
Voter Turnout at Federal General Elections in Canada

by Louis Lavoie

Possibly the most disturbing aspect of the June 2, 1997 general election was what seems to be the start of a downward trend in electoral participation in federal elections from an average of over 75% for many years to 70% in 1993 and just 67% in 1997. This happens at a time when significant changes to increase participation were implemented. Persistent non-voting is on the rise. Is alienation, not just discontent becoming a characteristic of the Canadian electorate? This apparent trend is a serious challenge for parliamentarians. The future of our democratic institutions may depend on their ability to reverse it.

The "simple act" of voting, once a privilege conferred on those affluent enough to own land or pay taxes, has become a right of citizenship enjoyed by practically all Canadians eighteen and over.

Voting in Canada follows the "first-past-the post system". In each constituency, the candidate with the most votes is declared elected. After the results of all constituencies are in, the Governor General invites the leader of the party holding the most seats in the House to form a government, and the leader becomes the Prime Minister.

Canadian parliamentary institutions began to take shape in the second half of the 18th century but the evolution of the vote was by no means smooth or steady. At first, colonial authorities in England determined who was entitled to vote and subsequently the elected local assemblies gained control of the voting function between 1784 and 1801. The principal barriers related to wealth (more precisely the lack of it), sex, religion and ethnicity.

During the 36 general elections, since 1867, an average of approximately 73% of registered electors voted. Turnout has ranged from a low of 62.9% at the June 1896 elec-

tion, to a high of 79% at three successive general elections between 1958 and 1963.

Voting is the principal element in maintaining public support for a form of government since it is through voting that electors participate in Canada's governance. It is the most efficient and effective way for the vast majority of citizens to register their political views and indicate changes in their preferences. Through the vote, citizens choose who should represent them in Parliament or legislative assemblies and which party will likely form the government. Voter participation is therefore a basic measure of citizens' confidence in the political system.

As the basis of democratic government, the right to vote must not be impeded by law or by administrative measures used to register voters or conduct the vote, nor should it be undermined by the absence of appropriate remedial measures.

Establishment Of A Royal Commission

A Royal Commission charged with Reforming Electoral Democracy in Canada was appointed in November 1989. It had a comprehensive mandate to inquire and report on the appropriate principles and process that should govern the election of Members of the House of Commons and the financing of political parties, candidates and campaigns, including:

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- the practices, procedures and legislation in Canada.
- the means by which political parties should be funded, the provision of funds to political parties from any source, the limits on such funding and the uses to which such funds ought, or ought not be put.
- the qualifications of electors and the compiling of voters, including the advisability of the establishment of a permanent voters' list.

The Commission held 45 days of public hearings in 27 cities across the country. It heard testimony from more than 500 groups and individuals and received more than 900 briefs from associations, individuals, political practitioners and election administrators.

Further to its analysis of what Canadians said about the electoral system the Commission suggested six major objectives that should govern Canada's system of electoral democracy:

- To secure the democratic rights of voters
- To enhance access to elected office
- To promote the equality and efficacy of the vote
- To strengthen political parties as primary political organization
- To promote fairness in the electoral process
- To enhance public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process.

The Report of the Royal Commission was tabled on February 13, 1992.

One of the principal recommendation of the Commission, was that federal election rules be changed to let a much broader range of Canadians exercise the right to vote including judges, prisoners, returning officers, persons with mental disabilities as well as Canadians living or travelling abroad and persons with physical disabilities.

Another recommendation was the establishment of the Special Ballot for people who would find it easier to use this way of casting a ballot. These people would include:

- Canadians living abroad
- Canadians away from their constituency
- Canadians unable to vote in person at the ordinary or advance polls

The Commission's recommendations were reviewed by a Special Committee of the House of Commons and the majority of these including those mentioned above were implemented for the general elections of 1993 and 1997.

The recommendations envisaged a voter-friendly election system for the estimated 20 million Canadians who are eligible to vote and a more straightforward administrative system for the people who are involved in the conduct of federal elections.

Voter Turnout and Institutional Factors

Comparative research found that the factors which are the most important in explaining differences in turnout relate to: the electoral system, the party system, the structure of government, and the basic electoral law. The following are examples of actions which could affect turnout:

- an electoral system which promotes some proportionality in translating party votes into seats.
- an incentive to voting with the existence of a strong competitive party system
- turnout is likely to suffer if governments tend to be formed through coalitions.
- the "day" of the election can also enhance voter turnout. Our elections are held on Monday while most elections in other countries are held on a day of rest (Saturday or Sunday) resulting in higher turnout and most likely lower costs. In Canada there are many who are quite adamant that voting should not take place on Sunday for religious or other reasons.
- another measure which could increase voter turnout is a compulsory voting law as found in Greece, Australia, Belgium and many other countries. In most cases the law is not vigorously enforced. Excuses for not voting are easily accepted and sanctions are not severe. In principle I doubt that this would be acceptable to the Canadian electorate.

