Confronting the Problem of Declining Voter Turnout Among Youth

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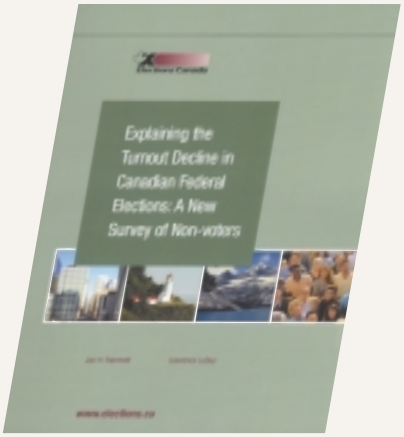
The decline of voter turnout in Canada to a historic low in the November 2000 federal election has generated concern among academics, the media and attentive members of the general public. While voter turnout has long been a subject of study by scholars interested in more general issues of political participation, the reasons for the recent precipitous decline are not yet well understood. It is evident, however, that the decline is not connected solely with the most recent federal election, as turnout has declined in each of the last three general elections. Nor does it seem that the turnout decline is necessarily connected to political issues and events specific to Canada. Voter turnout has also been declining in many other industrialized countries. In the most recent French parliamentary election, for example, it dropped to levels as low as those observed in Canada, while in the United Kingdom it has fallen even lower.

Implications of declining turnout

The issue of voter turnout is taking on greater importance in public discussion in Canada and elsewhere, both because of the magnitude of the recent declines and the way in which they are being interpreted. Observers increasingly link declining participation in elections to some of the more fundamental problems of modern democracy. In this view, declining public participation in a nation's most fundamental democratic exercise may be part of a larger "democratic deficit" and may have serious implications for the health of its democratic political system. Further, if the social and political forces that are driving turnout down are of a longer-term nature, the problem of low voter participation could continue to plague the political system for years to come. If, for example, there is a consistent pattern of declining turnout across the generations, we might predict that electoral participation would continue to decline well into the future, simply as a result of normal demographic processes of population replacement. Such an interpretation has already been suggested by Blais and his colleagues in their analysis of the low turnout in the 2000 election.[1]

Survey of voters and non-voters

To investigate more systematically the causes and possible consequences of the prolonged decline in voter turnout in Canada, we designed and carried out a new survey in co-operation with Elections Canada in April 2002.[2] The sample design called for a short screening interview with a large number of Canadians (5,637) and a longer interview continued with



The survey results are available in the Electoral Law & Policy section of the Elections Canada Web site (www.elections.ca).

960 reported voters in the 2000 federal election and 960 reported non-voters in that election. In this way, interviews were obtained with a much larger sample of non-voters than is possible in election-related surveys of the Canadian public. The survey was designed to explore a variety of explanations for not voting, both in general terms and with reference to the sharp increase in not voting that has occurred in each of the last three federal elections. This article highlights three of the more important findings of the survey – the generational patterns of not voting, the reasons behind it, and perceptions of both younger and older voters of possible solutions to the problem.

Table 1 illustrates the clear pattern of decline in turnout across generations that has been at work in the Canadian electorate over the past decade or more.[3] The levels of non-participation for the three cohorts of newly eligible voters entering the electorate in each of the past three federal elections are striking.[4] Only slightly more than one in five of those who were eligible to vote for the first time in 2000 chose to participate. The figures are only slightly better among those cohorts of voters eligible to vote for the first time in 1997 or 1993. Even those who entered the electorate during the later Trudeau period (1974–1980) voted in 2000 at a lower rate than those in the older age groups. For those who entered the electorate during the Mulroney years (aged 30 to 37 in 2000) the overall percentage casting a ballot in 2000 was only 54 percent.

Photo: Elections Canada

Participants at the Symposium on Electoral Participation in Canada (March 21, 2003, in Ottawa) discussed ways to promote turnout among young voters.

It is, of course, not unusual to find lower rates of voting participation among the young. Such patterns are well documented in the literature on non-voting behaviour in Canada and in other countries. But lower participation rates among the young have generally been interpreted as a pattern associated with specific behavioural characteristics of the life cycle. As people age, they become more politically aware and engaged. It is, therefore, to be expected that voting rates should increase over time with these normal life cycle changes.

