



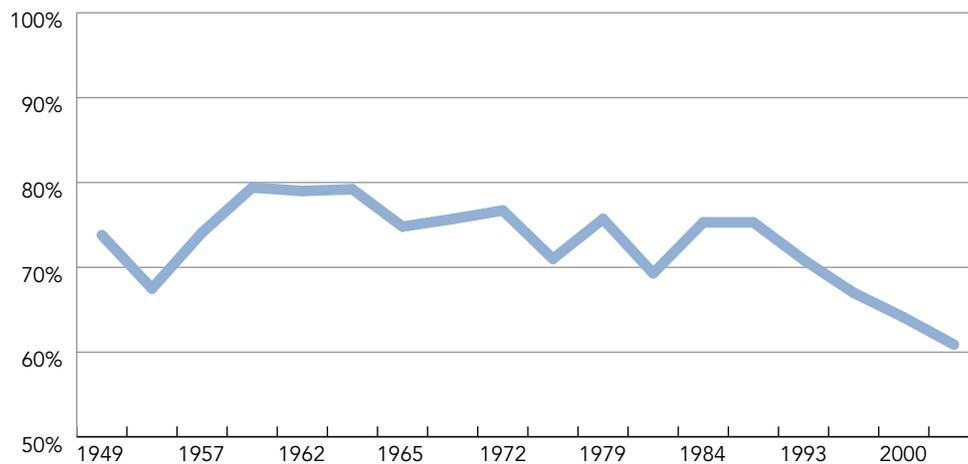
LESSONS IN LEARNING

Falling voter turnout: Is it linked to diminished civics education?

January 18, 2006

Voter participation rates are falling in Canada. In the elections between World War II and 1988, voter participation rates averaged close to 75%. However, in the four elections since 1988, turnout has declined steadily with every election and the average has fallen to 66 percent (see Figure 1; data drawn from Elections Canada).

Figure 1:
Post-WWII voter participation rates

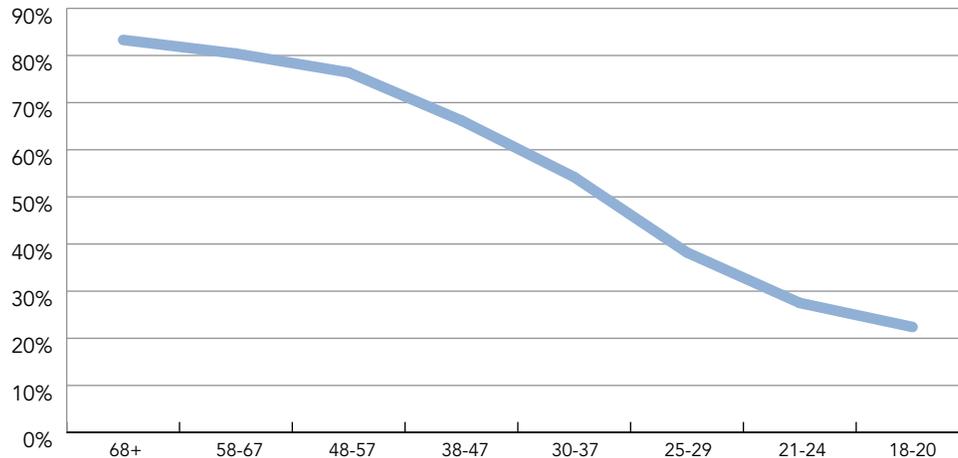


Internationally, this trend seems to be quite widespread. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, electoral participation rates around the world rose steadily between 1945 and 1990. However, since 1990, participation has fallen. In a number of well-established democracies—including the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Italy, Finland, Austria, and Japan—participation rates hit record lows in the most recent elections. Although declining electoral participation rates are not unique to Canada, “Canada is near the bottom of the industrialized-world turnout league tables.”¹

Some people are concerned about the trend, worrying that the slide in voter participation rates indicates decreased confidence in the democratic process, increased political cynicism, and signals a decline in people’s attachment to Canada. To shed light on the matter, CCL research staff looked closely at the available evidence.

