

# The Form and Meaning of Young People's Involvement in Community and Political Work

Anne Quéniart

*University of Quebec, Montreal*

Why are some young people actively involved in political parties, community groups, or associations? What do they have in common? These are some of the questions that underlie a qualitative research project on involvement carried out among 50 young Canadian activists residing in the province of Quebec. In this article, the author discusses the activist trajectory followed by these young adults and explains the characteristics and meaning of their involvement. For all of them, the cause is more important than the group, as are the more practical aspects of politics. Their viewpoint is similar to that of young people in general who wish to reinforce direct democracy and bring elected officials and citizens closer together. As a whole, the author demonstrates that their involvement practices correspond with a search for ethical consistency (that) aims to give meaning to the values that are adhered to both individually and collectively.

**Keywords:** *young people; activists; political involvement practices; new forms of social participation*

Why are some young people actively involved in political parties, community groups, or associations? What do they have in common? Do differences exist between young women and men or between those who are active in political parties and those who are active in other groups? How do these young activists perceive their involvement? What are their views on politics, male–female relations, and society in general? These are some of the questions that underlie a qualitative research project on involvement carried out among 50 young Canadian activists residing in the province of Quebec. Involvement here can be generalized as a social practice carried out in the civil or political domain, “consisting of adherence to a political organization, a community-based association, or a union, and includes espousing a cause, which requires a personal or material contribution of

some importance” (Becquet & Linares, 2005, p. 15). In other words, “involvement can be defined by the ability to attribute meaning to lived experience and social participation” (Lapeyronnie, 2005, p. 47). Furthermore, involvement among young people is strongly linked with the transition to adulthood and the construction of personal identity (Arnett, 1997; Lapeyronnie, 2005). In this article, we will first introduce the context of this research project and present an overview of our methodology. Next, we will discuss the activist trajectory followed by these young adults before explaining the characteristics and meaning of their involvement, highlighting the differences between young women and men when relevant.

### **Research Context: The Emergence of New Forms of Involvement**

Little research has been devoted to the activist practices of young people. The studies that do exist focus mainly on the factors predicating their political involvement, with particular attention paid to the role of family-based socialization in this domain (Beck & Jennings, 1982; Jennings & Stoker, 2004; Muxel, 2001; Passy, 1998; Percheron, 1993). The importance of family as a vehicle for the transmission of political values is emphasized in these studies.

The important role played by the family in the construction of individual political identity has been assessed and verified on many occasions. The transmission of ideological values, religious and political values in particular, stands out from all others included in the panoply of values and practices that a family may transmit. (Muxel, 2001, p. 51)

More precisely, the socioeconomic status of the parents as well as their political or social participation practices exert the most influence over the political participation and political behavior of young adults. However, several researchers also stress the importance of other sources of political socialization besides the family, such as schools (Beck & Jennings, 1982; Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2003).

A certain amount of research has also focused on young people’s voting behavior. Essentially, it emerges that young people, in North America and in Europe, tend to vote very little. In Canada, the participation rate in the federal election of 2004 was 39% for the 18 to 21 age group and 35% for the 21.5 to 24 age group (Elections Canada, 2005). The degree to which

young adults are politicized appears to vary according to gender, "young men remain, regardless of educational level, decidedly more politicized than young women (Bréchon, 2001). Young adults are also less likely to be members of an organization or a political party. For example, only 5% of young adults are members of such groups in Quebec and between 2% and 3% in France (Muxel, 2001). These statistics lead many political commentators to conclude that young people are uninvolved in politics. This is especially true in the media, where young adults are depicted as being apathetic and individualistic, and where their involvement "tends to form an impending threat to society rather than a contribution towards its future" (Becquet & Linares, 2005, p. 13). Young people are thus "absent from the polling booth" but "present in building hallways or in violent demonstrations" (p. 13), as exemplified by the violent outbreaks of autumn 2005 that occurred in various French *banlieues*.

