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THE CRIC PAPERS

Voter
Participation
in Canada:

Is Canadian
Democracy
in Crisis?



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Executive Summary

Voter turnout at federal elections in Canada has fallen significantly in recent years. In 2000, turnout reached its lowest level ever; only 61 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot, raising questions about the state of Canadian democracy. The paper reviews the four main explanations that have been advanced to account for this trend: the lack of competitiveness of elections since 1993; the problems associated with the switch in 1996 to a new system of voter registration; changes in the values held by Canadians; and rising levels of political disaffection or cynicism. After considering the strengths and weaknesses of each explanation, the paper emphasizes the importance of the last two. Lower voter turnout likely is a product of changing values (e.g., the decreasing importance of religion, or reduced acceptance of authority) and rising levels of cynicism. The paper then examines the case of young Canadians. The latest research confirms that young people are much less likely to vote than their parents or grandparents were when they were young. But this is not because young people are especially cynical about politics. They are no more cynical than older Canadians are. Nor are they necessarily apathetic. Many choose to become active in causes and movements outside of elections, political parties and parliamentary politics. But newer generations of Canadians clearly are not as likely as previous ones to look towards the country's main political institutions as agents of change. There are many reasons for this, including the declining quality of "civic education" and changing perceptions about government. The paper then examines whether or not decline in voter turnout really matters. While some argue that there is no cause for alarm, others disagree. Those who are concerned see lower turnout as an indication of a growing disconnect between

individual Canadians and their wider community, and of a declining sense of civic duty. This potentially can weaken Canadians' ability to come together as a political community to meet the challenges of the coming years. Given that declining voter turnout is cause for concern, what can be done to reverse the trend? Neither of the most significant underlying causes – the gradual shift in values, and the rise in cynicism among voters – lends itself to easy solutions. Nonetheless, the report outlines some proposals for reform. Some, such as Internet voting or compulsory voting, pose very serious problems. But other reforms, including a switch to a system of proportional representation (PR), and expanding the influence of Members of Parliament, would likely go some way towards restoring confidence in Canada's political system and generating more interest in elections. The challenge is to convince citizens that elections matter, either because their own votes make a difference, or because their elected representatives do. The paper notes that there is no guarantee that such reforms, if adopted, would raise turnout in Canada. But it concludes that the lack of easy solutions should not be taken as an excuse to avoid making reforms that are needed to reinvigorate the country's political system over the long-term.

Preface

Canadian unity is generally discussed in terms of relations among the provincial and federal governments. But it is possible, and indeed necessary, to conceive of it more broadly. A political community can only cohere if its citizens are willing to embrace its ideals and participate in its public institutions. Without vibrant citizen participation in politics, a political community is an empty shell. It is for this reason that the Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC) has singled out the issue of the decline in voter participation in Canada for special attention in this, the third CRIC Paper.

This paper is informed in many ways by the discussions that took place at a seminar on voter participation in Canada, hosted by CRIC in Ottawa in February of this year. CRIC would like to thank the following participants who took part in the seminar for their contributions.

In particular, CRIC would like to thank those who gave permission for their remarks to be reprinted in this paper (unless otherwise indicated, the remarks quoted in the boxes below were delivered at the CRIC seminar on voter participation). CRIC would also like to thank Elections Canada for granting permission to include the results of their most recent post-election survey, Environics Research Group for providing additional data, and Dr. Matthew Mendelsohn for assisting with the analysis of all the surveys cited in this paper. Finally, CRIC would like to thank Dr. Louis Massicotte for reviewing a draft of the text.

That being said, any errors in the paper are CRIC's alone.

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Introduction

The November 2000 general election in Canada saw Jean Chrétien's Liberal Party win its third consecutive parliamentary majority. It also saw the third straight decline in voter participation – that is, in the number of registered voters who cast a ballot. And while some 12.86 million Canadians cast ballots, some 8.25 million registered voters (or 39 percent of the total) did not vote at all.¹ Never before have so many voters abstained.

The decline in voter participation, or turnout, is worrying. The defining characteristic of a representative democracy is that those who govern are chosen by the people. A democracy without willing voters is a sham. It is important to ask what the decline in turnout says about the health of Canadian democracy, and what can be done to reverse the trend.

There are countless reasons why people do not vote, and not every instance of non-voting should be interpreted as an indictment of the existing political system. Many do not vote because they are traveling, sick, or have difficulty getting to a polling station. Others are not sure whether they are eligible to vote, or about how to get their names on the voters list. Still others may be inclined to vote, but nonetheless decide that they can sit this one out because the result in their own constituency or across the country as a whole is a foregone conclusion. Few of these people can be described as overly cynical about Canadian democracy or genuinely disaffected with politics.

But as the number of non-voters grows, the situation becomes more worrisome. What is keeping more and more voters away from the polls? Is declining voter turnout a symptom of growing dissatisfaction with parliament, political parties and politicians? Is non-voting more pronounced among certain groups within the population, such as young people? Does it really matter if fewer people are voting than in the past? Is Canadian democracy really in crisis?

These are the questions that this paper will address.

¹ All figures related to turnout and voting results in Canada are from Elections Canada (see www.elections.ca). Figures for 1997 and 2000 are taken from the official voting results published by the Chief Electoral Officer. Figures for elections prior to 1997 are taken from: Elections Canada, *A History of the Vote In Canada* (Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services Canada), 1997.

Voter Participation in Canada

FEDERAL ELECTIONS

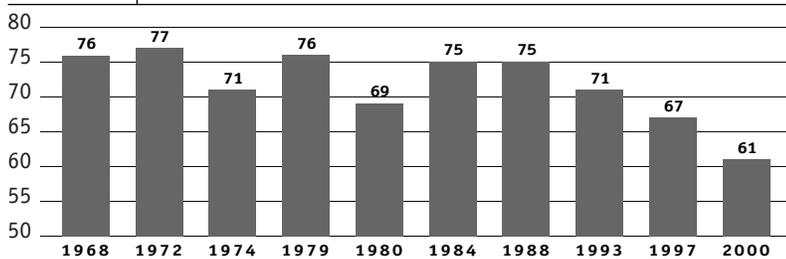
Voter participation in Canada is declining. Consider these facts:

- Turnout has declined in three straight federal elections, falling from 75 percent in 1988 to 61 percent in 2000 – a 14-point drop over the course of 12 years (see Figure 1).²
- Turnout at the last federal election was the lowest ever recorded in Canada.
- The average turnout at federal elections in the 1990s was much lower than it was in the decades that immediately preceded it (see Figure 2), and the lowest of any decade in Canadian history.

Turnout at federal elections has fallen in each province, but the decline has been more pronounced in some than in others.

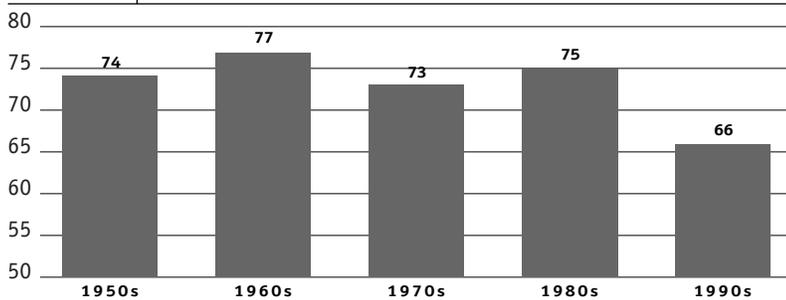
- Average turnout in the 1990s was at least 10 percentage points lower than it was in the previous decade in six provinces: Newfoundland, PEI, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. The largest drop in average turnout between the 1980s and the 1990s was in Saskatchewan and BC – almost 13 percentage points in each case.
- In Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Saskatchewan, turnout for the 2000 federal election was about over 20 percentage points lower than it was in the 1960s.
- The province where the drop in turnout has been the most moderate is Quebec. Average turnout in the 1990s was only 4 percentage points lower than it was in the 1980s.

FIGURE 1 | TURNOUT IN FEDERAL ELECTIONS, 1968-2000



Note: figure for 1993 is adjusted. Source: data from Elections Canada.

FIGURE 2 | TURNOUT IN FEDERAL ELECTIONS, DECADE AVERAGES



Notes: years ending with zero are counted as part of the previous decade (e.g. 2000 is counted as part of the 1990s). The figure for 1993 is adjusted. Source: calculated using data from Elections Canada.

² In most democracies, including Canada, turnout is calculated by dividing the number of ballots cast by the number of voters who were registered to vote. In the US, where the system of voter registration fails to reach large numbers of potential voters, turnout is calculated differently, namely, by dividing the number of ballots cast by an estimate of the voting age population.

“...Turnout dropped dramatically after 1988. According to our standard turnout measure, we have lost something like 20 per cent of the 1988 electorate. Where in 1988, 75 per cent of registered voters turned out, in 2000 the percentage was 61 per cent. Perhaps the truest indicator of how bad things are is the bottom line — turnout relative to the voting age population. ...[T]his is the measure Americans use and which produces handwringing about the fact that presidential-year turnout is only about 50 per cent. By this standard, we appear to be almost as bad. In 2000, only 55 per cent of Canada’s voting age population turned out, hardly better than the 50 per cent registered south of the line. We too should be wringing our hands.”³

Richard Johnston
University of British Columbia

PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

Voter participation has also been falling in provincial elections, though not as uniformly or as dramatically.

- A comparison of the average turnout within each province for elections from 1980 to 1989 with the average since 1990 gives the following results: turnout has declined in 5 provinces, risen in three provinces, and remained unchanged in two (see Appendix, Table 1). Where turnout has increased, the size of the increase has been relatively small.⁴
- Saskatchewan experienced the most dramatic change. Turnout at the last two elections (1995 and 1999) was 17 points lower than it was at the previous three elections (1982, 1986 and 1991).
- Turnout has also declined by several points in recent elections in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba and BC.
- Average turnout has not changed significantly in Ontario or Alberta, but the level of participation in those provinces (respectively, 58 percent and 53 percent at the most recent elections) nonetheless is very low.

³ Richard Johnston, “A Conservative Case for Electoral Reform,” *Policy Options / Options Politiques* Vol. 22, No. 6 (July-August 2001), p. 13.

⁴ The largest increase (+ 2.3 percentage points) was in Quebec, where the return of sovereignty to the agenda of party politics after 1990 heightened the stakes of electoral contests.

“Canada [is] near the bottom of the industrialized-world turnout league tables...

*Canada has never had peculiarly high turnout, but the gradual decline from the 1960s to the 1980s, followed by the precipitate drop in the 1990s, has taken us from the lower middle of the pack to near the very back.”*⁵

Richard Johnston
University of British Columbia

There are exceptions. For instance, there has been no downward trend in Australia – like Canada, a parliamentary democracy with a federal system – because voting there is compulsory. In the United States, voter turnout has not changed much over the last 30 years, but it was already very low to begin with. In many other west European countries, turnout has fallen slightly in recent years, but remains high by Canadian standards.

Despite some possible exceptions, it remains the case that voter turnout is falling in many countries, and not just in Canada. This has implications for how the causes of the problem, and the possible solutions, should be understood. At the same time, it should also be noted that few western democracies have experienced as steady and as significant a drop in turnout over the last 15 years as has Canada.⁸

AN INTERNATIONAL TREND?

Canada is not unique. Researchers have noted a decline in voter participation in other democratic countries. In fact, speaking of this decline, US political scientist Martin Wattenberg writes: “it is rare in comparative politics to find a trend that is so widely generalizable.”⁶ In a range of democracies, including the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Italy, Finland, Austria and Japan, turnout at the most recent election was the lowest recorded in the post-war period.⁷ In the case of the UK, voter turnout in the 2001 election fell by a dramatic 12 points to 59 percent, a level lower than that at the most recent election in Canada.