Recent analyses suggest that the drop in voter participation is largely the result of precipitously low election day turnout among young voters. For example, in a study commissioned by Elections Canada, Pammett and LeDuc (pdf file)² found that in the 2000 federal election, the participation rate among voters older than 58 was greater than 80 percent, but for 18- to 20-year-olds it was a dismal 22 percent (see Figure 2). The authors of the Elections Canada study concluded that age is one of the best predictors of electoral participation—better than income, educational attainment, interest in political issues or perception of voting as a civic duty.

Figure 2:
Election 2000, participation by age



Older voters have always turned out in greater numbers than younger voters. As people move into the workforce, settle down and begin raising families, they become more aware of the role of government and grow more inclined to take an active role in choosing their government. As a result of this lifecycle effect, older voters are more heavily represented than younger voters in any given election. In recent years, however, generations are voting at lower rates than did previous generations at the same age. Using Canadian Election Studies data going back to 1968, Blais and his colleagues (pdf file)³ examined the voting behaviours of four generations of Canadians. They found that, at the same age, participation rates were two or three percentage points lower for Baby Boomers than for the pre-Boomer generation. Rates were ten percentage points lower for Generation X voters than for Baby Boomers, and another ten points lower for the Echo Boomers compared to Generation Xers. In short, young voters are generally less likely to vote than older voters, and today's young voters are even less likely to vote than previous generations of young voters. As more recent generations begin to replace older generations among the voting population, this generational effect is dragging down the overall turnout numbers.

Why are young voters staying away from the polls?

One popular view is that the current generation of young voters (or non-voters, as they may be more accurately described) prefers to express political opinions through less conventional forms of participation. The suggestion is that young people are perfectly willing to cross the country in order to participate in a political protest, but they are unwilling to cross the street in order to vote. Although young people may engage in non-voting forms of political participation, there is no evidence that such activities replace voting. In a recent analysis of data from the 2003 General Social Survey, Anne Milan confirms that young people do engage in various forms of non-voting political behaviour (e.g., signing petitions, boycotting products, attending public meetings), but they are no more likely to do so than older generations and they are more likely to vote

than to engage in any other kind of political behaviour.⁴ In fact, according to Paul Howe, people who engage in non-voting forms of political participation are at least as likely (and often more likely) to vote as those who do not.⁵

Another popular perspective is that today's young voters are unusually cynical about politics and the political process. According to this view their failure to vote reflects their general apathy and sense of marginalization from politics. Again, the available evidence does not support this proposal. Elections Canada asked people whether they agreed with the statement "my vote doesn't really matter." Older non-voters were more likely to agree with the statement than younger non-voters. Older people also expressed less confidence in the political process than younger people. The results of a separate study, commissioned by the Institute for Research on Public Policy, indicate that younger Canadians are in fact less cynical, report greater satisfaction with Canadian democracy and elections, and hold more positive opinions of the federal government than their older counterparts.⁶

What keeps young voters from the ballot box?

