

Slack in the System: Turnout in Canadian Provincial Elections, 1965-2009*

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Abstract

As turnout continues its decline in most Western democracies, the term “popular vote” has become an increasingly outmoded measure of party performance and election results. By measuring party support among the *voting* public, such statistics ignore the role of *non-voters* in an election’s outcome. In staying home, an increasing number of citizens are helping to create “slack” in the system – a growing reserve of non-activated voters with the *potential* to affect the outcomes of present and future elections. This is seen quite clearly in the context of Canadian provincial elections, where non-voters now comprise the largest, and fastest-growing segment of most electorates. To gauge the impact of turnout on party performance, this research note introduces a new term – “the electoral vote”. By multiplying parties’ shares of the popular vote by the rate of voter turnout, thus incorporating the proportion of non-voters in each election, observers gain a better perspective of the composition of today’s provincial electorates. With this data as a baseline, analysts are better positioned to investigate the relationship between voter turnout and party performance in Canada and beyond.

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Introduction

In 2007, Premier Danny Williams of Newfoundland and Labrador led his Progressive Conservative (PC) party to one of the most dominating performances in Canadian history. When the ballots were counted on October 9, the PCs had collected 69.6 percent of the popular vote – the highest figure recorded in any provincial or federal election in the past century. In the process, the Conservatives had reduced the opposition to just 4 seats in a House of 48. Months later, on the opposite side of the country, the results of the most recent Alberta election returned the eleventh consecutive majority government for that province’s Progressive Conservatives. As in Newfoundland, the PCs had achieved a resounding victory. Under new leader, Ed Stelmach, the Conservatives increased their dominance of the 83-seat legislature, adding 10 members to an already large caucus of 62. Equally impressive, the party won 52.7 percent of the popular vote, making their government a “true” or “earned” majority (in contrast to the “manufactured” variety) (see Russell, 2008: 5-11).¹

A second, common storyline accompanied the results of these two elections, however. In Newfoundland and Labrador, fewer than two in three eligible voters turned out to vote. While average by recent Canadian standards, at a rate of 61.3 percent, this marked the province’s lowest level of voter participation in forty-five years (and the second-lowest since it entered Confederation). Turnout dropped even lower in Alberta. There, two in five eligible voters cast a ballot, setting a dubious new record for the lowest rate in Canadian history (40.6 percent).

Thus, by examining each electorate *in its entirety*, observers gain a different perspective on these two elections. Taking turnout into consideration, the Newfoundland and Labrador Conservatives received the support of 42.6 percent of *eligible voters* – still an admirable figure, but one considerably lower than their popular vote share suggested. Further west, just over 1 in 5 eligible voters (21.4 percent) cast a ballot in favor of Stelmach’s Tories. This odd combination – of high levels of party performance, on one hand, and low voter turnout figures, on the other – casts

considerable doubt on the utility of “popular vote” totals as an appraisal of election outcomes.

Newfoundland and Labrador and Alberta are not alone. Declining voter turnout has characterized most democratic systems over the past several decades. While the sources of this trend have received much attention from scholars, discussions surrounding the consequences of the decline on election results have been somewhat less prevalent (see, e.g., Blais, 2006; Clarke et al., 2009a: ch. 8; Pammett and LeDuc, 2004). In particular, most in the political science community have avoided the question of how lower rates of voter participation impact our perceptions of election outcomes (but see: Lutz and Marsh, 2007; Martinez and Gill, 2006). By continuing to isolate popular vote totals from turnout, observers misinterpret the effect of near-record numbers of non-voters on the shape of global party systems.

To remedy this, this research note has four objectives. First, it presents a comprehensive dataset on voter turnout in Canadian provincial elections, from 1965 to 2009. While elections at the federal level have received considerable attention, surprisingly few comparative studies have been published on voter turnout at the sub-national level in Canada (and elsewhere) (Studlar, 2001). Partly as a consequence, the present study marks the first time in recent decades that this data has been reported in a single document. Second, by combining this data with election returns from each province, the analysis presents a new perspective on election outcomes. This discussion is framed by revisiting the notion of “*slack*” – a term first introduced by Robert Dahl (1961) to describe the (acceptable) level of non-participation in a given polity. Building on this foundation, the analysis introduces a new concept – the “*electoral vote*” – as a means of comparing the contours of each provincial electorate. By including non-voters, the analysis offers a novel look at election results in each of the ten provinces, over time. Third, discussion section addresses the normative implications of these findings, before presenting a series of approaches toward the future study of provincial turnout. And fourth, the paper concludes that, by examining electoral vote figures in

lieu of popular vote totals, observers gain a more accurate perception of the results of recent elections in Canada and beyond.

“Slack” in the System

Well before the marked decline in voter turnout throughout the Western world in the late-twentieth century, scholars have long debated the value of political participation in modern democracy. On one side, “populists” have decried the decline in voter turnout as an affront to the very foundations of democratic societies (e.g., Barber, 1984; Gidengil et al., 2004: ch. 5; Lijphart, 1997; Pateman, 1970; Saul, 1995: ch. 3). One adherent summarized this view in the opening paragraph of a Royal Commission study of *Voter Turnout in Canada*:

The act of voting in an election is perhaps the single most important form of political participation in modern democracies. It remains the most direct means available to citizens of signaling their interests and preferences to government and of controlling those who seek to govern them. The extent to which citizens exercise this most fundamental right can be seen as an indicator of the health of democracy. A low level of voter turnout can be taken as indicative of political alienation among a good proportion of the populace; as a consequence, elected leaders may not be seen as fully legitimate. A lack of confidence when manifested through low voter turnout may also affect the legitimacy of basic political institutions. Conversely, high voter turnout can be construed as evidence of both a high level of commitment to the political order and existence of a citizenry interested in the welfare of their nation (Bakvis, 1991: xvii).

On the other side, followers of the “elitist” school have downplayed the negative implications of non-participation. Portraying the populist view as idealistic or mistaken, members of this second group have highlighted the importance of maintaining a “healthy” proportion of non-voters in each electorate (e.g., Almond and Verba, 1963: 16-30, 478-479; Mueller, 1999). Among them, Robert Dahl (1961: 305) explains this in terms of the amount of “slack” in any given society:

Most of the time... most citizens use their resources for purposes other than gaining influence over government decisions. There is a great gap between their actual influence and their potential influence. Their

political resources are, so to speak, slack in the system. In some circumstances these resources might be converted from non-political to political purposes; if so, the gap between the actual influence of the average citizen and his potential influence would narrow.

However, Dahl (1961: 305) concludes, “in most societies, politics is a sideshow in the great circus of life.” In this context, lower rates of voter turnout may be a symptom, not of the poor health of a democracy, but the tacit approval by non-voters of the status quo. Indeed, according to some adherents of this view, a purely participatory society holds the potential for electoral volatility (and political instability), as well as sub-optimal decision-making (Almond and Verba, 1963: 187; Lipset, 1981: 164). As long as the rate of participation is evenly distributed among all segments of society – such that no group is especially alienated from the voting process – and as long as the most informed citizens are engaged – such that the ill-informed do not spoil important deliberations – elitists assert that elections are serving their democratic function (Rosema, 2007).

The following analysis does not choose sides in this debate. It is neither the intent nor the product of this research note to address the issue of whether low rates of voter turnout call into question the “legitimacy” of democratically elected governments in the Canadian provinces. Indeed, the following analysis places a series of bold question marks on the composition of Canada’s non-voting population. Without ecological or micro-level analysis, for instance, one cannot establish whether those who stayed home during the 2008 Alberta election were tacit in their support of the governing Conservatives, alienated in their abandonment of the opposition, or simply apathetic toward the entire electoral process.²

Nor does this study aim to explain the sources of low voter turnout in Canada. Questions as to why slack exists in each province, and to such varying degrees, beg for the type of comparative analysis outlined in the discussion section of this note. To answer such questions would require a book-length treatment that is well beyond the scope of the present analysis, however. While providing a useful series of dependent variables for future investigation, again, such inquiries are left for future study.

Instead, the objective of this article is far more modest. The following sections reveal that, *empirically*, there is a lot of “slack” in most provincial electorates. Both populists and elitists would agree with this conclusion. The analysis leaves open – indeed, raises – important questions surrounding the attitudes and preferences of non-voters, the causes of low turnout, and the normative implications attached to those conclusions.

The “Electoral Vote”

Measuring the amount of slack in a given system requires examining election results from the viewpoint of the entire electorate, not simply those citizens who cast ballots. The latter approach yields figures based on the popular vote – a statistic that has become increasingly outmoded, considering that non-voters now constitute the fastest-growing segment of many electorates. The former vantage point employs an alternative concept: the “electoral vote”.

The total electoral vote for a given election contains two key components: voters and non-voters. In the Canadian provinces, the first element is usefully obtained by examining the performances of individual parties.³ Each party’s share of the electoral vote is calculated by multiplying its share of the popular vote by the rate of voter turnout in a given election. For example, assume a party obtained 50 percent of the popular vote in an election in which voter turnout was 60 percent. This party’s share of the electoral vote would be 30 percent ($50 \times .60$), reflecting the fact that it had the *expressed* electoral support of 3 in 10 *eligible* voters. The terms “expressed” and “eligible” are key to this definition, as actual support for this party may be higher or lower than its share of the popular vote would indicate, depending upon its popularity among non-voters.

The second component of the electoral vote represents the proportion of non-voters in a given election. With additional investigation, it may be possible to further sub-divide this population into a variety of different groups, like permanent versus temporary non-voters (see Laponce, 1967). Without the aid of comprehensive survey

data, however, the following discussion treats non-voters as a single bloc. Thus, for most elections, the combined shares of the electoral vote obtained by all parties, plus the total proportion of non-voters in the election, sums close to 100 percent.⁴

Findings

Using this conceptualization, the following sections sketch the contours of each provincial electorate, west to east, since 1965. By way of introduction, Table 1.0 depicts the minimum, maximum, and mean turnout rates for each province. The ensuing discussion suggests links between the performance of major parties and the proportion of non-voters in each province, carefully avoiding issues of causality. When observing a coincidence between, say, the sudden downturn in a New Democratic Party's support and a decline in voter turnout, it is tempting to conclude that NDP supporters stayed home on Election Day. While plausible, such a verdict falls victim to the ecological fallacy: one cannot draw conclusions about individual voters based on aggregate-level data. Instead, focusing on non-voting in the collective sense, the following analysis describes the expansion and contraction of "slack" in the various provincial electorates over time. From a macroscopic perspective, the findings suggest where at least some of the existing non-voting population may have originated, and offer some indication of which parties stand to gain most by 'picking up the slack.' It cannot be stressed strongly enough, however: these findings do not purport to make predictions at the individual (micro) level. Further survey or ecological analysis is needed to draw such conclusions.