⁵ Richard Johnston, “Canadian Elections at the Millennium,” *Choices* Vol. 6, No. 6 (September 2000), p. 13. Available from the website of the Institute for Research on Public Policy at www.irpp.org.

⁶ Martin P. Wattenberg, “Turnout Decline in the U.S. and other Advanced Industrial Democracies,” Centre for the Study of Democracy Research Paper Series in Empirical Democracy Theory (University of California, Irvine: Center for the Study of Democracy, 1998), p. 14 (available on the website of the Center for the Study of Democracy at: www.democ.uci.edu/democ/papers/marty.html). See also: André Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001): 33-36; Mark Franklin and Michael Marsh, “The Tally of Turnout: Understanding Cross-National Turnout Decline Since 1945,” paper prepared for delivery at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington D.C., August-September 2000, 2-3.

⁷ See the figures for turnout posted on the website of International IDEA, at http://www.idea.int/voter_turnout/index.html.

⁸ One exception is Japan, where turnout has fallen sharply.

Explaining the Decline in Voter Participation

Political scientists and commentators have identified a number of factors that may be responsible for lower voter participation. But they do not agree on which is the most important. More specifically, they do not agree as to whether the decline in voter turnout in Canada is a cause for alarm. While some argue that low turnout simply reflects the uninteresting or uncompetitive nature of recent election campaigns, others see it as a more worrying product of deteriorating public perceptions of parliament, parties and politicians.

What follows is a review of the four main explanations for low turnout in Canada, and a discussion of their strengths and weaknesses.

LIBERAL HEGEMONY

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 stake⁹. In the 1995 Quebec referendum, for instance, turnout was an unprecedented 93.5 percent. This figure is astoundingly high, yet understandable, given what was at stake and the small margin separating the two sides in the campaign.

In contrast, many observers argue that the federal elections of 1997 and 2000, when turnout fell below 70 percent, were singularly uninteresting. In both cases, the Liberal Party faced a divided opposition and won by a large margin over its nearest rival. In neither case

“We have to think about the circumstances of this particular election. It was very clear in the polls that people were satisfied with the Liberal government – the Liberals were experiencing significantly higher than average levels of satisfaction among the public in the pre-election period. The approval levels for the governing party were very high when you compare them to the figures for 1984, 1988 and 1993. The approval levels for the Prime Minister were also high by historical standards. So for a lot of people there would have been a sense of complacency – these indicators led to a sense that the Liberals were going to win. So the situation of the election itself had to be a factor.”

Donna Dasko
Environics Research Group

did the election appear to be fought over an issue of great importance to the future of the country, such as national unity or free trade. By and large, there was no widespread anger with the current government that could be counted on to drive Canadians to the polls to vote for change.

⁹ Political scientists who have studied political participation in a large number of democratic countries have concluded one of the factors affecting turnout is the voters' own sense of whether the election is either close (in terms of the winning party's margin of victory), or important (in terms of its political consequences, or how much the outcome is deemed to matter). See Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote*, p. 43; see 17-44; Franklin and Marsh, "The Tally of Turnout," p. 29. See also Mark N. Franklin, "The Dynamics of Electoral Participation," in *Comparing Democracies 2: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*, edited by Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, forthcoming).

EXPLAINING THE DECLINE IN VOTER PARTICIPATION

The decline in turnout, therefore, reflects the relatively uncompetitive period of national politics. There is no reason not to expect voters to participate in greater numbers once elections become more competitive and more meaningful.

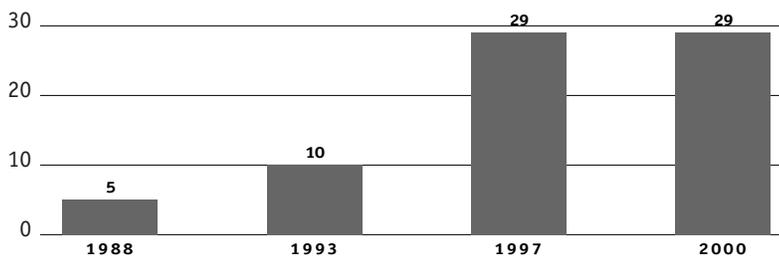
The following points support this theory:

- The number of people who said that there were no important election issues at stake was much higher in 1997 and 2000 than in previous elections (see Figure 3).¹⁰ And research has shown that those who say there are no important election issues are much less likely to vote.¹¹

- At the last election, the margin of victory for winning candidates was generally much smaller in constituencies with high voter turnout than it was in those with low voter turnout. In the 10 constituencies where turnout was highest, the average margin of victory was 17 percent. In the ten constituencies where turnout was lowest, the average margin of victory was 42 percent (see Appendix, Table 2).¹² This suggests that there is a relation between voter turnout and the closeness of the election result, and implies that turnout might be higher in future elections, should they be more competitive.

FIGURE 3 | NO IMPORTANT ELECTION ISSUES

Percentage of respondents who answer “none” or “don’t know” when asked to name the most important issue in the election campaign.



Source: surveys cited by Jon H. Pammett; see Note 10.

However, there are several weaknesses in the argument that turnout has fallen because recent elections were not all that interesting.

First, there have been previous elections in Canada where the results were predictable, or at least not very close, but where turnout remained high. For instance, turnout was as high at the time of the 1958 Diefenbaker landslide as it was for the much more closely contested elections that ensued.

Second, citizens are called upon to vote, not only because their vote might decide a close election, or because the central issue in the

¹⁰ Jon H. Pammett, “The People’s Verdict,” in *The Canadian General Election of 2000*, edited by Jon H. Pammett and Christopher Dornan (Toronto: Dundurn, 2001), p. 300; Jon H. Pammett, “The Voters Decide,” in *The Canadian General Election of 1997*, edited by Alan Frizzell and Jon H. Pammett (Toronto: Dundurn, 1997), p. 235.

¹¹ Tony Coulson, “Voter Turnout in Canada: Findings from the 1997 Canadian Elections Survey,” *Electoral Insight* Vol. 1, No. 2 (November 1999): 19. Available on the website of Elections Canada at www.elections.ca.

¹² The margin of victory is the difference between the number of votes won by the winning candidate and his or her nearest rival, expressed as a percent of the total votes cast for all candidates in the constituency. On this point, see the analysis of the 2000 federal election results in the province of Quebec, offered by Louis Massicotte and Édith Brochu. They note that turnout in that province declined most notably in Liberal strongholds on the island of Montreal. (Louis Massicotte et Édith Brochu, « Élections fédérales de novembre : coup de loupe sur un scrutin. » *Le Devoir* 26 février 2001, page A7. Available on the website of *Le Devoir* at <http://www.ledevoir.com/public/client-css/news-webview.jsp?newsid=165>.)

campaign is also their own top priority, but because it is a civic duty to participate in selecting the government. Research conducted by André Blais has shown that most people agree that it is their duty to vote. He writes: “the feeling that voting is a moral obligation and that not voting implies a failure to fulfill one’s civic duty is widespread and strongly ingrained in the population.”¹³ This raises a question: is the decline in turnout related not so much to the peculiarities of any one election campaign, but to more worrying changes in how people perceive and act on their sense of their obligations as citizens?

Third, the lack of an election issue or of competitiveness among parties is an explanation that begs more questions than it answers. There is simply no objective reason why this past election campaign should have been so devoid of debate about the country’s priorities and the best means to achieve them. At the time of the election, the government was wrestling with a number of acute challenges – the reform of the health care system, the need to manage globalization and negotiate new trade agreements, the rapidly deteriorating environment, and the plight of Canada’s disadvantaged Aboriginal communities, to name a few. Moreover, with five official parties spanning a wide range on the ideological spectrum, Canadian voters were offered a variety of choices at the ballot box. And yet the parties were collectively unable

“I conclude that for many people voting is not only a right, it is also a duty. And the belief that in a democracy every citizen should feel obligated to vote induces many people to vote in almost all elections... If I am right, the recent decline in turnout... could flow from a decline in the sense of duty.”¹⁴

André Blais
Université de Montréal

to initiate a debate about these issues, one capable of capturing the voters’ imaginations and of spurring them to cast a ballot. We need to ask why this was the case.

THE PERMANENT VOTERS LIST

The November 2000 election was the first one conducted on the basis of the new method for registering voters that Canada adopted in 1996.¹⁵ In previous elections, a new voters list was compiled during each election campaign by enumerators, who visited every household in the country to obtain the names of those eligible to vote. Enumeration “was repeatedly hailed as a highly effective method of registration, one that produced an up-to-date and accurate list of electors” at relatively low cost.¹⁶ Since a person needs to be correctly registered in order to vote, the

¹³ Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote*, p. 99.

¹⁴ Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote*, p. 113.

¹⁵ As in 2000, there was no door-to-door enumeration of voters during the June 1997 electoral campaign. But the voters list used in 1997 was the product of a final door-to-door enumeration carried out in April of that year, in preparation of the new permanent voters list. Therefore that election cannot be said to be the first one to have been conducted without the benefit of door-to-door enumeration.

¹⁶ Jerome H. Black, “The National Registry of Electors: Raising Questions About the New Approach to Voter Registration in Canada,” *Policy Matters* Vol. 1, No. 10 (December 2000), p. 8. Available on the website of the Institute for Research on Public Policy at www.irpp.org.

“Logic dictates that turnout would be affected by increasing the difficulty that people face in order to exercise their vote.”

Jerome Black
McGill University

accuracy of the list is very important. If the list is very complete and accurate, few people will be discouraged from voting because they are not registered, do not know how to register, or do not have the time or inclination to do what is necessary in order to register.

The decision was made to do away with door-to-door enumeration in favour of what is known as the permanent voters list. It is so named because rather than being produced from scratch at the start of each election, it is maintained from year to year and continuously updated. Unless voters otherwise object, their names remain on the list. Revisions to the list – changes of address, deletions of those deceased and addition of new citizens – are made automatically through electronic information sharing among Elections Canada and different federal and provincial government departments and agencies. Those who become eligible to vote on their 18th birthday automatically receive a card from Elections Canada, asking them to agree to have their

names added to the list.¹⁷ Because it is a permanent list, the new voters list is in place at the time an election is called, although voters whose names are not on the list can register throughout the election campaign, up to and including voting day itself.¹⁸

Two points have been made about the impact of the new list on voter participation:

- The old system was better at *encouraging* people to vote, because door-to-door enumeration reminded voters that an election had been called and that they were eligible to vote.
- The new system *discourages* more people from voting. All observers agree that, because it does not rely on door-to-door enumeration, the permanent voters list is less accurate. By the time an election comes around, more voters are likely to find that they are not registered correctly or at all. At this point, the onus is on the voter to add his or her name to the list. While many find this easy, others do not.

Is there evidence to support these claims?

- On the one hand, difficulties with voter registration were not the main reasons why non-voters did not vote in the last election (see Figure 4). According to a post-election survey conducted for Elections Canada¹⁹, only 16 percent of

¹⁷ Except in Quebec, where the names of 18 year olds are automatically added to the provincial list of electors, and then added to the federal list.

¹⁸ In 2000, there were 959,774 net additions of names to the voters list prior to election day, and a further 872,552 voters registered on election day itself. This means that 8.6 percent of all voters who were finally registered added their names to the list during the campaign or on election day. Many more had to revise their registration, for example, by recording a change of address. See the Chief Electoral Officer's report on the 37th General Election, available on the website of Elections Canada at www.elections.ca.