They should also increase with rising levels of education. Our evidence suggests, however, that such changes are occurring more slowly than they have in the past, and that many younger voters, when they do begin to enter the electorate, enter it at a much higher average age.[5] If such patterns persist over time, normal processes of population replacement will combine to keep driving turnout down, with each generation of newly eligible voters participating at lower rates and taking longer to enter the electorate. Since there is, as yet, no evidence that this process of steadily lower participation among younger generations is abating, there could well be even lower turnout in future elections than in 2000. Such a trend has potentially serious implications for Canadian democracy – for the extent of a democratic mandate that governments might claim, for the kinds of candidates who are elected and even for the types of issues that are discussed.

Table 1
Voting and Not Voting in 2000, by Age Cohorts

Voted in 2000 %	Age in 2000 (first eligibility)								Total %
	68+ (–1953)	58–67 (1957–1963)	48–57 (1968–1972)	38–47 (1974–1980)	30–37 (1984–1988)	25–29 (1993)	21–24 (1997)	18–20 (2000)	
Yes	83	80	76	66	54	38	28	22	61
No	17	20	24	34	46	62	73	78	39

N = 2,467 (weighted)

Reasons for not voting

Many of the questions in our survey were open-ended, allowing respondents to answer in their own words and to give more than one response to a question. In this way, we were able to explore more fully some of the attitudes and feelings that lie behind the decline in voter turnout in Canada. The ability to compare the answers of both older and younger respondents, and of voters and non-voters, provides insights into the problem of not voting among the young. We asked those who reported *not* having voted in the 2000 federal election to give their reasons for not voting, and we grouped these in three main categories as shown in Table 2 – *lack of interest*, *negativity* and *personal/administrative*.[6] Table 2 shows a number of interesting variations in the reasons for not voting given by different age groups. In particular, the youngest age group, aged 18–24 in 2000, was less likely to express reasons having to do with negative feelings towards political candidates, parties and leaders than were older age groups. They were, however, more likely to cite personal or administrative reasons for not voting, particularly that they were "too busy". They were also somewhat more likely to experience registration problems. The percentages reporting lack of interest were also higher in the two youngest age groups.

Photo: Wayne Brown

According to the authors' research, only about one quarter of eligible 18–24-year-olds are believed to have voted at the most recent Canadian general election in 2000.

Table 2
Main Reasons for Not Voting in 2000
(open-ended; multiple responses; % of respondents)

	Age in 2000					
	55+	45–54	35–44	25–34	18–24	Total
Lack of interest	**32**	**30**	**34**	**41**	**39**	**37**
Not interested; didn't care; apathy	23	18	20	27	28	25
Vote meaningless; won't count; election forgone conclusion	8	10	10	11	7	9
Forgot; unaware	2	0	1	2	4	2
Too complicated; confusing	0	2	3	1	0	1
Negativity	**30**	**50**	**46**	**32**	**27**	**34**
No appealing candidates/parties/issues	12	23	21	14	14	16
Lack of faith/confidence in candidates/parties/leaders	15	21	17	14	6	13
Lack of information about candidates/parties/issues	1	3	5	3	6	4
Regional discontent	2	3	3	1	1	1
Personal/Administrative	**46**	**33**	**28**	**35**	**43**	**37**
Too busy with work/school/family	4	3	12	14	23	14
Away from riding/province/country	22	9	8	11	8	10
Registration problems	3	7	3	5	7	6
Illness, health issues	12	8	2	2	*	3
Didn't know where or when; polling station problems; transportation	5	3	3	2	4	3
Moving-related problems	0	3	1	1	1	1
Other	**5**	**3**	**5**	**3**	**5**	**4**
Religious reasons	4	2	2	1	1	2
Other; unclassifiable; unclear; none	1	1	3	2	4	2
N =	101	109	171	331	347	1,059

*less than 1 percent

Table 3
Perceived Reasons Why Young People Are Less Likely to Vote (open-ended; multiple responses; % of respondents)

