
Voter Turnout in Canada and Denmark

by Jessica Nasrallah

The recent decline in voter turnout for Canadian federal elections is a cause for concern. In the 1993 election, voter turnout fell to 70 percent from 75 percent at the previous election. This fell to 67 percent in 1997 and then again to 61 percent in 2000. The 2008 election held on October 14th was the lowest in Canadian history at 59.1 percent. This article compares Canadian turnout with that of another democracy, Denmark.

In Denmark, where the voting age is the same as Canada, turnout is usually high, with an average of 85 percent. Since the 1950s the lowest voter turnout was in 1990 with 82.8 percent, still a very impressive number. In the 2007 election, voter turnout was 86.6 percent, a rise from the 2005 election of 84.4 percent. Clearly, the people of Denmark feel differently than Canadians when it comes to voting. If we can figure out why perhaps we can fix Canada's declining turnout.

Youth and Education Issues

In recent elections, young Canadians have been participating at low levels. In the 2004 Federal Election, the turnout among those aged 18 to 29 was 15 points lower. Mark Franklin explains:

Many of them are not in a position to have yet acquired the necessary social linkages, nor have they been adult long enough to have yet been mobilized by those who will attempt to enmesh them in such networks.¹

Evidently, when young people feel a lack of civic duty they will resist voting during elections. Young Canadians generally feel they are not integrating into the political system. They adopt basic attitudes of voter apathy; political distrust and a lack of information. This shows the need for increased political education

because better politically educated citizens are more likely to be open to new impressions and utilizing information to form personal opinions.

Young voters simply do not have enough education to make informed decisions relating to all aspects of electoral politics. A study on voter turnout in *Electoral Insight*, published by Elections Canada, reported that:

during the final ten days of the 2004 election campaign, 40 percent of those in the 18-29 age group were not able to identify Paul Martin as the Liberal leadership candidate, 53 percent couldn't name the Conservative leader and 66 percent couldn't name the NDP leader.²

Clearly, there is a significant level of unawareness among young Canadian voters. After all, 83 percent of Canadians feel that schools should be doing more to educate students about the benefits of voting and political participation. When Jon Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc investigated this topic for Elections-Canada, they found that:

This image of uncaring youth is sometimes accompanied by a more purposeful description of youth as being actively negative toward politics or elections. Some of the respondents said young people were less likely to vote because they were cynical or disillusioned about politics, sick of the "false promises, dishonesty, hypocrisy, corruption and negativity" which supposedly characterize political life, and

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Voting and Not Voting in 2000, by Age Cohort									
Age in 2000									
Voted in 2000	68+	58-67	48-57	38-47	30-37	25-29	21-24	18-20	Total %
Yes	83.3	80.4	76.4	66.2	54.2	38.2	27.5	22.4	61.3
No	16.7	19.6	23.6	33.8	45.8	61.8	72.5	77.6	38.7

N = 2467
V = .392 p < .000
Source: Lawrence LeDuc and Jon H. Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A new Survey of Non-Voters*, Ottawa, Elections Canada, 2003, p. 20.

not willing to participate in a “meaningless” activity.³

The negative feelings that young Canadians have regarding elections is damaging voter turnout.

Individual mobilization deals with the attitudes of individuals that provide incentives to vote. Political mobilization refers to social integration and civic duty, a feeling of obligation and responsibility to be politically active. It has already been stated above that Canadians fail to have a sense of mobilization especially in young voters. Denmark does not seem to struggle with this to the same extent.

Political scientists, Jorgen Elklit, Palle Svensson and Lise Togeby, from the University of Aarhus, in Denmark have said, “Part of the explanation of the stable turnout

in Denmark is, thus, that new generations have been mobilized as well as former generations.”⁴ It appears that civic duty plays a significant role in Denmark’s political culture for all age groups.

This case can be applied to Franklin’s idea that, “Turnout appears to be stable because, for most people, the habit of voting is established relatively early in their lives.” In Canada’s case, we see that one of the reasons for the lack of votes from young people can be connected to education. In Denmark, there is only a slight difference in turnout between the well and poorly educated. Thus further showing how the reasoning behind Canadians lack of turnout is due to negative attitudes and low levels of mobilization, characteristics not met with positive Danish citizens.