¹⁹ The survey was conducted between November 28 and December 11, 2000 by Ipsos-Reid. A total of 2,500 Canadians were surveyed, including 1,400 persons between 18 and 34 years of age.

“What Canada had from Confederation to the mid-1990s was an election-activated, door-to-door system of enumerating voters. It was truly unique. No other country in the world had, for such a long period of time, a system quite as arcane and yet as wonderfully socializing as the Canadian system.

The implications of door-to-door enumerations for voter turnout were obvious: when an enumerator came to the door during an election campaign, that individual was a representative of the state requesting information needed to ensure that as many eligible voters as possible had their names entered on the list. It was that simple. The process effectively reminded voters of their civic obligation, their civic duty if you like, to take part in an upcoming election. Canadians came to expect this as one of the elements of their civic culture: that the state would ensure that they were reminded that an election had been called and that they were entitled to take part in it because they had been included on the voters list. It was a process that required little time or energy on the part of the individual voter. Once we abandoned enumerations in the mid-1990s in favour of a so-called “permanent voters list,” we lost that contact between state officials and ourselves as citizens that had reminded us of our electoral rights and our attendant electoral obligation. Now that the onus for ensuring that one’s name is on the list has shifted from the state to the individual, the costs (in terms of time and effort) of ensuring that we get on the electoral registry are undoubtedly greater. For my money, this shift has made the matters of civic awareness, electoral obligation, and ultimately, voter turnout, much more problematic than had been the case in the past.”

John Courtney
University of Saskatchewan

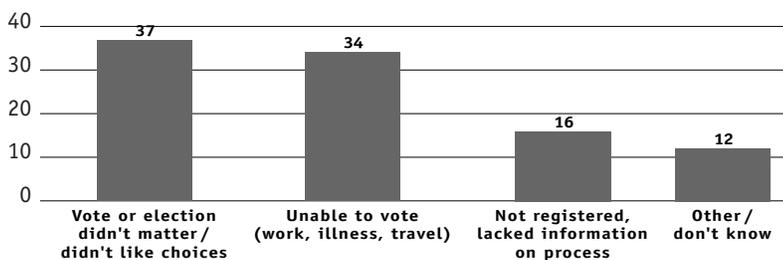
EXPLAINING THE DECLINE IN VOTER PARTICIPATION

non-voters said that they did not vote because of a reason associated with the system of voter registration, namely: (a) they didn't have enough information about where and when to vote; (b) they weren't registered or on the voters list in their riding; or (c) they didn't receive their voters' card.²⁰

Yet it is important to note that the reduced accuracy of the permanent voters list, and the greater onus it places on individual voters to ensure they are registered, likely discourages participation among *particular groups* within the population. As Jerome Black notes, "the impact of the registration system is not neutral across social categories. More demanding regimes will generally lead to under-registration and lower levels of voter turnout on the part of those who are less well-off or who are less favoured (e.g. in terms of income, occupation and education)."²² Those who already feel shut out by the political system are more likely to be put off by the need to register. And because of their mobility, students, young people and tenants are least likely to be correctly registered in the constituencies where they reside. Only about one in four 18-year-olds return the card sent to them by Elections Canada, asking them to agree to have their names added to the list. While Elections Canada tries to address these problems by various means, the fact remains that, for some people at least, the new system of voter registration places a new obstacle in the path of voting.

FIGURE 4 | REASONS FOR NOT VOTING (2000 ELECTION)

QUESTION: Were there one or more particular reasons why you did not vote? (n = 447)



Source: Elections Canada Post-Election Survey, November-December 2000.

- On the other hand, the number of non-voters in 2000 who did not vote because they were not on the voters list appears to have been higher than in previous elections.²¹

Thus, it could be that some people did not vote in 2000 because of the switch from enumeration to a permanent voters list. *But this was clearly not the main reason why people did not vote.* Moreover, it cannot account for the general downward trend in turnout, which began before the switch to the permanent voters list.

²⁰ The voter's card indicates that a person is registered to vote, and states where and when votes can be cast.

²¹ Pammett, "The People's Verdict," p. 310.

²² Black, "The National Registry of Electors," p. 13.

**CHANGING TIMES,
CHANGING VALUES**

Canadian society has changed considerably over the past 25 years. Canadians are much better educated, and receive much more information through the media. They are less religious, more morally permissive, more likely to have grown up within a “non-traditional” family structure, and more likely to change jobs several times throughout their working life. They are more egalitarian and open to cultural and other forms of social diversity. They are less accepting of hierarchies and more interested in participating directly in decision-making at work and within society. These changes are not unique to Canada.²³

Researchers argue that many of these trends help to explain why citizens have become less likely to vote.

RELIGION

The declining importance of religion is especially significant. Only 34 percent of adult Canadians attended church at least once a month in 1998, down from 41 percent a decade earlier.²⁴ But research shows that “people who regularly attend religious services and who say they are very religious are more likely to vote.”²⁵ It can be argued people who are more religious are likely to feel their

“I don’t believe that permanent voters’ lists can be indicted for the lower turnouts recorded in 1997 and 2000. For one thing, turnout declined in 1997 even though there had been an enumeration that year (everywhere but in Alberta and Prince Edward Island) just before the election was called. Much can be said about the validity of various formulas for preparing lists, and the enumeration system had its advantages, but if you wish to explain variations in turnout, the discussion should focus on other factors. The worldwide trend concerning turnout is too strong for permanent voters’ lists to be considered the main explanation.”

Louis Massicotte
Université de Montréal

obligation to vote more acutely.²⁶ And church groups and leaders often encourage their members to vote, especially when issues that are important to the church are at stake. But religion is also important because church attendance helps to foster people’s sense of attachment to and involvement in their

²³ See: Neil Nevitte, *The Decline of Deference: Canadian Value Change in Cross-National Perspective* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996); Neil Nevitte and Mebs Kanji, “Canadian Political Culture and Value Change,” in *Citizen Politics: Research and Theory in Canadian Political Behaviour*, edited by Joanna Everitt and Brenda O’Neill (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. p. 71.

²⁴ Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, 12 December 2000. See: <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/001212/d001212b.htm>. For other evidence on the declining importance of religion in the lives of Canadians, see Nevitte, *Decline of Deference*, Chapter 7.

²⁵ Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote*, p. 52.

²⁶ This hypothesis has been put forward tentatively by André Blais. He notes that “the process of secularization... has nourished a sense of moral relativism that makes it more difficult for people to be certain that voting is a good and not voting is wrong.” See Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote*, p. 114.

EXPLAINING THE DECLINE IN VOTER PARTICIPATION

community.²⁷ In other words, participation in religious services integrates people into community life in general, and this has a positive effect on non-religious activities like voting.

POLITICAL PARTIES

People's changing values have also made them less likely to identify strongly with any one political party.²⁸ As citizens become better educated and more informed, they also become more independent in their thinking and less likely to accept the lead of any given political party over the long-term. The increasing unease with rigid hierarchies also makes citizens less comfortable with traditional party organizations. Some also argue that with the rise of television as the main medium of political communication, parties have increasingly crafted their election campaigns around the party leader, focusing more on his or her image, and less on the party as a whole.²⁹ TV elections ads now regularly emphasize the leader's qualities (or attack the qualities of other leaders) and all but fail to mention the name of the leader's party. These trends weaken loyalty to particular parties. This, in turn, has an effect on turnout, because those who are strongly attached to a party will be more likely to vote.

ATTITUDES TOWARD AUTHORITY

Another factor underlined by political scientists is people's growing sense of personal autonomy and their changing attitudes toward authority. It is argued that citizens today tend to be more assertive and less deferential towards authority.³⁰ They are also more inclined to look within themselves for moral guidance. Pollster Michael Adams thinks that Canadians over time have moved away from traditional values (including respect for hierarchy and authority) and have become less "socially inclined or other-directed" and more "inner-directed" – a gradual shift that represents a "significant evolution of values current in our society and culture."³¹ For these reasons, contemporary citizens are somewhat less likely vote out of a sense of civic obligation, or respect for political institutions or authorities. This does not mean necessarily that citizens have an overly negative view of politics (a point that will be covered below), but simply that they are more individualist and less willing to be guided by tradition and moral absolutes.

To sum up, researchers have confirmed that Canadian values are changing. Some will see these changes as positive, while others will not. But none of these changes is *necessarily*

²⁷ Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote*, p. 52.

²⁸ Again, this is a gradual but unmistakable trend that is visible throughout the industrialized world. See, for instance, Nevitte, *Decline of Deference*, p. 49; Russell J. Dalton, "Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies," in *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*, edited by Pippa Norris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp. 65-66. Dalton reports that "the empirical evidence now presents a clear and striking picture of the erosion of partisan attachments among contemporary publics."

²⁹ Wattenberg, "Turnout Decline in the U.S. and other Advanced Industrial Democracies," p. 18.

³⁰ The most well-known statement of this thesis in Canada is Nevitte, *Decline of Deference*. See also Dalton, "Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies," pp. 67-68 and 74. Dalton concludes that "citizens have grown more distant from political parties, more critical of political elites and political institutions, and less positive toward government...The deference to authority that once was common in many Western democracies has partially been replaced by public scepticism of elites."

³¹ Michael Adams, *Better Happy than Rich: Canadians, Money and the Meaning of Life* (Toronto: Viking, 2000), pp. 19-23.

a sign that the Canadian political system is in crisis. Rather, they are developments that have taken shape over the longer-term and across most industrialized societies. They reflect a variety of profound and likely irreversible changes such as rising education levels, innovations in information technology, the changing nature of work and shifts in family structure.

POLITICAL DISAFFECTION

Many observers argue that the decline in voter turnout is a result of citizens losing confidence in their political leaders and becoming cynical about the political process. They see voter apathy as driven by a growing disaffection with politics that, in turn, is fueled by the perception that politicians and political parties are self-interested, dishonest and out-of-touch.

Evidence of cynicism – that is, contempt for the political system – and of a growing lack of confidence in politicians and political institutions in Canada is plentiful:

- According to a recent CRIC survey, 86 percent of Canadians agree that politicians often lie to get elected. And more than 7 out of 10 of those surveyed agree with the statement: “I don’t think governments care very much about what people like me think.”³² And there is evidence that these negative views are much more pronounced than they were 20 or 30 years ago (see Figure 5).³³

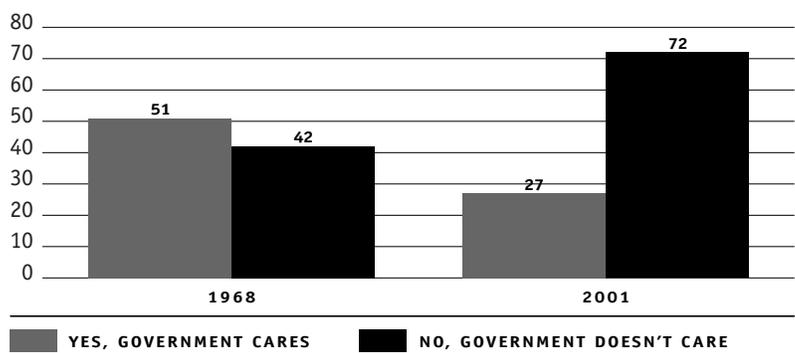
“I am not convinced that this election was more boring than others... My view is that if more people find elections boring, it is because they are more cynical to start with. And when you’re more cynical, you find everything boring. So I would argue that the issue is not whether the election is exciting or boring. The main problem is more the attitudes about how one sees politics.”

André Blais
Université de Montréal

FIGURE 5 | DOES THE GOVERNMENT CARE?