	Under 25 years old	25 and older
Not integrated	**79**	**71**
Distanced from politics by age; not feeling represented, connected	40	37
Lack of information, understanding, knowledge	34	27
Lack of encouragement	2	4
Too busy, too mobile	3	3
Disengagement	**51**	**59**
Uninterested, apathetic	31	30
Negativism, cynicism, disillusionment	9	14
Distrustful of system, politicians	7	9
Irresponsibility, rebelliousness, laziness	4	6
Other	2	4
Do not know	0	*
N =	386	1,420

*less than 1 percent

The oldest age group was most affected by health issues and by absence from the electoral district at election time, although it should be remembered that there were far fewer non-voters overall in the older age groups. The middle-aged groups, those between the mid-30s and the mid-50s, were more likely to cite reasons involving negative feelings toward politicians or political parties than were those in either the oldest or the youngest groups.

As part of the survey, we asked our respondents to speculate on the reasons behind the higher rates of not voting among youth. Their reasons (Table 3) fell into two broad categories – those related to a lack of integration of young people into the political system, and those suggesting that the problem lies with feelings of apathy or political distrust. It is apparent that the bulk of Canadians believe that young people are not voting because they feel distanced from the operations of the political system, or because they lack information about it. The first category, distancing from politics, contained responses of the following nature:

- Youth do not believe that government represents them or cares about their views, their needs and their issues.

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- The age difference distances youth from the political process and the politicians.
- Political parties do not reach out to them or are out of touch with youth.
- Youth feel that politics does not affect them, perhaps because they have not yet developed the responsibilities that are the subject of political discourse.
- No one listens to young people; they have no voice.

There is a strong feeling, then, that young people lack connection to the current political system. This explanation is joined by the suggestion that young people simply do not have enough political information. This lack of knowledge relates to all aspects of politics – the candidates, parties and issues. It extends to a lack of knowledge of how politics might affect their lives. Attitudes of this sort are cited as explanations by 34 percent of young people themselves. Overall, then, almost three quarters of the respondents in the study, and 80 percent of the under-25 age group, gave answers that we have classified in the "not integrated" category.

Explanations for not voting among youth also involved reasons that we classified as "disengagement". Such reasons were cited by 59 percent of respondents over 25, and 52 percent of young people themselves. The bulk of these answers simply categorized youth as uninterested or apathetic when it comes to voting in elections. This image of uncaring youth is sometimes accompanied by a more purposeful description of youth as being actively negative toward politics or elections. Older respondents were somewhat more likely to say that young people were less likely to vote because they were cynical or disillusioned about politics, sick of the "false promises, dishonesty, hypocrisy, corruption and negativity" that are sometimes seen as characterizing political life, and not willing to participate in a "meaningless" activity. Young people were also seen by some respondents as lacking trust in candidates, parties or the government, or simply disliking what is happening (or not happening) in politics.

Raising young people's interest in politics

We followed up the question about the reasons for lower voting levels among youth by asking respondents to suggest what they felt should be done to get young people to be more interested in politics. The answers to this question, again grouped by age, are shown in Table 4. A majority of those responding mentioned "improved education or information" as a potential solution. Answers in this category, however, were reasonably diverse, dealing not only with the need for more education in the schools but also in the home and in the media. Some also indicated that increased information or education needed to be made more relevant to the interests and personal situations of young people, to better engage them.

The notion of increased relevance to young people came up again in the next category of answers, which referred to systemic changes that might be made to encourage more involvement of youth. Table 4 indicates that 27 percent of respondents under 25 years of age felt that those setting the political agenda should make more effort to accommodate issues of relevance to young people, such as those relating to the jobs, education and future of youth. This number is almost twice as high as in the 25 and older group.

Other changes suggested in this category were related to improvements that might encourage more youth to enter politics – as leaders, politicians and candidates, for example. Few respondents mentioned the electoral system as a target of possible change. Indeed, in response to a separate series of closed-end questions on this topic, more than three quarters of the respondents in both the older and younger age groups expressed general satisfaction with the operation of the current electoral system.[7] But, in response to a different question, nearly two thirds of the respondents were at least "somewhat supportive" of reforms that might introduce greater proportionality into the electoral system.[8] The majority of respondents, however, were clearly opposed to compulsory voting. While those in the oldest age group were about evenly divided on this question, respondents in the youngest age cohorts were the most opposed to the idea of making voting mandatory.

