



# Civic Engagement Motivations and Barriers for English-Speaking Québec Youth



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## **Introduction**

Canadian youth are less civically engaged than their older counterparts, especially with respect to voting, party membership, and political knowledge. This is concerning since civic engagement strengthens our democracy and promotes economic growth as well as individual well-being (Stolle & Cruz, 2005). Accordingly, some researchers have investigated what motivates and hinders youth civic engagement (Ballard, 2014; Ballard et al., 2015; Jensen 2008). This research, though illuminating, has focused on youth civic engagement in the United States, leaving Canadian youth comparatively understudied. See Arriagada et al. (2022), Broom (2016), Bullock & Nesbitt-Larking (2011), and Stolle & Cruz (2005) for some exceptions. Further, there is hardly any research that privileges English-speaking Québec youth (ESQY) (ages 16-30) and their motivations and barriers for civic engagement. For this report, English-speakers are defined as “those who have English as a mother tongue as well as those who speak a mother tongue other than English, but for whom English is [their First Official Language Spoken]” (The Official Languages Support Programs Branch, 2011, p. 2). According to this definition, roughly 13% of all Quebecers are English-speakers (Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, 2010). As such, to better understand Québec’s civic landscape, civic engagement for ESQY ought to receive more scholarly attention. This report aims to help fill this gap by answering the following questions:

**Research Question 1:** How do ESQY characterize the motivations behind their civic engagement?

**Research Question 2:** How do ESQY characterize the barriers that hinder their civic engagement?

## **Methodology**

We interviewed 21 youths between the ages of 17 and 28 over four weeks to better understand what motivates and hinders ESQY towards/from becoming civically involved. We adopted this qualitative approach since, although there is a growing literature

on youth civic engagement motivations in general (Ballard, 2014; Ballard et al., 2015; Casalaspi & Jacobsen, 2016; Cheung, 2021), ESQY are an understudied population, and qualitative approaches are excellent for exploring understudied domains (Press, 2005).

## **Outreach and Sampling**

For outreach, we emailed various community groups and organizations across Québec. After briefly summarizing our research, we requested that they forward this email to any English-speaking employees/participants/volunteers (ages 16-30) who might be interested in being interviewed about their civic engagement. This email included a link to a Google Form, where prospective interviewees could indicate their interest in participating and some personal information (i.e., their age, region of Québec, gender identity, cultural background, racial identity, and to what extent they consider themselves civically engaged on a 1-10 scale). As well, we provided a quick definition of civic engagement along with several examples, anticipating that some respondents may be unfamiliar with the phrase. We then selected participants from those who responded, ensuring a diverse sample with respect to all the aforementioned personal details. The final sample consisted of 21 youths between the ages of 17 and 28. Participants were primarily from Montréal, as well as one from Outaouais, two from Chaudière-Appalaches, and three from Québec City.

## **Interview Procedure**

Interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted roughly 30 minutes. Participants received a \$50 check as compensation for participating. All interviewees signed an informed consent form and thereby released any information they conveyed during their interview for use in this report, with the exception that personal details would be omitted to ensure their anonymity. These consent forms also permitted us to record and transcribe the interviews. Prior to interviewing, we developed a script consisting mostly of open-ended questions. At the start of each interview, we reminded the interviewee that they could withdraw at any

point, refuse to answer any questions if they felt uncomfortable doing so, and that all information given would be kept confidential. Any names mentioned in this report are pseudonyms. We also defined civic engagement and offered multiple examples in case they were unfamiliar with the phrase. We started with more general questions by asking the interviewee about themselves and the activities they are involved in; later, we asked more specific questions such as: "You mentioned that you volunteered for X. How did you first get involved with them?" or "Have you ever been presented with an opportunity to become more civically involved that you did not take up?" Additionally, we recorded each interview, and using a transcribing software, we produced transcripts that were later used for coding.

