

Why fear them? Students are just tuning in to democracy's power

BY DIETLIND STOLLE AND ALLISON HARELL JUNE 1, 2012

For years, we have heard that young people are apathetic. They don't vote. They don't join traditional political organizations. They simply don't care about politics.

Yet, for months now, we have seen young people across Quebec taking to the streets en masse, doing everything from protesting naked to clanging pots and pans. Many young people suddenly seem anything but disengaged.

Many wish that young people would tune back out of politics. The students have been called spoiled and self-entitled. The message to this decidedly unapathetic movement seems to be that we prefer apathy, or at least participation limited to the ballot box.

Voting in elections is a key form of political participation. But participation is not limited to voting. Freedom of expression and assembly are fundamental to democracy, and citizens, even young ones, have a right to these freedoms. They are not only guaranteed when used to echo the opinions of elected officials, or of the majority of voters. In fact, they are only truly protected when they guard the rights of the minority.

So why have we been so scared of the student movement? We would like to take issue with three arguments that seem to have dominated the debate.

First, the government's position is that law and order have been at stake. Student protesters have been portrayed as violent and a threat to property and public safety. Without a doubt there has been some violence and destruction of property. Such violence should clearly be condemned; there is no place for it in a democratic society. But if we consider the number of protests and the sheer number of people involved in them, it is hard to characterize the movement as, on the whole, violent. That which has occurred should not take away everyone else's right to peacefully protest. While we can disagree about tactics, citizens in a democracy do not lose their rights because others break the law.

A second argument against student protesters is that their claims have been illegitimate because they are motivated by self-interest. In fact, most political action is motivated, in part, by what affects us personally. Pure altruism is rarely the motivating factor, nor must we expect it to be. Acting when things affect you is not counter to democratic politics.

Yet the striking students have not been purely self-interested either. Many student protesters (who are partway through their studies) would not benefit as much as future students would from a limit on fees.

Other factors have clearly motivated them, too. Our research with student protesters shows that they care about poverty and view “solidarity for people who have less than them” as a dominant principle of citizenship. So the greater good has also motivated them.

Finally, some argue that students have been unreasonable in their demands because, compared to other provinces and the U.S., education in Quebec is a bargain.

Regardless of our personal positions on this front, the students' position has not been de facto unreasonable. After all, there are different models out there. U.S. tuition fees are often tens of thousands of dollars a year, while Europe's tuition rates are on average much lower than here, and often free. Each of these systems has flaws that range from crowded classrooms to high debt burdens, but their sheer existence demonstrates that there is no obvious right or wrong answer.

Still, students have heard that paying \$254 more per year is hardly worth getting upset about. But imagine if we asked other citizens to pay hundreds of dollars more each year – for daycare or health care, for example.

Discussing who is responsible for post-secondary education and who should pay for it is something that any democratic society can and should do. While people may disagree with their position, students have a right to it – and to express it in the streets. In fact, it is a highly democratic response that should remind us that the next generation has not completely tuned out of politics.

And this, however inconvenient the strike, is not a bad thing for democracy.

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