In our opinion, this is a stereotypical image of young people that derives from the fact that the voting behavior of young adults is too often equated with their political involvement. Some studies have shown that young people are politicized, albeit in a different way (Bouamana, 1993). Others point out that young adults rely on a different political repertoire (Muxel, 1994, 2001), which includes modes of participation other than voting or membership in political parties. This is clearly illustrated by the findings of the General Social Survey on Social Engagement, carried out in Canada in 2003. Although only 59% of eligible voters in their 20s voted (compared with 71% of voters between the ages of 30 and 44 and 85% or more of voters aged 45 and over), almost three out of five people (58%) in the 22 to 29 age bracket participated in at least one other form of political involvement besides voting. This proportion is very similar to that of adults in the 30 to 64 age bracket (56%). In this respect, recent findings demonstrate that young adults perform a fairly large amount of volunteer work (Bellaoui, 2005). They are active on directorial boards, educational boards, on elected councils, and so on (Beaudet & Lapointe, 2001), as well as being involved with regional youth forums (Gauthier, 2000), associations (Ferrand-Bechmann, 2005; Roudet, 2005), or with local councils (Rossini, 2005). Looking at Canada in particular, although 26% of the Canadian population participated in at least one volunteer activity throughout the year in 1999, this proportion accounts for 37% of people between the ages of 15 and 19 and 22% of those in the 20 to 24 age group.<sup>1</sup> In addition, it appears that young Canadians devote as many or more hours to volunteer work as does the population as a whole. Those in the 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 age groups devote 121 and 169 hours, respectively, to volunteer work per year, in comparison with the 162

hours devoted by all age groups put together. Lastly, the results of various studies also reveal that young adults in their 20s are much more likely than seniors to search for information on a political issue, to sign a petition, to boycott (or purchase) a product for ethical reasons, or to participate in demonstrations (Milan, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2003).

In other words, similar to quite a few other researchers, we also believe that dissociation exists between electoral decision making and other forms of involvement among young people.

If many young adults remain on the sidelines of electoral decision making, if they maintain a certain distance or even mistrust with respect to political institutions and their representatives, and if they are particularly clear-sighted and critical even though they remain on their guard, they are nonetheless not depoliticized. . . . While they no longer wish to “hear about” the political world as it is now, they are still not leaving the political scene. They are actors in the fullest sense of the word. They are politically in the game, although in another way, in their own way. This is the way that their ties are formed nowadays, if not to politics, then at least to a group or collectivity. (Muxel, 2001, p. 47)

Furthermore, even the overall form of involvement has changed. The traditional modes of involvement (voting, party membership) and political reference points (the split between Right and Left) are dying off or becoming marginalized. New modalities are taking on greater importance, such as selective mobilization around larger issues, namely the environment, the inequality between the North and the South, the peace factor, and the emergence of new civil forms of action such as the autonomous left (Dobré, 2002) or political consumerism (Micheletti, 2003). The notion of a mutation in political involvement is used in this sense (Ion, 1997, 2005; Perrineau, 1994) to describe the widening scope of social and political participation (Barthélemy, 2000; Filleule & Pichu, 1993; Ion, 1997; Perrineau, 1994; Schehr, 2000). In fact, Ion (2005) described it as follows.

Describing the current landscape of activism involves describing a huge puzzle composed of very diverse types of action that are however almost always united by one common characteristic: the desire to act effectively. (p. 24).

These new forms of involvement take place in a context of uncertainty or risk (Beck, 2001) caused by the environmental and political state of the world (climatic changes due to the greenhouse effect, international tensions, opposition between the North and South, etc.). These forms of involvement

are undertaken with the specific intent of averting such potential dangers in a tangible way under the auspices of ecological, antiglobalization, or humanitarian groups. Particular to modern society, this way of envisaging political involvement is based on the possible short- and long-term repercussions of certain situations (Ion, Franguiadakis, & Viot, 2005). It implies that each person has a degree of responsibility toward others and the future (Genard, 2006), as the environmental actions carried out by young people, in particular, illustrate well. The idea, held notably by many antiglobalization activists, consists of acting for tomorrow today. Local-level action allows for direct and concrete action (Pleyers, 2004), but it does not exclude a political impact at the international level because global repercussions might ensue. In this respect, advances in technological communication (such as the Internet) have encouraged the creation of transnational networks and the development of new activist practices by providing novel ways of actively promoting a new vision of politics (Pleyers, 2004), especially among young people.

## Method

In terms of methodology, we felt that the goal of our research project would best be met through a qualitative study based on grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), drawing from data collected via detailed respondent interviews.