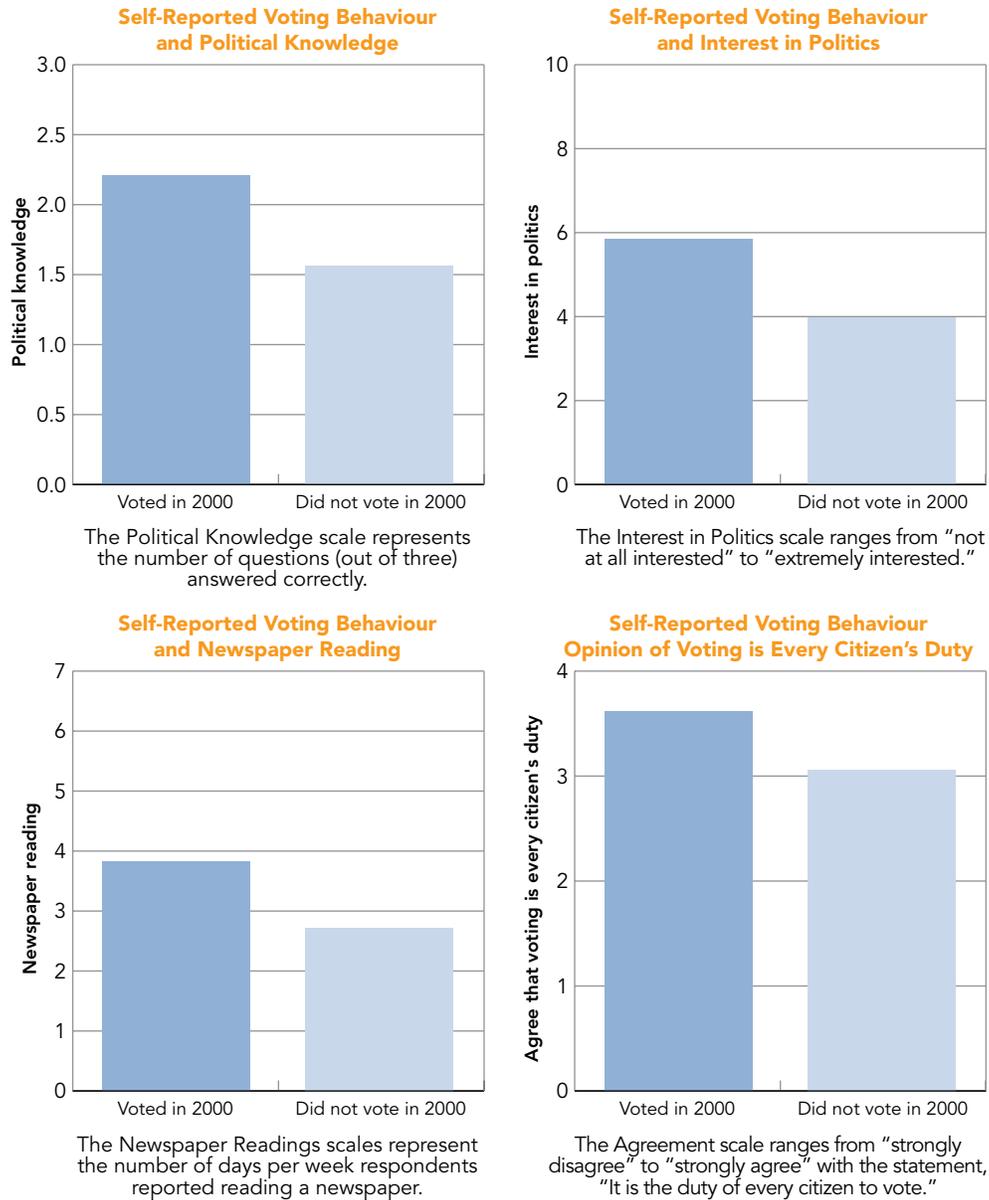
If it is not simply the case that young Canadians are unwilling to exercise their franchise because they are too busy with other forms of political expression or too steeped in political cynicism, what then is keeping them away from the ballot box? One answer that does find some support is that young people are less engaged in and knowledgeable of current political issues.

In a study of voting behaviour in New Brunswick prepared for the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy, Howe found that young New Brunswickers are less familiar with basic political facts than their older counterparts.⁷ When asked to name the premiers of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Alberta, only 17 percent of respondents under 30 succeeded in naming at least two of the three. That success rate rose to 58 percent for those over 60. Thus, there seems to be an age gap in basic political knowledge.

The current generation of young people seems to be less knowledgeable than were previous generations. Howe examined responses to political knowledge questions (e.g., asking for the identity of prominent political figures) in surveys taken in 1956, 1984 and 2000 (using Gallup polls and data from Canadian Election Studies).⁸ Over time, increasing proportions of young Canadians are demonstrating low political knowledge on these surveys. In contrast, this proportion is decreasing for older Canadians.

Howe also found that young people are less likely to be interested in politics, less likely to read newspapers, and less likely to see voting as a duty shared by all citizens.⁹ All of these factors suggest that young people are not particularly engaged in the Canadian political discourse; these same factors are also correlated with a failure to vote. Data from the 2000 Canadian Election Study show that people who reported voting in the 2000 federal election also reported greater interest in politics and greater frequency of newspaper reading than people who reported not voting. Voters were more successful than non-voters in answering political knowledge questions (e.g., "Do you recall the name of the finance minister?"). Finally, voters reported greater agreement than non-voters with the following statement: "It is the duty of every citizen to vote" (see Figure 3).