Western Canada

Figure 1.0 displays voter turnout rates for the Western Canadian provinces of British Columbia (BC), Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba.⁵ As illustrated, turnout has fallen considerably, if unsteadily, in three of the four jurisdictions over time. The decline began earliest in Alberta, where, despite brief recoveries in the 1980s, participation rates have fallen from a high of 72.0 percent in 1971 to a low of 40.6 in 2008. A similar story exists in Manitoba, where, since 1973, voter turnout has declined by nearly 25

percentage points (notwithstanding minor increases in 1988 and 2007). Turnout began its decline a decade later in BC, with comparable results. There, the rate of voter participation has fallen with increasing velocity from 77.7 percent in 1983 to 51.0 percent in 2009. Saskatchewan is the one Western Canadian exception to this trend. Turnout in that province remained the highest in the region, fluctuating very little, through the 1980s. Following a precipitous decline in 1991, when turnout fell from 83.2 to 64.6 percent, the rate of voter participation in Saskatchewan has recovered steadily and considerably, reaching 76.0 percent in 2007. This prolonged increase in voter turnout makes Saskatchewan's pattern a rarity in recent Canadian elections, and an anomaly in the West.

BRITISH COLUMBIA

In BC, voter turnout remained relatively stable throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The 1983 election saw an increase in support for both the New Democratic Party (NDP) and Social Credit, and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of non-voters in the electorate (see Figure 1.1). This picture remained relatively unchanged through 1986, after which point the proportion of non-voters began its steady growth. In the beginning, this trend coincided with the slow erosion of NDP support, and the sudden change in official opposition parties in 1991. Thereafter, through 2001, Liberal Party support grew alongside the non-voting population, as the New Democratic vote continued its decline. The NDP electoral vote recovered somewhat in 2005, as the Liberal share declined and the non-voting segment continued to grow. In the most recent election, the non-voting population grew considerably, as support for both major parties declined.

Overall, throughout much of the past twenty years, the proportion of non-voters appears negatively – but by no means perfectly, exclusively, or causally – linked with the New Democrats' share of the electoral vote. This suggests, in the aggregate sense, the NDP has the most to gain (or lose) from the contraction (or expansion) of the non-voting population.

ALBERTA

Following the Conservatives' first election victory in 1971, the proportion of non-voters in Alberta rose as the Social Credit share of the popular vote fell. The corresponding increase in Conservative support over this period suggests that, in the aggregate, the PCs benefited both by siphoning part of the Social Credit vote and picking up the "slack" in the system. Turnout stabilized, somewhat, in the late 1970s, before increasing slightly in 1982.

Since that time, turnout in Alberta appears most closely linked to the fortunes of the Liberal Party. Again, the relationship is neither perfect nor causal. Yet, as the Liberal Party's level of support grew between 1986 and 1993, then declined through 2008, the proportion of non-voters moved in the opposite direction (see Figure 1.2). The turnout decline was accompanied in 2004 by the dramatic fall in PC support, which – after growing consistently under Ralph Klein in the 1990s – now sits at 21.4 percent of the electoral vote. This is the lowest level of electoral support for any Canadian government, according to this measure. In fact, leading opposition parties in five other provinces have a higher proportion of the electoral vote than do the Alberta Conservatives.⁶ Since increasing from 1975 to 1989, the twenty-year decline in New Democratic Party support has also corresponded with the increase in non-voting in Alberta.

These findings suggest that, since the mid-1980s, the Liberal Party's gains and losses were made at the expense of the "slack" in the Alberta electorate. Second, the PC party's dominance of Alberta politics is qualified by the fact that non-voters have outnumbered Conservative voters in all but two of its eleven election victories (1971 and 1982). The gap narrowed considerably during the 1990s, but has since grown to nearly forty percentage-points in the most recent election. Third, the proportion of non-voters in the Alberta electorate has been consistently higher than the support of all opposition parties, *combined*. In particular, the ratio of non-voters to New Democrats has ranged between 3.3 and 17.2 to 1. As with any electorate, identifying the partisan

leanings of Alberta non-voters is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that, while non-voters hold the largest share of the popular vote in Alberta, by any measure, the Conservatives continue to outperform both major opposition parties by a large margin.

SASKATCHEWAN

Despite several transformations of its party system, and in the face of substantial fluctuations in the electoral vote shares of each major party, turnout remained remarkably stable in Saskatchewan through the early-1990s. Non-voting increased somewhat in the 1970s, as the Conservatives displaced the Liberals as the province's right-wing alternative (see Figure 1.3). Turnout then recovered in the 1980s, as the party system polarized between the NDP and PCs.

The level of non-voting increased dramatically between 1991 and 1995, however. Once more, this change corresponded with a transition in the Saskatchewan party system. The Conservatives' share of the electoral vote continued its precipitous decline and the Liberals rose to second-place status, setting the stage for the birth of a new right-wing party later that decade. Turnout increased marginally in 1999, as many Conservatives and Liberals joined forces under the Saskatchewan (Sask) Party banner (Wishlow, 2001). The NDP's share of the electoral vote declined steadily throughout this decade, before rising again in 2003. All told, the past three elections have featured polarized campaigns between the New Democrats and the Sask Party, and a steadily declining proportion of non-voters.

This brief history reveals that greater amounts of "slack" in the Saskatchewan party system tend to coincide with partisan instability on the right side of the province's political spectrum. Polarization of the party system into two highly-competitive forces – the Liberals and New Democrats in 1971, the Conservatives and NDP in the 1980s, and the Sask Party and the New Democrats in the first decade of the twenty-first century – has corresponded with higher levels of turnout.

MANITOBA

Unlike its Western neighbours, whose elections have featured two-party competition (BC and Saskatchewan) or one-party dominance (Alberta), Manitoba's party system has been of the two-party-plus variety. This makes analyzing the correspondence between non-voting and party support somewhat more complex.

Voter turnout rose considerably in Manitoba between 1969 and 1973, as the party system polarized between the New Democrats and Progressive Conservatives. The amount of slack gradually increased thereafter, however, as the Liberals' share of the electoral vote evaporated (see Figure 1.4). In 1977, the trend coincided with the decrease in the NDP vote, and in 1981, with the decline in PC support. Non-voting continued to increase in 1986, before a temporary surge in both the Liberal vote and turnout in 1988. The level of support for the governing PC's and the amount of slack remained relatively constant throughout the 1990s, as the New Democrats regained their share of the electoral vote, and the Liberal proportion receded. The most recent drop in voter turnout, begun in 2003 and sustained somewhat in 2007, corresponded with electoral vote decreases among all Manitoba parties.

Overall, slack in the Manitoba party system has varied in proportion to the electoral success of each major party. While the Liberal Party's post-1988 decline has coincided with a gradual increase in the rate of non-voting, the most recent drop in voter turnout is hardly attributable to the slide in Liberal support, alone. In comparison to the 1970s, both the New Democrats and Conservatives have seen their proportion of the electoral vote decline substantially. Most recently, Gary Doer's record three consecutive majority government victories – during which he raised the New Democrats' share of the popular vote by over fifteen percentage points – corresponded with an unprecedented growth in the amount of slack in the Manitoba electorate.

Central Canada

Turnout rates in the Central Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec have undergone similar, long-term declines as those experienced throughout most of the

West (see Figure 2.0). From a high point of 73.5 percent in 1971 to a new low of 54.1 percent in 2007, voter participation in Ontario has undergone two, separate downward trends, interrupted by a brief upturn during the 1980s. Turnout in Ontario has been consistently lower than in Quebec, with the latter experiencing a similar 'rolling' pattern of decline. Participation in Quebec provincial elections peaked at 85.3 percent in 1976, and surged again in 1994 (81.6 percent). Notwithstanding these two elections, however, Quebec voters continue to participate at lower rates as time passes.

ONTARIO

As in Manitoba, changes to voter turnout rates appear linked to the fortunes of several parties, at various points in Ontario's history. As the proportion of non-voters increased steadily in the 1970s, all three parties lost some ground in terms of their net share of the electoral vote (see Figure 2.1). For the New Democrats, this decline occurred throughout the entire decade; for the Conservatives, between 1971 and 1975; for the Liberals, between 1975 and 1981. The 1980s were a separate decade. As electoral support for the Liberals (1981 to 1987) and NDP (1981 to 1990) rose, so, too, did voter turnout. Meanwhile, the PC vote declined steadily. With the return of the Conservatives to power in 1995 came a return to the long-term trend of declining voter turnout. The dramatic drop in NDP support corresponded with growth in both the Liberal vote and non-voting population. Since 1999, NDP support has stabilized, and the PCs' share of the electoral vote has declined. All the while, the proportion of non-voters in the Ontario electorate has grown, complemented in 2007 by a drop in Liberal support.

In terms of the relationship between turnout and party performance, Ontario resembles Manitoba in many respects. At different times, the performance of different parties has appeared tied to changes in voter turnout in both provinces. There is one noticeable difference between the two jurisdictions, however. Whereas major parties in Manitoba have gained relatively large shares of the electoral vote, nearing if not exceeding the proportion of non-voters in most contests, in Ontario, non-voters have

made up the largest segment of the provincial electorate in all but one election (1971). This difference is attributable to the lower level of voter turnout in Ontario, and the more even division of the popular vote within its three-party system.

QUEBEC

The picture is somewhat clearer in Quebec. As illustrated in Figure 2.2, one of the most obvious trends concerns the inverse relationship between support for the sovereigntist Parti Quebecois (PQ) and the amount of slack provincial electorate. Surges in support for the PQ in the mid-1970s and early-1990s coincided with noticeable increases in voter turnout. Conversely, as Parti Quebecois support waned in the mid-1980s and began its latest descent in the late-1990s, the level of non-voting has increased substantially. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the gap between non-voters and PQ voters has grown. In the longer term, the Liberal Party's share of Quebec's electoral vote has been in continuous decline since the mid-1980s. From 1994 to 2007, this trend corresponded with a growth in the amount of slack in the system. Over the same period, growth in support for the right-wing Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) was positively correlated with the increase in slack. In the most recent election, as voter turnout plummeted to an all-time low, electoral vote shares for the Liberals and PQ held firm, while ADQ fortunes fell.

These findings suggest that, historically, the Parti Quebecois has had the most to gain by picking up the slack in the provincial electorate, and the most to lose when voter turnout has declined. If the 2008 drop in ADQ fortunes is linked, whatsoever, with the dramatic increase in non-voting, this analysis also points to a second pattern. Throughout the 1970s and early-1980s, erratic support for the Union Nationale (UN) – a small c-conservative party – coincided with inconsistent rates of voter turnout. When the UN folded following the 1981 election, there was a corresponding increase in the amount of slack in the system.⁷ Turnout levels were restored in 1994, alongside with a boost in support for the PQ and the arrival of the right-wing, autonomist ADQ. The precipitous decline in the latter's share of the electoral vote in 2008 coincided, once

again, with an increase in the proportion of non-voters. These observations suggests that, in part, slack in Quebec appears connected not only to the sovereigntist vote (in the form of the PQ), but to the conservative vote (in the form of the UN and ADQ).