### Respondent Sample

Respondents were recruited on a volunteer basis according to one main criterion: They must be active within a group or political party. In terms of political parties, we focused on the two parties that alternate power the most often in Quebec—the *Parti québécois* (PQ), a party that advocates an independent Quebec, and the *Parti libéral du Québec* or PLQ (Quebec Liberal Party), which in turn defends Quebec's place within Canadian federalism. Both of these political parties have instituted forums for young activist members, including the PQ's *Comité national des jeunes* (National Youth Committee) and the PLQ's *Commission-Jeunesse* (Youth Commission). In terms of community organizations and associations, we opted for two types of groups. The first type included groups composed of, and aimed at, young people. In this category, we chose *Force Jeunesse* (Youth Force, active in Quebec labor and socioeconomic issues), *la Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne*

(Christian Working Youth), *le Mouvement pour le Droit à l'Éducation* (Movement for the Right to Education), *l'Association des étudiants de 1er cycle en sociologie de l'UQAM* (Undergraduate Sociology Students' Association of the Université de Québec à Montréal), *le Regroupement autonome des jeunes* or RAJ (Youth for the Autonomous Left), and *Environnement Jeunesse* or ENJEU (Youth Environmental Network). The second type included groups that are likely to be of particular interest to young people because of the issues they address (globalization, poverty, the environment, social justice). In this category, we chose *Opération SalAMI* (the SalAMI Network—an antiglobalization coalition), *le Collectif pour une loi sur l'élimination de la pauvreté* (Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty), *Opération Québec Printemps 2001* (Operation Quebec Spring 2001, a reference to antiglobalization activity at the 2001 Summit of the Americas in Quebec City), *Les AmiEs de la terre de Québec* (Friends of the Earth), *le Rassemblement pour une alternative politique* (Union for a Political Alternative), *ATTAC-Québec (l'Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financières pour l'Aide aux Citoyennes et citoyens)*—a branch of ATTAC-International (the International Movement for Democratic Control of Financial Markets and Their Institutions), Greenpeace, *l'Institut du Nouveau Monde* (New World Institute), *Convergence des luttes anticapitalistes* or CLAC (Anticapitalist Convergence), *Option citoyenne* (Citizen Option—a social justice advocacy group), and *l'Union paysanne* (a Via Campesina subsidiary). A feminist group, *la Fédération des femmes du Québec* or FFQ (Federation of Quebec Women), is also included.

## Interviews and Analysis

Semistructured interviews, lasting an hour and a half on average, were carried out on the following main topics: (a) the trajectory that respondents' involvement has taken (motives, triggering mechanisms, origin of their interest in politics, etc.), (b) their life history (family and academic trajectories), (c) the meaning that involvement has for them (definitions, representations, etc.), (d) modes and practices of involvement (description of daily or specific activities), and (e) social representations (perceptions of *Québécois* society, social issues, etc.). Interviews were all recorded and transcribed in full. A qualitative content analysis was then performed. This involved the following two main steps: (a) vertical analysis (interview content), which involved delimiting and coding the main topics and related subthemes, extracting the organizational components of each narrative, grouping these elements into categories, and elaborating hypotheses; and (b) horizontal analysis (comparative

interview analysis), in which the content of young people's discourse was linked to independent variables to verify these working hypotheses, find cases that might negate these working hypotheses, and refine the original thematic categories.

## Description of Respondents

*Young women.* The young women interviewed for this study are all between 18- and 30 years, with an average age of 22 years. Their annual income varies from \$0 to \$57,000, although the average annual income of respondents active in the political parties and the FFQ is \$20,000. The average annual income of respondents who are active in community groups and associations is around \$11,000. Those with higher incomes all have full-time jobs, which helps explain these salary differences. Their residential situations also vary, some respondents live with their spouses or partners (6), whereas others live alone (4), with roommates (6), with their parents (3), or with a sister (1). Almost all of them are working or studying even though most are doing both at the same time. Two of these women have a child. In terms of parental age, their mothers are all between the ages of 45 and 61, and their fathers between the ages of 46 and 65. Most of the young women in this study come from social milieux characterized by high parental levels of education but more modest annual family incomes. Three fourths of respondents come from families earning an annual income of less than \$100,000. Interestingly, the mothers of almost all our female respondents are working, with the exception of three who consider themselves to be housewives, and one who is currently unemployed.

*Young men.* The young men participating in this study are all between 19 and 33 years,<sup>2</sup> with an average age of 24.1 years. The annual income of those who are active in political parties ranges from \$5,000 to \$85,000, with an average income of \$31,000. Young men involved with alternative groups and community associations have an annual income that ranges from \$5,000 to \$40,000, with an average income of \$18,000. This lower income range is due to the fact that 6 of these 10 young men are students. As with the young women, their residential situations also vary, eight live with a spouse or same-sex partner and the others live alone (5), with their parents (4), with friends or roommates (2), or with a brother (1). Only one of these young men has a child. Of the 20 young men interviewed in total, 10 are working (two also study at the same time) and 10 are full-time students. The parents of these young men belong to the same generation as

those of our young female activists. Their mothers are all between the ages of 45 and 62, and their fathers range in age from 50 to 59 years. The parents of these young men are also highly educated. However, these young men all grew up in families that have higher annual incomes. More than half of them come from families earning more than \$100,000 per year. Last, similar to our young women, the mothers of our young male activists all belong to a generation of women who have been able to reconcile work with family life, because, excepting one mother, they are all working.