Figure 3:



Why are today's young Canadians less engaged in the political process than were previous generations?

Young Canadians may not vote because they are not engaged in the political life of their country. But why are today's young Canadians less engaged in the political process than were previous generations? One place to look for answers is in citizenship education and particularly in changes over time in the nature of citizenship education in Canada. In the early days of universal education in Canada, preparing young people to assume the rights and responsibilities of

citizenship was the primary goal of schooling. “Just about every subject in the curriculum was defended in terms of its contribution to citizenship, not only in the case of such obvious subjects as history, language, and literature, but also gardening, art, music, nature study, physical education, health, science, and on and on,” writes Ken Osborne.¹⁰ Over time, the focus on citizenship has given way to an emphasis on training students to play their parts in the new global economy. Mark Evans writes that citizenship education has been relegated to the “margins of educational agendas across Canada.”¹¹ Citizenship education no longer pervades the entire curriculum but is now restricted to a much smaller place within social studies and civics curricula.

As teaching math, science, and computer science takes on an ever-increasing importance in Canadian schools, other subjects such as Canadian history and civics risk falling into neglect. Scarce resources are disproportionately allocated to those subjects seen as most directly relevant to preparation for a career in the knowledge economy. According to the results of the 1996 Provincial Learning Assessment on Social Studies in British Columbia, the devaluing of social studies has had a measurably negative impact on social studies education. The report revealed a decline in student performance relative to the previous social studies assessment (in 1989). The authors of the report argued that this decline reflects a “diminishing student awareness of some of the basic knowledge that informs a functional Canadian and global citizen.” The authors go on to conclude that “as it is, we quite simply are not doing well at educating for responsible, informed, inquiring and participatory citizenship.”

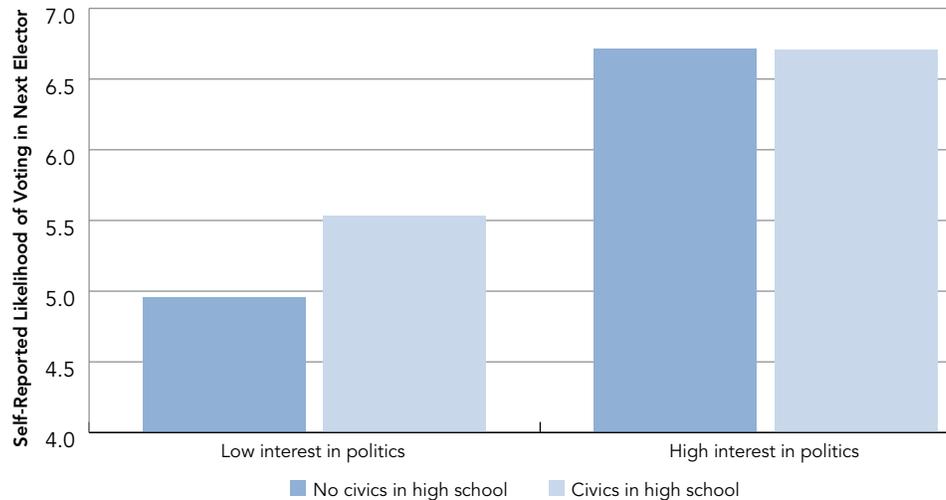
Can we infer a direct relationship between changes in citizenship education and declining voter participation?

The 2004 Canadian Election Study provides some interesting evidence in that regard. In the 2004 study, survey respondents were asked whether they had taken a civics course in high school. Those who answered “yes” were significantly more likely to report that they would vote in the next election. Intriguingly, this effect did not hold for respondents who reported high levels of interest in politics, but it did hold for those with low interest in politics (see Figure 4). That is, people with little interest in politics are unlikely to vote, but are significantly more likely to vote if they took a civics course in high school. These data do not allow us to draw a relationship between the quality of civics education in high school and subsequent voting behaviour, but they underscore the point that citizenship education is tightly linked to later voting patterns.

