

Voters and Their Motivations

1.0 Who is more likely to vote?

Many studies have been done on the socio-demographic profiles of who votes in Canada. Though most of the studies focus on turnout at the federal level, it is generally accepted that the trends apply to the provincial and municipal levels.

1.1 Education

Education remains the most prominent indicator of whether or not someone will vote. The question is why turnout has decreased over time while overall education levels have increased. Blais et al. find that decline is related to the following educational factors:

1. Better-educated people (i.e. with a university degree or higher) of newer generations are less likely to vote than better-educated people of older generations;
2. Lesser-educated people of newer generations are much less likely to vote than lesser-educated people of older generations. Only one out of 3 or 4 of those born in the 1970s now votes; and
3. Better-educated people of older generations are still voting consistently while the lesser-educated people in older generations are voting less.

1.2 Age

In an analysis of the Canadian Election Studies conducted between 1968 and 2000, Blais et al. find that generational effects are the primary cause for the recent voter decline, meaning the odds of a young person voting now are less than when their parents and grandparents were their age.

Unfortunately there is no data showing youth voter trends over time at the local level in Canada but it is known that municipalities are also experiencing low youth turnout. A study of the 2003 St. Catharines, Ontario municipal election indicates that seniors were the highest voting group (79.0%), followed by middle-aged voters (70.6%), followed by a considerable drop for the 25-44 age group (53.3%) and a greater drop for the 18-24 category (26.3%). The authors report that similar patterns have been found in the other few case studies of turnout in Canadian municipalities.

1.3 Other indicators

The two most important determinants of voting, after age and education, are income and religiosity.

2.0 Why don't people vote?

Elections Canada has done numerous studies on why Canadians don't vote. The two most common reasons are that voters didn't think the election or their vote mattered, and voters didn't like the choices they were offered. The most common responses are summarized below:

- Didn't like candidates or parties
- Didn't think their vote makes a difference
- Election doesn't affect them
- Not enough time to vote; had to work
- Injury, illness
- Wasn't registered; not on voters' list; didn't receive voter's card
- Not enough information on where and when to vote

3.0 Underlying reasons

The underlying reasons behind why people don't vote are diverse and interrelated. The main themes are explored below.

3.1 Changes in Canadians' values

3.1.1 Decline in deference

Over the last few decades Canadians and citizens in Western democracies in general, have experienced a "decline in deference" towards traditional institutions. People's growing sense of personal autonomy has changed their attitudes toward authority and traditional institutions.

3.1.2 Social disintegration

Social capital theory suggests that citizens interact with each other differently than they did before the 1970's. Citizens are now much more individualistic and have fewer ties to their communities, making them less trusting of each other and of institutions. A decline in voter participation is a symptom of this social disintegration.

3.1.3 Growing cynicism

Many observers argue that the decline in voter turnout is a result of citizens losing confidence in their political leaders and becoming cynical about political processes. Voter apathy is seen as being driven by a growing disaffection with politics. The decline in deference and community trust contribute to this voter apathy but political scientists have also pointed to other reasons such as the proliferation of information available to citizens and the way in which political activities are reported by the media.

3.2 Uninteresting elections

A 2001 Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC) report states that:

"People are more likely to vote when they think their vote counts and they are more likely to think their vote counts when the election is hotly contested, or when there are major issues at stake (...) Political scientists who have studied voter turnouts in many democratic countries have concluded that one of the factors affecting turnout is the voters' own sense of whether the

election is close (in terms of the winner's margin of victory) or important (in terms of how much the outcome is deemed to matter.”

3.3 Youth

There are many interrelated arguments about why newer generations are less likely to vote. Theories include:

- Most recent generations pay less attention to politics and are less likely to believe that voting is a moral duty.
- Time spent with family has changed, lessening the amount of time families engage with each other. This has implications for the transmission of values and behaviour from one generation to the next.
- Newer generations have not experienced the hardship and failure to meet material needs that comes with times of war and economic downturn therefore they focus on “higher order” issues like environmentalism and human rights. This changes their beliefs and behaviour.
- Young Canadians are not indifferent to politics, they simply engage differently. They withdraw from traditional forms of political engagement (e.g. voting, joining political parties, etc) because of the hierarchical, long-term and relatively unsatisfying nature of such activity. Solutions need to be adapted to meet their different needs.

3.4 No political parties at local level

Political parties are decidedly absent from municipal politics in Canada, with few exceptions (e.g. Montreal and Vancouver). Several researchers have argued that the introduction of political parties at the municipal level would help increase voter turnout as parties provide cues for electors who may not be familiar with individual candidates. When looking at a sample of Canadian municipalities, however, it does not look like having a party system will necessarily result in a higher turnout. A comparison of voter turnout in a sample of Canada's larger municipalities from their last four elections is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Comparing Party versus Non-Party Municipalities¹

	Party system			Non-party system				
	Burnaby	Vancouver	Montreal	Calgary	Edmonton	Ottawa	Toronto	Winnipeg
	28.92	43.4	43.32	39.43	34.5	39.92	54.67	50.23
	23.29	34.57	39.44	53.39	33.4	44	43.65	47.1
	23.49	30.79	34.95	32.9	27.24	54	39.3	38.2
	25.57	32.61	49.23	19.8	41.79	33	38.32	48.7
Average	25.32	35.34	41.74	36.38	34.23	42.73	43.99	46.06

A 1997 Milner study comparing Scandinavian and Canadian political institutions suggests that Scandinavia's higher voter turnout at the local level is linked to its strong vertical integration between parties at the local, regional and national level. Information passes more easily between parties at all levels of government, consolidating a party's message and creating a clearer and continuous political map for voters. This vertical integration does not exist in Canada and could be the reason why Canadian municipalities with party systems do not necessarily have higher voter turnouts than non-party municipalities.

