



SPEAK OUT! PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Change does not happen by accident. Nor does change happen by waiting for people with power to share their power. Change happens when people advocate for the causes they believe in. This often involves collectively organizing through mass movements. From workers' rights to student advocacy to honouring Treaties, our society has progressed because people became involved in the political system.

There are many ways to be personally involved in the political system to influence governments and change communities. For young citizens who are not yet old enough to vote, being involved in the political system is a good opportunity to demonstrate to older adults that citizenship is more than just voting once every four years. Citizenship requires being active and informed.

The following pages will briefly outline just some of the ways to participate in our democracy, both in the public square and in the online sphere. The reasons for getting involved do not have to necessarily be to propose or oppose something. If government or an elected representative is doing something you support, you should not hesitate to show your support for them.

Remember: the people elected to public office have a responsibility to listen to their community and represent the interests of all citizens.



SPEAK OUT! LETTER WRITING

Writing letters and e-mails or visiting government representatives are effective ways to express opinions. Elected representatives are there to represent the concerns and interests of their constituents. Writing to them is a way to directly voice your concerns.

Case Study: Reasonable Expectations and Letters to the President

The President of the United States is widely considered to be the most powerful person in the world. Even if the President spent the entire day reading and responding to the letters they receive, it would be impossible to reply to every one. After all, they receive tens of thousands of letters every day.

However, the President does read some of these letters. According to a *New York Times* report, letters to the President are first sorted by communications staff. Urgent matters and matters requiring further work are directed to the appropriate authorities. Of all these letters, a few that are believed to reflect a sample of what American people are experiencing are slipped into the President's daily briefing package. Mike Kelleher, the director of White House correspondence, told the *New York Times* "We pick messages that are compelling, things people say that, when you read it, you get a chill."

These letters appear to have an effect. It is not uncommon for people to receive personal responses. And often, these letters come up in meetings with top staff.

THINK

1. Civic politicians in Saskatchewan clearly have less constituents and responsibilities than the President of the United States. Is it important that your local politicians read all letters sent to them? Is it reasonable to expect a response from your local government?
2. Do you think a single letter can be effective? Why or why not?
3. How can you contact your elected representative in your local government?



SPEAK OUT! POLITICAL PARTIES

By joining a political party you can learn more about the political and legal processes at work in Canada. You can also influence party policies and participate in choosing the candidates who run for office, even if you are not yet voting age. All major parties have youth chapters that provide an opportunity for young people to get involved. It is important to note that political parties are not officially active at the municipal level in Saskatchewan.

Case Study: Canada's Political Leaders and their Party Memberships

Pierre Trudeau, former Liberal Prime Minister

Pierre Trudeau wrote about and rallied for progressive causes during his youth. He campaigned against conscription, studied Marxism and progressive economics, and supported striking workers. This brought Trudeau prominence as a left-wing writer and intellectual. During much of this time, he was involved with the CCF (the precursor to the modern-day NDP) and other left-wing parties and movements. However, when Trudeau entered elected politics in 1965, he joined the Liberals. He felt the party was the most realistic way to achieve power.

Stephen Harper, former Conservative Prime Minister

Stephen Harper was said to be an admirer of Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. As a teenager he joined the Liberal student club at Richview Collegiate in Etobicoke, Ontario. His friend persuaded him to join so that he could meet with a cabinet minister at a Young Liberal meeting. Harper, however, became disillusioned with Liberal plans such as the National Energy Program, a policy meant to share energy resources across Canada. Harper later joined the Progressive Conservative Party in the early 1980s.

Thomas Mulcair, former New Democratic Party leader

Thomas Mulcair became interested in student politics while studying Law at McGill University in the 1970s. He joined the youth wing of the NDP. Following university, Mulcair worked outside of party politics. However, in 1994 he was elected to the Quebec National Assembly as a Liberal, later becoming Quebec's Minister of the Environment. Mulcair quit Cabinet when the government tried to force him to allow condominiums to be built near environmentally-sensitive land. In 2007, Mulcair rejoined the NDP.

THINK

1. Do the experiences of these leaders indicate that once you join a political party, you must remain committed to that party for life?
2. Why is it important to question what each political party does, even if you are a member?
3. People's perspectives evolve. When is it fair to criticize politicians who change their mind?



SPEAK OUT! VOLUNTEER FOR A CANDIDATE

Political campaigns rely on volunteers. This is especially true at the municipal level, because candidates do not receive formal support from political parties. Volunteers can be involved in many ways, from going door-to-door telling people about the candidate to putting up posters to helping coordinate social media accounts.

Case Study: Young Voters and the Bernie Sanders Phenomenon

In the United States, the two major political parties—the Republicans and the Democrats—select their presidential candidates in the months leading up to the general election. People seeking the nominations for either party launch nation-wide campaigns and each state holds a vote so that citizens can select each party's nominee.