QUESTION (1968): “I don’t think that the government cares much about what people like me think” (agree or disagree). (Canadian Election Study)

QUESTION (2001): “I don’t think that governments care very much what people like me think” (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree). (CRIC survey on Trade, Globalization and Canadian Values. Figure shows the proportion who strongly or somewhat agree.)



Note: this chart shows responses for those 21 years old and over only, since the 1968 survey did not contact respondents younger than 21 years of age.

³² CRIC survey on Trade, Globalization and Canadian Values, 2001, February-March 2001. See: CRIC, *Opinion Canada*, Vol. 3, No. 23 (June 21, 2001); available online at <http://www.ccu-cuc.ca/en/op/archives/opv3n23.htm#file>.

³³ See for instance: Lawrence LeDuc, “The Canadian Voter,” in *Introductory Readings in Canadian Government and Politics*, second edition, edited by Robert M. Krause and R.H. Wagenberg (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1995), p. 371.

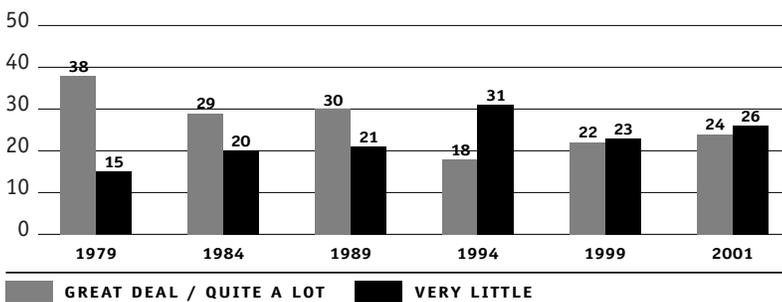
EXPLAINING THE DECLINE IN VOTER PARTICIPATION

- Over the past 25 years, the percentage of Canadians who say they have a great deal of confidence in the House of Commons or in political parties has declined significantly, while the percentage saying they have very little confidence has increased (see Figures 6 and 7).

- Similarly, surveys conducted by Environics show that the percentage of Canadians saying they have little or no confidence in governments rose from about 40 percent in the early 1980s to over 60 percent in the early 1990s.³⁴
- Over 50 percent of Canadians surveyed in the 1960s said that they could trust the government in Ottawa to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time.” But the 1990s, only about one-third took this position.³⁵
- A 1997 CRIC survey of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 34 found that respondents had less confidence in political leaders than in any of the other eight groups that they were asked about. Almost two-thirds of respondents said that they had “not much confidence” or “no confidence” in political leaders (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 6 | CONFIDENCE IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

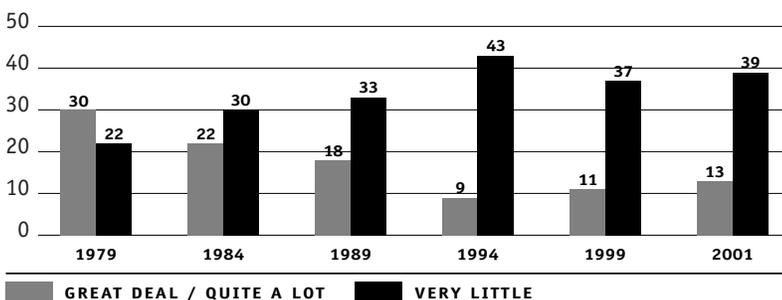
“I’m going to read a list of institutions in Canadian society. Would you tell me how much respect and confidence you, yourself, have in each one: a great deal, quite a lot, some or very little... The House of Commons.”



Source: Gallup polls, as quoted in George Perlin, *Canadian Politics, Volume 2: Canadian Democracy in Critical Perspective* (Kingston and Toronto: Queen’s University and CBC Newsworld, 2000).

FIGURE 7 | CONFIDENCE IN POLITICAL PARTIES

“I’m going to read a list of institutions in Canadian society. Would you tell me how much respect and confidence you, yourself, have in each one: a great deal, quite a lot, some or very little... Political parties.”



Source: Gallup polls, as quoted in George Perlin, *Canadian Politics, Volume 2: Canadian Democracy in Critical Perspective* (Kingston and Toronto: Queen’s University and CBC Newsworld, 2000).

Unlike the previous explanation, which focused on changing values, this explanation clearly implies that the problem lies with the way the political system is working. The point here is not that citizens have changed, but that the political system is perceived to be less and less responsive to people’s concerns.

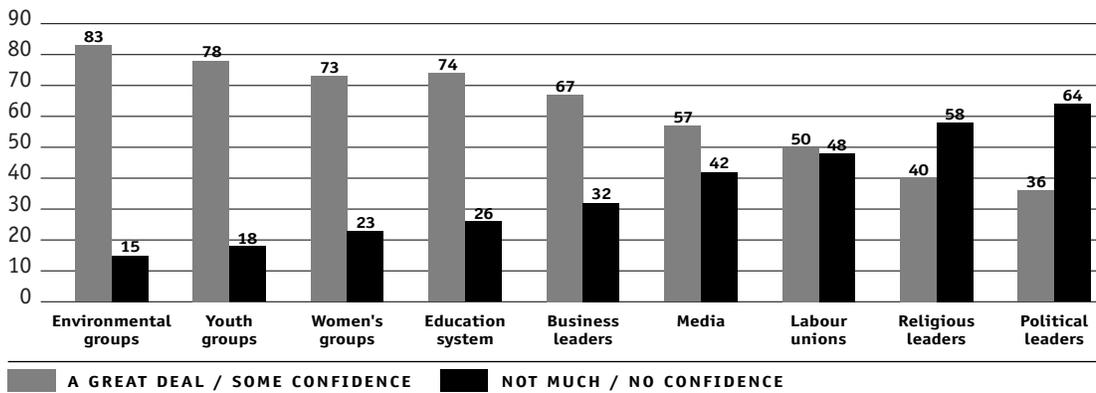
³⁴ Data from Environics Research Group, cited in George Perlin and Andrew Parkin, “Regime Legitimacy,” in George Perlin, *Canadian Politics, Volume 2: Canadian Democracy In Critical Perspective* (Kingston and Toronto: Queen’s University and CBC Newsworld, 2000)

³⁵ Data from Canadian Elections Studies, cited in Perlin and Parkin, “Regime Legitimacy.”

EXPLAINING THE DECLINE IN VOTER PARTICIPATION

FIGURE 8 | CONFIDENCE IN GROUPS (SURVEY OF 18 TO 34 YEAR OLDS)

QUESTION: I am going to read you a list of groups. For each, I'd like you to tell me how much confidence you have in them, is it a great deal, some, not very much, or none at all.



Source: CRIC survey on the concerns and values of young Canadians, March 1997.

Political scientists in Canada have varied views on which factors are to blame for heightening voter cynicism.³⁶ Some point to the way in which the news media cover politics. Television news emphasizes style over substance and portrays election campaigns as strategic contests among party leaders. This reinforces the sense that there are few major issues at stake and accentuates the negative tone of the campaign – a tone that some American researchers have shown to “contribute to the general antipathy toward politicians and parties.”³⁷

Others point to the limited role played in decision-making by the majority of members of parliament. As power has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the inner circle surrounding the Prime Minister and his or her key ministers,³⁸ parliament, as a whole, becomes less relevant as a forum

for political deliberation. Backbench and opposition MPs, in particular, are seen as having no power to shape the political agenda and no input into legislation. Citizens are left to wonder if their votes really matter, since in almost every case the MPs they select will be far removed from the center of political power.

Furthermore, without a meaningful role to play, MPs are reduced to trying to score partisan political points through cajoling and heckling – precisely the activity that increases the public’s negative view of politicians.

³⁶ See Perlin and Parkin, “Regime Legitimacy.”

³⁷ Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative, How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p. 112.

³⁸ See: Donald J. Savoie, *Governing from the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), e.g. pages 108, 362.

“There has been a massive change in the tone of political comment in Canada. In the mid-1960s, journalists commenting on public events adopted a deferential tone. Today, journalists attempt to expose all the contradictory statements that politicians make. I’m not sure that this is the only explanation for growing voter cynicism, or declining respect for politicians, but I don’t feel it is very bold to infer that there might be a link.

I suspect that the way parliamentary activities are reported by the media has some influence on the trust, or lack of it, that people develop towards politicians, towards institutions, and towards the political process. Most of the TV coverage of parliamentary business is focused on question period. Question period is the idea that most Canadians have of parliament. I don’t think that these 45 minutes on which the media attention is focused give a flattering image of parliamentarians in general. Nor does it provide a very reliable view of what is really going on in parliament. Politicians do much more than answering or asking questions. Constituency activities, for example, are something that take up most of an average MP’s time, and most MPs will say this is the most rewarding aspect of their activities. But there is nothing interesting about this to be reported in the media. Committee work is also quite interesting and challenging for average MPs, but it is not something that is very important to the media. I suspect that this kind of skewed coverage may have an impact on the poor image that people have of parliamentarians, and may help to produce a low turnout.”

Louis Massicotte
Université de Montréal

DISCUSSION

There is much about political turnout that political scientists do not know. One problem that researchers face is that many non-voters simply refuse to be interviewed in telephone surveys about politics. This limits our understanding of why some people don't vote.

Even if we cannot be sure which of the various factors is the single most important one, we can still draw the following conclusion: both the relative lack of competitiveness of the last two elections, and the problems associated with the switch to a permanent voters list, discouraged a certain number of people from voting. But even taken together, these factors cannot account in full for the longer-term trend toward lower turnout.

This means that the gradual shift in values, along with the increasing political cynicism or disaffection, have to be taken into account. The key point of disagreement is over how much weight to give to each of these two explanations. Those who argue that voter turnout is declining because Canadians, like most citizens in the Western world, are becoming more "inner-focused," more secular and less deferential to authority, are less likely to see cause for alarm. That is because these changes can be linked to developments, common to all industrialized countries, that have little to do with the performance of the political system.

But those who stress the coincidence of lower turnout and greater cynicism about politics are more apt to worry, since the implication is that declining turnout is a symptom of a deeper malaise. Given the apparent extent of political disaffection among citizens, there is little room for complacency. It should be stressed that while the above-noted changed values have been recorded in most Western

democracies, the decline in voter turnout in Canada in the past decade has been especially acute. Moreover, the most common type of reason for not voting given by those surveyed in 2000 by Elections Canada was that they didn't think the election or their vote mattered, or that they didn't like the choices they were offered (see Figure 4). This again prompts us to take seriously the idea that the Canadian political system may be performing particularly poorly in the eyes of its citizens.

A consideration of the case of young Canadians, which follows below, further reinforces the sense that all is not well with Canada's political system.

Young Canadians: Activist or Apathetic?

VOTING AND NON-VOTING

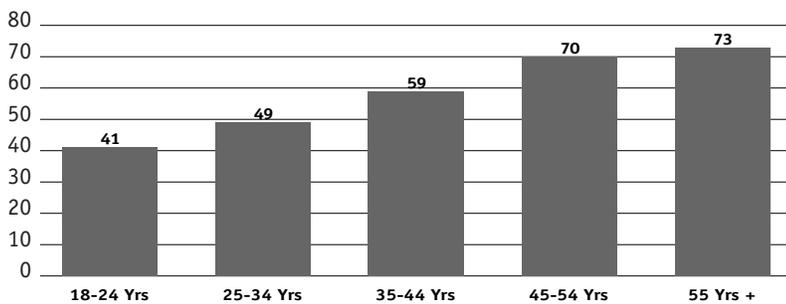
Younger people are less interested in politics (see Figures 9 and 10) and are less likely to vote than their elders.³⁹ This is not surprising. On the whole, voters who only recently have become adults will be less familiar with politics. They are at a relatively “care free” stage of life, and have had less opportunity to see how elections could affect their interests.