## Analysis

We employed a hybrid approach of deductive and inductive reasoning to code the interview transcripts (Swain, 2018). It should be clarified that coding involves categorizing excerpts from the transcripts to "establish a framework of thematic ideas about it... Thus all the text and so on that is about the same thing or exemplifies the same thing is coded to the same name" (Gibbs, 2008, p. 38). "Deductive reasoning" refers to producing codes prior to interviewing, whereas "inductive reasoning" refers to producing codes after an interview (i.e., while examining their transcripts) (Swain, 2018, p. 5). We formulated the deductive codes primarily from Ballard's 2014 study, in which she identifies different motivations and barriers for youth civic engagement in the United States (p. 448). Inductive codes emerged upon analysing the patterns and themes within and across individual interviews (Swain, 2018). Furthermore, we asked several members of the Y4Y team to be peer debriefers, which involved reviewing some transcripts as well as emerging codes and giving feedback on whether we missed any major points or exaggerated any minor ones (Janesick, 2015). We then collapsed the deductive and inductive codes into one set of family codes by merging similar codes together to eliminate any redundancies (Swain, 2018, p. 17). These family codes form the basis of our report.

## Defining Civic Engagement

The term "civic engagement" is difficult to define. It admits of many competing definitions, but the following, which we borrow from Adler and Goggin (2005), should suffice for the purposes of this report: "Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future" (p. 241). For example, voting, attending a protest, signing a petition, and volunteering all count as civic engagement. This definition is intentionally broad, contrasting with other definitions that limit civic engagement to political involvement or some other realm of activity (Diller, 2001). We opted for a broad definition because youth typically have fewer opportunities for direct political involvement (Jensen & Flanagan, 2008).

## Results: Motivations

We identified five categories of motivations from the interviews: "Issue/Cause," "Self-goals," "Response to External Influence," "General Beliefs about the Importance of Civic Action or of Opposing Injustice," and "Pursuing and Maintaining Community." Issue/Cause and Self-goals were borrowed from Ballard (2014), but we will mention some instances of these categories that seem unique to ESQY. "Response to External Influence" and "Beliefs about the Importance of Civic Action or of Opposing Injustice" are combinations of some of Ballard's categories and of our inductive codes, whereas "Pursuing and Maintaining Community" is entirely our own.

### Issue/Cause

Participants frequently referenced an issue or cause that affected them or that they felt passionate about that motivated their civic engagement. Notably, some were more closely connected to their issue/cause than others. For instance, one participant, Mary, volunteered to help organize a conference that informs students about the fashion industry and different jobs within it. Upon being asked why she volunteered, she

answered, “I’m really interested in fashion... I’m really passionate about the industry and it’s something I want to work in... in the future.” Another participant, Jenna, explained that she got involved with an organization that offers support to survivors of sexual violence since she is a survivor, and she wanted to provide support for those in similar positions. Thus, issues/causes can vary in how serious and how personal they are.

Interestingly, Jenna connected some of her other civic activities, such as her work with organizations that help those addicted to illicit substances, to her work with survivors of sexual assault:

“You can go into it and say, “I’m only going to support survivors of sexual assault.” That’s fine, but you’re not offering the best service you can if you’re not keeping in mind addictions, human trafficking, domestic violence, and more intersectional issues... So, I wanted to work more with other populations, like addiction treatments and stuff like that.”

Jenna is an example of someone who branches out into other civic activities as they realize that they intersect with their initial issue/cause. Of course, not all participants branched out in this way.

A couple of participants took up helping ESQY as their issue/cause. For instance, consider the following excerpt from Mark’s interview:

“English is my first language, and I wouldn’t say I speak French fluently yet. So, when I first moved here, I found it kind of difficult to integrate myself with the community. I felt kind of socially isolated, and the pandemic kind of hampered that. So, when I saw an organization that was trying to help people like me out, I thought, that’s a great way to get involved. And I think it’s something I can feel passionate about.”