## **Discussion and Analysis of Results**

### **The Route Leading to Activism**

The main point that emerges from our analysis is that one does not become an activist in a day. Social involvement takes place very early on in the life trajectory of the young men and women interviewed for this study.

### **Experience With Multiple Forms of Social and Political Involvement, Volunteer Work, and Civic Participation**

The majority of respondents have been involved in civic participation efforts and volunteer activities throughout their entire adolescence in sectors, such as education, politics, social issues, and community development. Some respondents, especially those who are active in political parties, also have some experience with political institutional activities. These include participating in a provincial and/or federal election campaign (poll clerk, invigilator, door-to-door work, putting up posters), in a referendum, in a party leadership campaign, and so on. Besides their educational and political involvement, many young people have also been involved in social issues or have participated in humanitarian projects (Senegal, Mali) or political training abroad (Brazil, Nicaragua), all experiences that have helped change their vision of the world.

In addition to having devoted time to participation in various organizations since their adolescence, many young people have also pursued activities that testify to their desire for social or civic involvement. These include things such as having signed or drafted a petition, written an article for the readers' comments section of a newspaper or magazine, or having participated in a demonstration (e.g., demonstrations against the war in Iraq, the Quebec

student strikes of 2005, the Summit of the Americas held in Quebec City in 2001, International Women's Day, demonstrations against the G20 Summit or the G8 Summit, or at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre). Therefore, in spite of their age, the young activists participating in this study already have solid activism experience and have been interested for many years in different causes and have invested their time concurrently in actions taking place in various spheres of influence.

### **The Influence of Family**

Furthermore, our findings confirm that the family plays an important role in the route toward activism, because the parents of most respondents are politicized or interested in politics. In quite a few families, either the mother or father is or was a member of a political party. Some are active on a regular basis or during electoral campaigns, and several other family members (grandfather, uncle, aunt, stepmother) currently hold or have held various political positions (member of a political party, deputy, minister, political attaché, ambassadors).

I've always been involved. Both my parents are activists, my background's really in union movements. . . . My father was an activist in the 60s . . . and my mother, she was into municipal politics. She used to work on things like employment, economic issues, the workforce. That's how I learned what political life is like. I think my mother had more influence over me in this than my father did, even if what I'm doing now is more like what he used to do. (Annie, 21 years, *Force Jeunesse*)

The young women in our sample who are active in a feminist group all have mothers and sometimes aunts who are active and involved at different levels and who sometimes have also had unconventional life trajectories for their times (living with a partner before marriage, working outside the home, etc.).

In short, the majority of young people participating in this research project have grown up in an environment where politics was a prime topic of discussion, which confirms current theories on the role of the family in terms of political socialization. The role parents play in their child's political education seems to be a determining factor in respondents' desire to become active or not, because "the initial acquisition of political knowledge and preparation for the role and function of the future citizen are made throughout childhood and adolescence" (Muxel, 1993, p. 54). It is to be noted here that

for young adults transmission of an interest for politics does not necessarily translate into adherence to their parents' political values and colors.

### **The Importance of Political Context: The Factor That Triggers Involvement**

Another factor to keep in mind when examining young people's activist trajectory is political context, because this acts as a triggering mechanism for many young women and men. Some young people were marked by political events (Meech Lake Accord, the 1995 Quebec Referendum,<sup>3</sup> etc.), whereas others got the bug while accompanying one of their parents to a political event. Most of the young feminists whom we interviewed reported that their involvement solidified during the World March of Women. This event united a total of 161 countries and more than 10,000 people on October 17, 2000, in New York, while more than 20 other marches also took place at the same time throughout the world. Each of these events represents a "moment of intense crystallization" for participating respondents, a moment when "historical and biographical time join together and rearrange to create a sustainable impression" (Muxel, 2001, p. 119) on an entire generation, or at least on a large part of it. To become a triggering mechanism, an element must combine, as Barthélemy (1994) put it, with socialization within the family or with elements of personal history—for example, with a keen interest in politics in the case of our respondents.