Lessons in learning

Schools clearly have an important role to play in producing politically knowledgeable and interested young Canadians. Though citizenship education has languished for many years, there are signs that this state of affairs is already beginning to change. A recent UNESCO report (pdf file) on Education for Peace, Human Rights, Democracy, International Understanding and Tolerance notes that “citizenship education is the subject of considerable renewed interest in Canada.”¹² Ministries of education across the country are developing new citizenship curricula, and the meaning of citizenship education is gaining the attention of education leaders. Still, specific improvements are needed.

Figure 4:
The role of civics education in voting behaviour



Respondents who rated their level of interest in politics as 0, 1 or 2 were classified as low interest (20 percent of the sample); 8, 9 or 10 as high interest (28 percent of the sample).

If citizenship education is going to remain confined to the social studies classroom, then “Canadian school boards should demand that social studies play a more prominent part in the lives of students. They should require that those who teach social studies be properly prepared for this important responsibility,” argues Charles Ungerleider. He points out that math and science teachers must have specific training in those subjects, something that is not necessarily the case for teachers assigned to social studies classes.¹³

Now that most schools have at least some access to the internet, social science teachers can make use of the wealth of resources available online. For example, the Historica Foundation strives to encourage the best possible Canadian history education and to inspire Canadians to explore their history. Through its website, Historica provides a wide variety of school programs, lesson plans, and student games. The Dominion Institute works to build active and informed citizens through greater knowledge and appreciation of the Canadian story. Through the Democracy Project, the Institute has been working to encourage young Canadians to vote in federal elections. The project includes All Candidates Town Halls, an on-line survey, text voting, free music downloads and educational tools—all via the Dominion Institute website. The Student Vote program was designed to foster an interest in voting habits of young Canadians before they reach voting age. Schools that register for the program receive free learning materials, and students in registered schools learn about election issues during the campaign period and then participate in a parallel election that coincides with the real election. The CBC Canada Votes website also contains an array of issue-based learning resources for teachers.

In order to address the phenomenon of political drop-outs (i.e., citizens who are unengaged in the political process and do not participate in elections), Henry Milner argues that “a main goal of civic-education related measures should be to promote the habit of attentiveness to political information.”¹⁴ Such courses should address the conflict-driven realities of modern politics, should introduce students in an even-handed manner to the partisan positions that characterize many current political issues, and should help students develop the habit of keeping up with political events.

The possibility of lowering the voting age often makes its way into the public discourse. Mark N. Franklin has argued that reducing the voting age to 16 would provide young citizens with their first opportunity to vote at a less unsettled time in their lives, when they are more open to the influence of teachers and parents who may encourage them to vote.¹⁵ Since people’s response to their first opportunity to vote often sets a lasting pattern, this question merits further study. Other options include having Canadian schools play a much bigger role in encouraging electoral participation. Teachers could design classroom activities and assignments around acquiring the kinds of concrete political knowledge required to cast an informed vote. They could also treat the process of registering to vote and actually voting as real-life learning opportunities.

Beyond schools, other institutions also have a responsibility to educate young voters about election issues. Jean-Pierre Kingsley (Canada’s Chief Electoral Officer) has taken steps to ensure that Elections Canada takes this responsibility seriously. Elections Canada has developed what Kingsley calls a “multi-pronged strategy” aimed at: increasing young Canadians’ understanding of the electoral process and their role in that process; removing administrative barriers to electoral participation; and raising public awareness of the problem of declining voter participation among young people.¹⁶ Elections Canada has launched its own initiatives, including a Young Voters website, and they also support the civic education efforts of other non-governmental organizations.

And political parties themselves are also being encouraged to take responsibility for finding ways to educate young voters. During election campaigns they put tremendous effort into educating the public about political issues and their stances on those issues. Now that federal political parties receive vote-related tax dollars to finance those efforts, Rudyard Griffiths and Greg Lyle argue the parties must bear some responsibility for reaching out to politically uninterested young Canadians, encouraging them to exercise their political franchise.¹⁷

Generational definitions used by Blais & colleagues

Pre-Baby Boomers: born before 1945

Baby Boomers: born between 1945 and 1959

Generation X: born in the 1960s

Echo Boomers: born in the 1970s

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