Political Culture

Political interest or apathy are characteristics that must be examined as they help explain the level of incentive to vote. Canada is a unique case when it comes to this topic. In reality, a majority of Canadians do feel some sort of interest in politics. However, not all demographics demonstrate this level of interest. A study published in *Electoral Insight* entitled: “Missing the Message: Young Adults and Election Issues” identifies a declining interest in politics among young people specifically. The study found that Canadians between the ages of 18 to 29 rated their level of political interest as 4.5 out of 10. This once again can be applied to Franklin’s idea on the need of developing a voting habit at a young age in order to gain a stable voter turnout. Meanwhile, in regards to the 2000 election, over half of the non-voters said they actually do have an interest in politics but not in the election. Suggested reasons for this were: perceived non-competitiveness, lack of appeal and confidence. This is also true for the number of people who were interested in both politics and the election yet did not vote. In order to create a continually high and stable voter turnout in Canada, there must be little to no gap between political interest

Perceived Reasons Why Young People Less Likely to Vote (Open-ended; multiple responses)		
Not Integrated	Under 25 years old	25 years and older
Distanced from politics by age; not feeling represented, connected	40.4	36.6
Lack of information, understanding, knowledge	33.9	27.1
Lack of encouragement	2.0	4.2
Too busy, too mobile	3.3	3.2
	79.6	71.1
Disengagement		
Uninterested	31.3	30.4
Negativism, cynicism, disillusionment	9.2	13.5
Distrustful of system, politicians	6.7	8.7
Irresponsibility, revelliousness, laziness	4.3	6.4
	51.5	59.0

Source: Lawrence LeDuc and Jon H. Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A new Survey of Non-Voters*, Ottawa, Elections Canada, 2003, p. 50.

and actually voting, thus prompting a more positive outlook on the idea of voting. The way to assure such a situation is of course, adopting a norm for civic duty, an important concept that is essential to increasing voter turnout.

Denmark is a perfect example of voting despite low political interest or apathy. Generally, as it has been mentioned, interest does tend to be high. But, even when it is not, there is “no trend towards an increasing difference” between turnout among the least interested and those that are. Also, the turnout among the least politically interested people is increasing. This was true in Denmark’s 2001 election as it was higher than the previous year. The key factor here is coming to understand why those Danes continue to vote despite having a low interest. This brings back the idea of civic duty or political mobilization.

Elkit, Svensson and Togeby offer an explanation of the importance of political mobilization and civic duty. They say:

According to the theories of individual mobilization and social integration, we expect that the acceptance of a norm of civic duty to vote in a representative democracy is important for electoral participation. Politically mobilized citizens want to vote, and citizens who are socially integrated take in the norms of society and seek to follow them, because such norms are seen as reasonable and more or less self-evident.⁵

This concept is completely rational; why would someone pick up garbage they see in Place A on the street if they do not feel it would make a difference or if everyone else is simply by passing it? In this case, the norm is to walk by the wrapper on the sidewalk without picking it up. If this citizen were in another place, say B, where people were seen picking up garbage here and there, as well as being in a social environment that adopts and encourages this idea of picking up garbage, he would follow along as it is the norm. To some extent, Place A is like Canada, a country with weak civic duty and Place B is like Denmark, a country with strong civic duty.

When examining civic duty among Canadians, it is important to analyze their mentality. It may be surprising to learn that a majority of Canadians do feel that it is important to vote in elections seeing as their average voter turnout is weak and decreasing. The problem is that Canadians are saying one thing but doing another. After all, actions speak louder than words. In the study found in *Electoral Insight*, a Canadian was quoted as saying, “I understand the importance of voting and I understand that I should be, but I just

don’t care to vote.”⁶ The implementation of civic duty into the minds of Canadians is obviously failing. Their negative mentality is creating a lack of incentive to vote, thus harming Canada’s voter turnout.