In other words, the activist trajectory seems to be dependent on the conjunction of several temporalities, which in this case involves the intersection of genealogical time (family legacy), biographical time (life experiences, personal events, etc.), and a particular historical context, which Labadie (2005) calls generational time (the historical period lived by a particular generation).

### **The Characteristics of Young Adults' Involvement**

Involvement among the young adults participating in this study has three main characteristics. First, it allows for subjectivity, for affirmation of the "I" within the collective "We." Second, it aims to achieve concrete objectives. And third, it is synonymous with responsibility toward others—toward future generations and society in general.

*Involvement that allows for subjectivity.* The importance granted to subjectivity during young people's involvement appears in two ways. For

some, it is linked with the choice of cause itself. For a large majority, on the other hand, it centers around the fact that although their involvement is collectively oriented, it remains an individual act.

It should be kept in mind that for all the young adults interviewed for this study, being involved means defending a cause, having convictions, and fighting for values that they hold very dear. In effect, involvement in a cause must correspond with their values and interests and should also coincide with their deepest aspirations. This is what gives meaning to their action. This is especially true in the case of young women and some young men involved with alternative groups, who state that they are activist to defend a cause for which they feel outrage or indignation, or which touches them personally.

The women's cause affects me particularly profoundly, personally, through and through. It also comes of course from my desire for justice, but it's special because it affects me personally, especially now that I have kids. I'd say there's also the need to change the world for my kids, for my daughter of course, but also for my son, they can both benefit from it. (Patricia, 30 years, FFQ)

I can't be indifferent to this, it really appalls me, [ . . . ] it gives me the energy to go and find out what it's about and to explain it, defend it. To try and tear down this neoliberal lie, that everyone's free, that everyone can do what they want. It's not true! So that's what energizes me. (Marc-André, 33 years, *ATTAC-Québec*)

Furthermore, these young people have all chosen to be activist in the collective sense because they believe it is important to be politically active to make things happen. They are all certain that if individuals went to the trouble of taking an interest in current events, of speaking out publicly instead of denouncing their dissatisfactions in private, in short, of participating more in city life, then societal change will be possible.

I would've liked to spend my whole life on my organic farm doing sustainable community agriculture and different projects . . . for the next 30 years . . . but then Bush completely destroyed this with just one signature. . . . It's important not to forget the global aspect of this, that there are people who, for reasons I don't agree with, go and decide for us, decide directly for us. (Félix, 21 years, ENJEU)

If everyone made an effort not to get discouraged or give up, if everyone got together, then there would be a way to do something. (Lydia, 22 years, *l'Association des étudiants*)

In other words, for these young adults common effort is needed if action power is to function. This highlights the necessity of uniting under the banner of collective action, of acting together, as Neveu (1996) relates. Viewed in this way, activist involvement is in keeping with a collectivist perspective. It occurs through group action, mainly to pursue a power struggle through strength in numbers, using the idea that two heads are better than one, by taking advantage of everyone's talents through teamwork.

This being said, quite a few young men and women stressed the idea that although involvement is operationalized within a collective framework, it remains an individual act in that it requires that an activist's individuality be kept in mind.

[I'm active] as an individual, and my individuality includes the fact that I'm a woman, a student, a young person, a citizen, that I'm all this in the end. I don't specifically defend the women's cause, perhaps more the students' cause than the women's cause. (Lydia, 22 years, *l'Association des étudiants*)

For these young people, although collective change depends above all on the efforts of everyone and on individual involvement, it is conceived in a highly personal way. In practice, this requires that group cohesion be maintained while reserving the right to dissent at the same time. The majority of respondents involved in a political party or an alternative group affirm that within a collective framework one's personal interest must necessarily be put aside. These young adults believe that members' support for the democratically obtained general opinion of the group serves to maintain its unity and cohesion.

You have to think politically and not about your personal interests. We represent a group, and it's the same for me when I write something, or when the YC [Youth Commission] makes a decision, for example. Whether it goes with my personal interests or not, I've got to go along with it, I have to defend it, I have to defend all its platforms, so that's exactly what I'll do. (Mathieu, 21 years, PLQ)

However, they maintain that they feel free to express their opinions and defend their viewpoints within the group. The exchange of perspectives or debate that precedes decision making is considered to encourage the expression of ideas, opinions, and personal viewpoints. Indeed, although intergroup cohesion is important for the majority of respondents, this does not prevent many young adults from retaining the right of dissension, that is, the possibility of dissociating from the group if ever they are required to defend ideas that do not correspond with their principles, values, or convictions. Above

and beyond the fact of being openly opposed to an idea, for these young people it is a matter of physically dissociating themselves from an action, demonstration, or from the group itself (temporarily or permanently). As we saw previously, respondents join a group because it corresponds with their values and convictions, and if this turns out to be no longer the case they will terminate their involvement with the group in question.