Not all qualified voters vote at every federal election. This pool of non-voters has been about 25 percent for a number of years in the '80's but with the most recent elections of '93 and '97 this percentage is more like 30%. Studies of voting behaviour reveal only a small core of perennial non-voters which is estimated at about 5 percent of the electorate; most of those who fail to vote fall in a group between 20 to 25%. People do not vote for a variety of reasons. For some it may be a lack of interest in the election or in politics in general; others may find it difficult to vote that particular day for all sorts of reasons.

In this last instance, the changes implemented at the '93 and '97 elections would have made it possible for these electors to vote, but it seems that some electors were not aware of those possibilities and lost their chance to cast a ballot.

Concerning the 1997 election, the turnout was particularly disappointing because participation is traditionally

Table 1
Federal General Elections in Canada
Voter Turnout 1867 - 1997 (36 elections in 130 years)
- an election every 3.6 years -

% Turnout								
Election no.	Date of Event	%	Election no.	Date of Event	%	Election no.	Date of Event	%
1	9/1867	73.1	13	12/1917	75.0	25	6/1962	79.0
2	10/1872	70.3	14	12/1921	67.7	26	4/1963	79.2
3	1/1874	69.6	15	10/1925	66.4	27	11/1965	74.8
4	9/1878	69.1	16	9/1926	67.7	28	6/1968	75.7
5	6/1882	70.3	17	7/1930	73.6	29	10/1972	76.7
6	2/1887	70.1	18	10/1935	74.2	30	7/1974	71.0
7	3/1891	64.4	19	3/1940	69.9	31	5/1979	75.7
8	6/1896	62.9	20	6/1945	75.3	32	2/1980	69.3
9	11/1900	77.4	21	6/1949	73.8	33	9/1984	75.3
10	11/1904	71.6	22	8/1953	67.5	34	11/1988	75.3
11	10/1908	70.3	23	6/1957	74.1	35	10/1993	69.6
12	9/1911	70.2	24	3/1958	79.4	36	6/1997	67.0

Source: *A History of the Vote in Canada - 1997*. Note: There were also three referendums: in Sept 1898 on prohibition, in 1942 on Conscription and the latest one in 1992 on the Constitution. The participation was 44, 71, and 71 percent respectively.

higher in elections held in the Spring than at any other time of the year, and because most regions of Canada had good weather on voting day. Political scientists say the displeasure that Canadians felt about an early call may be one reason they stayed away from the polls

As indicated in Table 1, participation in federal events since Confederation in 1867 (36 general elections in 130 years) as measured by the percentage of registered voters who actually cast a ballot, has averaged around 73%, including the '93 and '97 elections when turnout was lower than usual.

Overall voter turnout peaked at nearby 80% in the elections of 1958 through 1963 then declined thereafter except for five elections out of 11, when small increases in % took place.

Although voter turnout may vary from one federal election to the next, no constant clear trends are apparent. Every election takes place in circumstances that may facilitate or inhibit participation. These circumstances may be quite different and may be political, inclement weather or other reasons beyond anyone's control.

A grouping of percentages in the same table shows that:

- the overall average percentage for the 36 elections is 73.6%

- the percentage for the first twelve elections 1867-1911 was 74.9%
- the percentage for the next twelve elections 1917-1958 was 72%
- the percentage for the most recent twelve elections 1962-1997 was 74%

We must also consider that internationally we are considered as having an effective electoral system. When comparing our percentage turnout with that of other countries, mainly European, we must keep in mind factors which in most instances provide for a higher turnout: (proportional representation, voting on a day of rest, and compulsory voting) do not exist in Canada, the United States or England.

