

Political mobilization and Quebec's 'Maple Spring'

A major study shows the least-well-off students were the likeliest to protest

June 3, 2013, Victoria – Political theory says people from comfortable economic backgrounds are most likely to take part in a political demonstration.

But a new study shows that during Quebec's 'Maple Spring' last year, it was the students who were more vulnerable, socio-economically, who were leading the pack.

The study was carried out by researchers from three Montreal universities: McGill, l'Université du Québec à Montréal, and l'Université de Montréal, under the direction of McGill's Dietlind Stolle.

About 120,000 Quebec students were asked to fill out an online survey about their participation in the Maple Spring, a string of often-violent student protests that rocked the province in the spring of 2012. Some 15,491 people completed the survey, which coincided roughly with the provincial election last fall. The results are being presented at the 2013 Congress of the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

Eva Falk Pedersen, a Master's level political science student at McGill and one of the authors of the study, says the researchers wanted to understand what was driving the students' political mobilization – mobilization that was virtually without precedent in Canada. Understanding what happened, she said, will help people predict similar phenomena in the future.

They tried to see whether they could, for example, identify factors that predicted whether a student would take part in a demonstration.

"What we found contradicts political science theory," said Falk Pedersen. "And that in itself may be important in advancing research."

It wasn't the best-off students who were most apt to march, but the ones on the economic margins – the students with heavy debt loads, those living on their own in apartments, or those with part-time jobs in which they worked less than 30 hours a week.

Where they came from also mattered: Montrealers and students from rural areas were most likely to demonstrate.

"It would appear that mobilization is no longer the preserve of the better-off," said Falk Pedersen.

The survey also attempted to ascertain whether the fact of having taken part in a protest influenced the student's vote in the provincial election.

They found that a student's opinion about Quebec's plan to hike tuition fees – the issue that set off the protests – was a strong predictor of the way a student voted. The fact of having taken part in a protest was also important, but to a lesser degree.

Falk Pedersen said that the authors of the study worked hard to make sure they conducted the study done with strict scientific rigour. “We wanted it to stand out from what has already been done, and we wanted to avoid political opinions,” she said.

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