If the group made choices that I totally disagree with, for sure I'd withdraw as well, I mean at the level of actions and orientations, if I could, but if I completely disagreed, I wouldn't be able to continue being involved with that group. (Thomas, 27 years, CLAC)

In this respect, young males active in political parties are noticeably different from other respondents in that they all refer to the importance of following the party line, of defending the party's positions in public without necessarily sharing them fully. In fact, they do not envision the possibility of physically dissociating themselves from an action or stance if it is arrived at through a democratic vote, because the democratic process has significant value for them.

The perspective of young women active in these same political parties is quite different, because they assert loud and clear their right to freedom of thought and their right to provide or withdraw support for the party line. Although their involvement is driven by their convictions and belief in a cause, they want to be able to keep their own opinions and retain some freedom of thought and independence within the party. They do this by giving themselves the option of not supporting everything, for example, or of leaving if the situation is no longer acceptable. They do not believe that one leaves one's identity at the door when joining a group; it is important to remain true to oneself and to be genuine even within a political party.

There's a way to have values and believe in things anyways, so as not to lose your individuality in the name of the party line. (Célia, 20 years, PLQ)

We've got our things to say, we've got the right to think what we want, so it's discouraging to be blocked by those who are higher up. (Caroline, 22 years, PQ)

The need for freedom of speech and the refusal to entertain a sole way of thinking or absolute loyalty to the party clearly conveys how the meaning of political involvement is changing, especially among young adults. It signifies "contention over the fact that an organization's message cannot be reduced to the specific expression of its individual members. In principle,

such formal language usually expresses agreement; it is understood to imply a ‘we’ wholly and completely” (Ion, 1994, p. 33). The demand is now arising for an “I” that can predominate within the “We,” and that is even able to disaffiliate and leave the “We.” Involvement with a political party or community organization is not expected to last a lifetime. It creates only “obligations freely consented to” and “allows people to meet others, to speak with them, to cooperate together” (Dubar, 2000, p. 20). In this respect, it might be said that activism allows all the young people in our study to form ties of friendship and solidarity and that the group represents an important place of sociability for them. In short, young adults’ involvement illustrates well the emergence of new forms of subjectivity in the field of politics, of what Dubar calls “a self-identity,” one that arises from “a reflexive awareness that actively encourages involvement in a project that has subjective meaning. . . . For example, this can be political involvement in a movement that is chosen out of conviction and which constitutes a ‘passion’” (Dubar, 2000, p. 11). Involvement among young people and among young women, in particular, arises out of a “correspondence or compatibility between the collective orientations of an action and personal subjectivity” (Wiervorka, 1998, p. 41). This is especially true for the young feminists interviewed for this study, whose personal identity is a mobilizing force beyond the more collective identity of the association, a phenomenon that was noted previously in the case of young women involved with political parties.

*Getting involved to achieve concrete objectives.* All the young adults participating in this study said that they are active in a political party or an alternative group to change, to advance, or to make progress on things within society.

The future’s far from rosy. That’s why I’m an activist, because the future’s far from rosy, and I’d like to brighten it up a bit. (Olive, 20 years, RAJ)

I’d go into politics for the power, the power to change things, and for the chance to achieve something really necessary, for women to take the place they’ve never rightfully been given. (Gabrielle, 26 years, FFQ)

I told myself that I wouldn’t be like the others, that I’d truly get involved and I’d really do what I could to change things. You always sort of come into politics for that, to change things and to further some of your concerns. (Martin, 20 years, PLQ)

Their involvement has an active dimension, because it implies putting action in motion (Perrineau, 1994) and represents the ability to act as a change agent and the possibility of fixing things. Even within political parties that

have broad agendas, young adults prefer to mobilize around a limited number of objectives that can have a large impact nevertheless. This is why the importance of what respondents call fieldwork appears as a leitmotif throughout all their interviews.