Table 4
What Should Be Done to Get Young People Interested in Politics? (open-ended; multiple responses; % of respondents)

	Under 25 years old	25 and older
Improved education; information	**47**	**53**
More education in the schools	23	24
More dialogue/exposure/education (general)	9	13
More emphasis on personal relevance, benefits, jobs	8	10
More advertisements, media exposure	8	4
More education in the home	0	2
Political system change; involvement	**43**	**39**
More relevant issues to youth	27	15
Recruitment, involvement of youth	7	11
Younger candidates, politicians, leaders	5	7
Better politicians, leaders, parties	2	4
Electoral reform; democratic reform	2	2
Changes in conduct of politics	**25**	**30**
Government relate better to, understand youth	11	14
More honesty, responsibility, accountability in politics	6	11
Make politics less complicated, more interesting, fun	8	5
Other	2	2
Nothing, do not know	3	3
N =	332	1,184

The matter of the "relevance" of politics to youth comes up again in the third category shown in Table 4 – changes in the actions or conduct of those running the political system. These respondents felt that young people might become more interested in politics if government made an effort to contact and relate to youth, giving them more say in government activities. Other people who referred to changes in the conduct of politics were more likely to cite the need for more honesty, responsibility and accountability in the actions of politicians. In response to a separate series of questions, many respondents also agreed that technological developments, such as the possibility of Internet voting, might help bring more young people into the active electorate.[9]

The survey findings point us toward an understanding of the scope of the problem, but only in a limited way toward its possible solution. It is evident that the decline in voter turnout in recent elections is mainly attributable to the young, and that it is part of a demographic trend that shows every sign of continuing well into the future. It has serious implications for the kinds of issues that are likely to be addressed in the political arena, the types of candidates who seek election, the positions of the parties, and even possibly for the health of democracy itself. It is a problem that deserves our attention, but one that will not be easily solved. The direction of a solution is clear – making voting easier and more meaningful for first-time voters; making politics more relevant to the young; providing them with the tools they need to understand its relevance to their own lives, engaging them more directly in the political process. But without fundamental changes in the way in which politics is conducted in Canada, these are goals that could well remain out of reach for some time.

NOTES

1. André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte, *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory: Making Sense of the 2000 Canadian Election* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), pp. 45–63.

2. The full report of the survey, "Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters," is available at www.elections.ca under Electoral Law & Policy. Field work for the survey was conducted by Decima Research. Technical details may be obtained by contacting Decima Research or Elections Canada.

3. To calculate this table, we employed a corrective weight to rebalance the total proportions of voters and non-voters in the sample. The weighting was arrived at by weighting each of the non-voters in the sample at 1 and voters at .34, thereby simulating a sample of 2,467 with a voting rate of 61.3 percent.

4. The cohorts displayed in Table 1 are structured according to the particular election at which a respondent first became eligible to vote. To have been eligible to vote in the 1988 federal election, for example, a respondent would have to have been at least 30 years old in 2000.

5. An analysis of data from the Canadian National Election Studies, collected over the past 30 years, which was also conducted by the authors for Elections Canada, shows clearly that each generation of newly eligible voters participates at lower rates and begins to enter the active electorate at a higher average age. Jon H. Pammett, Lawrence LeDuc, Erin Thiessen and Antoine Bilodeau, "Canadian Voting Turnout in Comparative Perspective," unpublished report prepared for Elections Canada, 2001, pp. 71–74, 78–79.

6. In tables 2, 3 and 4, which use multiple responses, category totals should be regarded as approximate, since respondents were allowed to give more than one response in the same category.

7. The question asked was: "In general, how satisfied are you with the present Canadian electoral system?" Twenty-eight percent of all respondents indicated that they were "very satisfied", while fifty percent responded that they were "somewhat satisfied".

8. The question asked was: "How supportive would you be of introducing a proportional representation system for federal elections in Canada?" Twenty-two percent of respondents indicated that they would be "very supportive" and another forty-four percent, "somewhat supportive". Differences between the age groups on this item were negligible.

9. A majority of the survey respondents said that it was "very likely" or "somewhat likely" that they personally would take advantage of an Internet voting option. The proportion responding positively to this item was higher among younger, better-educated, higher-income and urban respondents, and among those who did not vote in 2000.