A 2002 study done on Denmark found that 98 percent of the people feel it is important to have a large majority of voters for democracy and 96 percent agreed that a belief in democracy meant an obligation to vote, as well as 92% said they felt a strong obligation to vote. The study also found a small difference in turnout between the people of strongest obligation and those with weak obligation, as well as, when factors of age and education were tested into this, the impact was very weak, allowing a strong relationship to continue. This can only mean that Danes naturally have a strong norm for the civic duty and is reinforced through a habit of voting. This allows for a powerful and autonomous impact on voter turnout for the Danish people.

Electoral Systems

Furthermore, it is essential to look at the effectiveness as well as the competitiveness of elections. These factors relate to the existing electoral systems. Understanding the influence this has on voters will allow us to reach the core root of the issue of why Canada’s turnout is declining, unlike Denmark’s. This will further explain why Canadians have such negative perspectives on voting compared to Danes. Canada uses a plurality system otherwise known as first-past-the-post. Denmark, on the other hand, uses proportional representation.

The plurality system is the oldest used voting system but is becoming less common. Under this system, elections are run based on geographical defined districts. Voters base their ballot on the candidate of their riding. The party that wins the majority of votes overall is awarded the riding. As a result, the party that

How much do you feel obliged to vote at a parliamentary election?			
	Without Control	After Control for Age and Education	N
Very large obligation	97	96	629
Fairly large obligation	82	83	192
No and rather small obligation	58	61	58
All	91	91	979
Turnout and Civic Duty, 2002. Survey Data - Percentages			

wins will be represented by those candidates who won in their selected constituencies.

The first application of the proportional representation system took place in Denmark in 1855. Proportional Representation (PR) is based on the principle that the number of seats given to a specific party is determined by the percentage of the popular vote which goes to that party. In other words, the number of seats assigned to the winning party is more or less proportional to the votes received. The PR system can apply in electing the legislature in either parliamentary or presidential systems.

Elections are central to democracy as this is the way citizens can choose who will represent them in regards to public policy and in governing of their country. This is why people vote. Different electoral systems have different levels of reaching the wants and needs of its citizens. The degree to which voices are heard is clearly essential and is dependent upon the electoral system used.

The plurality system which Canada uses serves to dissuade some from voting. One of the main concerns with this system is that it is based on the representation of districts. In the book, *The Politics of Representation: Election Campaigning and Proportional Representation*, authors Juliet Roper, Christina Holtz-Bacha and Gianpietro Mazzoleni write:

Plurality systems can, however, and very often do, produce disproportional election results. Because governmental power is decided upon an aggregate of constituency results on a first-past-the-post basis, the winner is not necessarily the party or the candidate with the overall majority of the vote. Thus, the key interest of a majority of voters may not be represented directly in government.⁷

Because of this, voters have a sceptical idea when it comes to the meaningfulness of their vote as well as the competitiveness of the election. This is important because, in Pammett and LeDuc's investigation into this topic, they concluded that "...feelings that the vote mattered was a statistically significant predictor of having voted."⁸ A majority of non-voters in the Canadian election of 2000 felt their vote made little or no difference. This creates a thought of a "wasted vote" which is a negative conception that will only lead to the lack of interest in voting. The effect of a Canadian vote is not as strong compared to Danes who vote under a different electoral system, permitting more proportional results.

Proportional Representation, a more modern electoral system, present in Denmark, allows more of a

voice for citizens than those under the plurality system because the effectiveness of the vote is greater. A greater range of social representation is possible with a corresponding range of citizens' voices in a political environment. This also means parties can still represent important issues that otherwise may be ignored. This institutional framework helps mobilize people who once felt their needs were not being represented or in other words. The PR system has many advantages that entice a person to vote. Robert Richie and Steven Hill comment, "Because nearly every vote [in a proportional representation system] will help a party win more seats, voters have more incentive to participate and parties have incentives to mobilize their supporters." They also go on to say, "...parties and other electoral organizations have strong incentives to keep their supporters informed, and informed citizens are more likely to vote."⁹ The PR system allows politicians to encourage voters through ways that will actually work and leaves the voter with less reason not to vote. This is a good strategy to keep up a high voter turnout.