Many young adults are highly mobile, and so less rooted in their communities and less aware of community needs and issues. For these reasons, they are likely to be less interested in elections. But as they grow older, it is generally assumed that they will become more likely to vote.

FIGURE 9 | INTEREST IN POLITICS (BY AGE GROUP)

QUESTION: In general, would you say you follow politics and public issues very closely, somewhat closely, not too closely or not at all?

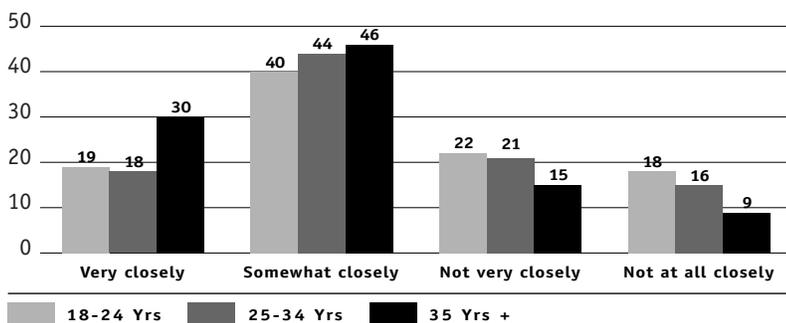
(Figure shows the proportion saying very or somewhat closely)



Source: CRIC, Portraits of Canada, 2000.

FIGURE 10 | INTEREST IN ELECTION (BY AGE GROUP)

QUESTION: Would you say that you followed the election very closely, somewhat closely, not very closely or not at all closely?



Source: Elections Canada Post-Election Survey, November-December 2000.

³⁹ Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote*, 52; Neil Nevitte, André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil and Richard Nadeau, *Unsteady State: The 1997 Canadian Federal Election* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61; Jon H. Pammett and John Myles, “Lowering the Voting Age to 16,” in *Youth in Canadian Politics: Participation and Involvement*, edited by Kathy Megyery, Volume 8 of the Research Studies prepared for the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991), 99-101.

YOUNG CANADIANS: ACTIVIST OR APATHETIC?

The decline in voter turnout raises questions about this assumption. Contrary to expectations, are more and more young people continuing to abstain from voting as they grow older? And are young people today even less likely to vote than they were a generation ago?

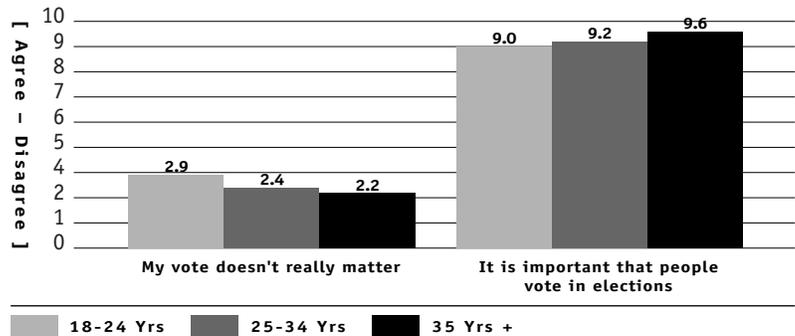
The answer is “yes.”⁴⁰ The team of researchers leading the 2000 Canadian Election Study have found that, at the same age, turnout among those born in the 1960s is 10 points lower than it was for earlier generations, and it is a further 10 points lower among those born in the 1970s. In other words, turnout for younger Canadians (those born after 1970) is 20 points lower than it was at the same age for those born before the 1960s.⁴¹ This research confirms that it is less and less the case that voters who abstain when they are young are opting to vote as they get older. And this in turn accounts for much of the decline in turnout experienced in Canada; that is, turnout is declining because, as time passes, newer generations of Canadians, who are less inclined to vote, are coming to represent a larger share of the electorate.⁴²

NEITHER CYNICISM NOR APATHY

It might be assumed that young people are voting less because they have become especially cynical about politics. But this is not the case.

FIGURE 11 | DOES VOTING MATTER? (RESULTS BY AGE GROUP)

The figure shows the average response on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly disagree with the statement and 10 means you strongly agree.



Source: Elections Canada Post-Election Survey, November-December 2000.

Elections Canada’s recent post-election survey found 18 to 24 year olds are more likely to agree that their vote doesn’t really matter, and less likely to agree that it is important to vote. But the difference in the responses given by older and younger people is relatively small (see Figure 11). As expected, the same survey found a very large difference in the proportion within each age group who said they had voted in the election. Clearly, the much lower voter turnout among 18 to 24 year olds cannot be attributed to the fact that they were only slightly less likely to think that voting mattered.

⁴⁰ Nevitte, Blais, Gidengil and Nadeau, *Unsteady State*, 62.

⁴¹ André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Neil Nevitte and Richard Nadeau, “The Evolving Nature of Non Voting: Evidence from Canada,” paper prepared for delivery the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, August 30-September 2, 2001, p. 3.

⁴² Blais, Gidengil, Nevitte and Nadeau, “The Evolving Nature of Non Voting,” pp. 4-5. The authors note, however, that “it also remains to be explained *why* younger generations are less prone to vote than their predecessors” (p. 7). See also: Nevitte, Blais, Gidengil and Nadeau, *Unsteady State*, 63.

YOUNG CANADIANS: ACTIVIST OR APATHETIC?

In addition, consider the following:

- The same survey asked those who had not voted to say why they had abstained. Non-voters, 18 to 24, were *less* likely than older non-voters to say that they had abstained because they didn't think their vote made a difference, because the election didn't matter to them, or because they didn't like any of the candidates or the political parties (see Appendix, Table 3).
 - As noted above, a majority of Canadians agree that governments don't care very much about what they think, and that politicians often lie to get elected. But younger people are no more likely to agree with these statements than are older people.⁴³
 - Data from Environics' *Focus Canada* surveys show that the percentage of those saying they had confidence in governments fell by a dramatic 28 points between 1988 and 1992. However, the decline was less pronounced among younger Canadians: among 18 to 29 year olds it fell by 23 points, whereas it fell by 28 points among those aged 30 to 44, and by 33 points among those aged 45 to 59.
- CRIC's *Portraits of Canada 2000* survey found that young people are slightly less likely to say that the main parties running in that year's federal election are basically the same, and about as likely to say that there are real differences between some of them.⁴⁴
- These latest findings confirm previous studies' findings that "young people are less cynical about politics and have higher feelings of political efficacy than do older people."⁴⁵ Or, in the words of another group of researchers, "there is no relationship between age and cynicism. It is *not* because they are more cynical that the generation born after 1970 is less prone to vote."⁴⁶
- Some commentators also claim that the evidence that young people today are less interested in politics is misleading. While they may be less interested in federal elections, they are more attracted than ever to other political activities at the local and international levels. As is often noted, the cultural, economic and political horizons of young people have become much more global. And where conventional political institutions appear remote, hierarchical and ineffective, community politics is "hands-on," co-operative and

⁴³ CRIC survey on Trade, Globalization and Canadian Values, 2001, February-March 2001. See: CRIC, *Opinion Canada*, Vol. 3, No. 23 (June 21, 2001); available online at <http://www.ccu-cuc.ca/en/op/archives/opv3n23.htm#file>.

⁴⁴ Similarly, the IRPP found that young people are less likely to agree with the statement that "all federal parties are basically the same; there isn't really a choice." See: Paul Howe and David Northrup, "Strengthening Canadian Democracy: The Views of Canadians," *Policy Matters* Vol. 1, No. 5 (July 2000), 88. Available from the website of the Institute for Research on Public Policy at www.irpp.org. There is one exception to the statement made above: in the CRIC survey, 18 to 24 year olds were less likely than every other age group, *except those over 55 years of age*, to say that all parties were the same.

⁴⁵ Pammett and Myles, "Lowering the Voting Age to 16," 101.

⁴⁶ Nevitte, Blais, Gidengil and Nadeau, *Unsteady State*, 63.

“The proliferation of the world wide web and its various elements has changed the way in which people, especially younger people, perceive both time and space. When you talk about time, you’re talking about an increasing desire for an immediate response. Elections occur only every four years or so, and the processes of parliamentary government and electoral democracy seem very slow and out of touch with the contemporary world. As far as space is concerned, the way in which most of us understand the scope of political issues has changed dramatically. They are understood increasingly in ways that transcend the nation-state, so that domestic politics seems less and less relevant to people’s lives. At the same time, global politics seems to many younger people to be beyond their grasp, or at least their capacity to have influence (except for some through the illusion of consumer choice). Voting in local, provincial and national elections, then, seems to many younger citizens to be a waste of time. I think some of these perceptions are actually incorrect, and are media-driven. But nevertheless, they’re there and they explain a lot about how younger people are behaving.”

Fred Fletcher
York University

promises to deliver concrete results in the short term. In short, many socially and politically engaged young people “do not feel that voting is an empowering form of change. They would rather put their energies into other forms of political engagement.”⁴⁷

This argument is compelling. At the same time, it is interesting to note that recent surveys have shown that the views of young adults in Canada are not all that different from those of their parents.

- An Institute for Research for Public Policy survey asked “what do you think is a more effective way to work for change nowadays: joining a political party or an interest group?” Only 21 percent of 18 to 29 year olds said that it is more effective to join a political party, but the proportion of 46 to 60 year olds who preferred this option was exactly the same.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ D-Code Inc., *Social Vision Report: Young Adult Perspectives on Social and Civic Responsibility* (Toronto: D-Code, Inc., 2001), p. 21.

⁴⁸ Howe and Northrup, “Strengthening Canadian Democracy,” p. 95.

“I don’t think young Canadians are any more cynical than older Canadians. Surveys confirm this. Moreover, surveys reveal that younger Canadians are actually happier with democracy and politics than older Canadians. But I do think that young Canadians are disaffected with some of the institutions of politics. We know, for instance, that the young are less likely to get out and vote on election day. And this stems, I think, in part from a belief among the young that voting has no immediate consequences. Nothing will change as a result of the election. Political parties fall into the same category; parties make promises but they never follow through on those promises. The result is that young people have disengaged from the traditional political institutions. This doesn’t mean, however, that they have disengaged from politics. For Canadian youth, the salient issues are now international issues - globalization being the most visible of these. The lens is far more focused on the international than the domestic arena. And for those young people who are interested in politics and who want to participate, international groups and social movements are more likely to be chosen as the vehicles for change than traditional institutions such as political parties. It is easy to see the effect that these groups are having on politics - one need only read the newspaper. So if you are young and you want to do something in politics that has meaning and which is likely to affect change, you do it yourself. You join a group and you go out and protest.”

Brenda O’Neill
University of Manitoba

- Similarly, a CRIC survey found that young Canadians essentially are no more likely than their parents to approve of acts of civil disobedience. Seventy-two percent of 18 to 29 year olds said they would never engage in acts of civil disobedience, such as occupying a building or blockading a road – a figure only slightly lower than the 76 percent of 46 to 60 year olds who said the same.⁴⁹

In each case, the real difference of opinion was between those under 60 years of age, and those over that age. In other words, it is the oldest generation of Canadians that has distinctive views about the efficacy of political parties or the legitimacy of political protest, not the youngest.

These limited findings do not invalidate the argument that, increasingly, young people are ill at ease with the country's political institutions. But they do suggest that other factors need to be considered in order to explain the growing reluctance of young Canadians to participate in elections.

