

Non-voting behaviour and efforts to increase turnout

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Pundits and others routinely bewail the decline in voter turnout in Canada. Voter turnout from 1867 to 1997 was usually above 70 per cent. It fell to 67 per cent in 2000, 61 per cent in 2004, 64 per cent in 2006 and 58.8 per cent in 2008 (<http://www.sfu.ca/~aheard/elections/historical-turnout.html>). Then turnout increased slightly to 61.4 per cent on May 2.

During the last federal general election, some commentators endorsed the idea that—like Australia—Canada should fine non-voters. This is a milder version of making voting mandatory. An Angus Reid poll conducted shortly after the May 2 election found that "almost two out of three Canadians favour 'mandatory voting' like in Australia," (Douglas Todd, *Vancouver Sun*, May 16, 2011).

It is time—nay overdue—to cast a skeptical eye on the conventional wisdom about (i) the significance of declining turnouts, and (ii) the desirability of efforts to increase the turnout rate.

It's a Choice, and There are Alternatives

Voting/non-voting is a choice, but it is not one that has to be made frequently. In Canada, there have been only 41 general elections since 1867. Voting is a low-effort action (being subsidized in several ways), but also a low-affect action.

During the campaign, there is plenty of information at hand—albeit most of it biased as it is supplied by parties. The news media follow the leaders closely, and summarize the party platforms.

The conventional view is that "If you're not voting, you don't have much to say about who's being elected." However, the linkage between any individual's vote and the election of a government is indirect and the result of the interaction of millions of individual votes cast in 308 local contests, and a complex set of rules governing the process, e.g., the first-past-the post method, and the large allowed variances in the size of ridings by population, (see Hall and Stanbury, *The Hill Times*, April 19, 2010).

Importantly, there are other ways for citizens to signal their preferences to government (see Stanbury, *The Hill Times*, May 16, 2011).

Exhortations to Vote

During the campaign leading to the vote on May 2, there were several organized

efforts urging electors to vote. Comedian Rick Mercer's rant on CBC TV on March 29, 2011, (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=225Mx6ya7SQ>) led to some 35 "vote mobs" on university campuses (Gloria Galloway, *The Globe and Mail*, April 18, 2011) and some videos posted on YouTube (e.g., University of Victoria, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t71ICJn_lkQ).

Elections Canada's extensive efforts were under the banner "Vote. Shape your world." The Public Policy Forum sponsored a "Go Vote!" effort which adapted a video from the U.S. There were plenty of columns and editorials calling on electors to go to the polls (e.g., *The Globe and Mail* editorial, April 29, 2011; Dan Lett, *Winnipeg Free Press*, May 2, 2011; and Lorraine Sommerfeld, *The Toronto Star*, May 2, 2011). Very few argued that voters had any obligation to make an informed choice.

Both the Liberals and the NDP exhorted electors, particularly young people, some eligible for the first time, to get out and vote. On the other hand, the Conservative Party was seen as trying to reduce turnout so as to ensure that the votes of their well-motivated base will have a greater impact for the party. As it was, the Conservatives won 167 of 308 seats with 39.6 per cent of the popular vote.

Subsidizing Voting

The federal government subsidizes voting in various ways, the general effect of which is to lower the voters' cost of voting. The Canada Elections Act requires employers to ensure that employees have a minimum number of hours either before or after work to get to the polls. Elections Canada spends a great deal of taxpayer dollars (i) to provide many polling places so voting is convenient; (ii) to provide a permanent voters' list: In 1997, the national registry of electors was developed, a permanent list that kept track of every eligible voter in Canada. By comparison, the U.S. has a voluntary registration system which parties help to operate; (iii) to provide advance polls/absentee ballots (which accounted for 14 per cent of the 14.7 million votes cast on May 2).

Are The Exhorters are Biased?

Lawrence Solomon (*Financial Post*, April 29, 2011) argues that "The moral high horses [pushing to get out the vote], in fact, are often cynical opportunists who are trying to manipulate people into the ballot booth. The chief manipulators are left-leaners and their favourite targets are youths, whom they believe are likelier to vote for their left-leaning causes and candidates. Although the manipulators pretend to be non-partisan, they often have an ideological agenda."

"In the U.S. where registration is voluntary, it is certainly true that it is the Democratic Party that devotes far more efforts to getting people registered to

vote. They have good reason to believe that such efforts favour their party on election day."

More Ignorant Voters?