Atlantic Canada

As a region, throughout much of the past four decades, the Atlantic provinces have featured some of the highest rates of voter turnout in Canada. This said, most provinces have experienced the same long-term pattern of 'rolling' decline as their Central and Western neighbours (see Figure 3.0). Since its high-point in 1982 (82.1 percent), and notwithstanding a marginal increase in 1999, voter turnout in New Brunswick has fallen steadily over the past three decades. Likewise, Nova Scotia's electoral history has featured two periods of decline: from 1978 to 1984 (when turnout fell over 10 percentage-points to 67.5 percent) and again from 1988 to 2009 (when it dropped almost 18 percentage points to 58.0 percent). Turnout in Newfoundland and Labrador has fluctuated more than in any other Canadian province. After reaching a Canadian record in 1971 (87.9 percent), voter participation declined to the low-70 percent range throughout much of the next decade. It then climbed to a height of 83.6 percent in 1993, before descending, unsteadily, to a depth of 61.3 percent in 2007. As in BC, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec, the most recent elections in each of these three Atlantic provinces have resulted in the lowest rates of voter turnout in the history of their jurisdictions. The sole exception to this Eastern Canadian trend exists in Prince Edward Island (PEI), where turnout has remained well above the Canadian average. Indeed, even at its lowest point (78.2 percent in 1982), turnout in PEI was still higher than in the *peak* years of Nova Scotia, Ontario, Alberta, and BC. This makes PEI one of the few jurisdictions to avoid the secular decline in voter turnout experienced throughout much of the Western world.

NEW BRUNSWICK

The history of the electoral vote in New Brunswick is somewhat counterintuitive. Contrary to many assumptions surrounding the relationship between competitiveness and voter turnout (e.g., Abramson et al., 2007), the level of non-voting in New Brunswick actually increased during the 1970s and 2000s – decades in which the Liberals and PCs were locked in a dead heat in terms of the popular (and electoral) vote (see Figure 3.1). A gradual increase in the popularity of the NDP coincided with a boost in voter turnout later in the 1970s; after plateauing in the 1980s, both figures retreated once again in the 1990s. Throughout both of these decades, support for the Liberals and Conservatives fluctuated, without any discernible relationship to the increasing amount of slack in the system. Indeed, turnout was actually higher during the Liberals' landslide victory in 1987 (in which the party won every seat in the New Brunswick legislature), than it was throughout the 1970s. (Of note, however, the proportion of nonvoters actually increased between 1982 and 1987.)

Since 2003, with of the collapse of the PC vote and further decline in voter turnout, the New Brunswick electorate has been divided evenly between three principal segments: Liberals, Conservatives, and non-voters. That year, for the first time in the province's history, a larger proportion of the New Brunswick electorate failed to cast a ballot than voted for any one, single party. (It was a feat repeated in 2006).

NOVA SCOTIA

With the exception of a dramatic drop in voter turnout following the 1984 provincial campaign, elections in Nova Scotia have featured a relatively close, positive link between support for the NDP, on one hand, and levels of non-voting, on the other (see Figure 3.2). Both figures have risen gradually, but noticeably, over the past four decades. Indeed, following two consecutive Conservative minority governments, this trend culminated in 2009 with the New Democrats attaining control of a majority government for the first time in Nova Scotia history. At the same time, notwithstanding brief moments of success for the Liberals in 1974, 1988, and 1993, and the

Conservatives in 1978 and 1999, the electoral vote of each old-line party has been in long-term decline. This was particularly evident between 1978 and 1984, as turnout fell at roughly the same rate as the Liberal and Tory fortunes. The Liberals' recovery in 1988 briefly stemmed the tide, but the increase in non-voting has continued apace in the subsequent six elections. Taken together, these macro-level trends suggest that, while the New Democrats may have picked up some of this slack in their rise to power, their improved performance has not stemmed the decline in voter turnout.

NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

As hinted in the introduction, the relationship between voter turnout and electoral support for the Progressive Conservatives has a long and varied history in Newfoundland and Labrador. For instance, the dramatic decline in non-voting in the 1971 election coincided with a sudden upswing in the Conservatives' share of the electoral vote (see Figure 3.3). Combined with the fact that the Liberals maintained their electoral vote between 1967 and 1971, this suggests that the Conservative victory in 1971 was due primarily to the PCs' ability to take up the slack in the Newfoundland electorate. The steady decline of the Liberal Party and voter turnout over the next two elections, and the sudden fall of the Tory vote in 1975, lends further support to this interpretation. From that point through 1993, the PCs' share of the electoral vote roughly paralleled the proportion of non-voters in the Newfoundland and Labrador electorate. This changed in 1996, when a decrease in the Conservative vote coincided with a surge in non-voting – a trend that slowed, but continued, through 1999. The sudden decline in Liberal fortunes between 1999 and 2007 correlated with two events: a dramatic upswing in the Conservative share of the electoral vote in 2003, and a delayed, but noticeable, increase in the amount of slack in 2007. Indeed, in the most recent Newfoundland and Labrador provincial election, the proportion of non-voters was nearly three times that of the Liberal party and only slightly behind that of the governing Conservatives. As in Alberta, while an examination of the electoral vote in Newfoundland and Labrador places a crucial caveat on the PCs' high-level performance,

the Conservatives continue to draw far more electoral support than any of their competitors.

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

Compared with other provinces, the level of non-voting in Prince Edward Island elections has remained relatively stable over the past forty years (see Figure 3.4). With the exception of the 1982 to 1986 period, during which non-voting fell from an all-time high of 21.8 percent to a record low 12.4 percent, turnout in PEI provincial elections has settled in the mid-80 percent range. Tracking the relationship between slack and party performance is challenging, given the consistency of the former and the relative volatility of the latter.

From 1970 to 1982, for example, the Liberal Party's share of the electoral vote fell from a peak of 51.0 percent to 35.8 percent. Over the same timeframe, Conservative support rose a net 5.7 percentage points. The level of non-voting increased marginally and unsteadily over this period. From 1970 to 1974, non-voting moved in the opposite direction of declining Liberal and Conservative party support. In the subsequent election, non-voting fell as the PCs increased their share of the popular vote. In the three elections from 1978 to 1982, non-voting increased again, as the Liberals' share of the electoral vote declined. As the Liberals regained their support in 1986, non-voting fell once more, just as it had during the Tories' rise in popularity in 1978.

A similarly vexing pattern existed between 1989 and 2000. Over the course of these four elections, support for the Liberals and Conservatives moved in opposite directions as the two parties traded places in office. The Liberals' share of the electoral vote fell from 49.0 to 28.6 percent, while PC support climbed the same 20 percentage-points. This dramatic shift in party fortunes corresponded with minor changes in voter turnout. The level of non-voting dipped from 19.3 percent in 1993 to 14.5 percent in 1996, just as the Conservatives replaced the Liberals in government (and NDP support

climbed slightly). Since that time, the two major parties have once again traded turns in office, yet non-voting has crept up only slightly, reaching 16.2 percent in 2007.

These findings reveal few discernible, long-term relationships between turnout and party fortunes in PEI. At times, minor variation in the amount of slack appeared correlated with changes to either Conservative or Liberal support; at others, it appeared tied to the performance of both parties, or to neither. If any pattern exists, it appears that turnout rates increase, slightly, in close elections. (The rate of non-voting decreased in 1978, 1986, and 1996 – three elections in which competitiveness increased.) Further empirical testing is required to confirm this hypothesis.

Discussion

In addition to traditional statistics like popular vote shares and voter turnout rates, the foregoing analysis has provided a series of new data for the study of party systems and elections in the Canadian provinces. Examining the “electoral vote” allows analysts to examine the electorate in its entirety, and offers a novel perspective on the election outcomes.

Elitists may see little reason for concern in the findings presented above. After all, recent research at the federal level indicates that there is very little distinguishing the political views of voters and non-voters (Rubenson et al., 2007), and a preliminary analysis of the 2008 Alberta provincial election produced similar results (Sayers and Stewart, 2008). While their historical and geographic scope remains limited, collectively, these studies offer little reason to believe that the *outcomes* of provincial elections would have differed drastically, had more citizens turned out to vote.

Moreover, from the elitist standpoint, provided non-voting is evenly distributed across the entire population, long-term increases in the amount of slack in most provincial party systems may be an indication of the health of Canadian democracy. The fact that non-voters now make up the largest segment of nearly every provincial electorate (except Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador, and PEI) may suggest to them that most voters feel satisfied – pleased with the status quo; content that their

vote will not make much of a difference, given that a change in government is unlikely to result in a change to their everyday lives; or comfortable allowing someone else to make the necessary decision on Election Day (see: Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Mueller, 1999: chs. 6-8). Moreover, many elitists may view the non-voting population as so-called “couch” supporters of the governing party (who see little reason to turnout, given that their party of choice will win the election, regardless of their vote); “closet” supporters of the opposition (who see only futility in casting a ballot for a losing party); or “political drop-outs” (who are so ill-informed that their participation in the election could only serve to distort the outcome).⁸

By contrast, populists are likely to be concerned with the findings of this study. Examining the mean levels of support for governing parties in the various provinces, critics may point to the fact that parliamentary majorities are being built on the expressed support of much smaller proportions of these electorates. This is illustrated in Figure 4.1, which depicts the extent to which governing parties’ shares of seats in various provincial legislatures (1PSC) dwarf their shares of the popular vote (1PVC) and electoral vote (1PEC). Among all provinces, the average governing party has controlled an average of 66.5 percent of seats in the legislature, on the strength of just under half (48.0 percent) of the popular vote. This disparity is cause for concern among those favouring more proportional forms of representation. Yet the distortion of provincial election results is even greater considering the *actual* proportion of the electorate casting ballots for the governing party. On this count, parties forming government following provincial elections have earned the expressed support of 34.4 percent of eligible voters. This means that the typical provincial government has enjoyed a two-thirds majority in the legislature based on the support of just over one-third of the entire electorate.

This may lead some populists to consider the amount of legislative “payoff” typical governing parties receive, based on their proportion of popular and electoral support. Figure 4.2 depicts the ratio of seat-share won by the governing party to its shares of the popular and electoral vote. There, we see that support-to-seat inflation is

by far the greatest in Alberta. On average, for every percent of support among participating voters, governing parties receive 1.5 percent of seats in the Alberta Legislature. In large part, this is the product of the province's first-past-the-post electoral system, political geography, and divisions within the opposition. This compares with an average popular vote payoff of 1.4 in the rest of Canada, to a low of 1.3 in Manitoba. For every percent of support among *eligible* voters, however, governing parties in Alberta receive over 2.7 percent of seats. Governing parties in British Columbia (2.0) and Ontario (2.2) also received at least a two-to-one return in terms of their share of the electoral vote. This return was lowest in Prince Edward Island (1.7), where a strong two-party system and high level of turnout have served to limit the electoral vote payoff.

Other populists may point to several surveys at the federal level that challenge the assumption that non-voters in Canadian elections are drawn proportionately from all segments of the population. Studies consistently report an under-representation of youth, Aboriginals, recent immigrants, members of visible minority communities, people with lower levels of education, and lower-income individuals among Canadian voters (see: Blais et al., 2002: ch. 3; Gidengil et al., 2004: 108-116; Nevitte et al., 2000: ch. 5; Pammett, 1991). This "participatory distortion" suggests that only certain types of people are involved in the electoral process (Verba et al., 1995: 468). This may establish a situation in which active citizens are over-represented in terms of their influence on public policy, yet unrepresentative of the general population with respect to some politically relevant characteristic(s). These qualities may include not only policy preferences and partisan orientations, but demographics and socio-economic status, as well. Because they are more likely to vote (or otherwise engage in politics), public officials are more likely to hear, respond to, and behave proactively in the interests of the most active citizens and groups. By the same token, parties have fewer incentives to engage with those people and communities who are least likely to participate. These distortions may create a vicious cycle, in that marginalized groups may feel even less inclined to vote, thus further distancing themselves from the electoral process.