Mark, like the aforementioned participants, had an issue/cause that drove him to become civically involved; his issue/cause was the difficulty he faced in integrating into his community because of his status as an ESQY as well as the pandemic. Thus, a wide

variety of issues/causes can motivate ESQY towards civic engagement.

## Self-goals

This category, which we also borrow from Ballard (2014), applies to participants who were motivated towards civic engagement out of personal interests. These participants pursued civic engagement to acquire new skills, develop themselves, improve their resume, and even to promote their health. For example, Alex, who helped run a personal fitness club in high school, stated the following when asked why she got involved: “It was... a way to stay fit... I’m not usually athletic in any way... This would count as my exercise for the week.” Other participants had self-goals that were more other-oriented, such as Claire, who volunteered for an organization because of the extensive training they offer:

“Honestly, the [organization’s] training is really amazing... it’s so comprehensive. We cover harm reduction, anti-racism, anti-oppression... active listening, and peer support. I was really interested in training as a volunteer to access that training and be a better friend and develop my listening skills in that way.”

Claire notes that this training would allow her to “be a better friend” and “develop [her] listening skills”; hence, this self-goal seems more other-oriented. This is not to suggest that participants who had self-goals that were not other-oriented like Claire’s were motivated purely out of concern for themselves. These participants still exhibited at least some of the other types of motivations alongside their self-goals.

## General Beliefs about the Importance of Civic Action or of Opposing Injustice

Youth reporting this category did not reference specific issues or causes when describing their motivations. Instead, the youth in this group referenced general beliefs about either the value of being civically involved or about the value of opposing injustice. While Ballard (2014) posits a similar code titled

“Beliefs about the importance of civic action,” this code does not account for those who characterize their motivations by referencing their opposition to injustice rather than the value of civic action. To demonstrate this, we will contrast how two participants describe their motivations. First, consider Lindsay. When we asked Lindsay if she could summarize her motivations for all of her civic activities, she answered: “Injustice... a sense of injustice”. When we then inquired whether these injustices were personal, she replied: “No... I don’t have Crohn’s and Colitis, but it is a terrible thing and our health care system sucks... It doesn’t have to touch me personally for me to think about it as an injustice.” She mentions that she does not have Crohn’s and Ulcerative Colitis since she volunteers for an organization that tries to help those who do; thus, she seems motivated by a general belief that she ought to oppose injustice.

When we asked Aileen, who volunteers with a soup kitchen in Montréal, why she does it, she appealed to the importance of identifying what the community needs are, and trying to meet them: “I think that it’s important to see the gaps in the community... and kind of see what you can do to help or... what exactly should be done in the community.” There does not seem to be a specific issue/cause at play here as Aileen is concerned about helping the community in a more general sense. Other participants also expressed their motivations in more general terms. So, neither Aileen nor Lindsay are motivated by local considerations like self-goals or issues/causes that affect them; they are motivated by more general considerations about the importance of meeting one’s community’s needs and of opposing injustice.

### **Response to External Influence**

This category includes youth who were steered towards a civic opportunity by someone else. This could be a parent pressuring them to join, or a friend simply inviting them. For an example of the former, one participant explained how their parents pressured them into volunteering at a local hospital, insisting that “it’s a good idea to do something with your free time.” For the latter, another participant re-

counted in her interview how one of her acquaintances founded a non-profit and informed her that they were “looking for more people to join.” All participants under this category were influenced by someone else to become civically involved, but the extent to which they were influenced varies. Some were directed by figures of authority, while others received casual invitations.

### **Pursuing and Maintaining Community**

Several participants conveyed that they first became civically involved to find a sense of community. Most participants under this category emphasized that the community had to be similar to themselves in some respect. Most prominently, participants wanted this community to consist of other English-speakers. One participant, Adam, explained this in-depth while discussing why he became involved with an organization that plans events for English-speakers:

When I went to that English language event... I was so happy to be surrounded by English speakers as well as people who are bilingual. I’m so used to just being in a Francophone environment that I really miss being around people who speak my maternal language... So, I decided to get involved with [the organization] because I was like, “This is a great opportunity to find other events like this.” I wanted to get involved with them, not because I’m a newcomer and not because I’m... uncomfortable with French. It was just that I wanted to be more involved in the Anglophone community or English-speaking community in Québec City. It’s not about distancing myself from the Franco-phone community. It’s about me getting closer to my roots... I am more comfortable in English, and I really love interacting in English because I can use it fully, right? So, it’s very, very important to me to find other people like me who speak the language because I can be my fullest self.