In the lead-up to the 2016 American election, a 74-year-old democratic socialist named Bernie Sanders caused an earthquake in American politics. He sought the Democratic Party nomination for president. He promised universal health care, free college tuition, and criminal justice reforms. He said these programs would be paid for by tax increases, mostly on corporations and the rich. His message resonated with Americans. Tens of thousands of people filled parks and sports arenas to hear Sanders speak. In the end, he did not win the Democratic nomination but he came very close. He ran again for the Democratic presidential candidate nomination in 2020. The 2020 campaign was very similar to the 2016 campaign: while he did not win, he came very close and helped shift the political conversation. In his wake, countless young progressive people picked up Sanders' torch, and ran for political offices in the United States.

One thing that made Bernie Sanders' campaigns different from the other candidates who were seeking the presidential nomination was his reliance on young volunteers and small donations. While competing candidates took in millions of dollars in donations from millionaires and corporations, Sanders refused their money. Instead, he relied on enthusiastic young volunteers and small donations, averaging \$27. These small donations added up: Sanders' campaign received more individual donations than any other campaign in American history.

It is universally-agreed that Sanders' campaign would never have been as influential had it not been for young people. His young volunteers' understanding of social media and their ability to motivate their peers was unequalled in American politics. And when it came time to vote, Sanders was the overwhelming choice of young people. In some states, Sanders received over 80% of the votes cast by people aged 18-29.

THINK

1. If a candidate speaks about issues you believe in, would you volunteer for their campaign?
2. Is it more likely that candidates will better-understand issues important to young people if young people are involved in their campaigns?
3. Even if a candidate does not win, how can their candidacy contribute to change?



SPEAK OUT! PETITIONS

Citizens can create petitions to make people aware of issues. Petitions are formal requests for change that can be signed by people who support the idea. Given the ease with which petitions can be made online, this task has become much more simple than when petitions had to be taken door-to-door. By promoting and then presenting a petition to city council, the council can become aware of the depth of citizen concern with an issue of interest.

Case Study: Changing Local Bylaws on Longboarding and Skateboarding

Saskatoon longboarder Mike Nemeth was discouraged with how the City of Saskatoon fined people \$15 for skateboarding and longboarding in the city's downtown. Nemeth believed that skateboarding and longboarding was a legitimate form of transportation. So he began an online petition so that the city would recognize that longboarding was a legitimate form of transportation.

Nemeth's petition outlined four specific reasons why longboards should be allowed downtown. Through his work, city council changed the bylaw so skateboarders and longboarders were allowed to use downtown trails and cycling lanes. Tricks, however, would still be subject to fines to ensure the use of these boards downtown was transportation-related.

THINK

1. Because online petitions are easy to create, is simply creating a petition an effective way of voicing concern? Or should they be created in conjunction with other efforts?
2. How can you be sure the signatures on an online petition are legitimate? How can you be sure the signatures on a paper petition are legitimate?
3. If a petition meets certain requirements and gains enough signatures, a municipal government may be forced to hold a plebiscite or referendum on the issue. What kinds of issues should be put to a direct vote so all citizens can decide?



SPEAK OUT! INTEREST GROUPS

Interest groups are people who come together over common concerns. They work toward a common goal. Many interest groups exist at the local, provincial and national level, ranging from local heritage societies to advocacy groups for minority rights. These groups are often called members of “civil society.” By supporting civil society groups you can help focus public and government attention on important issues.

Case Study: Local Heritage and Regina’s École Connaught School

École Connaught School, built in 1912, was a central feature of Regina’s historic Cathedral neighbourhood. It needed a costly renovation, but the Regina Public School Board believed that the enormous challenge of renovation was too much. Instead, it decided that it wanted to tear the school down and build a new one.

The school board’s decision disappointed many in the community. A movement began to save the school. A civil society group Save Our Connaught formed, and their work—along with the work of many concerned citizens—brought much awareness to the importance of the school as a heritage building and the architectural and cultural value the building brought to the Cathedral neighbourhood. Heritage Regina, the Connaught School Community Council, the Cathedral Area Community Association, and local heritage advocates presented the school board with petitions indicating widespread support for renovating the building, and gave the school board presentations that spoke to the heritage value of the school. However, the school board still believed tearing the school down was its best option.

The school board’s demolition plan hit a snag when Regina’s Municipal Heritage Committee recommended to Regina’s city council that the building receive a heritage designation. This designation would have prevented the school division from demolishing the school. When the matter came to a vote at Regina city council, 14 different people and groups spoke to council about designating the school as a heritage property. The only speaker who opposed the heritage designation was the Regina Public School Board.

Despite the immense public support for saving the school, council voted against the heritage designation. This allowed the school board to tear down the then 102-year-old school.

THINK

1. Do you think that civil society helped build a better-educated public by bringing attention to Connaught School and its importance to local heritage?
2. Even if an interest group is unsuccessful in certain endeavours, does this mean their work was a waste of time?
3. Is changing people’s attitudes a lengthy process?



SPEAK OUT! POSTERING

Many communities have public spaces where posters can be displayed. These spaces can be used by citizens to post any number of things, from concert announcements to information about public events. It is not uncommon to see information posted in these places that address issues, concerns, and causes relevant to the community.