In addition, some populists may argue that, rather than being ‘partisans-in-waiting’, non-voters are actually non- or anti-partisans. Rather than conforming to “Duverger’s law” and switching their allegiance to other parties, these non-voters may be exercising Hirschman’s “exit” option by staying home on Election Day (Duverger, 1967 [1951]; Hirschman, 1970). From this perspective, the choice to abstain is not a ballot foregone, but a vote for “none of the above” (Clarke et al., 2009b).

Without further research at the provincial level, it is impossible to decide between these two normative evaluations of the data presented in this article. Federal-level survey data appears to support both causes, and applying these findings to the provincial level requires the tenuous assumption that the same (sorts of) people vote (and do not vote) in both types of elections (Scarrow, 1960; Studlar, 2001). As Gidengil et al. (2004: 120) concluded in their brief examination of voting in the Canadian provinces, despite considerable research at the national level, “the puzzle remains why the decline in turnout has taken longer to show up – and has shown up less consistently – in provincial elections than in federal elections.” Put simply, more research is needed to settle the debate between populists and elitists.

In this vein, three approaches commend themselves to the future study of turnout and party performance in the Canadian provinces: macroscopic comparison, ecological analysis, and micro-level study. The first technique involves using aggregate-level data to compare electoral vote figures across time and/or space. In their seminal study of voter turnout in 91 countries over 23 years, Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) provide an excellent model for this type of research (see also: Blais et al., 2003; Geys, 2006; Kim et al., 1975; Powell, 1986). In particular, analysts could examine the effect of “competitiveness” on turnout in provincial elections, either by comparing provinces to each other, or examining trends within specific jurisdictions over time (for models, see: Abramson et al., 2007; LeDuc and Pammett, 2006). This would reveal whether closer elections, or more competitive party systems, lead to higher rates of turnout. Fortunately for students of provincial politics, Alan Siaroff (2006) has compiled an impressive database containing just such information, including seven separate

measures of electoral competition. Combined with the data provided in this article, and employing typical institutional and socio-economic control variables, the resulting analysis would prove an effective test of the relationship between electoral competitiveness and voter turnout, at the macro-level.

A second approach would involve examining turnout from the constituency-level perspective. By dividing each province into its electoral districts, this type of “ecological” analysis would study the environmental (or contextual) factors related to voter participation (Eagles, 1991). For instance, it may be that turnout is lower in so-called “safe seat” constituencies than in more competitive ones, regardless of the party controlling the district (see: Blais and Lago, 2009). Conversely, one may find that Liberal constituencies have a higher proportion of non-voters than those held by NDP members, regardless of the level of competitiveness of the riding. Compiling constituency-by-constituency results for Canadian provincial elections is an enormously time-consuming task. Where such data is available, it is not always in electronic format, forcing researchers to perform manual transcription. Fortunately, a Canadian Elections Database is presently under construction, under the guidance of Anthony Sayers and the Institute for Advanced Policy Research at the University of Calgary. Once completed, this database will be of tremendous use to the academic community.

Third, analysts could take a micro-level approach toward studying turnout and party performance. Through interviews, focus groups, or surveys, scholars could study the attitudes and partisan preferences of the voting and non-voting populations. This could lead to the conclusion that non-voters in some provinces are predominantly Liberal, for instance, whereas those in other jurisdictions are mostly Conservative, independent, or entirely anti-partisan. In conjunction with these studies, researchers may opt to simulate election results as if the entire electorate had participated, gaining a sense of whether turnout affects election outcomes (e.g., Martinez and Gill, 2006).

Election studies, let alone surveys specifically-designed to study non-voting, are regrettably rare in the Canadian provinces.⁹ Of those that do exist, most are very recent (precluding any historical analysis of previous elections), and many have been

conducted by election authorities (whose objectives often did not involve asking respondents about their partisan leanings).¹⁰ An analysis of the 2000 Canadian federal election, conducted by Rubenson et al. (2007), serves as an excellent model for future research of the survey variety, although analysts remain challenged in terms of engaging non-voters as participants in such studies. Ideally, a coordinated analysis –of a pan-Canadian nature, spanning a series of election cycles, and involving a combination of methodologies – would be of greatest use in the area of provincial politics.

Pursued in tandem, these three approaches would yield much-needed insight into the relationship between party performance and turnout in the Canadian provinces. Johnston et al.'s study of "Turnout and the Party System in Canada, 1988-2004" (2007) and Franklin's groundbreaking analysis of *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies Since 1945* (2004) serve as useful prototypes for this type of multi-method research. Yet, the value of such comparative, provincial studies extends well beyond this country's borders. The Canadian provinces offer an ideal set of laboratories for comparative analysis in general, and the investigation of voter turnout, in particular. Throughout most of their common history, politics in these ten communities have been based on common Westminster parliamentary traditions. Broadly speaking, most provinces share similar demographic profiles, economic foundations, and electoral institutions. Indeed, what subtle differences exist between the ten provinces are very conducive to most-similar-system comparisons. By sketching the contours of each provincial electorate since 1965, the foregoing article offers a tentative, but necessary, first step in developing this research programme.

Conclusion

Examining the "electoral vote" offers observers a new perspective on election results in the Canadian provinces. With turnout continuing to decline in most jurisdictions, an examination of popular vote totals overlooks the existence of an ever-growing proportion of these electorates. In all but three provinces (Saskatchewan,

Newfoundland and Labrador, and Prince Edward Island), non-voters now constitute the largest segment of the eligible voting population. This means that, on the most recent Election Day in each of the remaining seven provinces, more people stayed home than cast ballots for the eventual victor. Researchers ignore such a large proportion of the population at their own peril.

It also means that there is a substantial amount of “slack” in most provincial electorates. In some cases, the growth in non-voting appears attributable to a drop in one party’s popularity. The fortunes of the NDP in British Columbia, the Liberals in Alberta, right-wing parties in Saskatchewan, and the Parti Quebecois in Quebec appear closely tied to the level of voter turnout in those provinces. In other places, the slack seems to have been drawn from across the party system, as in Manitoba, Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and PEI. On occasion, some parties seem to have captured the support of the non-voting population, improving their own share of the electoral vote by ‘taking up the slack’ in the system. This appeared to be the case in 1971, when Conservative Parties in Alberta and Newfoundland and Labrador first rose to power.

These types analyses are only possible when the *entire* electorate is brought under investigation. As non-voters become a larger component of most political systems, analysts must reconsider the way they view election results. This means moving beyond measures like “popular vote” – which examine the behavior of a shrinking voting population – toward new concepts like the “electoral vote”. Such was the purpose of this research note – not to solve definitively those mysteries surrounding voter turnout in the Canadian provinces, but to demonstrate the types of questions raised by a holistic examination of each provincial electorate. Armed with these data and questions, students of provincial politics, and elections more broadly, are better positioned to engage in the study of turnout and elections in Western democracies.

Notes

¹ “True” majorities are relatively rare in recent Canadian elections, a fact that makes the Tories’ accomplishments in Newfoundland and Alberta especially remarkable. Since 1965, in only 1 of 14 federal elections has a single party garnered over 50 percent of the popular vote (1988). The same feat has been accomplished a total of 38 times in 120 provincial elections, over the same period. (This number decreases significantly when Newfoundland and Labrador [8 of 13] and Prince Edward Island [12 of 13] are excluded.)

² Sayers and Stewart (2008) take an important first step toward answering these questions in their “Preliminary Analysis” of non-voters in Alberta. See also: Johnston et al. (2006).

³ For simplicity, this paper discusses polity-level results based on party performance. Electoral vote is calculable at the constituency- or poll-level, as well, and can be determined by examining individual candidates’ returns.

⁴ Those voters supporting independents and casting spoiled ballots make up the remainder of the electorate.

⁵ Notes on the source data are included in the Appendix.

⁶ At the time of writing, the New Democrats in British Columbia and Saskatchewan, the Conservatives in Manitoba and Prince Edward Island, and the Liberals in Newfoundland and Labrador all have higher proportions of the electoral vote than do the governing Alberta PCs.

⁷ There was also an increase in support for independent candidates and minor parties, including the Equality Party (which won four seats in the 1989 election).

⁸ The term “drop-out” is borrowed from Milner (2007).

⁹ For a surveys of voters and nonvoters at the federal level in Canada, see Environics Research Group (2006), Elections Canada (2005), and Pammet and LeDuc (2003).

¹⁰ To study the two most recent provincial elections in their respective jurisdictions, Elections Manitoba (see: Prairie Research Associates, 2004; 2008), Elections BC (BC Stats, 2005, 2009), and Elections Alberta (Leger Marketing, 2008) have commissioned

several voter/non-voter surveys. None of these studies examined the relationship between turnout and partisanship or vote choice.

Appendix

Source data for this article were compiled directly from provincial election authorities (e.g., Elections British Columbia and Elections Manitoba). Wherever possible, turnout figures were recorded as stated in official reports of the various Chief Electoral Officers. This was not possible for Newfoundland and Labrador, where official turnout statistics were never reported. There, following the convention applied by election authorities in other provinces, turnout was calculated by the author as the number of total votes cast divided by the total number of registered voters (see also: Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998: 241; Geys, 2006: 638-639).

The year 1965 was selected as a starting point for this study, based on the following considerations. Several provinces did not have fully-functioning, independent election authorities prior to this date; as a result, few maintained reliable records of election results in the early twentieth century. Indeed, no voter turnout statistics are available for New Brunswick or Prince Edward Island prior to this date; in neither province did authorities maintain a list of eligible voters for use as a denominator in calculating turnout. Moreover, election officials in provinces like Saskatchewan are reticent to endorse statistics compiled in the first half of the twentieth century.

The tables and figures below offer as much reliable information on the various Canadian jurisdictions as could be compiled from available sources. Only “relevant” parties have been included in this analysis (Sartori, 1976: 123). Abbreviations are as follows: Liberal Party (LIB), Liberal-Progressive Party (LibProg), New Democratic Party (NDP), Progressive Conservative Party (PC), Saskatchewan Party (SP), and Social Credit (SC). Much thanks is owed to Alan Siaroff (2006) for the use of his election results data. Meticulous research assistance was provided by Maria Nyarku and Kaila Mahoney. Any errors in transcription belong to the author.

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Table 1.0: Turnout in Provincial Elections, 1965 to 2009

| <i>Province</i> | <i>Minimum Turnout (Year)</i> | <i>Maximum Turnout (Year)</i> | <i>Mean Turnout (Ranking out of 10)</i> |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| British Columbia | 51.0% (2009) | 77.7% (1983) | 69.2% (7) |
| Alberta | 40.6% (2008) | 72.0% (1971) | 56.4% (10) |
| Saskatchewan | 64.6% (1995) | 83.9% (1982) | 77.0% (2) |
| Manitoba | 54.2% (2003) | 78.3% (1973) | 67.9% (8) |
| Ontario | 52.1% (2007) | 73.5% (1971) | 62.5% (9) |
| Quebec | 57.4% (2008) | 85.3% (1976) | 76.3% (4) |
| New Brunswick | 67.5% (2006) | 82.1% (1967) | 76.9% (3) |
| Nova Scotia | 58.0% (2009) | 78.2% (1978) | 71.1% (6) |
| Newfoundland & Labrador | 61.3% (2007) | 83.6% (1993) | 74.2% (5) |
| Prince Edward Island | 78.2% (1982) | 87.3% (1970) | 83.8% (1) |
| <i>All</i> | <i>40.6% (AB 2008)</i> | <i>87.3% (PE 1970)</i> | <i>71.5%</i> |

Source: Reports of Chief Electoral Officers, calculations by the author

Figure 1.0: Voter Turnout in Provincial Elections, Western Canada (1965-2009)

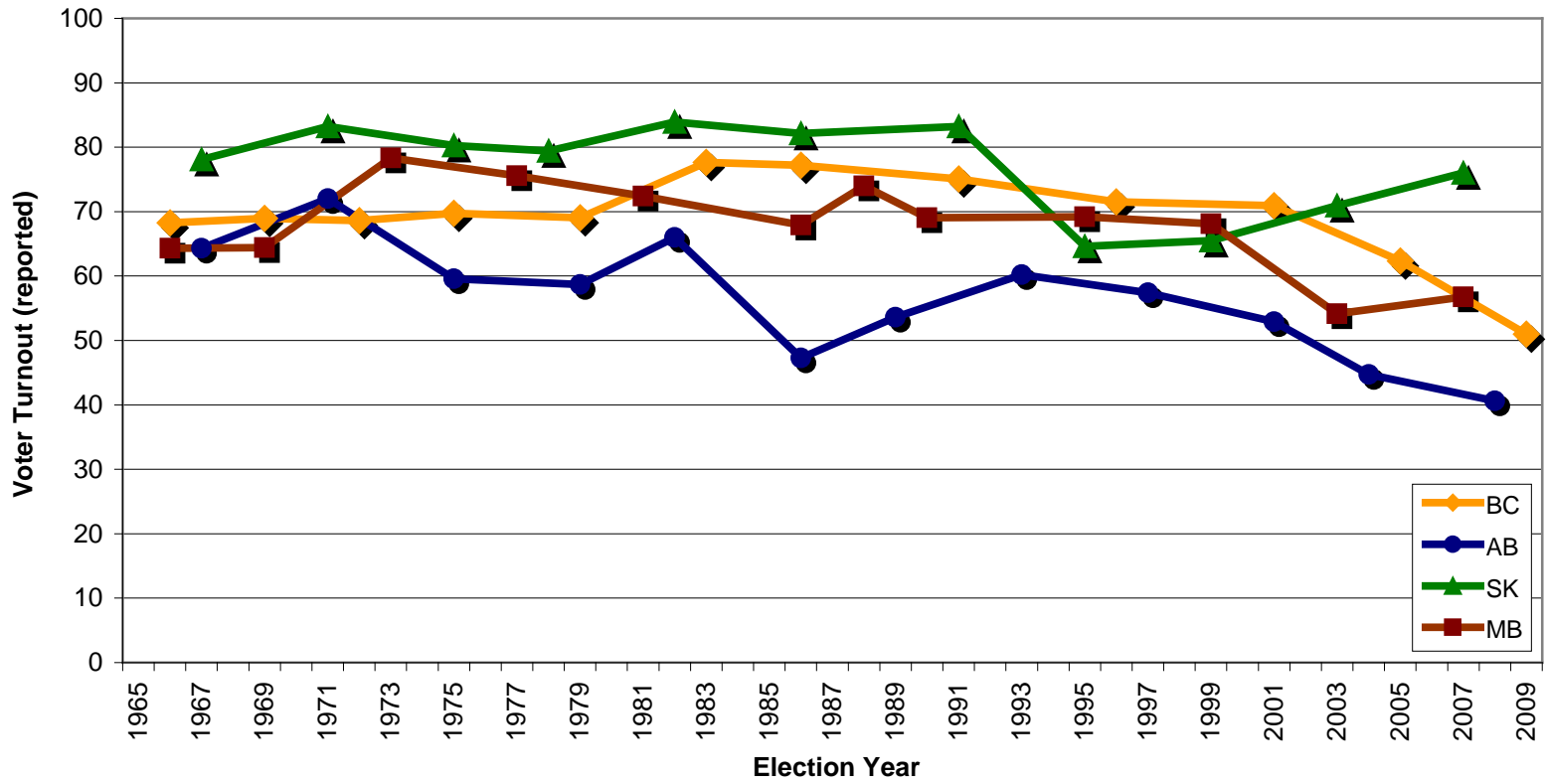


Figure 1.1: Electoral Vote in British Columbia Provincial Elections (1966-2009)

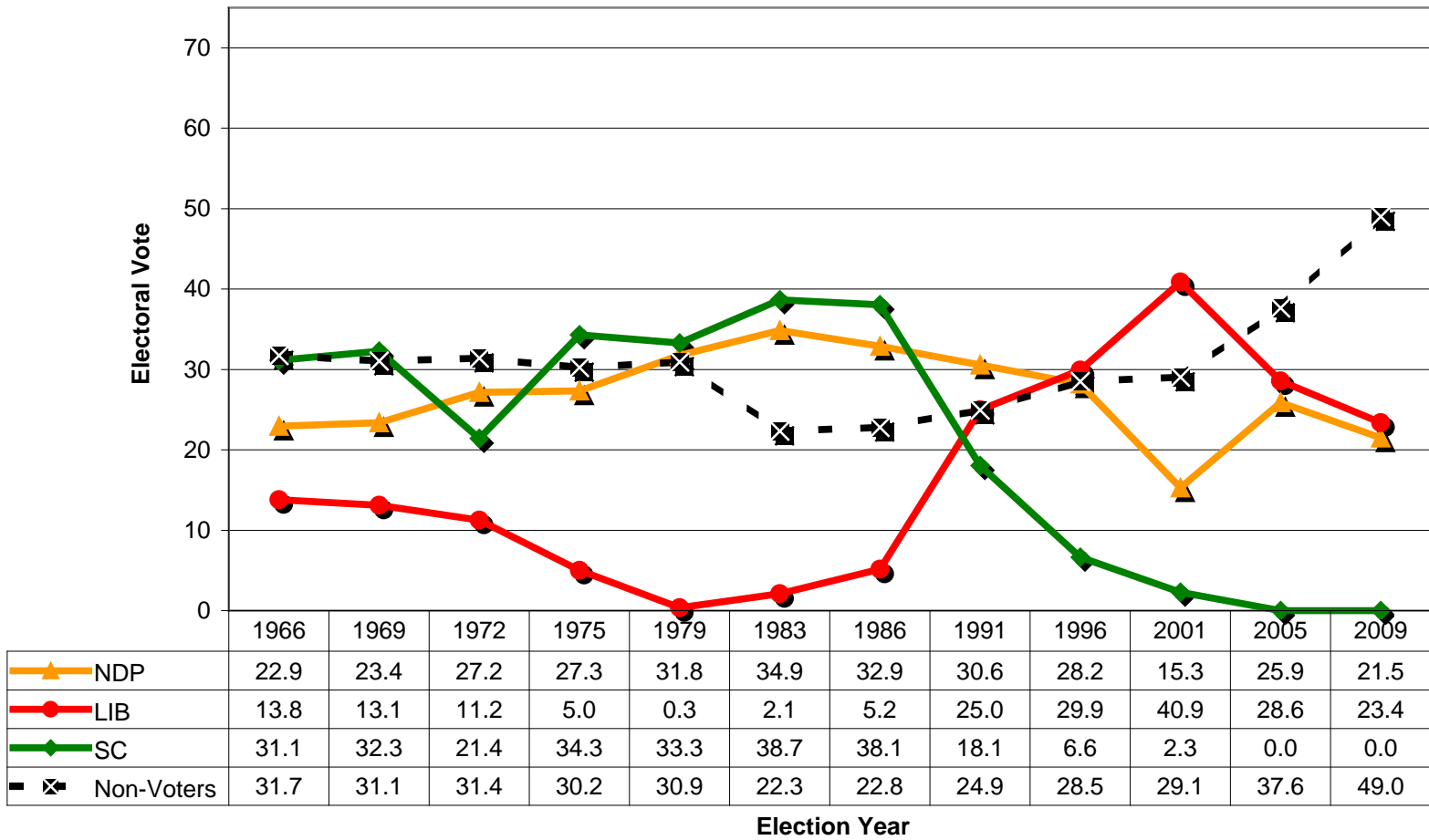


Figure 1.2: Electoral Vote in Alberta Provincial Elections (1967-2008)