Adam clarifies that he sought community with other English-speakers to get “closer to his roots” and to be his “fullest self.” Some others stated that when they became civically involved to pursue a sense of community with other English-speakers, they “felt this

kind of belonging” or “[felt] as if it was [their] home.” These participants, like Adam, frequently clarified that they did not want to completely withdraw from the Francophone community. They just want a space to share with other English-speakers.

Of course, some participants pursued a community that was similar to themselves in other respects. One such participant joined their university’s Taiwanese Student Association because they “actively want[ed] to keep in touch with [their] roots.” Another presented no such similarities, simply stating that “being socially connected and having community is so important, and for me, it’s a big part of activism.” As well, participants under this category—both those who wanted their community to be similar to them and those who did not—commonly indicated that COVID made them feel isolated (or intensified their isolation), such that they became civically involved to attain community and thereby alleviate this isolation. One participant described this like so:

COVID definitely made it hard to meet new people... [M]ost of the time, it was kind of awkward to just text someone that you met on Zoom through a class. And for me, because volunteering was such a big part of my life and because COVID kind of took that away for a while, I felt that when restrictions were lifted, it pushed me even more to want to meet new people, and volunteering really facilitated that.

Several participants expressed similar sentiments, detailing how COVID instilled in them (or strengthened) a desire for community, which civic action could facilitate.

Thus far, we have focused on youth who become involved for community, but a couple of our participants expressed that they stayed involved with certain civic activities out of a sense of solidarity with their fellow volunteers. After working with their peers for some time, they became committed to their team due to their shared goal(s). Take Sarah’s description:

There’s just this sort of... solidarity that’s been built up with, like, the different volunteers, especially since we’re all working on this one singular project... we’re focusing all of our efforts on this [project] ... it feels good to be part of a team like that.

Due to working on joint projects, Sarah and her team developed a form of solidarity that motivated them—or motivated Sarah, at least—to continue working together. Sarah, like some other participants, wanted to maintain the community she developed.

## Results: Barriers

We follow Ballard (2014) in classifying all barriers as systemic, personal, or somewhere in between. Youth reporting personal barriers are not civically involved (or, at least, not civically involved with respect to certain civic activities) because they personally choose not to be, whereas youth reporting systemic barriers feel unable to become (more) civically involved due to a lack of time, energy, skills, etc. (Ballard, 2014, p. 453). We will now provide examples of each, highlighting those that were prevalent and those that appeared unique to ESQY.

### Systemic Barriers

Many participants gave systemic reasons as for why they are not (more) civically involved; these included burnout, feeling disempowered, navigating COVID risks as well as COVID restrictions as well as a lack of time, knowledge, resources, and skills. For brevity’s sake, we will not explore all of these; instead, we will focus on feelings of disempowerment as participants frequently reported feeling disempowered because they are young and because they are English-speakers. For instance, one participant, Maya, doubted whether her civic engagement would be valued since she is only 20:

[When] you’re in these bigger meetings and you’re the youngest person in the room, and then everybody else is talking about all these things, all their experi-

ences, and you're just like, well, I'm just 20, and I'm just here... I just got started. And it kind of makes you question your words or why you're there... [So] many of the other people who have, like, 30 years of experience have so much to say, and then you kind of question yourself and think like, what am I saying? Does it even matter? Is it even valuable?