Case Study: Speaking Out or Vandalism? Protest Stickers in Saskatoon's Downtown

Protest stickers have frequently appeared in Saskatoon's central neighbourhoods, especially downtown. For example, in May 2010 Saskatonians woke up to protest stickers placed in areas relevant to their message. For example:

- "Have you driven drunk yet today?" was posted near a bar.
- "Clean up after your religion" posted near a cathedral.
- "No human rights allowed within 5 meters" was posted near a courthouse.

This trend continued in late 2015, when a new batch of stickers targeting Saskatoon's Mayor Don Atchison appeared throughout downtown. These stickers read "Don Atchison for a drug and gay free Saskatoon." Their message likely was connected to a police raid of a downtown marijuana dispensary, and the Mayor's continual reluctance to attend the city's annual Pride parade.

While the fairness of the criticisms on these stickers could be debated, they did succeed in bringing awareness to local and national issues. However, it was against the law to place these stickers on public and private property. The first round of stickers were characterized by the Saskatoon Police as public mischief, and the second round of stickers were treated under the city's graffiti bylaw.

THINK

1. Do you think the messages on these stickers raised valid concerns? Why or why not?
2. Would these stickers have been more or less effective if they were placed on designated poster areas?
3. If you were posterizing, where would you put your posters?



SPEAK OUT! SOCIAL MEDIA

For most of the past 150 years, traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers have been one-way forms of communication. Audiences were largely confined to receiving information from “reliable” sources. However, the rise of the internet has changed this. From Facebook groups to re-tweets, social media provides people with a platform to express their opinions to engage in conversations with people who agree or disagree.

Case Study: The Fast Rise of #IdleNoMore

Founded by four Saskatchewan women, Idle No More is a movement that “calls on all people to join in a peaceful revolution to honour Indigenous sovereignty and to protect the land and water.” Within weeks of it first appearing on social media, Idle No More grew into one of the largest mass movements in Canadian history.

Idle No More started in October 2012 when planning began for a teach-in about the federal government’s omnibus budget bill. The omnibus bill made changes to the *Indian Act*, the *Navigable Waters Protection Act*, and the *Environmental Assessment Act*. When the founders posted the group’s teach-in event to Facebook, they called it “Idle No More.”

The first Saskatoon teach-in on November 10th quickly expanded to events in Regina, North Battleford, and Prince Albert. From there, a National Day of Action ensued on December 10th with events across Canada that brought attention to issues of importance to Indigenous people and Canadians as a whole. Round dance flash mobs popped up across the country, solidarity protests sprung up around the globe, and dialogues took place in communities and on social media.

The lightning-fast spread of Idle No More was helped by the power of social media. According to CBC News, the movement’s famous #IdleNoMore hashtag first appeared on November 4th 2012. In a few weeks it was trending on Twitter. Social media and the instant networking it allowed meant that activists across Canada could network to engage in dialogues about Idle No More. As well, its phenomenal rise meant that mainstream media could not ignore Idle No More.

The initial flurry of Idle No More has passed. However, the hashtag is still commonly used when discussing issues of importance on social media. And more importantly, Idle No More has changed the nature of the national conversation about Indigenous perspectives.

THINK

1. Do you think Idle No More would have been the success it was without social media?
2. Who is excluded from using social media? Think of issues such as access to technology and wealth disparity. How can we find ways to include everyone?
3. When engaging in dialogue online, are people always polite and thoughtful in their discussions? If they are not, what can you do to change that?



SPEAK OUT! POLITICAL RALLIES AND PROTESTS

Political rallies and protests are surprisingly common occurrences. They are part of our right to peaceful assembly guaranteed in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Even if one does not believe in the cause, attending a rally or peaceful protest as an observer can be a useful way to understand the multiple viewpoints that make up our society.

Case Study: The Occupy Movement

The Occupy movement rose up in 2011. It described itself as a leaderless resistance movement that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the super-rich and elite. Spurred on by the Canadian magazine *AdBusters*, Occupy protests began in New York City's financial district. Soon the protests spread to Canada and around the world. People congregated in public spaces to bring awareness to increasing social and economic disparity. Their rallying cry, "We are the 99%," is a reference to disparity between the richest 1% of society and everybody else. In Canada, for example, the wealth gap between the rich and everyone else is at its highest point since the 1930s.

The initial round of Occupy protests disbanded over the course of winter 2011/2012. However, demonstrating the ongoing impact of protest movements, the awareness it created carried on. Major documentary films have been created, addressing wealth disparity has become a plank of political party platforms, and income inequality is now frequently discussed on social media and some mainstream media.

THINK

1. Have you heard people talk about "the 1%"? Do you think the Occupy movement was successful in getting their message out?
2. When is protest appropriate? Can you think of circumstances where violent protest is appropriate?
3. During a town hall meeting with young people in April 2016, United States President Barack Obama told the assembly that sometimes young activists focus too much on protest and not enough on finding solutions. He said:

You can't just keep on yelling at [political leaders] and you can't refuse to meet because that might compromise the purity of your position.... Too often what I see is wonderful activism that highlights a problem but then people feel so passionately and are so invested in the purity of their position that they never take that next step and say, 'How do I sit down and try to actually get something done?'

Do you agree or disagree with this comment? Discuss.