The level of competitiveness plays a role based on its electoral system. Competition keeps things exciting and thus increases levels of interest. In a plurality system, it is more difficult to have a highly competitive election because the fact is, is that your vote counts only toward your district area. Basically, this means, if one district is constantly voting for the same parties every year, and has a strong focus on one particular view (also known as a non-competitive district), someone who feels opposite to this majority may not vote due to the lack of competition. Mark Franklin touches on the significance of competitiveness as he says, "At the time of a more competitive election, interest in politics goes up and so does the extent to which people feel sympathy toward their most preferred party."¹⁰ The level of competition in Canada is a fairly new concern for Canadians. A majority of Canadians believe that elections are not very competitive. This is important due to the correlation of competition and participation. This is one of the reasons why Canada's voter turnout is quite low and staying that way.

Under proportional representation, competitiveness in elections is not lacking to the same extent as it is in the plurality system. John Stuart Mills, an early supporter of PR has spoken about how this system increases the chances that a legislative majority has support from the most voters. This allows for voters to elect representatives that reflect a range of opinions and views. Elklit, Svensson and Togeby have concluded, "The Danish electoral institutions have facilitated the mobilization of weak groups, and the high competitiveness in the national elections

has maintained the high level of mobilization." In Denmark, a low level of competition among parties is not an issue for voter turnout because of the PR system that offers a win to the majority. People want to vote. The feeling of a 'wasted' vote is not possible in this case. Because of this, voter turnout is not sacrificed.

Conclusion

Canada and Denmark are both industrialized liberal democracies but have opposite voter turnout characteristics. Denmark's consistently high turnout contrasts with Canada's embarrassing low one. The negative feelings Canadians feel towards elections and voting does not provide enough incentive to vote especially when the norm for civic duty is lacking. There are many reasons to suggest why this is.

Young Canadian voters have a low turnout rate. Their lack of concern and knowledge about elections is too low. They need to feel part of a political society in order to establish a norm of civic duty so that they will feel obligated to vote. This idea of integration relates to political mobilization. Without this, citizens would not feel the need to vote or have established a norm for civic duty. This quality is very high in Denmark, even those that fail to be interested still go out to vote. This is not true in Canada. Parties need to mobilize citizens to vote to create feelings of obligation and interest, but this has to take effect soon, because if new generations do not start developing a habit of voting, improvements in turnout will not be made. This habit has been in place for Denmark for a long time now and so civic duty is strong and continuing. Danes do not have a negative outlook on elections and voting.

Most Canadians feel their votes do not count because of the way their electoral system is structured. This is

not the case in Denmark where they use proportional representation. The more positive outlooks Danish people have and their norm of a civic duty allow them to continue high voter turnout under a PR system. In Canada, under a plurality system, citizens struggle to find motives to vote creating poor political habits that result in very low turnout. If Canada intends on improving voter turnout, we should look to our friends in Denmark for ideas.

Notes

1. Mark N. Franklin, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945*, (USA: Cambridge University), p. 203.
2. Ashleigh Ryan, "Fulfilling their civic duty...if they have to" *Queens Journal*. (Queens, Kingston, October 17, 2008).
3. Lawrence LeDuc and Jon H. Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A new Survey of Non-Voters*, Ottawa, Elections Canada, 2003, p. 50.
4. Jorgen Elkit, Palle Svensson and Lise Togeby, "Why is Voter Turnout in Denmark Not Declining?" (Washington DC, 2005). p. 5.
5. *Ibid.* p. 16.
6. Ashleigh Ryan, *op. cit.*
7. Christina Holtz-Bacha, Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Juliet Roper, *The Politics of Representation: Election Campaigning and Proportional Representation*, (New York, 2004), p. 3.
8. Lawrence LeDuc and Jon H. Pammett, *op. cit.* p. 40.
9. Steven Hill and Robert Richie, *Whose Vote Counts?*, (Boston, 2001), p. 14.
10. Mark N. Franklin, *op. cit.* p. 208.