“Many young Canadians are politically engaged... However, their political involvement does not exhibit characteristics of the traditional forms of political and civic engagement. Our respondents suggested that young people are not lining up to join youth wings of political parties, nor are they rushing to the ballot box. Recognizing the lack of focus and energy that politicians target at young adults, combined with the low levels of trust and relevance this age group places in the current political system, has forced many young Canadians to seek out alternate sources of political engagement. According to our respondents, community-oriented initiatives are seen as more relevant, as are Internet organized protests and boycotts. Actions that satisfy this age group need to be relevant, have an impact and must demonstrate tangible results.”⁵⁰

D-Code Inc.
Social Vision Report

⁴⁹ CRIC survey on Trade, Globalization and Canadian Values, February-March 2001. See: CRIC, *Opinion Canada*, Vol. 3, No. 23 (June 21, 2001); available online at <http://www.ccu-cuc.ca/en/op/archives/opv3n23.htm#file>.

⁵⁰ D-Code Inc., *Social Vision Report*, pp. 21-22.

“At one time, the education system helped to provide a sense of civic responsibility and civic duty that encouraged people to get out and vote.

But in my own teaching experience at various universities, I’ve seen a change that has impacted negatively on this. In the past couple of decades there has been an increasing emphasis on technological and practical degrees, like business, commerce, engineering, and computer science. As a result, many students who in the past would have taken introductory courses in the social sciences no longer do so. Curriculum changes have meant that as students have become more technologically sophisticated they also have been required to take a narrower and more specialized curriculum. The effect of this specialization has been to reduce the likelihood that an engineering student, for example, will have the option of taking a social science course in which there would have been at least some measure of civic education. I do not see as many engineering, commerce, business, medical or nursing students in my political science classes as I used to. This means that those men and women who are among the best educated people in the country are also the least likely to have been introduced to some notion of government and politics.”

John Courtney
University of Saskatchewan

CIVIC EDUCATION

One example is the decline in “civic education” in schools — classes that focus on the country and its political system, and encourage discussion of current affairs. Some argue that the education system is not doing as much as it once did to familiarize young people with the political system and its underlying values. This may help to explain the fact that Canadian citizens appear to be less knowledgeable about politics than they once were. As Paul Howe reports, “a sizeable and growing section of the population is woefully

ill-informed about political matters... Nor are things likely to improve down the road. Young Canadians are the least politically knowledgeable group in the country, and by a wider margin today than ten years ago... What’s more, this relative decline in levels of political knowledge also holds true of young Canadians who have received a post-secondary education.”⁵¹ Howe adds that those who are less knowledgeable about politics are also less likely to vote.

⁵¹ Paul Howe, “The Sources of Campaign Intemperance,” *Policy Options / Options Politiques* Vo. 22, No. 1 (January-February 2001), p. 22.

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT GOVERNMENT

A second factor is changes in perceptions about government and its role in society. The current generation of young voters came of age during the 1990s, at a time when political debate focused on the deficit and debt problem, wasteful spending and excessive levels of taxation. Governments were frequently portrayed as the source of Canada's problems, not the solution. Government program spending was dramatically curtailed, sending young people the message that citizens should become more self-reliant and seek more opportunities outside the public sector. Thus, it is no surprise that young Canadians question the effectiveness and relevance of government and the value of political participation.⁵²

Furthermore, for young adults full of creative energy and ideals, the world of politics is arguably less inviting than it once was. Until recently, post-war governments in Canada had been preoccupied with managing economic expansion, creating the welfare state, "nation-building" through constitutional renewal, and promoting peace and justice abroad. But government's role has been curtailed, both as a result of the need to cut spending and in response to the constraints of economic globalization. Once again, it is perhaps no surprise that young Canadians with more ambitious goals are by-passing traditional political institutions.

"Enrollment in political science courses has been declining in many universities across the country in recent years. While most institutions have breadth requirements that force students to take courses outside their immediate area of specialization, they are typically free to choose from a vast array of options. A good argument can be made that an introductory political science course involving a healthy dose of Canadian politics should be a mandatory part of any university degree... [O]nly political science is directly concerned with the indispensable task of building civic capacity by creating politically-informed citizens. If Canadian high schools continue to produce graduates who lack the most rudimentary understanding of Canadian politics, perhaps the universities will have to fill the void..."⁵³

Paul Howe
University of New Brunswick

⁵² I am grateful to Lisa Young and Phillip Haid for bringing this point to my attention. As one indication of how the effort to contain government spending has affected the lives of young Canadians, consider that average university tuition for an undergraduate arts program doubled over the course of the 1990s. See Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, 27 August 2001, available online at: <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/010827/d010827b.htm>.

⁵³ Howe, "The Source of Campaign Intemperance," p. 23.

“One of the main reasons many young Canadians are not interested in politics today is due to what they see as a lack of leadership... They look at the leaders on the political landscape and see managers, whereas what they are really looking for are strong leaders with vision... The leadership question does not have to do with age, it has to do with vision.”

Phillip Haid
D-Code Inc.

a fragmentation of the Canadian public – turning it into numerous micro-audiences.⁵⁴ Again, common community is partially eclipsed.

Each of these three developments is important, since research has shown that voter participation is linked to the degree to which citizens are connected with the larger community. Voting is, in part, an expression of one’s sense of community. As the visibility or salience of the shared community is eroded for the reasons mentioned above, then one of the most important forces that once encouraged young people to participate in the country’s political life is weakened. The problem is not that more and more young people feel hostility towards the political system, but that more and more are indifferent to it.

A FRAGMENTED COMMUNITY

A third factor is the gradual fragmentation of public communication and debate. Much has been said about the Internet’s impact on Canadian society. Some argue that it is a means through which young people can become socially engaged. Via the Internet, citizens with similar interests can form “virtual” communities. But virtual communities are still diffused communities. There is little that connects them to one another or to a larger, all-encompassing community. With the proliferation of virtual communities, the common community becomes less and less visible.

Similarly, developments in other forms of electronic media – including the expansion of cable, satellite and digital television – mean that there are many more channels of public communication to choose from. Fred Fletcher has argued that, among other things, the proliferation of TV channels may bring about

⁵⁴ Frederick J. Fletcher, "Media, Elections, and Democracy," *Canadian Journal of Communication* Vol. 19, No. 1 (1994), pp. 143-44.

Does Turnout Matter?

Does it really matter if 40 percent of the electorate chooses not to vote?

NO

Low turnout could be a sign of what pollster Michael Adams calls a “new consensus” about the need for smaller governments and the reduced importance of national politics in our day-to-day lives. Elections matter less than they did before, he argues, but not because there is a crisis in Canadian democracy. They matter less because governments are doing less, because globalization places more policy issues beyond Ottawa’s control, and because citizens are more self-reliant and less willing to be led by traditional figures of authority. According to Adams, “there is life after electoral politics” – by which he presumably means that the health of a society must be measured by more than the tally of those willing to trudge to the polls every four years to cast a vote.⁵⁵

It can also be noted that turnout is not necessarily the best measure of the health of a democratic society. For various reasons, Switzerland has very low turnout at national elections, yet in many ways constitutes a model democracy. Conversely, some countries whose democratic institutions rest on very shaky foundations can nonetheless boast high levels of voter participation.

YES

There are at least three good reasons why turnout does matter.

“Turnout does matter. One important way that it does is in connection with participation inequality. The problem with an overall decline in voter turnout is that it is very unlikely to be uniform across major social categories. Instead, the drop is virtually certain to be accompanied by a widening disparity in participation rates, that is, an enhanced degree of inequality between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Such a disproportionate decline in voter turnout is particularly expected for groups such as young people, immigrants, tenants, and the poor; these are people who, of course, already participate at lower levels relative to those who are socially and economically better off. At the same time, arguably, the less well off are the ones who most need to vote. The real problem is that unevenness in electoral participation usually translates into distortions in representation and governmental response. That is, to the extent that participation matters, to the extent that the views of citizens are taken into account in the setting of policy priorities, then an important consequence of nonparticipation is the neglect of major interests. In Canadian politics as elsewhere, voices that are not heard are usually not heeded.”

Jerome Black
McGill University

⁵⁵ Michael Adams, “The Revolt of the Voting Classes” (30 November, 2000). Available on the website of Environics Research Group at <http://erg.environics.net/news/default.asp?aID=424>. Published in *The Globe and Mail* under the title of “Death of Politics.”

EQUALITY OF INFLUENCE

First, it matters because declining turnout sows the seeds of increasing inequality among social groups in terms of political participation and political influence.

As political scientist Jerome Black reminds us, it is important to look at who is voting, and who is not. The decline in voter participation is particularly acute among certain groups within society — young people and those who are less well-off economically. This means that, as overall turnout declines, the active electorate becomes less and less representative of society as a whole: “low voter turnout means unequal and socioeconomically biased turnout.”⁵⁶ Voters no longer appear to speak with the voice of “the people” — they speak more and more with the voice of those who are relatively privileged.

This reality in turn shapes the behaviour of political parties. As noted American political scientist Arend Lijphart argues, “unequal participation spells unequal influence,” a fact that he calls “a major dilemma for representative democracy.”⁵⁷ Political parties craft their platforms in order to gain the votes they need to win power. There is little incentive for them to aim their appeal at those groups that are the least likely to vote. As non-voting increases among the less affluent, political parties and, ultimately, governments will tailor their messages and policies to an increasingly narrow segment of the population. The result: the political system will seem even less relevant to the less affluent than before – reinforcing their sense that there is little point in voting.

⁵⁶ Arend Lijphart, “Unequal Participation: Democracy’s Unresolved Dilemma,” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 91, No. 1 (March 1997), p. 2.

⁵⁷ Lijphart, “Unequal Participation: Democracy’s Unresolved Dilemma,” p. 1.

LEGITIMACY

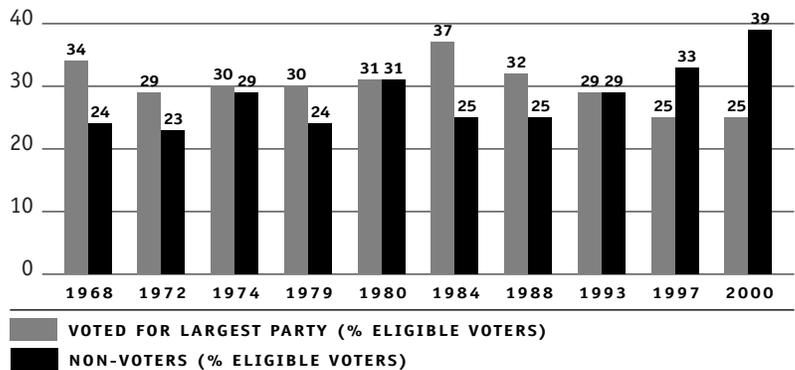
Second, turnout matters because the government’s moral authority to govern rests on its claim that it won the support of the largest share of the electorate. Many people may oppose the current party in government, but they recognize that it has legitimacy because it won a mandate from the people.

As more voters abstain, however, the total votes won by the winning party, measured as a share of the number of eligible voters, decreases. For example, the last two Liberal majorities were elected by only 25 percent of eligible voters, whereas at least 30 percent supported the majority governments elected in 1968, 1974, 1980, 1984 and 1988. Indeed, minority governments elected in 1972 and 1979 were supported by a greater share of the electorate than were the two most recent majority governments.

What is more striking is that the proportion of the electorate who vote for the winning party is now smaller than the proportion who do not vote at all (see Figure 12). In 1988 for instance, the Conservative party attracted the support of 32 percent of the electorate, while 25 percent did not vote at all. In 2000, as mentioned, only 25 percent voted Liberal, compared to the 39 percent who abstained.