Unfortunately, Maya was not the only participant who felt this way. Later in the interview, Maya wished that older people did a "better job making the younger people in the group feel comfortable." Furthermore, these feelings did not only occur for people who were already civically involved, with some youth mentioning them as factors that deterred them from becoming involved in the first place. We should also note that participants who were on the older end of the age range (i.e., ages 25-30) did not express these concerns, suggesting that these feelings are more common among those on the younger end.

Additionally, some youth worried that their civic involvement would prove ineffectual since they are not proficient enough in French. These participants felt that for roles that required more French than they know, they "would not be of any use" since they could not fully connect with those they are trying to help. This pushed some participants towards civic activities that required less French as they wanted to maximize their impact. Evidently, (some) ESQY report feeling civically disempowered because of their young age and because of their levels of French-language proficiency.

Other participants felt civically disempowered for different reasons. For example, Lindsay maintained the following about civic action and environmental issues:

There are things, though, that I feel kind of powerless towards. I don't really have any involvement in environmental stuff, even though that's kind of the stuff that's really important to me. I think we need to take action on climate change, but I feel like no matter what we do, there is no point. So, I'm involved in other things that I think

are important... but [these things] I think I can have more of an impact on.

Lindsay does not dismiss civic action wholesale; she simply believes that civic action is ineffective when it comes to certain issues (i.e., environmental issues). She also presents her hesitance towards environmental civic activities as both systemic and personal, indicating that her feelings of disempowerment fit both categories. Other participants felt that their involvement with certain organizations would be unproductive, so either they never became involved with them, or stopped their involvement altogether. As one participant passionately put it, "There was no point at [that organization]... [they] didn't care, and there was no substance to it. It was like this was an exercise to be put on our CV... to look good for everyone." Instead of targeting a particular issue (like the environment), this participant felt that a particular organization was superficial and ineffective, leading her to eventually stop volunteering with them.

## Personal Barriers

Some youth decided against becoming (more) civically involved for personal reasons rather than systemic reasons. One participant, Alex, reported that, although her high school had a student council and plenty of clubs, "[these extra-curriculars] never really interested me because I wanted to focus on getting my French to be better and getting good grades." Participants like Alex often acknowledged the importance of civic action, but they nonetheless shared her sentiment that other commitments had to come first.

Several participants noted that they try to avoid political civic opportunities, offering various explanations for their aversion. Some felt that once politics are involved, "ulterior motives" are at play. One young man, Noah, described this like so:

I really try to not be political... I just try to keep it simple. If I'm doing something, who's the immediate person that benefits? Who am I trying to help? Not necessarily who gains something from this, but what do I want to gain something from this. And I go in and I get that work done... I like to avoid ulterior motives... I try to not think about

them and keep it simple as much as possible.

Another participant, like Noah, worried that if they took up political civic opportunities, they would be “used.” These youth seem to distrust political actors and thus opt for non-political (or, at least, not explicitly political) civic activities over political ones.

As for other justifications, one participant expressed that he sticks to non-political civic activities since his parents fled their home country because of its “catastrophic politics,” such that taking up political civic opportunities would “not be following their choice in life.” Other participants reported that they do not know enough about Canadian politics to become involved, either because they recently moved here or lack any interest in it. This lack of political knowledge also counts as a systemic barrier. One participant clarified that he steers clear of partisan civic opportunities. Indeed, he turned down an invitation to a conference that was run by a Canadian political party since he “did not want to choose a side” or “giv[e] away a position.” Yet, he accepted an invitation to a nonpartisan conference that touched on political topics since it was not “politically sided.” For him, only partisan civic activities are problematic. However, it is unclear whether any of the other youth who claimed to avoid political civic activities meant partisan and nonpartisan political activities or just partisan ones.

In summary, ESQY experience a wide range of systemic and personal barriers for their civic engagement, especially when it comes to feelings of disempowerment and political civic activities.