3.5 Administrative barriers and weather

The effects administrative factors (e.g. advance vote days, mail-in options, etc) can have on voter turnout have been studied by numerous researchers. A 2007 Elections Canada study completed by Blais et al. analyzes the effect of non-election day voting opportunities has on voter turnout at the national level. The study concludes that:

1. There is relatively clear evidence that when voting is more convenient, a greater proportion of the population turnout out to vote. However, the effect is modest at best.
2. Cross-national research on the effects of advance voting, holiday voting (also includes voting on a weekend), and a two-day voting period has yielded inconsistent and ambiguous results. Some studies show that these institutional factors have a positive effect on voter turnout while other studies show no effect.

¹ Election years from top to bottom of column:

Burnaby, Vancouver	Montreal	Calgary, Edmonton	Ottawa, Toronto	Winnipeg
2014	2013	2013	2014	2014
2011	2009	2010	2010	2010
2008	2005	2007	2006	2006
2005	2001	2004	2003	2002

3. Research on the consequences of postal or advance voting in the United States usually indicates positive effects, but these effects tend to be limited and restricted to certain subgroups of the electorate. For example, mail-in voting increases turnout by making it easier for people who generally, but not always, vote to cast ballots. It did little to cause habitual non-voters to cast ballots.

The effect that identification restrictions have on voting has been studied extensively, primarily in the United States. Studies generally show that the strictest forms of voter identification requirements –presenting an identification card and positively matching one’s signature with a signature either on file or on the identification card, as well as requirements to show picture identification – have a negative impact on the participation of voters. Stricter voter identification requirements depress turnout to a greater extent for less education and lower income populations, for both minorities and non-minorities. The requirement that citizens register to vote ahead of Election Day makes voting a more difficult act and also lowers the number of people who turn out.

Studies have shown a statistically significant relationship between weather and voter turnout, though the impact is quite small. In a study of each American presidential election from 1948 to 2000, Gomez et al. find that one additional inch of rain decreases turnout by almost one percentage point while the effect of one additional inch of snow is almost 0.5 percentage points.

3.6 Immigrants and minorities

An analysis of the impact of immigration and ethnicity on the voting behaviour of Canadians in federal and provincial elections shows that while personal characteristics (age, education, etc.) and social/civic connections explain a great deal of voting behaviour, minority status (ethnic origin, language, etc) does not. What is important for immigrants is the same as any other voter; their sociodemographic makeup and how connected they are to the community. Because people who access the news are more likely to vote than those who do not, it is noted that ethnic media sources may be every bit as good at encouraging voter participation as mainstream news sources.

In 2011, the Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary (ECCC) and Immigration Sector Council of Calgary (ISCC) surveyed a group from the immigrant community about their experiences and understandings of municipal voting, and what would encourage them to vote. The three most common reasons cited for not voting in the 2010 municipal election were:

1. They were not a Canadian citizen
2. They did not have time to vote
3. They did not feel strongly about any one of the candidates

Bibliography:

- Alvarez, Michael R., Delia Bailey and Jonathan N. Katz (2008). "The Effect of Voter Identification Laws on Turnout." Social Science Research Network, January.
- Belgrave, Debbie and Carla Vall (2011). "Every Vote Counts." The Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary and the Immigrant Sector Council of Calgary, April.
- Bevelander, Pieter and Ravi Pendakur (2009). "Social capital and voting participation of immigrants and minorities in Canada." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32(8):1406-1430.
- Blais, Andre, Agnieszka Dobrzynska and Peter Lowen (2007). "Potential Impacts of Extended Advance Voting on Voter Turnout." Elections Canada, September.
- Blais, Andre, Elisabeth Gidengil, Neil Nevitte and Richard Nadeau (2004). "Where does turnout decline come from?" *European Journal of Political Research*, 43(2):221-236.
- Canadian Research and Information on Canada (CRIC) (2001). "Voter Participation in Canada: Is Canadian Democracy in Crisis?" October.
- Geys, Benny (2006). "Explaining voter turnout: A review of aggregate-level research." *Electoral Studies* 25(4):637-663.
- Gidengil, Elizabeth, Andre Blais, Neil Nevitte and Richard Nadeau (2003). "Turned Off or Tuned Out? Youth Participation in Politics." *Electoral Insight* 5(2):9-14.
- Gomez, Brad T., Thomas G. Hansford, and George A. Krause (2007). "The Republicans Should Pray for Rain: Weather, Turnout, and Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections." *Journal of Politics*, 69 (3): 649-663.
- Kushner, Joseph and David Siegel (2006). "Why Do Municipal Electors Not Vote?" *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 15(2): 264-277.
- Milner, Henry (1997). "Electoral Systems, Integrated Institutions and Turnout in Local and National Elections: Canada in Comparative Perspective." *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 30(1): 89-106.
- O'Neill, Brenda (2007). "Indifferent or Just Indifferent? The Political and Civic Engagement of Young People in Canada." Canadian Policy Research Networks, June.
- Putnam, Robert D (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York City: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks.