

Elections and Participation: the Meanings of the Turnout Decline

Lawrence LeDuc
University of Toronto

Jon H. Pammett
Carleton University

It is increasingly evident that the precipitous decline in voting turnout in the 2000 federal election to an historic low is rooted in social and political trends extending well beyond the specific context of that particular election. While there is a natural tendency to attribute the decline to the dominant position of the Liberals, the absence of meaningful party competition in many constituencies, or the lack of appeal of particular political leaders, there are many aspects of the decline which invite us to probe for deeper causes. The drop in turnout has been a prolonged one, falling in each of the last three federal elections – to 70% in 1993, 67% in 1997, and finally to 61% in the 2000 election. Voting turnout has been similarly declining in many other industrialized countries. In the 2001 British election, it dropped even more sharply, to a level (59%) even lower than that observed in Canada. As is seen in table 1, declines of varying magnitude have occurred in many established democracies over the past two decades, with large declines being recorded in countries as diverse as France, Austria, Ireland, Portugal and New Zealand. While there are a few exceptions to the general pattern, it is clear that the decline in turnout seems to have occurred in a range of different electoral systems, party configurations, and electoral environments. In beginning to investigate this phenomenon, we should consider hypotheses which are not necessarily specific to the Canadian political context

It is also clear that the turnout decline is not specific to *federal* politics in Canada, although it has been more pronounced there. As is seen in table 2, the 2000 turnout decline occurred in every province, the magnitude of the decline varying only slightly with different aggregate levels of turnout. In Ontario, for example, where turnout in the 2000 election was 58%, it declined 17 percentage points from the average levels of the 1980's. In Newfoundland, where average federal turnout in the 1980's had been lower to begin with, the decline was 9 percentage points. While voting turnout in provincial elections has held up better over this period, the overall pattern there is also one of decline, even though there is considerable variation between the provinces with respect to turnout patterns, especially in provincial elections. In Saskatchewan, the decline of 17 percentage points in provincial turnout is as steep as that found at the federal level. In Alberta, where turnout in the 1980's was already the lowest among the provinces, it declined a further 3 percentage points. While turnout at the provincial level has held up better in Quebec and Prince Edward Island, there is nothing to suggest that provincial politics is immune from the forces that appear to be driving voting participation steadily lower.

Prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Dalhousie University, June 1, 2003

TABLE 1
Recent voting turnout in 20 democracies compared with 1980's average

Country	Electoral system	----- Turnout -----		
		Last election ¹	1980s avg.	Net change
Denmark	PR	87	88	-1
Italy	Mixed	81	89	-8
Sweden	PR	80	89	-9
Austria	PR	80	91	-11
Netherlands	PR	79	84	-5
Germany	Mixed	79	87	-8
New Zealand	Mixed	77	92	-15
Norway	PR	75	83	-8
Greece	PR	75	83	-8
Spain	PR	70	73	-3
Finland	PR	65	74	-9
Ireland	PR -STV	63	74	-11
Portugal	PR	63	78	-15
Canada	Plurality	61	73	-12
Japan	Mixed	61	69	-8
India	Plurality	60	60	0
France	Majority-Pl.	60	73	-13
Britain	Plurality	59	74	-15
United States ²	Plurality	51	52	-1
Switzerland	PR	43	48	-5
Mean decline				-8

1. Most recent election to December 31, 2002. Lower house of legislature unless otherwise noted.

2. November 2000 presidential election. Comparison is with 1984 and 1988 presidential elections.

SOURCES: International IDEA (www.idea.int/), *Electoral Studies*, LeDuc, Niemi & Norris (2002)

TABLE 2
Voting turnout in recent provincial and federal elections compared with 1980's
average, by province

	Provincial			Federal		
	Last election ¹	1980s avg.	Net change	2000 election	1980s avg. ²	Net change
Prince Edward Island	85	84	1	73	85	-12
Quebec	78	79	-1	64	76	-12
New Brunswick	76	82	-6	68	77	-9
British Columbia	72	77	-5	63	78	-15
Newfoundland	70	79	-9	57	66	-9
Manitoba	68	71	-3	62	74	-12
Nova Scotia	68	72	-4	63	75	-12
Saskatchewan	66	83	-17	62	78	-16
Ontario	58	64	-6	58	75	-17
Alberta	54	57	-3	60	72	-12
Mean decline			-5			-13

1. To December 31, 2000.

2. Federal average of 1984 and 1988 elections.

SOURCES: Fox and White (1995), Elections Canada, Provincial sites.

The issue of voting turnout has recently been taking on greater importance in public discussion in Canada and elsewhere, both because of the magnitude and sustained character of the recent declines and the ways in which they are being interpreted. Declining participation in elections is increasingly being linked to some of the more fundamental problems of modern democracy. In this view, declining public participation in a nation's most fundamental democratic exercise may be part of a larger "democratic deficit", and may have implications for the health of our democratic political system. Further, if the social and political forces which are driving turnout down are of a longer term nature, the problem of low voter participation could continue to plague the political system for years to come. If for example, there is a consistent pattern of declining turnout across the generations, we might expect that electoral participation will continue to decline well into the future, simply as a result of normal demographic processes of population replacement. Such an interpretation has already been suggested by Blais et al in their analysis of the low turnout in the 2000 election.¹

It is notoriously difficult to study nonvoting with ordinary cross section survey data because of the combination of relatively small samples and over reporting of vote. Pooled datasets can help to address at least one aspect of this problem by providing more cases for analysis and allowing the introduction of time as a variable.² Panel studies can also provide insights into the behaviour of nonvoters, by allowing them to be tracked over more than one election.³ But the number of available cases is likewise invariably small in such studies. In order to more systematically investigate the causes and possible consequences of the recent decline in voting turnout in Canada, we designed and carried out a new survey in cooperation with Elections Canada in April 2002.⁴ The sample design used in this survey called for a short screening interview with a large number of randomly selected Canadians (5637) and a longer interview continued with 988 reported voters in the 2000 federal election and 968 reported nonvoters.⁵

¹ André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte. *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory* (Toronto, Broadview Press), pp. 45-63.

² We employed this strategy in a report prepared for Elections Canada, as did Blais et al in another analysis. See Jon H. Pammett, Lawrence LeDuc, Erin Thiesen and Antoine Bilodeau, *Canadian Voting Turnout in Comparative Perspective*, Elections Canada, 2001. See also André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte, "The Evolving Nature of Non-voting: Evidence from Canada", paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 2001.

³ See Harold D. Clarke, Jane Jenson, Lawrence LeDuc and Jon H. Pammett, *Absent Mandate: Interpreting Change in Canadian Elections* (Toronto, Gage, 1991).

⁴ Field work for this survey was conducted by Decima Research. Technical details may be obtained by contacting Decima Research or Elections Canada.

⁵ The two stage sample design was similar to one used by Verba et al in a study of political participation in the U.S. See Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, Henry Brady and Norman Nie, "Citizen Activity: Who Participates? What Do They Say?", *American Political Science Review* 87 (1993), pp. 303-16.

In this way, interviews were obtained with a much larger sample of nonvoters than is possible in election-related surveys such as the CNES.⁶ Our survey was designed to explore a variety of potential explanations for nonvoting, both in general terms and in reference to the sharp increase in nonvoting that has occurred in each of the last three federal elections. In this paper, we present some of the preliminary findings of the survey, and attempt to draw some conclusions about the meaning and significance of the turnout decline.⁷

Many of the 2000 nonvoters fit the profile of a group that we have identified in previous panel studies as “transient voters”, i.e. voters who enter and exit the active electorate at each election.⁸ As is seen in figure 1, half of the 2000 nonvoters sampled report having voted in *one* of the two previous federal elections, while an equal proportion did not vote in either instance.⁹ More than a third of the 2000 nonvoters who were eligible at the time voted in the 1997 election (37%) *or* the 1993 election (39%). Slightly more than a quarter voted in *both* of those elections, even though they did not participate in 2000.

These data present a somewhat more complex picture of nonvoters than is found in some of the election and panel studies. The larger number of respondents who report not having voted in *any* of the last three elections is suggestive of the possible emergence of a potentially more permanent group of nonvoters. Since this evidence is based on respondents recall of past behaviour rather than on panel reports, the actual proportion of three-time non-voters may in fact be somewhat higher.¹⁰ While we cannot say with assurance that such respondents will not choose to enter or re-enter the electorate in some future election, there is likewise no compelling reason to predict that they *will* do so. While most of the 2000 voters are confident that they would vote in a future election, the nonvoters are much less certain (table 3). Only about a quarter of the nonvoters indicate that it is “very likely” that they would vote in a future election.

⁶ The post election wave of the 2000 CNES for example contained 479 reported nonvoters – 16.7% of the valid cases.

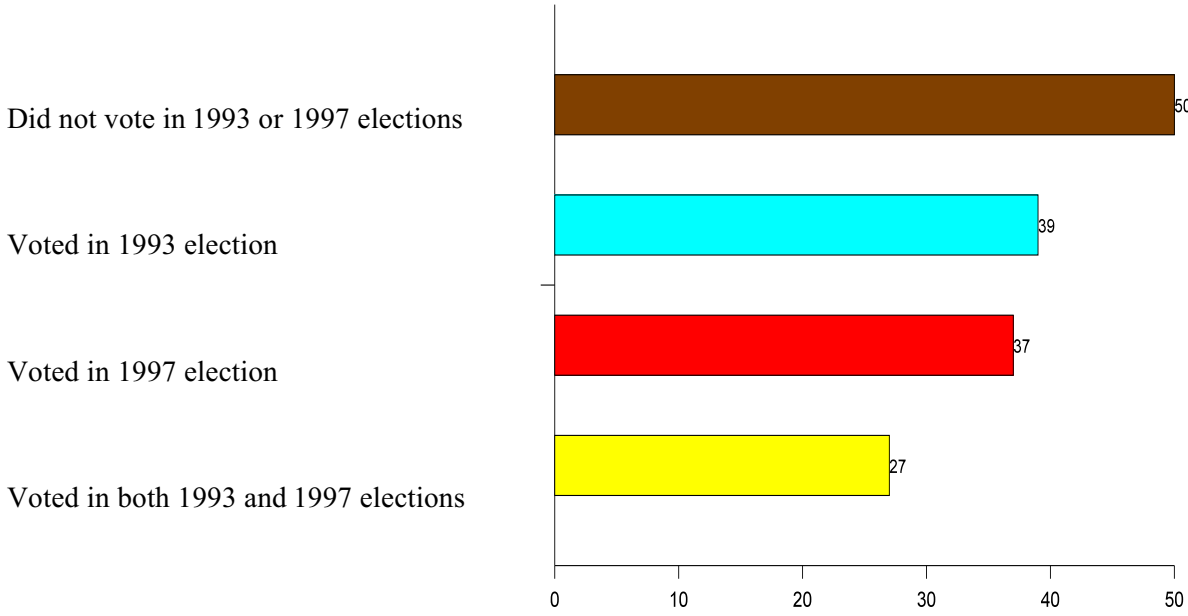
⁷ We are grateful to Elections Canada for permission to make use of these data for further academic analysis. We especially wish to thank Alain Pelletier, Assistant Director for Policy and Research, for his advice and support throughout all stages of the survey project. A full report of the survey, entitled *Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: a New Survey of Nonvoters*, may be viewed at www.elections.ca. Neither Elections Canada nor Decima Research are responsible for the analyses of the data or the conclusions presented in this paper.

⁸ For an analysis of transient voters in previous studies, including a three wave panel study, see Lawrence LeDuc, Harold D. Clarke, Jane Jenson and Jon H. Pammett, “Partisan Instability in Canada: Evidence from a New Panel Study”, *American Political Science Review*, 78 (1984), pp. 470-484; or Harold D. Clarke, Jane Jenson, Lawrence LeDuc and Jon H. Pammett, *Absent Mandate: Interpreting Change in Canadian Elections* (Toronto, Gage, 1991).

⁹ Excluding those 2000 nonvoters who would not have been eligible to vote in 1997 or 1993.

¹⁰ Since recall reports in cross section surveys will typically underestimate levels of past nonvoting.

FIGURE 1
Voting behaviour of 2000 nonvoters in 1993 and 1997 federal elections



[N = 789/893*]

* Excluding those not eligible

TABLE 3
Likelihood of future vote by vote/non vote in 2000
(column percentages)

		2000 voters	2000 non voters	Total sample
How likely are you to vote in the next general election?	Very likely	87.2	26.6	55.0
	Somewhat likely	10.6	37.9	25.1
	Not very likely	1.1	16.8	9.4
	Not at all likely	1.1	18.7	10.5
N = 2008				

TABLE 4
Perceived importance of voting, by vote/non vote in 2000
(column percentages)

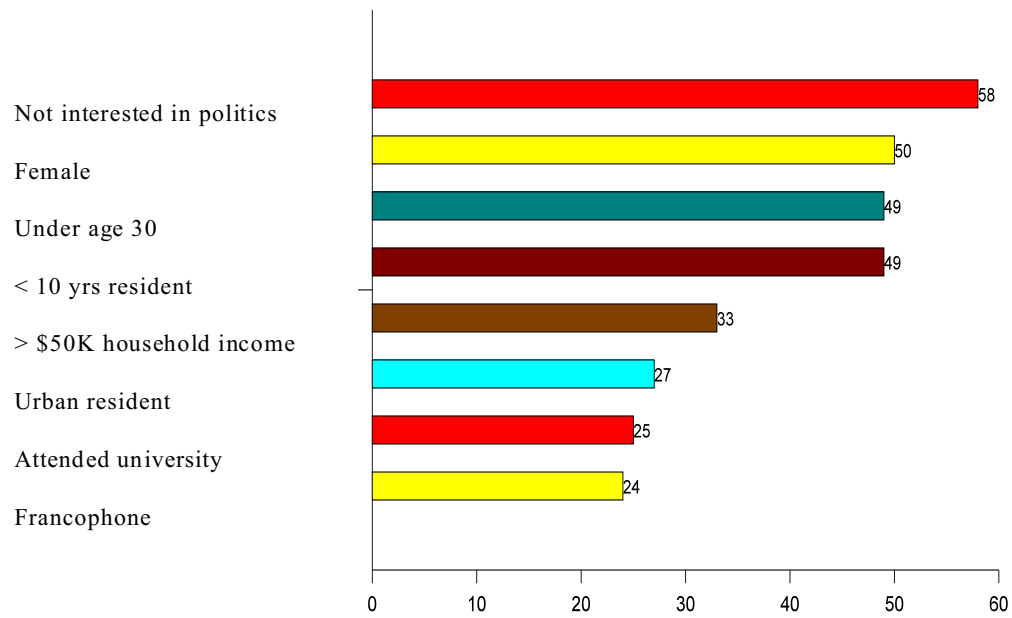
		2000 voters	2000 non voters	Total sample
In your view, how important is it that people vote in elections?	Essential	55.9	19.2	36.2
	Very important	37.9	37.3	37.6
	Somewhat important	5.4	33.6	20.5
	Not at all important	.8	9.9	5.7
N = 2029				

More than a third say that it is “not very likely” or “not at all likely”. They also attach less importance to the act of voting (table 4). Given that the near term trend in voting turnout generally has been down, it is entirely possible that future elections will see fewer previous nonvoters circulating back into the active electorate than has been the case in the past. Some further clues to the characteristics of 2000 nonvoters may be found in the profile shown in figure 2. Demographic factors that *should* have been operating in recent years to pull turnout up, or at least to slow the decline, have seemingly had little effect. The modest gender gap which once existed has now completely closed, as more women have entered the electorate. Equal proportions of men and women are found in both the voting and nonvoting groups. There are no significant differences between francophone and anglophone respondents in levels of participation. Other demographics tell us little. Nonvoters are found in substantial numbers among the more affluent, better educated, segments of the population. Increasing levels of education therefore have not acted to raise turnout levels, even though education continues to be a weak correlate of nonvoting. Factors such as mobility or place of residence likewise tell us little about contemporary non voting in Canada.

A parallel regression analysis (table 5) finds that age (measured here by year of birth) and a cluster of attitudinal variables regarding politics, are among the principal predictors of nonvoting in 2000.¹¹ The attitudinal variables, measured here by a set of factor scores, along with age, paint a comprehensive picture of the 2000 nonvoters. Age emerges as the number-one predictor of whether someone voted or not in the 2000 election. Two factors involving feelings of ‘citizen duty’ also have significant connections to voting turnout. The *interest, discussion, civic duty* factor is the second most important predictor in the equation, and a related factor, *vote matters, civic duty* is also significant. Another predictive factor of importance is one measuring administrative effects, namely the respondent having his/her *name on the List of Electors* in 2000. Some additional demographic and attitudinal factors reach statistical significance, but are less powerful in their ability to predict nonvoting in 2000. The *trust* factor is a statistically significant, but weaker predictor, as is *net household income*. *Being new to Canada*, as measured by whether respondents were born in this country or not, is associated with lower turnout. So is *geographical mobility*, as measured by the length of residence in one’s current neighbourhood or community. Finally, in the 2000 election, where we were able to measure this factor, being *contacted by the parties or candidates* is also correlated with higher voting turnout.

¹¹ The attitudinal items entered into the regression were factor scores derived from measures of interest, efficacy, political discussion, party competition, civic duty, trust, and party support. See Appendix B.

FIGURE 2
A profile of the nonvoters in the 2000 federal election



[N = 1097]

TABLE 5
 Predictors of voting/non voting in 2000
 (Multiple Regression)

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients
	B	Std. Error	Beta
1. Year of birth	-.008	.001	-.271*
2. Highest level of formal education	-.020	.005	.090*
3. Total household income	.010	.040	.062*
4. Gender (F)	-.008	.019	-.009
5. Born in Canada	-.050	.028	-.038
6. Length of residence	.020	.007	.082*
7. Interest, discussion, civic duty [†]	-.108	.012	-.172*
8. Vote matters, civic duty [†]	-.123	.012	-.197*
9. Parties competitive [†]	.002	.012	.004
10. Inefficacy/cynicism/party negative [†]	.020	.012	.040
11. Trust, represented [†]	-.030	.012	-.055*
12. Party support [†]	-.003	.012	.005
13. Name not on list	-.217	.026	-.168*
14. Party or candidate contact (none)	-.104	.020	-.097*

[†] = factor scores (see Appendix B)
 * = statistically significant $p < .01$
 missing data = mean substitution
 $R^2 = .320$
 N = 2047

Two characteristics of contemporary nonvoters in Canada stand out. Almost half of all nonvoters in the 2000 federal election were under thirty years of age. A majority expressed little interest in politics.¹² Nonvoters assigned much less importance to the act of voting than did voters, and they do not have as strong a sense of ‘civic duty’ with respect to voting as do older respondents. Set alongside the earlier observation that many of the 2000 nonvoters were also nonvoters in one of the two previous federal elections, the picture that begins to emerge is that of a younger generation withdrawing or partially withdrawing from politics. As some of the other evidence from the survey will show, it appears that this process has been taking place for some time, and is not necessarily specific to the 2000 election. While some of the particular characteristics of that election may have contributed to the decline, it seems unlikely that they are its root cause. The explanation is to be found more in the normal processes of population replacement which have been taking place over a number of years than in the failure of the electoral system or party system to provide meaningful choices for Canadians in the 2000 election. A steady growth in the proportion of the population with little interest in politics and a belief that voting is not all that important is driving turnout down in each successive election.

Table 6 discloses dramatically the pattern of decline in turnout across generations which has been at work in the Canadian electorate over the past decade or more.¹³ The levels of non-participation for the three cohorts of newly eligible voters entering the electorate in each of the past three federal elections are striking.¹⁴ Only slightly over one in five of those who were eligible to vote for the first time in 2000 chose to participate. The figures are only slightly better among those cohorts of voters eligible to vote for the first time in 1997 or 1993. Even those who entered the electorate during the later Trudeau period (1974-1980) voted in 2000 at a lower rate than those in the older age groups. For those who entered the electorate during the Mulroney years (aged 30 to 37 in 2000) the overall percentage casting a ballot in 2000 was only 54%.

¹² The item shown in figure 2 refers to general political interest. Respondents were asked “Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?”. The response categories “not very interested” and “not at all interested” are combined to obtain the percentage shown in figure 1. A separate item was asked regarding interest specifically in the 2000 federal election. The proportion among 2000 nonvoters responding “not very interested” or “not at all interested” to that item was 72%.

¹³ To calculate this table, we employ a corrective weight to rebalance the total proportions of voters and nonvoters in the sample. The calculation was arrived at by weighting each of the nonvoters in the sample at 1 and voters at .34, thereby simulating a sample of 2467 with a voting rate of 61.3% -- the actual rate in 2000.

¹⁴ The cohorts displayed in table 6 are structured according to the particular election at which a respondent first became eligible to vote. To have been eligible to vote in the 1988 federal election for example, a respondent would have to have been at least 30 years old in 2000. See Appendix A.

TABLE 6
 Voting and non-voting in 2000, by age cohorts

Voted in 2000 (%)	Age in 2000 [FIRST ELIGIBILITY]								All
	68+ [--1953]	58-67 [1957-63]	48-57 [1968-72]	38-47 [1974-80]	30-37 [1984-88]	25-29 [1993]	21-24 [1997]	18-20 [2000]	
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 (weighted; see note 13). See Appendix A for further description of cohorts.

It is of course not unusual to find lower rates of voting participation among the young. Such patterns are well documented in the literature on nonvoting in Canada and in other countries. But lower participation rates among the young have generally been interpreted as a pattern associated with specific behavioural characteristics of the life cycle. As people age, they become more politically aware and engaged. It is therefore to be expected that voting rates should increase over time with these normal life cycle changes. They should also increase with rising levels of education. Our evidence suggests however that such changes are occurring more slowly than they have in the past, and that younger voters, when they do begin to enter the electorate, do so at a much higher age.¹⁵ If such patterns continue to persist over time, normal processes of population replacement will combine to keep driving turnout down, with each generation of newly eligible voters participating at lower rates and taking longer to enter the electorate. Since there is as yet no indication that this process of steadily lower participation among younger generations is abating, future elections could well see even lower turnout than in 2000. Such a trend has potentially serious implications for Canadian democracy – for the extent of a democratic mandate that governments might claim, for the kinds of candidates who are elected, and even for the types of issues that are discussed. If the age of the electorate is rising even faster than that of the population more generally, it will not be surprising to find governments under increasing pressure to pay more attention to health care than to education.

The data presented thus far tell us a good deal about *who* is not participating in federal elections, but they provide only a hint of the reasons why young voters may be withdrawing from the electorate in such large numbers. The survey was designed to explore this question in greater detail by including a number of open ended questions on the turnout decline and on the reasons for nonvoting. The open ended questions allowed respondents to answer in their own words and to give more than one response to a question. In this way, we were able to explore more fully some of the attitudes and feelings that lie behind the turnout decline. The ability to compare the answers of both older and younger respondents, and of voters and nonvoters, provides additional insights into the problem of nonvoting among the young.

¹⁵ An analysis of pooled data from the Canadian National Election Studies confirms this pattern. Such an analysis clearly shows that, across a number of elections, each generation of newly eligible voters participates at lower rates and begins to enter the electorate at a higher age. Jon H. Pammett, Lawrence LeDuc, Erin Thiessen and Antoine Bilodeau, *Canadian Voting Turnout in Comparative Perspective*, report prepared for Elections Canada, 2001, pp. 71-74, 78-79.

TABLE 7
Reasons for the turnout decline
(open-ended; multiple responses; column percentages)

	All respondents	Non- voters
Politicians and Political Institutions	68.0	67.7
Politicians (negative public attitudes)	26.2	24.9
Government (negative public attitudes)	13.0	16.0
Candidates (negative public attitudes)	11.7	12.4
Political parties (negative public attitudes)	6.3	6.2
Issues (negative public attitudes)	5.5	4.2
Leaders (negative public attitudes)	3.3	2.3
Electoral system (negative public attitudes)	1.0	0.5
Election administration (problems)	1.0	1.2
Meaninglessness	32.5	24.9
Meaninglessness of participation	15.7	14.5
Lack of competition	14.0	8.6
Regional discontent	2.8	1.8
Public Apathy	39.2	40.3
Apathy and disinterest	22.7	24.2
Turned attention elsewhere	5.1	5.8
Lack of knowledge, information	4.3	5.0
Cynicism	4.0	3.4
Youth not voting	3.1	1.9
Other	3.1	5.0
Do not know	1.4	2.5
N =	4659	848

We asked all respondents in the survey, including those in the screen sample, to speculate on the reasons for the turnout decline.¹⁶ The responses to this item are shown in table 7. The majority of the respondents attribute the turnout decline to negative public attitudes towards the performance of the politicians and political institutions more generally. Over two-thirds (68%) gave an answer coded in this category. The objects of perceived public displeasure run the complete gamut of personnel and institutions, but the most prominently mentioned were “politicians” and “the government”, general terms which indicate the broad nature of the attitudes people ascribe to others. It should be noted that these negative attitudes were not necessarily personally held by those respondents who voted in the election. However, given the large sample size, it is likely that the feelings reported here are fairly widespread among Canadians.

The lodestones of discontent are politicians and the government. There is a widespread perception that politicians are untrustworthy, selfish, unaccountable, lacking in credibility, not true to their word, etc. Candidates are mentioned frequently, because the question asked specifically about the turnout decline, thereby placing it in the election context. As one might expect, “candidates” are perceived to have the same faults as “politicians”. Political parties are singled out as well, because some attributed the lowered voting rate to the difficulties people might have in finding any good choices, or in distinguishing between the parties. Some said that potential voters have difficulty in relating to the issues brought forward by the parties at election time, or sometimes that the policies which are proposed are misguided.

With the answers just described relating to the deficiencies of political actors and institutions, it is difficult to discern what might have happened in recent years to precipitate a major decline in the voting rate. After all, citizens have complained about politicians and governments for a long time, and it is hard to believe that one could find any objective measure of “decline in quality” of candidates or elected officials, or of the actions of government. To some degree, the malaise of discontent noted thus far may have come about through a widespread feeling that political participation is meaningless. A number of these responses are captured specifically in the second section of table 7, but such feelings may lie behind some of the other responses as well. Those classified under the “meaninglessness” heading commented on the lack of choice in elections, or stated that their votes would not change anything. “It’s always the same thing over and over,” said some. Others referred to the situation of “single party dominance”, whereby it seemed that there was no realistic hope of an alternative government. It is reasonable to point out, however, that those who did not vote in 2000 were less likely to cite the lack of competition as a general diagnosis of the situation of falling turnout than the total group. Subsequent analysis will show that a perceived lack of competition is but one of several reasons for not casting a ballot.

¹⁶ The question read : “The federal election of 2000 had one of the lowest voter turnouts in Canadian history. In your opinion, why is the turnout going down?” Up to three responses were recorded for each respondent.

The final major category in table 7 identifies those responses which blamed public “apathy” for the decline in voting. According to many people, we are faced with a situation where people just do not care, do not pay attention, are lazy, or do not find the political scene exciting enough. A variation of this explanation is that people see nonvoters as simply interested in other things, giving political participation a low priority. Or perhaps it is because those choosing not to vote have not bothered to seek out the information required to cast a meaningful vote. Some cited attitudes of cynicism, disillusionment, discouragement, frustration and hopelessness. Some specifically targeted young people as responsible for the voting decline, an observation which we will examine more closely, given the strong generational patterns already identified.

Overall, there seems a general recognition among the Canadian public that the voting turnout rate is declining and that there are identifiable explanations for this trend. Many of the problems identified defy easy solution, as they may well result from shifts in popular perceptions and expectations of the political system rather than any specific behavioural change among politicians and governments. Combined with a number of the findings reported in this paper, they suggest that the turnout declines of the past decade may continue for some time to come.

The answers given by the general public to the question, “why is turnout going down?”, while they cluster around a number of major themes, are by no means centered on only one explanation. Some of the answers, related to a lowering of interest in elections, and in politics more generally, raise more questions than they answer. If declining turnout is a result of declining interest, why then is interest going down? We may therefore expect to find a variety of explanations which combine to explain the low turnout in recent federal elections, rather than one single “key” to the situation.

Similarly, the answers to the open-ended question posed to nonvoters, “What was the main reason you did not cast a ballot”, have a variety of responses. We asked those who reported not having voted in the 2000 federal elections to give their reasons for not voting, and we group these under the three main categories shown in table 8 – *disinterest*, *negativity*, and *personal/administrative*.¹⁷ The largest single group of responses to this question consisted of those who simply weren’t interested in the election (or politics more generally), didn’t care it was being held, and did not want to vote. About a quarter of all respondents gave such an answer. For others in this category, however, it was the meaninglessness of the voting that counted, as they reasoned that their vote would not matter or make a difference, and that the election was a foregone conclusion. A few others in the *disinterest* category found the whole election scene too confusing for them, or just forgot about it.

¹⁷ In tables 7-10, for questions which use multiple responses, the category totals should be regarded as approximate, since respondents may give more than one response in the same category.

TABLE 8
Main reasons for not voting in 2000, by age
(Open-ended; multiple responses; column percentages)

	Age Groups					
	55+	45-54	35-44	25-34	18-24	Total
Disinterest	32.6	30.2	33.4	41.4	38.4	37.2
Not interested; didn't care; apathy	23.2	18.3	19.7	27.3	28.0	25.0
Vote meaningless; not count; election forgone conclusion	7.6	9.6	10.0	11.4	6.5	9.0
Forgot; unaware	1.8	0	1.2	2.0	3.9	2.3
Too complicated; confusing	0	2.3	2.5	0.7	0	0.9
Negativity	30.1	50.3	45.7	31.7	27.3	34.4
No appealing candidates/parties/issues	12	22.7	21.2	14.1	13.9	15.9
Lack of faith/confidence in candidates/parties/leaders	15.4	21.3	16.7	14.0	6.3	12.8
Lack of information about candidates/parties/issues	0.9	3.3	5.0	3.1	6.3	4.3
Regional discontent	1.8	3.0	2.8	0.5	0.8	1.4
Personal/Administrative	46.8	32.0	28.1	35.2	43.0	37.3
Too busy with work/school/family	4.1	3.1	11.9	13.7	22.6	14.3
Away from riding/province/country	22	9.3	8.0	10.9	7.9	10.4
Registration problems	3.5	6.7	2.7	5.2	7.4	5.5
Illness, health issues	11.8	7.7	1.9	2.0	0.4	2.9
Didn't know where or when; polling station problems; transportation	5.4	2.7	2.5	2.2	4.2	3.3
Moving-related problems	0	2.5	1.1	1.2	0.5	0.9
Other	4.6	2.3	5.1	2.9	4.5	3.9
Religious reasons	4.1	1.5	2.0	1.1	0.9	1.5
Other; unclassifiable; unclear; none	0.5	0.8	3.1	1.8	3.6	2.4
N =	101	109	171	331	347	1059

We classified responses as expressing *negativity* rather than simple disinterest if they indicated a lack of confidence in any of the candidates, parties, leaders, or said that they could find none them appealing enough to vote for. Some of these respondents also said they did not find the issue discussion meaningful, or that they did not have enough information about the issues or other political factors to make a choice. A few of these expressed grievances against the federal government of one sort or another, or stated they weren't interested in federal politics. The third category, *personal/administrative*, contains a variety of specific responses involving personal issues such as health or work obligations, or difficulties in the logistics of voting.

Table 8 shows a number of interesting variations in the reasons for nonvoting given by different age groups. In particular, the youngest age group (those aged 18-24 in 2000) was less likely to express reasons having to do with negative feelings towards political candidates, parties and leaders than were older age groups. They were, however, more likely to cite personal or administrative reasons for nonvoting, particularly that they were "too busy". They were also somewhat more likely to experience registration problems. The percentages reporting "disinterest" were also higher in the youngest two age groups. The oldest age group, were most affected by health issues and by absence from their district at election time, although it should be remembered that there were far fewer nonvoters overall in the older age groups. The middle aged groups, those between the mid-30s and the mid-50s, were more likely to cite reasons involving negative feelings toward politicians or political parties than were those in either the oldest or the youngest groups.

As part of the survey, we asked our respondents to speculate on the reasons behind the higher rates of nonvoting among youth.¹⁸ The answers that they gave (table 9) fell into two broad categories -- those related to a lack of integration of young people into the political system, and those suggesting that the problem lies with feelings of apathy or political distrust. It is apparent that the bulk of Canadians believes that young people are not voting because they feel distanced from the operations of the political system, or because they lack information about it. The first explanation, distancing from politics, contained responses of the following nature:

- youth do not believe that government represents them or cares about their views, their needs, and their issues
- the age difference distances young people from the political process and the politicians
- political parties do not reach out to them, or are out of touch with young people

¹⁸ The question read: "It has often been observed that young people are less likely to vote than older people. Why do you think this is?" Up to three responses were recorded for each respondent.

TABLE 9
 Perceived reasons why young people are less likely to vote
 (Open-ended; multiple responses; column percentages)

	Under 25	25 +
Not Integrated	79.6	71.1
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
Disengagement	51.5	59.0
Uninterested, apathetic	31.3	30.4
Negativism, cynicism, disillusionment	9.2	13.5
Distrustful of system, politicians	6.7	8.7
Irresponsibility, rebelliousness, laziness	4.3	6.4
Other	1.8	3.5
Do not know	0.0	0.4
N =	386	1420

- youth feel that politics does not affect them, perhaps because they have not yet developed the responsibilities which are the subject of political discourse
- no one listens to young people; they have no voice

There is a strong feeling, then, that young people lack connection to the current political system. Such an explanation is joined by one that young people simply do not have enough political information. This lack of knowledge relates to all aspects of politics—the candidates, parties and issues. It extends to a lack of knowledge of how the operations of politics might affect their lives. Attitudes of this sort are cited as explanations by 34% of young people themselves. Overall, then, almost three-quarters of the respondents to the study, and 80% of the under-25 age group in the survey, gave an answer that we have classified in the “Not Integrated” category.

Explanations for nonvoting among youth also involved reasons that we have classified here as “Disengagement”. Such reasons as these were cited by 59% of respondents over 25, and 52% of young people themselves. The bulk of these answers simply categorized youth as uninterested or apathetic when it comes to voting in elections. This image of uncaring youth is sometimes accompanied by a more purposeful description of youth as being actively negative toward politics or elections. Older respondents were somewhat more likely to say that 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 are sometimes seen as characterizing political life, and not willing to participate in a “meaningless” activity. Young people were also seen by some respondents as having a lack of trust in candidates, parties, or the government, or simply disliking what is happening (or not happening) in politics.

We followed up the question about the reasons for lower voting levels among youth by asking respondents to suggest what *they* felt should be done to get young people to be more interested in politics?” The answers to this question, again grouped by age, are shown in table 10. A majority of those responding mentioned “Improved education or Information” as a potential solution. Answers in this category, however, were reasonably diverse, dealing not only with the need for more education in the schools but also in the home and in the media. There was also a realization on the part of some that increased information or education needed to be made more relevant to the interests and personal situations of young people in order to better engage them.

TABLE 10

“What do you think should be done to get young people to be more interested in politics?”

(open-ended; multiple responses; column percentages)

	Under 25	25 +
Improved education; information	47.7	52.8
More education in the schools	23.0	23.7
More dialogue/exposure/education (general)	9.0	12.7
More emphasis on personal relevance, benefits, jobs	8.0	10.0
More advertisements, media exposure	7.7	4.1
More education in the home	0.0	2.3
Political system change; involvement	42.7	38.8
More relevant issues to youth	26.7	14.7
Recruitment, involvement of youth	7.3	10.5
Younger candidates, politicians, leaders	4.7	7.0
Better politicians, leaders, parties	2.3	4.3
Electoral reform; democratic reform	1.7	2.3
Changes in the conduct of politics	24.3	29.7
Government relate better to, understand youth	10.6	14.1
More honesty, responsibility, accountability in politics	6.1	10.9
Make politics less complicated, more interesting, fun	7.6	4.7
Other	1.8	1.8
Nothing, do not know	3.2	3.0
N =	332	1184

The notion of increased relevance to young people comes up again in the next category of answers, which referred to changes which might be made to the political system itself to encourage more involvement of youth. We can see from table 10 that 27% of respondents under 25 years of age felt that those responsible for setting the issue agenda of politics should make more effort to accommodate issues of relevance to young people, such as those relating to the jobs, education and future of youth. This number is almost twice as high as is found in the 25 and older group. Other changes suggested in this category were related to the improvements that might result from an injection of youth into the personnel of politics -- younger leaders, politicians and candidates, for example. Finally, the theme of greater relevance to youth also comes up as the first entry in the third category shown in table 10 -- that of changes in the actions or conduct of those running the political system. These respondents felt that young people might become more interested in politics if government made an effort to contact and relate to youth, giving them more say in government activities. Other people who referred to changes in the conduct of politics were more likely to cite the need for changes like more honesty, responsibility and accountability in the actions of politicians. In response to a separate series of closed-end questions included in the survey, many respondents also agreed that technological developments such as the possibility of internet voting might be beneficial in bringing more young people into the electorate.¹⁹ But it is hard to believe that such improvements in the technology of voting, desirable though they might be on their own merits, could make a substantial difference to nonvoters who are inclined to believe that voting is neither important nor meaningful, and who feel distanced from the political process in a variety of ways.

We conclude by returning to the theme of whether younger generations of voters are likely to enter or return to the electorate in the future if they continue to feel that the act of voting is meaningless or that their voices are not heard in the political arena. It is, to some degree, a self fulfilling prophecy. Since the mid to late seventies, each newly eligible cohort of voters has been increasingly disinclined to believe that elections are important or meaningful -- a view that stands in stark contrast to that of the generations that entered the electorate before 1974 (figure 3).²⁰ Accompanying this growing disbelief in the efficacy of elections is a propensity to disengage, which displays a similar trend across the cohorts of young voters for the past two decades. While the trend appears to moderate slightly among the youngest cohort (18-20 year olds), who became eligible to vote for the first time in the 2000 election, it should be remembered that this group was also the one that displayed the lowest participation rate of any of the cohorts in the 2000 election. If, as was the case in that election, only one in five newly eligible voters choose to participate next time, there is little doubt that voting turnout will continue on its long term downward path. Combined with the tendency of transient voters to cycle out of the active electorate for longer periods, or perhaps even permanently, it is entirely possible that turnout in future elections in Canada could again register new lows.

¹⁹ A majority of the survey respondents said that it was "very likely" or "somewhat likely" that they personally would take advantage of an internet voting option. Not surprisingly, the proportion responding positively to this item was higher among younger, better educated, higher income, urban residents.

²⁰ The variables are dichotomized to produce the distributions in figure 3, combining the two lower categories. See tables 3 & 4 for question wording and response categories.

FIGURE 3
Importance of elections and probability of voting, by age cohorts

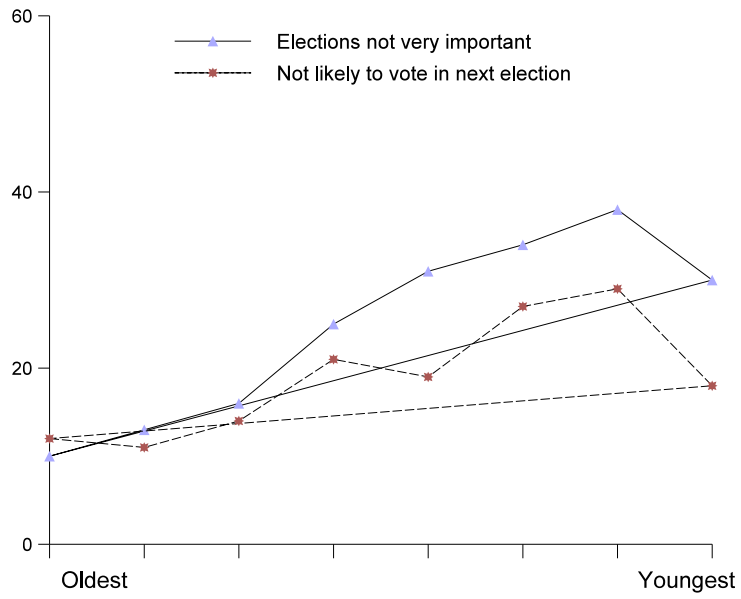
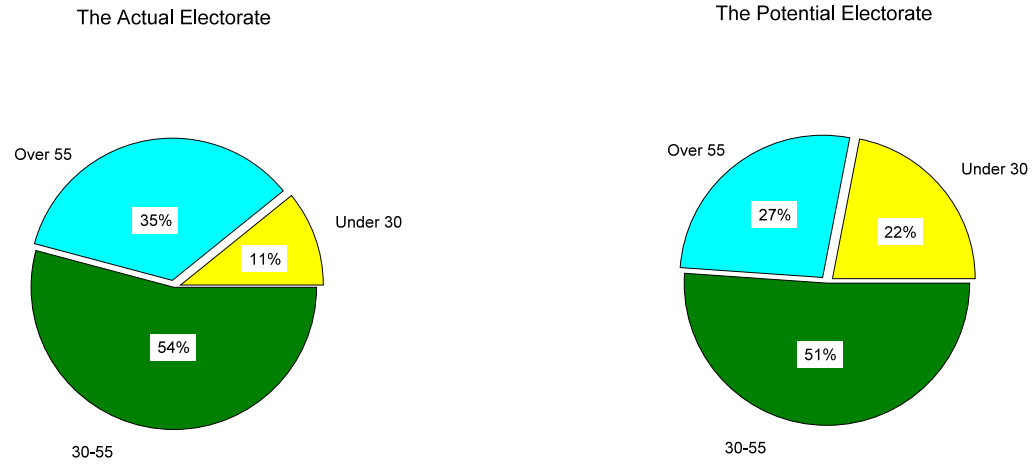


FIGURE 4
Two electorates in the 2000 federal election¹



¹ N = 4553 / 2467. Weights applied. See note 13.

This disengagement of young voters from the electorate has many implications for the kinds of issues that are likely to be addressed in the political arena, the types of candidates who seek election, the positions taken by the parties, and the formation of public policy. Politicians and political parties are more likely to respond to the demands of voters than of nonvoters. If younger voters continue to exit the electorate in large numbers, their voices will not be heard, their issues will not be addressed, and their candidates will not be elected. Based on the survey, we estimate that over one third of those who voted in the 2000 federal election were over the age of 55, while only slightly more than one voter in ten was under thirty (figure 4). Had all eligible voters participated, the age structure of the 2000 electorate would have been very different. The proportion of voters under age 30 would have doubled, approaching a level of between a fifth and a quarter of the total electorate. The proportion over 55 would shrink to a level closer to a quarter, rather than a third. The proportion of voters falling between these two age clusters would fluctuate only slightly under these two different sets of assumptions, accounting for about half of all voters in both instances (figure 4).

The survey findings point us toward an understanding of the scope of the problem, and its potential significance in many areas of politics ranging well beyond the conduct of elections. It is evident that the decline in voting turnout in recent elections is mainly attributable to the young, and that it is part of a demographic trend that shows every sign of continuing well into the future. It is a problem that deserves our attention, but that will not be easily solved. The direction of a solution is clear – making voting easier and more meaningful for first-time voters; making politics more relevant to the young, providing them with the tools that they need to understand its implications in their own lives, engaging them more directly in the political process. But without fundamental changes in the way in which politics is conducted in Canada, and regaining the ability to convince future generations that voting is indeed worthwhile, these are goals that could well remain out of reach for some time.

REFERENCES

- Bakvis, Herman (ed.). 1991. *Voter Turnout in Canada: Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing*. Toronto: Dundurn Press.
- Blais, André. 2000. *To Vote or Not to Vote: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory*. University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Blais, André and Louis Massicotte. 2002. "Electoral Systems", in LeDuc, Niemi & Norris, *Comparing Democracies 2*.
- Blais, André, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte. 2002. *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory*. Toronto: Broadview.
- Blais, André, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte. 2001. "The Evolving Nature of Non-voting: Evidence from Canada", paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco.
- Blais, André and Agnieszka Dobrzynska.. 1998. "Turnout in Electoral Democracies", *European Journal of Political Research*, 33:239-261.
- Boix, Carles. 1999. "Setting the Rules of the Game: the Choice of Electoral Systems in Advanced Democracies", *American Political Science Review*, 93:609-24.
- Brians, Craig. 1997. "Residential Mobility, Voter Registration and Electoral Participation in Canada", *Political Research Quarterly* 50: 215-227.
- Carty, Kenneth, William Cross, and Lisa Young. 2000. *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Cox, Gary W. 1997. *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems*. Cambridge University Press.
- Eagles, Munroe. 1991. "Voting and Non-voting in Canadian Federal Elections: An Ecological Analysis." In Bakvis, *Voter Turnout in Canada: Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing*, 3-32.
- Fox, Paul and Graham White (eds.). 1995. *Politics:Canada*, 8th edition. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.
- Franklin, Mark. 2002. "Electoral Participation", in LeDuc, Niemi & Norris, *Comparing Democracies 2*.
- Franklin, Mark. 1999. "Electoral Engineering and Cross-National Turnout Differences: What Role for Compulsory Voting?", *British Journal of Political Science* 29: 205-216.

- Grofman, Bernard, Guillermo Owen, and Christian Collet. 1999. "Rethinking the Partisan Effects of Higher Turnout: So What's the Question?", *Public Choice* 99: 357-376.
- International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). 1999. "Youth Voter Participation.", *Democracy in the Making - Annual Report*.
- International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). 1997. *Voter Turnout from 1945 to 1997: A Global Report on Political Participation*. 2nd ed.
- Jackman, Robert. 1987. "Political Institutions and Voter Turnout in the Industrial Democracies", *American Political Science Review*, 81:405-23.
- Jackman, Robert and Ross A. Miller. 1995. "Voter Turnout in the Industrial Democracies During the 1980s", *Comparative Political Studies*, 27:467-492.
- Jennings, M. Kent. 1987. "Residues of a Movement: the Aging of the American Protest Generation", *American Political Science Review* 81: 67-82.
- Johnston, Richard. 2000. "Canadian Elections at the Millenium." *Choices: Strengthening Canadian Democracy (IRPP)* Vol 6 No 6 (September): 4-36.
- Jowell, Roger, et al. 2000. *British Social Attitudes 17*. London: Sage Publications.
- Klingemann, Hans-Dieter and Dieter Fuchs (eds.) 1995. *Citizens and the State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LeDuc, Lawrence, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris (eds.). 2002. *Comparing Democracies 2: New Challenges in the Study of Elections and Voting*. London: Sage Publications.
- Lijphart, Arend. 1997. "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma" (Presidential address, American Political Science Association, 1996)", *American Political Science Review* 91: 1-14.
- Mackerras, Malcolm and Ian McAllister. 1999. "Compulsory voting, party stability and electoral advantage in Australia." *Electoral Studies* 18: 217-233.
- Milner, Henry. 2002. *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work*. University Press of New England.
- Milner, Henry (ed.). 1999. *Making Every Vote Count*. Toronto: Broadview Press
- Milner, Henry. 1997. "Electoral Systems, Integrated Institutions and Turnout in Local and National Elections: Canada in Comparative Perspective." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 30: 89-106.

Pammett, Jon H. 1991. "Voting Turnout in Canada.", in Bakvis, *Voter Turnout in Canada: Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing*. 33-60.

Pammett, Jon H. 2001. "Youth in the Electoral Process", *Electoral Insight* Vol 3 No 1 (January): 14-17.

Pattie, Charles, and Ron Johnston. 1998. "Voter Turnout at the British General Election of 1992: Rational Choice, Social Standing or Political Efficacy?", *European Journal of Political Research* 33: 263-283.

Pharr, Susan J. and Robert D. Putnam (eds.). 2000. *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* Princeton University Press.

Powell, G. Bingham. 1986. "American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective", *American Political Science Review* 80:17-43.

Ragsdale, Lyn and Jerrold G. Rusk. 1993. "Who Are Nonvoters? Profiles from the 1990 Senate Elections", *American Journal of Political Science* 37: 721-746.

Ratcliffe, Benjamin. 1992. "The Welfare State, Turnout and the Economy: a Comparative Analysis", *American Political Science Review* 86: 444-454.

Rose, Richard. 1997. "Evaluating Election Turnout." in *Voter Turnout from 1945 to 1997: a Global Report on Political Participation*, 2nd ed., International IDEA.

Schmitt, Hermann and Sören Holmberg. 1995. "Political Parties in Decline", in Klingemann and Fuchs, *Citizens and the State*.

Smith, Elizabeth S. 1999. "The Effects of Investments in the Social Capital of Youth on Political and Civic Behavior in Young Adulthood: A Longitudinal Analysis", *Political Psychology* 20: 553-580.

Teixeira, Ruy. 1992. *The Disappearing American Voter*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings.

Topf, Richard. 1995. "Electoral Participation", in Klingemann and Fuchs, *Citizens and the State*.

Van Egmond, Marcel, Nan Dirk de Graaf, and Cees van der Eijk. 1998. "Electoral Participation in the Netherlands: Individual and Contextual Influences", *European Journal of Political Research* 34: 281-300.

Verba, Sidney, Kay Schlozman, Henry Brady and Norman Nie. 1993. "Citizen Activity: Who Participates? What Do They Say?", *American Political Science Review* 87: 303-16.

APPENDIX A.

TABLE A1
Distribution of cases by age cohorts

Age in 2000	Birth year	First eligibility	Prime Minister	Total N	Nonvoters
18 to 20	1980 to 1982	2000	Chrétien	282	148
21 to 24	1976 to 1979	1997	Chrétien	460	207
25 to 29	1971 to 1975	1993	Chrétien	512	177
30 to 37	1963 to 1970	1984/88	Mulroney	1023	224
38 to 47	1953 to 1962	1974–80	Trudeau	1099	161
48 to 57	1943 to 1952	1968/72	Trudeau	926	85
58 to 67	1933 to 1942	1957–63	Diefenbaker/ Pearson	638	49
68+	Before 1933	1953 –	King / St. Laurent	587	35
				5527	1086

APPENDIX B.

TABLE B1
 Factor Analysis of Variables Related to Interest,
 Civic Duty and Party Competition

	1	2	3
*			
Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?	.768	.262	-.050
Thinking of the 2000 federal election in the country as a whole, how competitive did you find the political parties to be?	.004	.090	.861
How about the 2000 federal election in your electoral district? How competitive did you find the political parties to be?	.020	.178	.840
In the 2000 federal election, how much chance was there that your vote would make a difference in the country as a whole?	-.008	.857	.170
How much chance was there that your vote would make a difference in your electoral district?	.135	.845	.157
In your view, how important is it that people vote in elections?	.506	.457	-.010
When you were growing up, how often did your family talk about politics and current events?	.717	-.080	.030
How about now? How often do you talk to your family or friends about politics and current events?	.813	.040	.030
*principal components; varimax rotation			
Factor 1: Interest, discussion, civic duty			
Factor 2: Vote matters, civic duty			
Factor 3: Parties competitive			

TABLE B2
Factor Analysis of Variables Related to
Efficacy, Trust and Party Support

	1	2	3
*			
Generally, those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people	.648	-.134	-.010
Those elected to Parliament reflect the diversity of Canadian society	-.060	.694	.106
People like me don't have any say about what the government does	.652	.040	-.148
Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on	.369	.578	-.302
I don't think that the government cares much what people like me think	.695	-.133	-.070
Most of the time we can trust people in government to do what is right	-.338	.629	.192
All political parties are basically the same; there really isn't a choice	.584	-.010	-.272
Political parties are the best way of representing people's interests	-.221	.385	.519
The political parties confuse the issues rather than provide clear choices between them	.680	-.050	-.160
Political parties provide good plans for new policies	-.230	.445	.411
During electoral campaign periods, political parties and candidates discuss issues that really are of interest to voters	.080	.010	.811
Political parties are too influenced by people with lots of money	.639	-.155	-.004
Too many political parties represent a small part of the country, rather than the country as a whole	.540	-.040	.137
* principal components; varimax rotation			
Factor 1: Inefficacy, cynicism, party negative			
Factor 2: Trust, represented			
Factor 3: Party support			