I'm not really into noble causes or fancy speeches. I'm very down to earth, very practical, ok, there's a problem, let's fix it. Of course I know that those other things are important, there are people who do it, and that's fine, it takes all kinds. (Fanny, 21 years, PLQ)

For all the young adults in this study, involvement is linked with the need to carry out concrete actions, which range from speaking out on issues to sundry tasks such as arranging chairs and tables for a meeting or organizing conferences. It also includes advancing their ideas and promoting their vision of society through different means, such as public speaking, writing newspaper articles, developing and presenting proposals at their party's general congress, participating in demonstrations, and so on. Seen from this angle, the young people in this study are no different from young people in general, who often attribute prime importance to the ability to take concrete action (Boy, Muxel, & Roche, 1994; Muxel, 2001). In addition, these young adults want to remain close to people and to reduce the distance between party members and citizens. In short, they want to retain their humanity and remain accessible and wish to bring citizens and elected officials closer together.

*Involvement as a responsible act.* Above and beyond the specific objectives of their involvement, the young people interviewed over the course of this study felt responsible for the future of society on different levels. Responsibility takes on a prospective dimension for them with respect to future generations (Jonas, 1990).

I'm doing this for my children, but also for all of us, I told myself we can do better if we all get together. You have to take action in order for things to change, so that things do change, we can do better, we can go farther. It's having hope and confidence in ourselves. (Ian, 19 years, *Option citoyenne*)

Some view their involvement as a type of gift for their children's future and for the future of all children worldwide. They favor concrete change for this reason, especially change that is sustainable over the long term. They are convinced that they can contribute today toward improving both the present

and the future. Environmental issues are first and foremost in young adults' minds when they speak about the future.

For all the young people in this study, involvement also means responsibility in the form of one's obligation toward others and toward the collectivity. In other words, participation in city life, and in social and political life in general, is a duty and an action required of citizens.

Citizenship is like a responsibility that you have towards the society you're living in. Acting like a citizen means acting responsibly. I'm going to use my right to vote, my right to speak out. I'll pick litter up when I see it on the ground. Even if all I do is help distribute Christmas baskets, it's all a way of being active in my community. (Annick, 28 years, FFQ)

For our respondents, citizenship is much more than a collection of rights and duties. It has both legal and participative dimensions and is not only a state of being but is also an action. In fact, citizenship for many young adults is a collection of individual and collective obligations and responsibilities, whether it is a matter of voting, understanding history, having public spirit, respecting the environment, or using public transportation. The right to vote is the civic responsibility that is mentioned the most often, because it is the basis of all freedoms, all other rights, and is thus a citizen's number one duty (Éric, 23 years, PLQ). In other words, involvement for these respondents is equivalent in many ways to the exercise of citizenship.

Being a citizen means getting involved in your surroundings, it's taking part in democracy; you start by voting, with that little action. Getting involved in decision-making processes in your area at different levels. It's all about thinking collectively. (Vicky, 25 years, FFQ)

It's someone who tries to think about how the way he lives can affect the life of others. Someone who's a good citizen is going to try to think about his actions from time to time, on what they can do to others. And also participate a bit in life, in the life of the city. Voting, being informed, being able to form an opinion on subjects and discussing them. For me, that's a good citizen. (Benoit, 23 years, PQ)

In this respect, although the majority of respondents interviewed for this study acknowledge the importance of acting collectively to change things, some young people, especially those who are actively involved with alternative groups, also mention the importance of acting individually. These young people say that they pursue tangible individual actions in their daily life to this end (buying local or organic products, pursuing fair trade consumption, getting around by bicycle or public transportation, etc.).

You can make daily actions that are very political, like taking the *métro* [subway] instead of your car, buying fair trade coffee, eating Moroccan clementines, these are all political actions. (Sophie, 27 years, FFQ)

I bike 6 months out of the year; when I do my groceries, I walk; instead of going once every two weeks, I go three times a week; I walk and I always watch what I eat; it's all part of my conception of things. You can't be an antiglobalization activist and eat at McDonald's or eat meat three times a day. There are all sorts of conceptions that feed into this, and at a certain point you end up with a more balanced life and you realize that you live in a complex system and what you do can either make things go better or worse. (Marc-André, 33 years, *ATTAC-Québec*)

For these young people, every daily action merits thought and “the slightest action is political” (Ian, 19 years, *Option citoyenne*). Many of these young adults adhere to the idea that every daily action can have social and environmental repercussions at the global level and take the antiglobalization slogan “Think globally, act locally” to heart. In fact, quite a few of them refer to the idea that Laure Waridel puts forward in her latest work, *Acheter, c'est voter* (2005), and also in *Coffee with Pleasure* (2001), that small actions taken here make a fairly big difference in less developed countries, especially in the South.

