

Encouraging Early Political Engagement: CitizenNext.ca

by Tia Everitt - Monday, October 03, 2011

<https://politicsrespun.org/2011/10/citizennext/>

It is not an accident that I am a political junkie.

Even as a toddler, I was fed a steady diet of left-of-centre ideology, pro-union sentiments and anti-monarchist dogma. My mother, who was not overtly political, ensured I could recognize political leaders from around the world by sight before I could read, that I understood the vast differences between different types of political thought, and the inherent differences in Canadian political parties before I was school aged. During election season, she brought me with when she voted, and made sure that I was well aware that voting was a responsibility that we had as Canadians, and was something that was not an option. One of my earliest memories as a child is one of smearing mud on the back the giant brown and orange "JIM FULTON, NDP" billboard in our yard when I was sent out to play while my infant brother napped. In a subsequent provincial election, the neighbours erected a massive Social Credit sign on their front lawn, and I was informed "SoCredits are evil. NDP is Good. SoCredits only work for big businesses. NDP is for the working class people...like us." One might even say I was brainwashed.

When I was in grade 4, I engaged in fisticuffs on the school bus with a boy from down the street. Ryan was a year older, and his parents were self employed. There was some sort of provincial election brewing, and Ryan's parents had a megalith of a Social Credit sign on the corner of the lawn. I informed Ryan that his family was clearly batting for the wrong political team, and that, people who voted SoCred were evil and sucked. Ryan retaliated, informing me that only losers would vote NDP. We wound up smacking the hell out of each other with math books, and were sent up to sit in the front of the bus for the remainder of the year.

Why are my memories of a blue collar, slightly pinko childhood in Northern BC in the 1980's relevant now?

As Manitoba (where I am a home owner and my children go to school) creeps ever closer to the October 4th provincial election, there has been an onslaught of automated calls to our residence, glad-handling politicians standing on my doorstep, reams of glossy campaign fliers from the Conservative, NDP and Liberal parties festooning my mailbox. Most of the propaganda is of the usual variety: health care funding/cuts, taxation increases/cuts, infrastructure, aboriginal issues, education. Bored to tears of watching the Three Stooges bonk one another on the head on the local news, I was pleased to notice something that was out of the realm of the usual regurgitation. It was a large 1/4 page ad in the Winnipeg Free Press, advertising a website: www.citizennext.ca. The tag line? *"When You Vote on October 4...Bring Your Child."* On it, a man voting at a booth, with children surrounding him. Under the picture, it read *"It is never too early to learn about democracy."* Finally! A government campaign that I could relate to!



A quick visit to the [CitizenNext](http://CitizenNext.ca) website shows that someone in the employ of the government put some thought into the program. There are games and puzzles for kids to enjoy while passively learning about democracy. There are voter pledge cards, which can be personalized and printed off for the child, and a sticker that they can finish it off with only when they go to the booth with you to vote. They list books to read to children about democracy and politics. While I've seen previous campaigns that were targeted at educators, this one is targeted at parents. The gist is that declining voter numbers can be traced back to parental apathy, and that by acting now, we can turn the tide in a decade or two, by educating our children now. The site also shares a number of simple ways to foster engagement early:

Ideas for raising kids to be engaged citizens:

Talk about it – Let your kids know why you think it's important to vote. Even very young kids can understand the idea of selecting a leader. Engage older children in a discussion about political issues that are important to you or that come up in the news. Encourage your kids to express their own opinions and ideas.

Vote at home – Introduce the concept of voting by holding simple votes on household issues. It could be as simple as voting on what to prepare for a special meal.

Bring your child with you when you vote – Children are welcome at voting stations. Show your kids what voting looks like.

Visit our Game area – For games and activities related to citizenship and voting.

Take older kids to a live debate or watch one on TV – Discuss the points the candidates make and ask your kids for their views.

Point to resources on the Web – There are many excellent websites devoted to encouraging youth to participate in the election process.

All of the people that I know, who are avid political enthusiasts and are active politically, have at least one parent that downloaded some sort of passion or duty into them. When reading biographies of politicians, they often come from what seems to be dynasties: generations of people who catch the bug, and can't shake it. *What concerns me about this campaign, which I believe is a fantastic start, is that it misses the mark.* People who care already do this with their kids. They are having these discussions. They're involving their charges. They're taking their progeny to the booth. *The problem is that people who are already apathetic are not going to pick up the glossy half page flier in the mail and suddenly feel inspired to a) leave the house and vote and b) have deep and meaningful conversation with their children about the importance of voting.*

I give the Manitoba Government an "A" for effort, but remain skeptical of the impact that this will have long term.

In the meantime, my daughters both have "I VOTED - CITIZENNEXT.CA" stickers on their coats, because they joined me at the advance polls over the weekend. I can only hope someone else sees the round little reminder on their coats as they scamper by, and suddenly feels compelled to put an X in the box on October 4th, possibly with their child in attendance.