these participants stayed home."

At Leadnow.ca, director Biggar noted pundits appeared to miss the point.

"Media often framed this as a 'youth apathy' issue," he explained. "We were hoping for substantive discussion on just what it is about the political system that alienates so many young voters."

That issue drew no serious media scrutiny. Witness this April 20 exchange between *Canada AM* host Seamus O'Regan and Toronto web reporter Maurice Cacho:

O'Regan: "Is this going to work?"

Cacho: "It's like saying, 'Okay, Whistler Mountain exists and it's great to go skiing or snowboarding, but if you don't know how to buckle into skies you're not going to make a huge difference.' So, I think it's actually going to come down to Election Day to see if these translate into votes."

O'Regan: "Do you think it will translate?"

Cacho: "I think we might see a small bump."

Today activists have no figures on whether the campaign was successful or not. Biggar said that in the absence of hard data from Elections Canada, "There was anecdotal evidence that more people were engaged."

My own research suggests the campaign worked, and then some.

Of federal ridings that are home to the top doctoral universities in the country as ranked by *Macleans*, fully eight out of 10 saw increased voter turnout. The gains were often substantial; turnout in the Montreal riding home to McGill University rose six per cent. Turnout at the University of Toronto's constituency was up nine per cent—an eyebrow-raising gain in political terms. Other notable increases were seen in the home ridings of the University of Saskatchewan (up nine per cent), University of Calgary (seven per cent), Queen's and McMaster (four per cent), the University of Alberta (three per cent) and Dalhousie (two per cent).

Of the Top Ten schools only two—UBC and University of Western Ontario—saw lower turnout from the last campaign in 2008.

Students had more reasons to vote this time; Liberals promised an annual \$1,000 bursary to university or college enrollees, while the NDP proposed to outlaw tuition fee hikes as a condition of education transfers to the provinces. Yet the higher voter turnout appeared to favour no particular party. In the Top Ten campus ridings, voters elected four Conservatives, three New Democrats and three Liberals.

The trend more generally was to greater participation, period.

Of the Top Ten ridings, eight saw voter turnout surpass the national average.

"Fantastic news," said Biggar. "It's encouraging."

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