## Conclusion

In closing, it becomes clear that the involvement practices of young male activists closely resemble those of their female counterparts. For all of them, the cause is more important than the group, as are the more practical aspects of politics, such as fieldwork. Their viewpoint is similar in fact to that of young people in general who, as many studies have shown, wish to reinforce direct democracy and bring elected officials and citizens closer together. In this respect, the young activists encountered over the course of this study all hold an active conception of citizenship. This conception is composed of rights and obligations, but is also based on action.

Furthermore, the families of these young men and women have all had a role to play in encouraging their desire to change the world. Although these young people have followed activist trajectories that are different from one another, they all come from families that are open-minded with regard to political issues or where a strong socialization process into social or political activism exists. The parents of most of these young people are actively involved in politics and also became involved themselves at a very young age with school committees or charitable organizations, among others.

Last, similar to a number of other researchers, we believe that the activism practiced over the past century “is perhaps only one type of involvement among others,” and that new forms of social participation are “in the making, corresponding to an evolution in the relationship between the individual and society” (Ion, 1997, p. 12). Although these new forms of social participation are certainly not specific to young adults alone, they do describe their practices well, as we have seen over the course of this article. The activists who participated in this study are testing out a type of involvement that is more distant (Ion, 1994), that is, limited, contractual, and partial, an “involvement that is tailored, ephemeral, multiple” (Ion & Ravon, 1998, p. 64). This type of involvement is also more pragmatic, in that it not only centers around actions that target long-term global transformation but are also primarily situated in the here and now, as opposed to actions that defend a single great cause or ideology. These young people are interested in immediate and tangible social change. They prefer causes that tend to be tied in with their identity (female, young person) or with their living conditions (poverty, inequality) and that are also linked to the global future of society and the earth itself, a future for which they feel partly responsible. This is particularly true for young activists with the PQ and with feminist or alternative groups, for whom the status of women is a very important cause that merits support, whatever the forum of involvement might be or regardless of the other struggles awaiting them. These young people are thus far from being nonpoliticized; they are indeed politicized, but in a way different than the youth of previous generations.

As a whole, their involvement practices correspond with what we might call a “search for ethical consistency (that) aims to give meaning to the values that we adhere to both individually and collectively” (Lamoureux, 1996, p. 14). In effect, their involvement is an individual as well as a collective act. Individually, it brings them personal satisfaction in addition to being beneficial at the professional level. Collectively, it is an act that is constructed through interrelations with others and with society in general. Some young people said that being involved is a philosophy of life that implies living in accordance with one’s ideals. In this respect, authenticity is one of the values that they support the most. This is demonstrated by their desire to carry out daily actions that are consistent with the values and causes that they defend publicly during their political activities. In practice, the search for consistency has encouraged them to find work (or to want to work) in a field or for a firm whose aim corresponds with their activist ideals (feminist, political, humanitarian, environmental, etc.) and to carry out corresponding daily practices that range from choosing ecologically friendly modes of transportation to buying fair trade products.

These observations, coupled with the increasing popularity and media attention given to a panoply of products that can be considered to be fair trade, sustainable, ethical, or that show solidarity with a certain cause, suggest that it might be interesting to explore these new forms of consumption, called responsible or socially engaged consumption, in greater depth to analyze their meaning and political impact. One can already suggest the hypothesis that above and beyond the choice of quality foods (pesticide-free or nongenetically modified) and more egocentric goals (preservation of health, for example), the purchase of fair trade or organic products has an altruistic goal and that for young people it represents another way of investing in public space besides the "collective or mass format" (Ion, 2005, p. 24). Generally speaking, it seems that young people's involvement is increasingly becoming embodied in intermediary practices, in practices such as responsible consumption that allow a transition between public and private space to occur (Dobré, 2002) and that also exhibit political potential.

## Notes

1. These figures are taken from Statistics Canada's *National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating* (2000).

2. Only one young man was older than 30 years at the time of interview, but we decided to retain this respondent due to the relevance of his account.

3. In 1982, the province of Quebec opposed a new constitutional law, resulting in its exclusion from the Canadian constitutional framework. The Meech Lake Accord was then signed in 1987 to remedy this. The Accord was rejected in 1990 in the wake of much opposition throughout Canada. In the end, the Charlottetown Accord, another attempt at constitutional reform, was rejected by a referendum held in 1992.

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**Anne Quéniart** is a professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Montreal, Canada. Her expertise lies in family sociology, particularly in representations of parenthood made by fathers and mothers; in sociology of political involvement; and in qualitative methodology. She is currently working on the question of fair trade and organic consumption, known as responsible consumption, as a form of political involvement among young people.