In particular, “Pursuing and Maintaining Community” seems more prevalent among ESQY than other youth studied thus far in the youth civic engagement literature (Ballard, 2014; Ballard et al., 2015; Cheung, 2021; Jensen, 2008). Indeed, many participants insisted that they became civically involved to find community specifically with other English-speakers. This widespread desire for community is, seemingly, a distinguishing feature of ESQY’s motivations for civic engagement.

As for the second research question, barriers fell into two categories: personal and systemic. ESQY reported a wide range of both types of barriers. For personal barriers, youth commonly indicated that they sometimes chose not to participate in civic activities because they had other obligations that they wanted to prioritize (such as their job, schoolwork, or learning French). Other youth avoided political civic activities (or, at least, partisan ones). They justified this on varying grounds: some youth felt that they were not politically knowledgeable enough to become involved, while others were deterred by the “ulterior motives” that political civic activities might involve. As for systemic barriers, youth discussed a lack of time, knowledge, and resources as well as burnout, and navigating COVID risks and COVID restrictions. Another systemic barrier was feeling disempowered, and while youth felt civically disempowered for varying reasons, several participants felt this way because French was not their first official language spoken. They therefore worried that they could not adequately contribute to any activities that involved speaking French. This strikes us as a distinguishing feature of ESQY’s barriers for civic engagement.

To better facilitate civic engagement for ESQY, civic opportunities ought to be presented and structured in such a way as to capitalize on the motivations and attenuate the barriers outlined in this report. There is a growing literature on how to facilitate youth civic involvement more generally (Levin-Goldberg, 2009; Michelsen et al., 2002; “Strengthening civic,” 2013), and the methods recommended in this literature should, typically, apply for ESQY given the overlap in motivations and barriers between ESQY and youth elsewhere. However, there are ways in which ESQY’s motivations and barriers are unique. As previously

## *Discussion and Recommendations*

We set out to answer two research questions: (1) “How do ESQY characterize the motivations behind their civic engagement?” and (2) “How do ESQY characterize the barriers that hinder their civic engagement?”. For the first question, we identified five categories of motivations. Of these five, “Self-goals,” “Issue/cause,” and “Pursuing and Maintaining Community” were expressed more frequently.

discussed, (some) ESQY are uniquely motivated towards civic engagement, in part, by their desire for community, and they are uniquely hindered by their feelings of disempowerment with respect to their lack of French. Regarding their desire for community, civic opportunities ought to be, as much as possible, structured/presented as community-building, allowing participants to foster connections with their peers and community as a whole. Regarding their feelings of disempowerment, civic opportunities ought to be made accessible for ESQY who may be insecure about their proficiency in French. Of course, we acknowledge that, for some civic activities, this will not be possible as fluency in French is required. In sum, organizations and individuals can promote ESQY's civic involvement by facilitating conditions for ESQY to find a sense of community through their civic action and ensuring that (prospective) participants feel that their contributions will be valued despite their first official spoken language being English.

## Limitations

There are a few limitations to this report worth mentioning. Most participants were from Montréal, with only six of the 21 interviewees hailing from other regions. Consequently, our findings may not be as reliable for youth outside of the Montréal core. Because we found our participants through various community groups and organizations, civically involved youth were more likely to show up in our sample than uninvolved youth. To correct for this, we had applicants self-report how civically involved they are on a 1-10 scale, and we chose participants with scores from all across this range. While this surely mitigated any sampling bias, it likely did not eliminate it as the applicants' self-ratings only provided a cursory insight into their levels of civic engagement. Nonetheless, we maintain that the youth in our sample are not atypical and that our results shed light on how ESQY characterize the motivations and barriers for their civic engagement.

## Conclusion

This report aimed to help us better understand Québec's civic landscape by providing insight into ESQY's civic engagement. Through our interviews, we collected rich data on what drives ESQY towards and away from civic action, uncovering the elements that make them unique civic actors. This has potential practical implications on how we should structure and present civic opportunities to ESQY to encourage their future involvement. Promoting deeper and more widespread civic involvement among ESQY would not only benefit them, but Québec as a whole (Stolle & Cruz, 2005).

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