

## Kids lean Liberal - or is it the hotdogs?

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Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff really has a way with young people.

A shame for him they won't be able to vote until 2025.

Although, if Dietlind Stolle is being honest, Iggy's appeal with the pre-K crowd might have had something to do with what she calls "the hotdog factor."

Stolle, an associate professor of political science at McGill University, wanted to do something a little different for her final class this spring. So she invited a group of 4- and 5-year-olds from the McGill daycare centre to visit her class on political participation. Her 4-year-old daughter was one of the 14 kids in the daycare group.

Stolle asked her students to prepare a lecture introducing the little ones to the concepts of voting, democracy and choosing a prime minister.

They started by talking about what a prime minister does - making decisions for all Canadians. Someone a little like the teacher in their daycare, except a prime minister can be chosen.

Then Stolle's students made up a game. First, daycare kids were given clickers and asked to vote which sticker they liked best, one of an ice cream cone or a soccer ball. Because this was a democracy, and ice cream had trounced soccer, everyone got a sticker with an ice cream cone on it.

But what would have happened if this wasn't a democracy?

"They voted again for a sticker, but instead they got nap time," said Stolle.



CREDIT: FRED GREENSLADE REUTERS FILE

MICHAEL IGNATIEFF Were the kids charmed by the Liberal leader or what he's holding?



CREDIT: CHRISTINNE MUSCHI REUTERS  
 JACK LAYTON Is the NDP out of season?

"They were puzzled, and one girl said right away, 'I want democracy.' Then all the others joined in. It was fantastic as an experience."

After that, McGill students took turns campaigning, debating the merits of playing indoors and outdoors. Outdoors won by a wide majority.

In a second round, the kids had to choose between Victoria, a candidate who promised them vegetables and a healthy lifestyle, and Sarah, who promised an endless whirl of lollipops, television and playtime. The health buff squeaked to victory with 54 per cent of the vote.

"Originally, everyone was convinced the kids would choose the candidate who offered lollipops," said Stolle. But when the children were asked afterward why they chose vegetables over candy, they said they preferred to "grow up," what Stolle sees as indirect proof that citizens can be educated to choose what's best for them.

Finally, the students were shown pictures of Conservative leader Stephen Harper, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff and New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton. "I had to reduce the number of candidates because clicker voting is not so easy for kids of that age," Stolle explains.

In the pictures, each of the candidates is smiling and doing something that ought to appeal to children. "Steve" was cuddling an orange cat, "Iggy" was holding a platter of hotdogs and "Jack" was carrying a giant pumpkin. "I was certain they would chose the cat."

Three out of four wouldbe voters under the age of 6 chose Ignatieff, with one in four picking Harper and no votes for Layton. If the daycare set had its way, Layton wouldn't even qualify for the next televised debate.

Then a student talked to the children about each of the leader's daycare policies. The children were shown neutral pictures of the leaders and asked to vote again.

"We cannot know for sure whether the hotdog effect was lingering, or whether this was a reaction to the policies. But kids listened, and some obviously changed their vote. Ignatieff won again," although with a slight drop in support.

All in all, Stolle said it was a terrific exercise.

"They learned what to look for in decisions - first looking out for hotdogs, but then focusing on what politicians had to offer. That's a fantastic outcome.

"The kids were amazing, they knew the name of the prime minister and really participated well in all games, and they could sit still for 50 minutes. The students also had a blast. It was actually challenging to prepare these ideas, and to say everything in the vocabulary of a 4-to 5-year-old. I am certain this was one of their favourite learning experiences. It's triple satisfaction - kids and students learn and everyone enjoys the experience."

Especially Iggy.

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**KIDS VOTE: THE DAYCARE CLASS WAS SHOWN THESE THREE PICTURES OF THE MAJOR LEADERS AND EACH STUDENT WAS ASKED TO PICK THE BEST CHOICE FOR PRIME MINISTER**

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