FIGURE 12 NON-VOTERS VS. VOTERS FOR LARGEST PARTY

“Largest Party” = party winning the largest share of the popular vote.



Source: calculated using data from Elections Canada.

Therefore, as turnout decreases, the ability of the winning party in an election to claim that it has won the support of the public is brought into question. As the American political scientist Ruy Teixeira writes, “as fewer and fewer citizens participate in elections, the extent to which government truly rests on the consent of the governed may be called into question. As a result elites may feel they do not have sufficient legitimacy among citizens to pursue desired policy objectives, and citizens may feel the government is not legitimate enough for them to support these elites and their policy objectives.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Ruy A. Teixeira, *The Disappearing American Voter* (Washington: Brookings Institute, 1992), p. 101.

DOES TURNOUT MATTER?

POLITICAL COMMUNITY

Third, turnout matters because of what it tells us about the health of our political community. It is arguable that the decline in voter turnout can be seen as but one symptom of a growing disconnect between Canadians and their community, a growing distrust of public officials and institutions, and a weakening sense of civic duty or obligation. It is notable that volunteerism is also on the decline, with 1 million fewer Canadians giving their time in 2000 as compared to 1997.⁵⁹ Statistics Canada reports the proportion of Canadians who were members of a political organization also fell during that period, from 4 to 3 percent.⁶⁰ The problem, therefore, may not be simply that fewer people vote, but that fewer are engaged, as citizens, in the public life of the common community.

This does not place Canada in a very good position to meet the challenges that will likely befall it in the years to come. It is foreseeable that in the next five to ten years the country will have to respond to developments as varied as the completion of the Free Trade Area of the Americas, the need to reinvent medicare, a third referendum on sovereignty in Quebec, the coming-of-age of a young and more assertive Aboriginal population, and the moral issues raised by new medical and biological technologies. The finding of effective policy responses must be rooted in citizen participation, for at least two reasons: first, those advancing creative policy ideas must seek public support in order for these

ideas to find a place on the political agenda; and second, governments that cannot connect with citizens are unlikely to be able to build the support to ensure that their policies are accepted and effectively implemented.

It is even possible to suggest that Canada's future depends at least in part on the ability of its population to cohere as a community. Many commentators have stressed how the shifting flow of trade, from an east-west axis to a north-south one, weakens the economic bonds that once tied Canada's regions together.⁶¹ More than ever, Canadian unity must be forged through an appeal, not to economic self-interest, but to a sense of shared values and common purpose. The more citizens become non-participants in key political events, such as elections, and lose respect for political institutions, the greater the likelihood that appeals to shared values and common purpose will fall on deaf ears.

⁵⁹ Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, 17 August 2001, available online at: <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/010817/d010817c.htm>.

⁶⁰ Michael Hall, Larry McKeown and Karen Roberts, *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*, Statistics Canada Cat. No. 71-542 (August 2001), p. 50; supplemented by communication with Statistics Canada.

⁶¹ See, for instance, John Ibbitson, *Loyal No More: Ontario's Struggle for a Separate Destiny* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).

Looking Forward

If turnout does matter, can anything be done to encourage more citizens to go to the polls? A number of suggestions have been put forward. But at the outset, it should be noted that some of the principal causes of declining voter participation – notably shifting values and rising political disaffection – are not “problems” to which easy solutions readily can be found.

INTERNET VOTING

Some argue that new communications technology offers a possible solution. Voters might be more inclined to vote if they could do so online or by telephone. In the wake of the low turnout in the recent UK election, that country’s Electoral Commission proposed a review of both these methods of voting.⁶² Elections Canada has also studied the implication of information technology for the voting process.⁶³

Canadians are currently divided on the question of whether such innovations are advisable. The Elections Canada post-election survey found that 47 percent said they would like to vote online in future elections, if technology allowed, while 52 percent said they would not. Similarly, 38 percent agreed with the proposition that “to make it easier for people to vote, Internet voting should be allowed for a general election,” but the same proportion disagreed.⁶⁴ (In the case of

telephone voting, only 28 percent agreed that it should be allowed, compared to 47 percent who disagreed). Furthermore, 48 percent agreed that “there is too much potential for fraud and mistakes to ever have Internet voting for a general election,” and 30 percent remained opposed to Internet voting even in the event that “systems are proven safe and secure.” Those most likely to be familiar with computers and the Internet – that is, younger, better-educated and wealthier Canadians – were more supportive of voting online.

Concerns have been expressed about the potential for fraud, should voting online be allowed. For instance, hackers could disrupt the system, cause it to misallocate votes, obtain voters’ passwords, or reveal whom individual voters supported.

The biggest problem with voting online, however, has nothing to do with the technology. It has to do with the potential for abuse simply because more and more voters would be voting outside of a polling station, where nothing prevents someone from looking over voters’ shoulders to make sure they support the “right” candidate. If families gather to vote around the household terminal, it will be harder for spouses or children to secretly defy the political wishes of their partners or parents. More serious abuses could follow from the actions of unscrupulous political activists. In tightly fought constituencies, one can readily imagine activists

⁶² Kevin Ward, “Britain Looks at Internet Voting, Ballot Redesign to Overcome Voter Apathy,” Canadian Press article posted on CBC News website on July 24, 2001.

⁶³ See “The Feasibility of Electronic Voting in Canada,” in *Electoral Insight* Vol. 2, No. 1 (June 2000): 2-5. Available on the website of Elections Canada at www.elections.ca.

⁶⁴ Respondents were asked to use a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means strong disagreement and 10 means strong agreement. For the purpose of the results cited above, answers from 0 to 2 were coded as “disagree” and answers from 8 to 10 were coded as “agree.” The remaining responses were coded as “neutral.”

armed with portable, wireless computers seeking out otherwise apathetic voters and buying their online votes.

Finally, it can be argued that the visit to a polling station has a positive influence on citizens in a democracy. It is perhaps one of the most important exercises in civic education that voters are likely to experience. The traditional voting process can be seen as a ritual that, like many other rituals in human life, heightens the sense of importance of the act in question. These intangible effects of voting would be lost in the transition to voting online.

For all of these reasons, new communications technology is not the best solution to the problem of low voter turnout.

COMPULSORY VOTING

The simplest way for Canada to boost turnout at elections would be to adopt compulsory voting. As Arend Lijphart argues, “compulsory voting is the only institutional mechanism... that can assure high turnout virtually by itself.”⁶⁵ Countries such as Australia, Belgium and Greece each make voting mandatory, and as a direct result, turnout in these countries is very high.

Compulsory voting does more than increase the number of ballots cast. It can have a “spillover effect,” acting as a “form of civic education and political stimulation” that encourages citizens to become more interested and involved in politics.⁶⁶ And it can enhance democracy by counteracting the tendency, noted above, for certain groups within the population – notably those who are better-off – to vote in greater numbers than others.

There are two compelling arguments against compulsory voting. The first is that it likely would be opposed by a majority of the public, who would see it as an unwarranted restriction on the freedom of the individual. In a survey conducted last year by the IRPP, only 24 percent supported compulsory voting, while 73 percent opposed it.⁶⁷ Compelling citizens to vote might therefore *contribute* to their sense of anger toward the political system, even if a greater number of them turned out to vote.

⁶⁵ Lijphart, “Unequal Participation,” p. 10.

⁶⁶ Lijphart, “Unequal Participation,” p. 10.

⁶⁷ Howe and Northrup, “Strengthening Canadian Democracy,” p. 86. The question was: “In Australia and a number of other countries, people must vote or pay a small fine. Do you think Canada should have a law like this?”

“Some years ago, I argued that compulsory voting would be a bit like shooting the messenger. The level of turnout tells us something about the health of democracy, and if we artificially raise turnout by means of compulsory voting then we no longer have a signal to tell us that something is wrong with our procedures.

But I am not so sure about that any more. If we had compulsory voting in America, politicians would have an incentive to come forward with policies that simply are not dreamt about now, because the people who would vote for them aren't voting. If you forced those people to vote, then you would get policy entrepreneurs making proposals that currently are not on the agenda at all.

Maybe political scientists ought to stand up and say it would be good for democracy to have compulsory voting. Maybe that would be a good role for us to play.”

Mark Franklin
Trinity College

Second, compulsory voting does little to address the underlying causes of low voter turnout, and might only mask the problem. If turnout were artificially high through mandatory voting, we would not have the evidence of declining turnout to alert us that something is wrong with the political system, with the level of civic education, or the sense of civic duty in Canada.

For these reasons, compulsory voting is not the best solution for Canada.

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

In recent years, Canada's electoral system has been increasingly criticized. Under the existing "first-past-the-post" system, the candidate who wins the most votes in an individual constituency is elected. While this seems fair, it produces results that on the aggregate are peculiar. Examples are familiar and plentiful: in 1993, the party with the fourth highest popular vote (the Bloc Québécois) won the second highest number of seats and formed the official opposition; in 1997, the Progressive Conservative Party won almost as many votes as the Reform Party, but one-third as many seats; in 2000, the Tories won more votes than the Bloc but less than one-third as many seats. And parties regularly form majority governments on the basis of the support of only 2 in 5 voters.

In response, many argue that Canada should adopt a system of proportional representation (PR). Under PR, parties would be allocated a share of the seats in the House of Commons that more closely reflected their level of popular support. Advocates of PR argue that it is fairer to voters and to parties. In Canada, PR would also alleviate regionalism, as it would make it possible for each of the major parties to win seats in all regions of the country.

But it can also be argued that a switch to PR would give voters added incentives to cast their ballots, and thereby enhance turnout. There are several reasons why this might be the case:

- a. PR would do away with "wasted" votes. At present, many voters know that their preferred candidate has no chance of winning in their constituency. Under PR, each vote is weighed in the calculations used to allocate seats in the House of Commons. Therefore every vote counts in a way that it does not under the existing system.
- b. PR would make elections more interesting and competitive. Easy majority victories would be unlikely, and election outcomes less predictable. The electoral monopolies that certain parties exercise over specific areas of the country would be disrupted. Smaller parties would emerge as potential coalition partners, giving their supporters an added incentive to turn out to vote.
- c. Since the relative standing of the parties in the House of Commons would more closely reflect their level of popular support, the political system would appear more responsive. It would no longer be the case that some parties could lose official party status despite winning a significant portion of the vote, or that others could win large majority despite being supported by less than half the electorate. The more direct relation between votes cast and seats won would contribute to the sense that voting matters.

In general, then, advocates of PR argue that it is more responsive to voters' intentions and therefore removes the disincentives to vote that characterise the electoral system as it now stands. As Mark Franklin writes, "voters are not fools, and an unresponsive system will motivate many fewer of them to vote."⁶⁸ From this standpoint, it is perhaps not surprising that researchers have found that, other things being equal, countries that use a form of PR tend to have higher turnout (although there is some disagreement as to how much of a difference PR makes).⁶⁹

Since the lack of competitiveness in recent elections, combined with some citizens' view that voting or elections don't matter, are among factors contributing to low turnout in Canada, the need to examine PR is evident. The government could give Elections Canada a mandate to engage Canadians in a serious debate about changing the electoral system, establish a commission of enquiry to recommend alternatives, and ultimately put the question of PR to the people in a referendum on electoral reform.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Franklin, "The Dynamics of Electoral Participation."