Do we really want a flood of previous non-voters whose decisions are based on almost no knowledge of the issues, parties, their leaders, or even the rudiments of the system? Polls by the Historical-Dominion Institute, among others, show that many Canadians know very little about Canada's system of government and about

Lawrence Solomon argues that "no one who cares about Canada should vote if their vote isn't well-informed. Voting is a small part of being a good citizen, and a relatively unimportant part, especially if the goal is to keep government leaders accountable," (*Financial Post*, April 29, 2011).

Robert Drummond of York University, an expert on voting patterns, explains that "apathetic people are sometimes very well-informed, and people who vote sometimes aren't," (Jordan Press and Robert Hiltz, *Postmedia News*, April 30, 2011).

Jason Brennan, in his book, *The Ethics of Voting*, argues having a small, well-informed voting public is more important than large-scale participation. He defines a voter who votes "well" as someone who not only knows what the policies of politicians are, but what effect those policies will have, (Jordan Press and Robert Hiltz, *Postmedia News*, April 30, 2011). To meet this standard, requires voters to make a considerable effort, and to penetrate the misinformation widely distributed by parties and candidates.

Interpretation of Non-voting

Rational Behaviour: In his 1957 book, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Anthony Downs described what has become known as the paradox of voting: "for a rational, self-interested voter the costs of voting will normally exceed the expected benefits. Because the chance of exercising the pivotal vote (i.e. in case of a tied election) is tiny compared to any realistic estimate of the private individual benefits of the different possible outcomes, the expected benefits of voting are less than the costs," (Wikipedia). Yet a majority of people vote in general elections in Canada.

Related to this analysis is the zero affect: Even if I bear the cost of becoming informed, my vote will not make any difference. Even if my party forms the government, it is unlikely to enact the policies I want. So why bother voting. It is also true that a considerable number of electors (61.4 per cent on May 2, 2011) take the decision seriously—apparently reasoning that voting in general

elections is a crucial act of citizenship in a democracy.

Voting as an Option: Electors treat the right to vote as an option to be exercised if the incentives to do so are (much) higher than is usually the case. That is when those electors who usually abstain are moved (by anger, fear, and possibly euphoria for a specific party or candidate) to exercise their franchise.

Non-voting is a Sign of Satisfaction: George Jonas (*National Post*, April 30, 2011) argues that "Many commentators fail to see that what they call voter apathy is the result of a sensible complacency that flows from good times and good government." He later argues that "all people vote when they worry. Not voting isn't a sign of bad, dysfunctional democracy. On the contrary. Democracy feeling confident in its skin, comfortable with its own institutions and generally expecting good times, is more likely to stay home on election day."

This can be understood another way. Non-voting is evidence that the elector is within his/her "zone of indifference." they are prepared to accept the verdict produced by those who do vote. Or they believe that, regardless of the outcome, they have other ways of signaling their preferences which they believe are more efficacious.

Conclusions

I agree with Lawrence Solomon: "Whether or not you're informed, don't vote if you don't want to. You don't become unworthy if you don't obey the election scolds, just as you don't become worthy by casting a mindless vote at the behest of others."

I agree with Prof. Drummond who argues that "Making voting compulsory, which more than 30 countries have done, isn't necessarily going to make things better. While it would ensure that people vote, it's not clear whether they would feel any more engaged."

I agree with George Jonas's view: "High voter turnout reminds me of antibodies rushing to the site of an infection. Civic engagement signifies a festering wound on the body politic, I'm afraid. Healthy skin presents as voter apathy." Non-voters in this election may be voters in the next one—and vice-versa.

At the same time, it is rational for parties to ignore citizens who are not expected to vote. They can be written-off as irrelevant in terms of any effort to shape policy promises (and rhetoric) to please them and get their votes. As one old pol told me, "they are simply not players, and we ignore them."

"Almost half of Canadians would prefer some form of proportional representation to our first-past-the-post system, which has allowed the Conservatives and Liberals to form majorities with less than 40 per cent of the

popular vote," (Douglas Todd, *The Vancouver Sun*, May 16, 2011 citing an Angus Reid's poll conducted shortly after the May 2 election). FPTP is safe while the Tories enjoy a majority.

Voting is fundamental to democratic self-government. It is one of the primary bases of legitimizing the governors' efforts to (legally) coerce the governed to effect Canada's constitutional shibboleth of "peace, order, and good government," (The analog in the U.S. is quite different: "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.")

But a high turnout at the polls in general elections is not the be all and end all of a healthy democracy. Non-voting too is signaling—although the meaning of the signals is often obscure. However, the meaning of election results (beyond which party gets how many seats and their geographic distribution) is often almost as opaque.

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