Comparison With Other Democracies

Contrary to general belief, the voter participation rate in Canada is not good when making international comparison. Canadians apparent satisfaction with the current rate relates no doubt to the favourable comparison with the lower rate of the United States, which is in the area of 55% at presidential election. It should be noted that the American percentage is based on "voting-age population" i.e. those 18 and above regardless of whether they

Table 2
Voter turnout in %
29 members of OECD 1945-1997

OECD Country	1997 Population (000)	Descriptions of Electoral Systems	Day of Vote		Voting Compulsary		Number of Events	Average % Turnout
			Work	Rest	Yes	No		
Australia	18,054	AV		✓	✓		21	94
Austria	8,064	list PR		✓	✓		15	92
Belgium	10,146	list PR		✓	✓		17	92
CANADA	29,606	FPTP	✓			✓	17	74
Czech. Republic	10,332	list PR		✓		✓	3	85
Denmark	5,220	list PR	✓			✓	21	85
Finland	5,110	list PR		✓		✓	15	76
France	58,060	TRS		✓		✓	15	76
Germany	81,869	MMP		✓		✓	13	85
Greece	10,147	list PR		✓	✓		16	80
Hungary	10,229	MMP		✓		✓	2	66
Iceland	268	list PR		✓		✓	16	89
Ireland	3,586	STV	✓			✓	15	73
Italy	57,204	MMP		✓	✓		13	90
Japan	125,313	Parallel		✓		✓	21	70
Luxembourg	410	list PR		✓	✓		11	89
Mexico	93,860	MMP		✓	✓		22	64
Netherlands	15,460	list PR	✓		✓		15	88
New Zealand	3,601	MMP		✓		✓	18	89
Norway	4,354	list PR		✓		✓	13	80
Poland	38,612	list PR		✓		✓	3	52
Portugal	9,821	list PR		✓		✓	9	78
South Korea	44,606	Parallel		✓		✓	9	74
Spain	39,199	list PR	✓			✓	7	74
Sweden	8,830	list PR		✓		✓	16	86
Switzerland	7,039	list PR		✓	✓		13	57
Turkey	61,058	list PR		✓	✓		9	80
United Kingdom	58,533	FPTP	✓			✓	14	76
United States	263,119	FPTP	✓			✓	13	53
			7	22	10	19	392	78

Source: Global Report on Political Participation by Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, May 1998. See below for an explanation of the description of electoral systems.

are qualified electors or not. This has the effect of lowering their percentage since a great number of those 18 or over cannot vote according to law since they are not registered.

Canada's turnout rate has been consistently below the international average over the years. Moreover, Cana-

da's rate is now slipping further behind the international average.

Table 2 indicates the kind of electoral system used in each country.

The chart compares electoral participation in 29 OECD countries at 392 elections from 1945 to 1997. Canada's av-

erage percentage (including the elections of '93 and '97) is 74% while the overall average of the 29 countries is 78%. On a ranking basis Canada is 20th of 29. The numbers following the types of electoral systems relate to the countries with that system in the group of 29.

- **Alternate Vote (AV) (1).** A preferential, plurality-majority system used in single-member districts in which voters use numbers to mark their preference on the ballot paper. A candidate who receives over 50% of first-preferences is declared elected. If no candidate achieves an absolute majority of first-preferences, votes are re-allocated until one candidate has an absolute majority.
- **List Proportional Representation (List PR)(16).** In its most simple form List PR involves each party presenting a list of candidates to the electorate, voters vote for a party, and parties receive seats in proportion to their share of votes. Winning candidates are taken from the lists.
- **Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) (5).** Systems in which a proportion of Parliament (usually half) is elected from plurality districts, while the remaining members are chosen from PR lists. Under MMP the PR seats help compensate for any disproportion produced by the district seats results.
- **Single Transferable Vote (STV) (1).** A preferential Proportional Representation system used in multi-member districts. To gain election, candidates must surpass a specified quota of first-preference votes. Voters' preferences are re-allocated to other

continuing candidates if a candidate is excluded or if an elected candidate has a surplus.

- **Parallel System (2).** A proportional Representation system used in conjunction with a plurality system, but unlike MMP, the PR seats do not compensate for any disproportion arising from elections to the plurality system.
- **First Past the Post (FPTP)(3).** The simplest form of plurality electoral system, using single-member districts, a candidate who gains more votes than any other candidate, but not necessarily a majority of votes is elected.
- **Two Round System (TRS) (1).** A majority system in which a second election is held if no candidate achieves an absolute majority of votes in the first run.

Conclusion

There were approximately 20,000,000 Canadians qualified to vote out of a total population of 30,000,000 at the '97 election. Only 67% of these people voted which means that 6,000,000 Canadian citizens did not. To have good democratic representation in government we need to maximize the number of voters expressing their choice.

It is now easier than ever to vote in a federal election. It is therefore difficult to understand a turnout of 67%. Surely Canadians want and need a truly Representative Parliament and the best way of getting this is by insuring that qualified voters exercise their right.