⁶⁹ See, for instance: Franklin, "The Dynamics of Electoral Participation"; André Blais and Agnieszka Dobrynska, "Turnout in Electoral Democracies," *European Journal of Political Research* Vol. 33 (March 1998), pp. 247-248; André Blais and Ken Carty, "Does Proportional Representation Foster Voter Turnout?" *European Journal of Political Research* Vol. 18 (1990), pp. 174 ff.

⁷⁰ For some thoughts on how the process of electoral reform in Canada might proceed, see Matthew Mendelsohn and Andrew Parkin, with Alex Van Kralingen, "Getting from Here to There: A Process for Electoral Reform in Canada," *Policy Options / Options Politiques* Vol. 22, No. 6 (July-August 2001): 55-60

LOOKING FORWARD

“I also looked at voter turnout. The voter turnout... is steadily going down. We have to consider why that apathy exists... So this is my message... Take off the Whips! Do away with the Whips on most issues. By Whips, I mean those whose function is to pressure members to vote the party line. I believe it would have a tremendous impact in how Parliament functions – and it would restore the stature and the relevance of the individual member. One result would be that we will get many more qualified candidates from all parties... The time is right and the public mood is supportive.”⁷¹

Peter Lougheed
Former Premier of Alberta

INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

A change in the electoral system is only one of a number of possible reforms that could reinvigorate Canada’s political system. Others include:

- Enhancing the role of individual members of parliament by relaxing party discipline and allowing more free votes in the House of Commons. (Note that, in CRIC’s March 2001 survey of the four western provinces, 55 percent of respondents said that “changing the rules of the House of Commons so that members of parliament can vote more freely, rather than having to vote the same way as their party” was a high priority for making the country work better.⁷²)
- Further expanding the influence of MPs by strengthening parliamentary committees (Canadian parliamentary committees are much weaker than those of similar countries⁷³).
- Subjecting leadership campaigns within political parties to public regulation, in order to make fund-raising and spending, as well as the voting process, more transparent and worthy of public confidence.
- Hold more referendums on key public policy issues (as was done recently in New Brunswick, on the question of video lottery terminals), or allow citizens to initiate referendums on issues of their choice.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Peter Lougheed, Speech to the Public Policy Forum Testimonial Dinner, Toronto, March 29th, 2001.

⁷² A report on this survey is available on the website of the Council for Canadian Unity at: <http://www.ccu-cuc.ca/en/polls/data/cric.html>.

⁷³ See for instance, Peter Dobell, “Reforming Parliamentary Practice: The Views of MPs,” *Policy Matters* Volume 1, No. 9, p. 11. Available from the website of the Institute for Research on Public Policy at www.irpp.org. In this paper, Dobell outlines several ways in which the role of committees could be expanded.

⁷⁴ This idea was widely dismissed during the 2000 election campaign, but did not receive the serious consideration it deserves. See Matthew Mendelsohn and Andrew Parkin, “Introducing Direct Democracy in Canada,” *Choices* Vol. 7, No. 5 (June 2001). Available from the website of the Institute for Research on Public Policy at www.irpp.org.

Each of these changes could be debated at length. Some may be found to be more appropriate than others. But the need to embrace at least some of these proposals is clear. The challenge is to convince citizens that elections matter, either because their own votes make a difference, or because their elected representatives do. And citizens are sufficiently cynical about politics, and sufficiently savvy, that they cannot be won over by public relations campaigns that offer nothing more than slogans. In order to rekindle their interest in politics, the political system must become more transparent, more participatory and more responsive. Only reforms designed to further these objectives can raise public confidence in the system. Without such changes, citizens committed to improving their communities and country will be drawn away increasingly from an ossified parliamentary system.

Thus, declining turnout can be seen as a challenge that calls for a bold, innovative and far-sighted response from Canada's political leaders. They need not look elsewhere, since they themselves have the power to reinvigorate the institutions over which they preside.

MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

Electoral reform and changes to other political institutions are measures that are intended to make elections more competitive, make parliament more responsive and more relevant, and ultimately raise citizens' interest and confidence in the political process as a whole. In so doing, they clearly address some of the causes of declining voter turnout that were discussed earlier in this paper. But several notes of caution are in order.

First, there is no solid evidence from other countries that measures such as a loosening of party discipline or a revitalization of parliamentary committees will boost turnout. It could be that such measures will only impress those who are already interested and active in politics, yet fail to inspire non-voters.

Second, changes to political institutions may not have the desired effect unless there is also a commitment among politicians, their advisors and the media to improve the tone and depth of political debate. In the US, for instance, referendums on policy issues are often manipulated by narrow interest groups with ample money to spend on negative TV advertising, and hardly serve to instill greater public confidence in government.

Third, none of these reforms directly address the issue of the long-term change in values, such as decreasing deference to authority or the declining importance of religion. Indeed, as noted above, many observers see such value change as irreversible.

For these reasons, many political scientists in Canada seem uncertain whether anything can be done to reverse the trend toward declining turnout over the long-term. This uncertainty may serve to keep our expectations in check, but does not stand as a valid reason to avoid undertaking the modest reforms suggested above.

“Popular dissatisfaction with present democratic structures is fueling calls to reform the processes of representative democracy...

The potential for citizen participation is limited by the traditional forms of representative democracy... The chance to cast a few votes during a multiyear electoral cycle is not a record of citizen input that should be admired. Furthermore, declining vote turnout in advanced industrial societies suggests growing disenchantment with this form of democratic participation. The fundamental structure of contemporary democratic institutions was developed in the nineteenth century; society has changed a good deal since then.

Strengthened commitments to the democratic ideal, and increased skills and resources on the part of contemporary publics, are leading to increased political participation beyond the present forms of representative democracy...

These new participation patterns are creating pressure on governments to develop forms of more direct, participatory democracy... The use of referendums and initiatives is generally increasing in democratic nations. Younger generations and the better educated are more likely to favor referendums, greater participation by the citizenry, and other forms of direct democracy.

...In summary, the growth of critical citizens is really a challenge. Democracies need to adapt to present-day politics and the new style of participatory politics...”⁷⁵

Russell J. Dalton
University of California, Irvine

⁷⁵ Dalton, “Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies,” pp. 75-77.

Conclusion

IS CANADIAN DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS?

Does the decline in voter turnout constitute a crisis for Canadian democracy? It is tempting to adopt a “wait and see” attitude – turnout might rise again at the next election, especially in the event that a stronger opposition emerges to challenge the governing party. But this is too complacent an approach. As we have seen, the problem goes well beyond the issue of the lack of excitement generated by the last two election campaigns. For this reason, the trend toward lower turnout may prove difficult to reverse. Even if turnout rises somewhat at the next election, in the coming decade we are unlikely to see, on a consistent basis, a return to the levels of voter participation that we experienced in the 1960s or even the 1980s.

Whether or not this amounts to a crisis depends on the extent to which one values citizen participation in politics as a good thing in and of itself. It is true that parliament currently works equally well, whether it is elected on the basis of high voter turnout or on the basis of low voter turnout. In this sense, turnout does not really matter. But if citizen participation in politics is taken to be a fundamental characteristic of democracy, then the situation appears more

grave. What is especially worrying is that the younger generations of Canadians – those who are now beginning to move into positions of leadership – are voting in lesser numbers than ever before. Those who must be relied upon to give the country its future direction and vision presently are much less engaged in the political process than were their parents or grandparents. It remains to be seen what implications this will have for the ability of the country’s political leadership, political parties, and civil service to renew themselves and respond to Canada’s needs in the years to come.

Appendix Tables

**APPENDIX TABLE 1
TURNOUT AT PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS**

Percentages of registered voters actually voting in provincial elections since 1980
(year of election precedes turnout figure):

Province	1980-1989			1990-2001			Average: 1980-1989	Average: 1990-2001	Change
NF	1982: 70	1985: 77	1989: 81	1993: 84	1996: 74	1999: 70	76.0	76.0	0.0
PEI	1982: 78	1986: 88	1989: 81	1993: 81	1996: 85	2000: 85	82.3	83.7	+ 1.3
NS	1981: 74	1984: 68	1988: 76	1993: 75	1998: 69	1999: 68	72.7	70.7	- 2.0
NB		1982: 82	1987: 82	1991: 80	1996: 75	1999: 76	82.0	77.0	- 5.0
QUE	1981: 82	1985: 76	1989: 75	1994: 82	1998: 78		77.7	80.0	+ 2.3
ONT	1981: 58	1985: 62	1987: 63	1990: 64	1995: 63	1999: 58	61.0	61.7	+ 0.7
MA	1981: 72	1986: 68	1988: 74	1990: 69	1995: 69	1999: 68	71.3	68.7	- 2.7
SA		1982: 84	1986: 82	1991: 83	1995: 65	1999: 66	83.0	71.3	- 11.7
AB	1982: 66	1986: 47	1989: 54	1993: 60	1997: 54	2001: 53	55.7	55.7	0.0
BC		1983: 78	1986: 77	1991: 75	1996: 72	2001: 71	77.5	72.7	- 4.8

Sources: websites of the provincial elections agencies supplemented by communications with these agencies.

**APPENDIX TABLE 2 (A)
MARGIN OF VICTORY FOR THE TEN CONSTITUENCIES
WITH THE HIGHEST TURNOUT (2000 ELECTION)**

Constituency	Province	Winning Party	Turnout	Margin of Victory ¹
Saanich – Gulf Islands	BC	Alliance	70.6	10.9
Louis-Hébert	Quebec	Liberal	70.8	4.3
Beauséjour – Petitcodiac	NB	Liberal	71.3	15
Miramichi	NB	Liberal	71.4	26.3
Lac-Saint-Louis	Quebec	Liberal	71.7	66.6
Saint-Maurice	Quebec	Liberal	72.5	15.1
Egmont	PEI	Liberal	72.8	11.5
Malpeque	PEI	Liberal	73.2	9.7
Acadie – Bathurst	NB	N.D.P.	75.4	6.3
Cardigan	PEI	Liberal	79.2	1.6
		Average	72.9	16.7

¹ See note 12.

**APPENDIX TABLE 2 (B)
MARGIN OF VICTORY FOR THE TEN CONSTITUENCIES
WITH THE LOWEST TURNOUT (2000 ELECTION)**

Constituency	Province	Winning Party	Turnout	Margin of Victory
Brampton West – Mississauga	Ontario	Liberal	47.6	50.0
York West	Ontario	Liberal	47.9	66.6
Calgary East	Alberta	Alliance	48.2	33.8
Hamilton East	Ontario	Liberal	48.4	33.4
Bramalea – Gore – Malton – Springdale	Ontario	Liberal	49.5	38.3
Oshawa	Ontario	Liberal	49.9	14.1
Windsor West	Ontario	Liberal	50.0	31.3
Etobicoke North	Ontario	Liberal	50.1	53.0
Brampton Centre	Ontario	Liberal	50.4	25.2
Scarborough – Rouge River	Ontario	Liberal	50.5	70.1
Average			49.3	41.6

**APPENDIX TABLE 3
REASONS FOR NOT VOTING, BY AGE GROUP
(NON-VOTING RESPONDENTS ONLY)**

Question: Were there one or more particular reasons why you did not vote?	18 to 24 years	25 to 34 years	35 years and over
Didn't like candidates or parties; don't think my vote makes a difference; election didn't matter to me.	33	40	41
Not enough time to vote; had to work; out of town; transportation problem; injury; illness.	34	36	33
Wasn't registered; not on voters list; didn't receive voters card; not enough information on where and when to vote.	17	15	16
Other; don't know.	16	9	10

Source: Elections Canada Post-Election Survey, conducted between November 28 and December 11, 2000 by Ipsos-Reid. A total of 2,500 Canadians were surveyed, including 1,400 persons between 18 and 34 years of age.

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