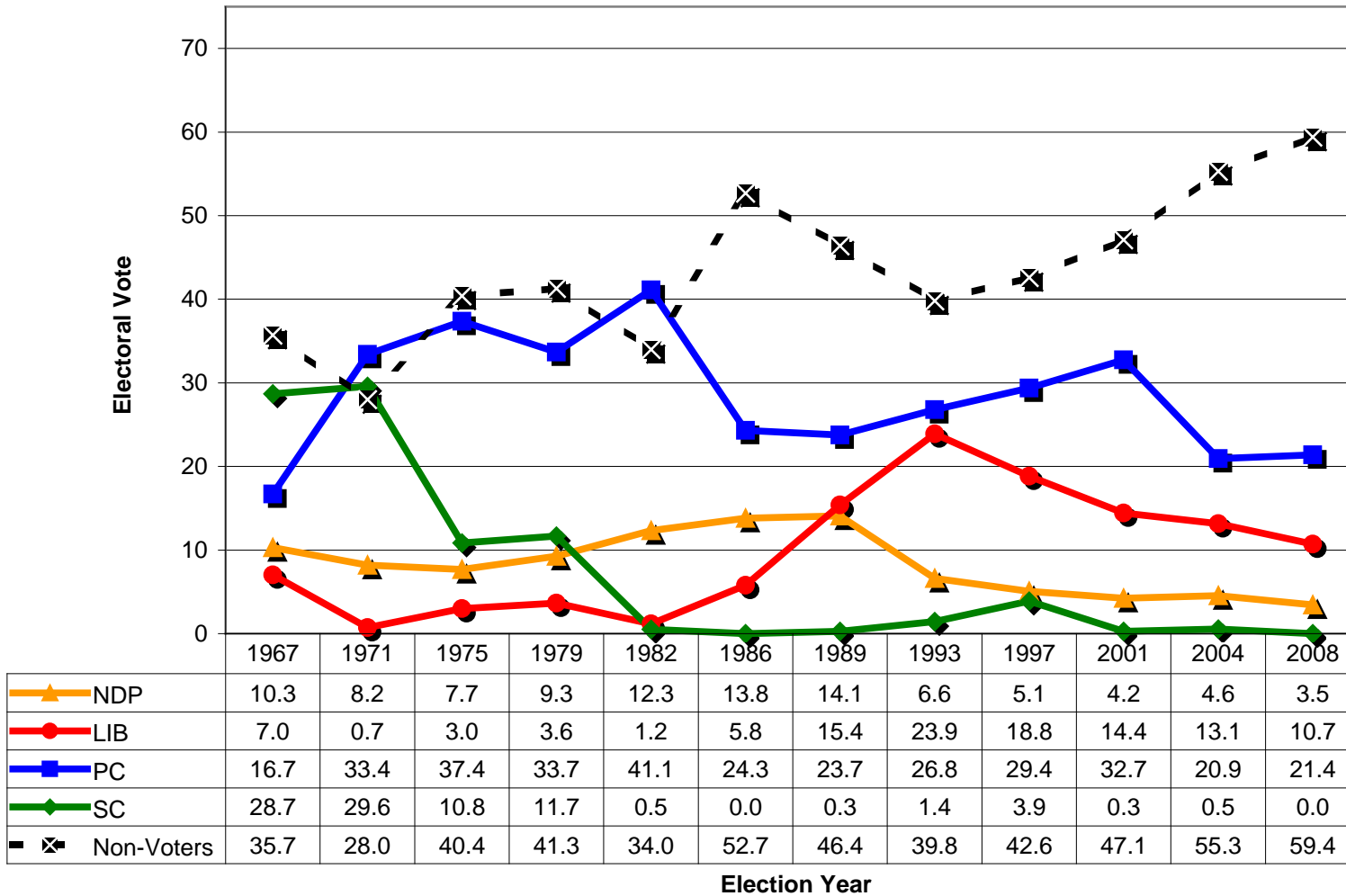


Figure 1.3: Electoral Vote in Saskatchewan Provincial Elections (1967-2007)

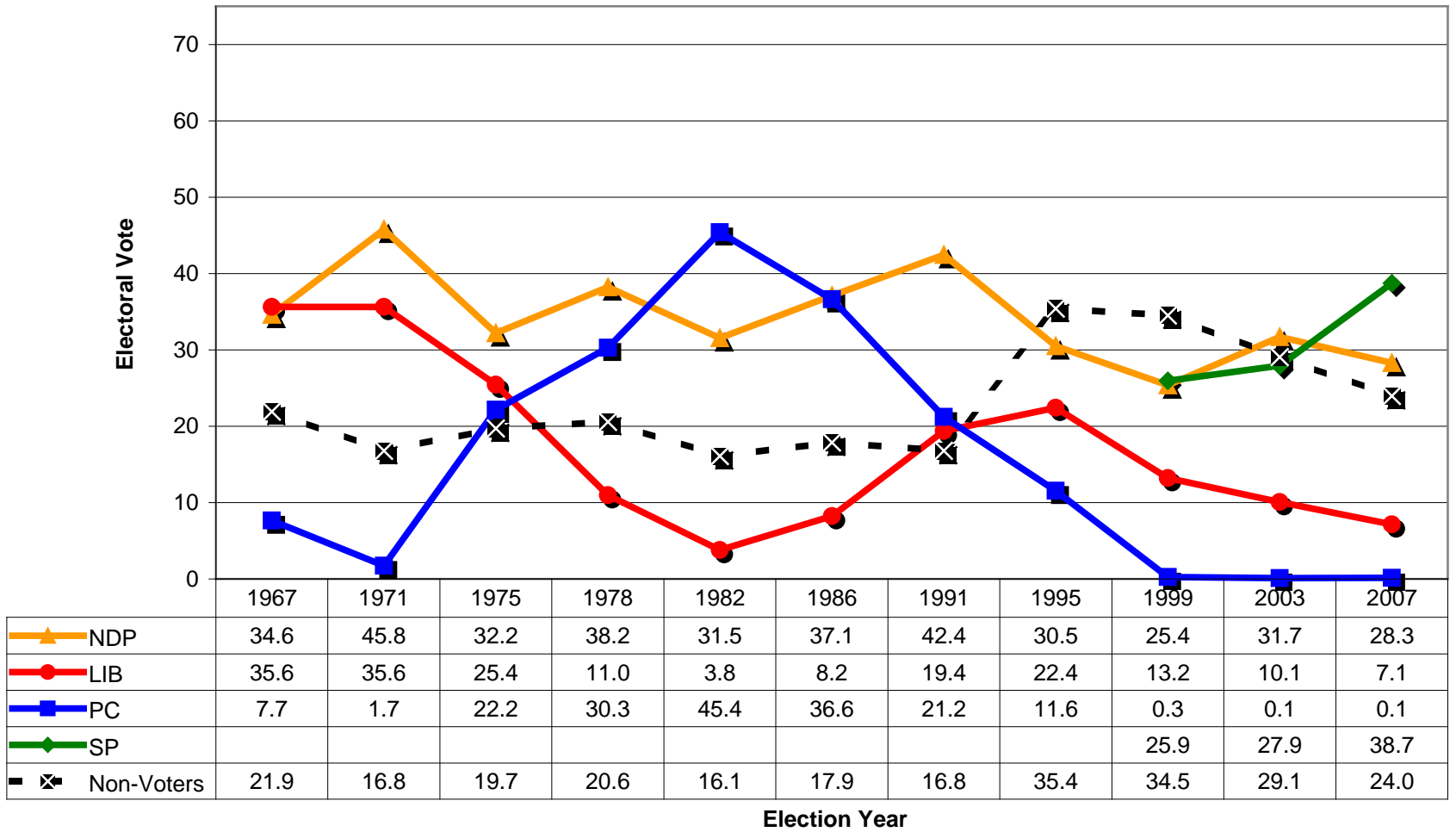


Figure 1.4: Electoral Vote in Manitoba Provincial Elections (1966-2007)

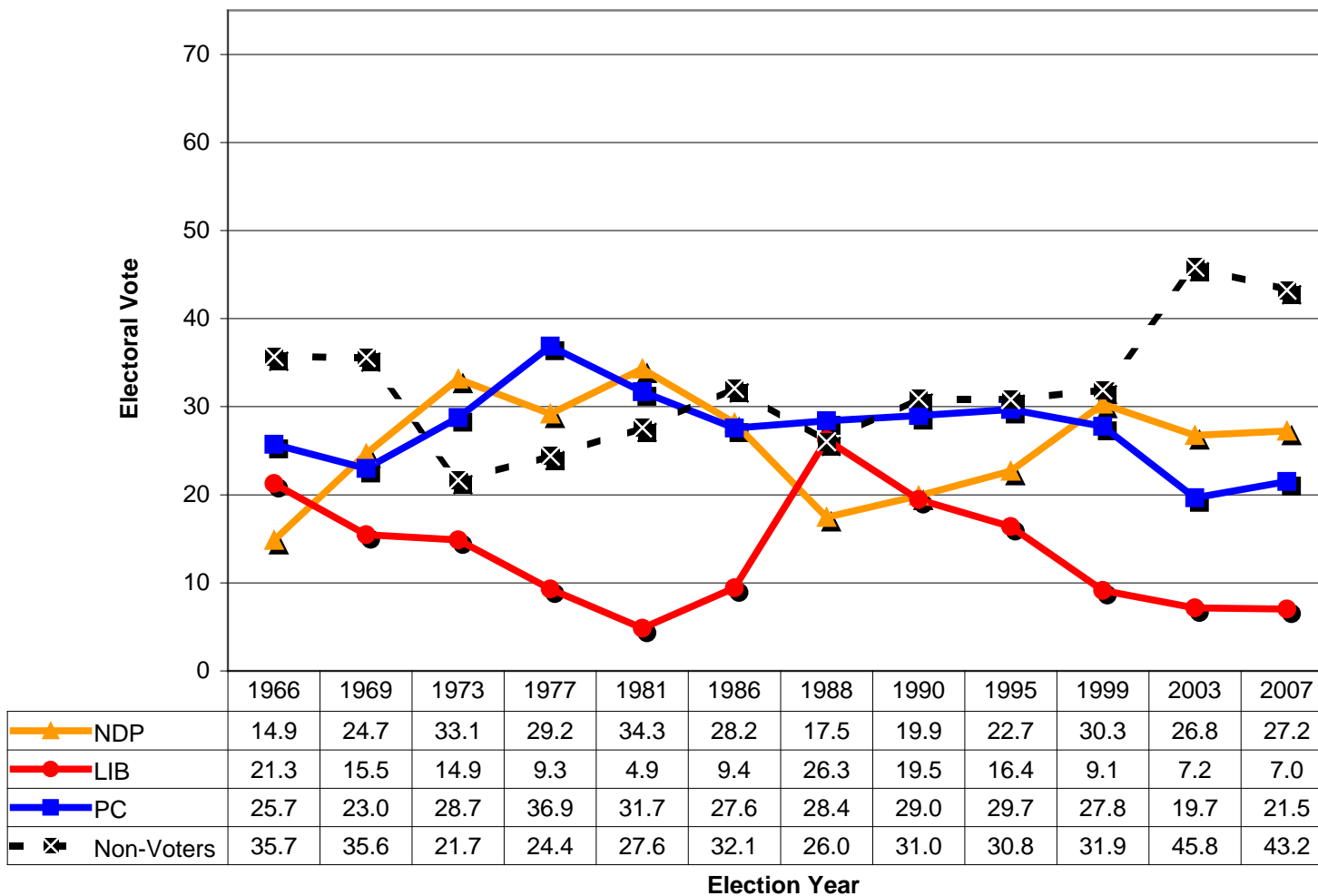


Figure 2.0: Voter Turnout in Provincial Elections, Central Canada (1965-2009)

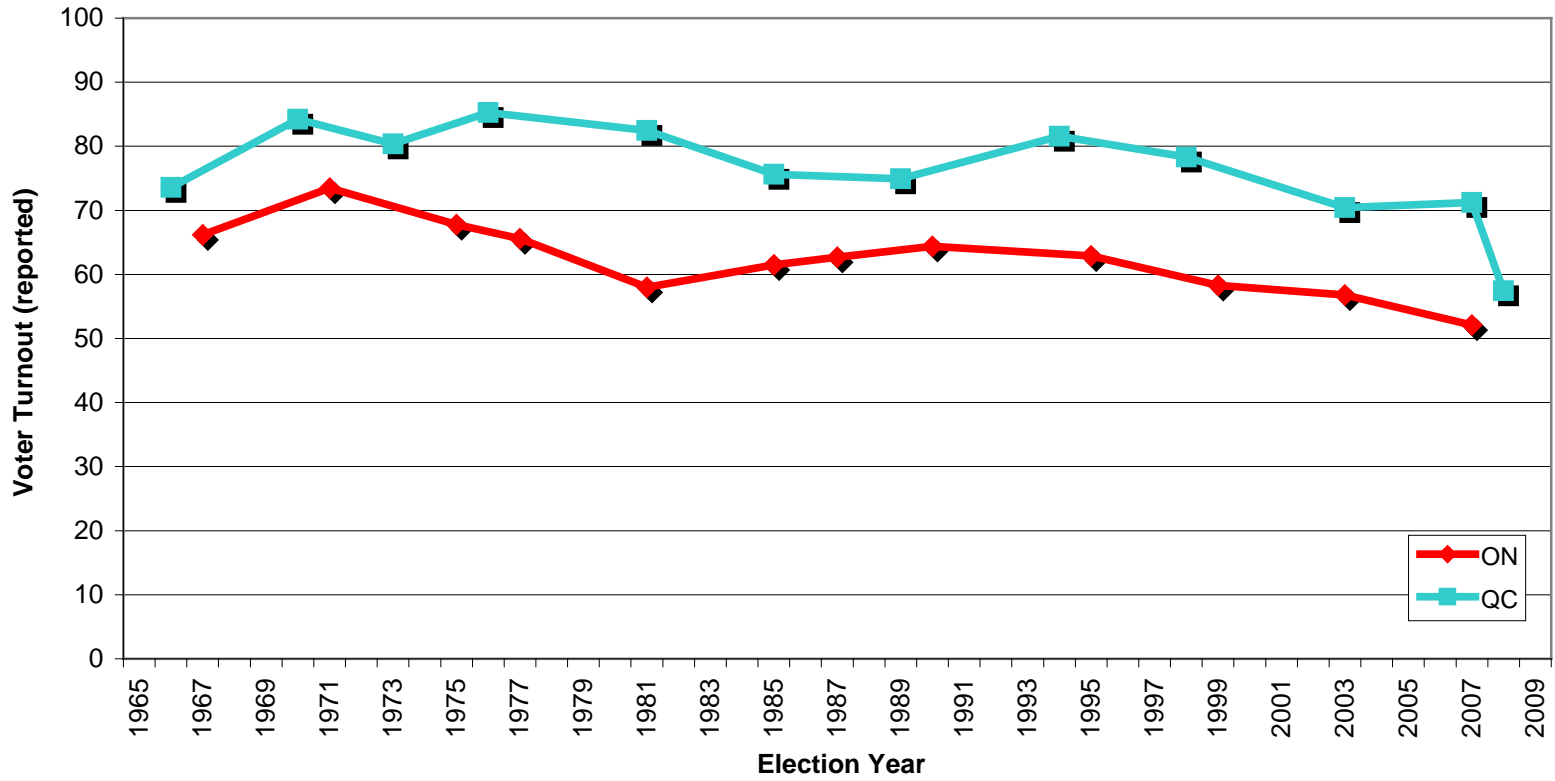


Figure 2.1: Electoral Vote in Ontario Provincial Elections (1967-2007)

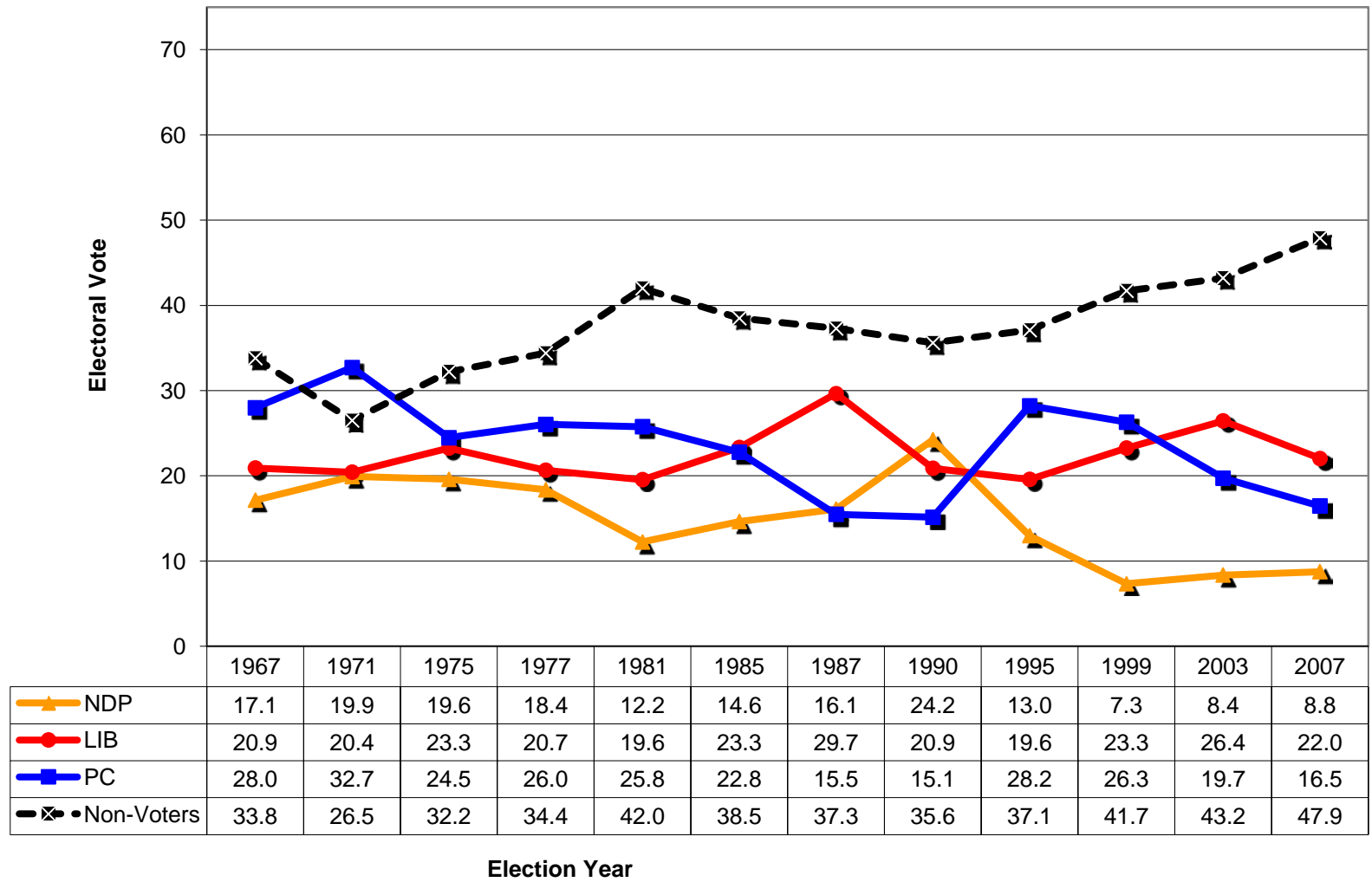


Figure 2.2: Electoral Vote in Quebec Provincial Elections (1966-2008)

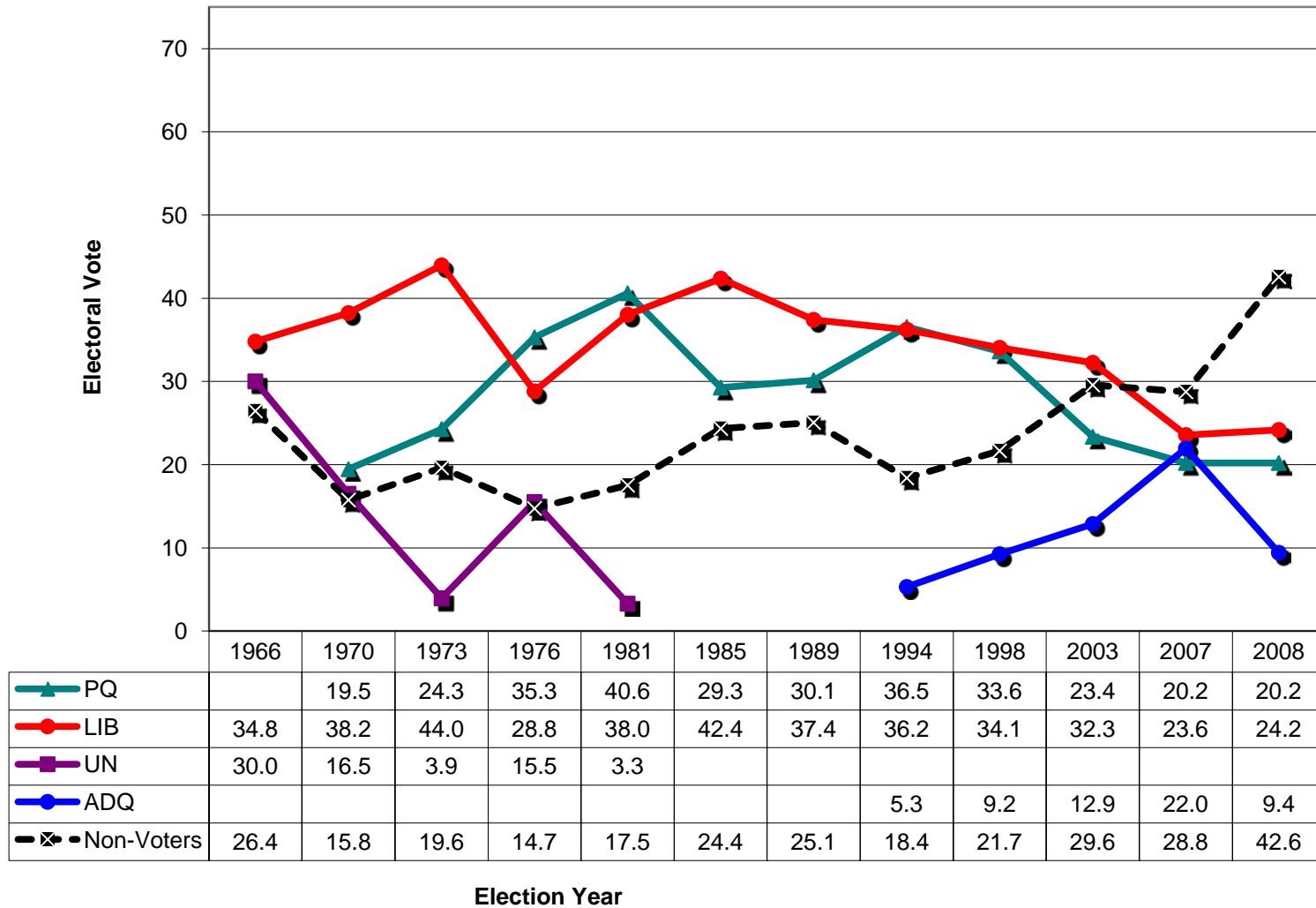


Figure 3.0: Voter Turnout in Provincial Elections, Atlantic Canada (1965-2009)

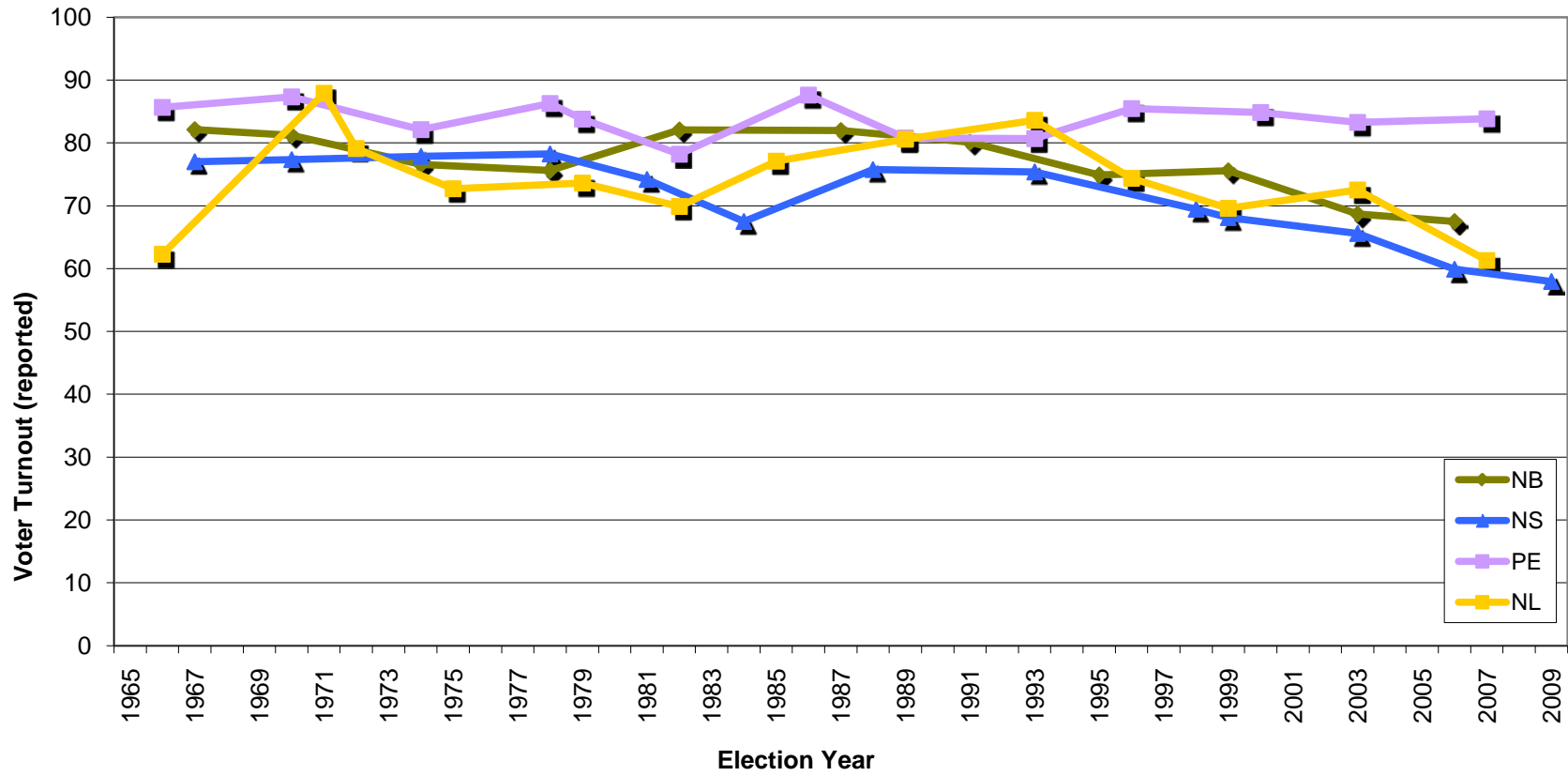


Figure 3.1: Electoral Vote in New Brunswick Provincial Elections (1967-2006)

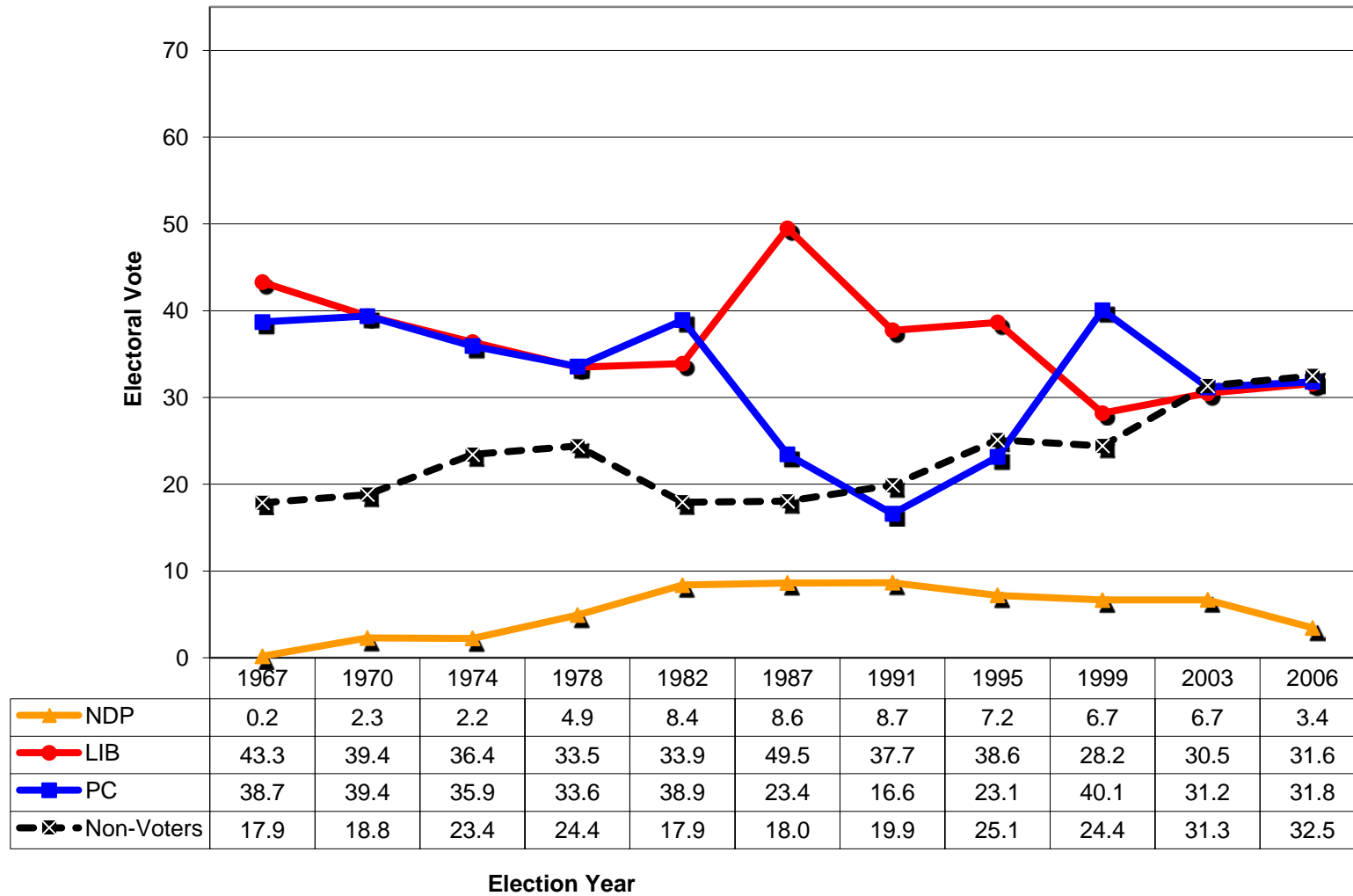


Figure 3.2: Electoral Vote in Nova Scotia Provincial Elections (1967-2009)

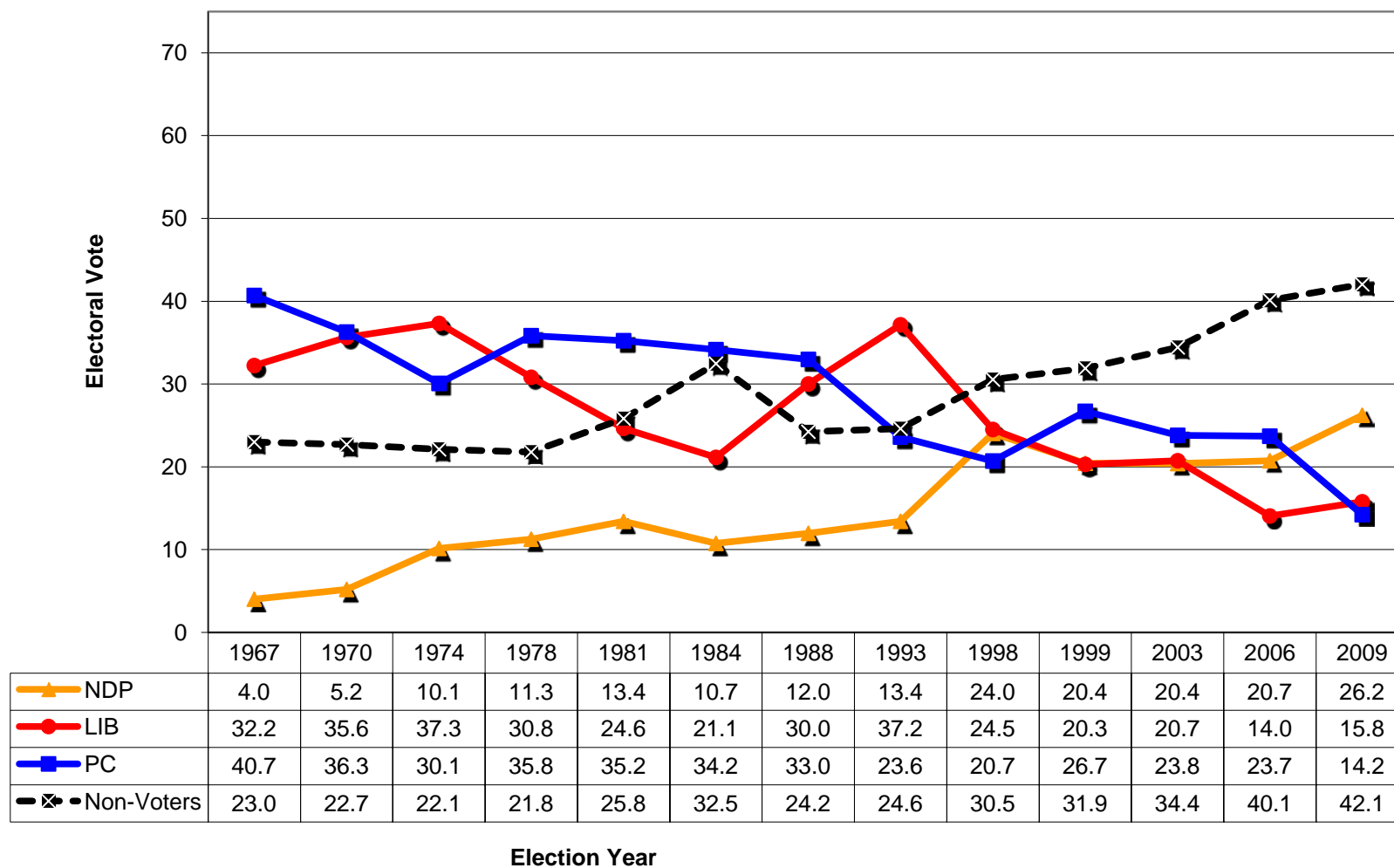


Figure 3.3: Electoral Vote in Newfoundland and Labrador Provincial Elections (1966-2007)

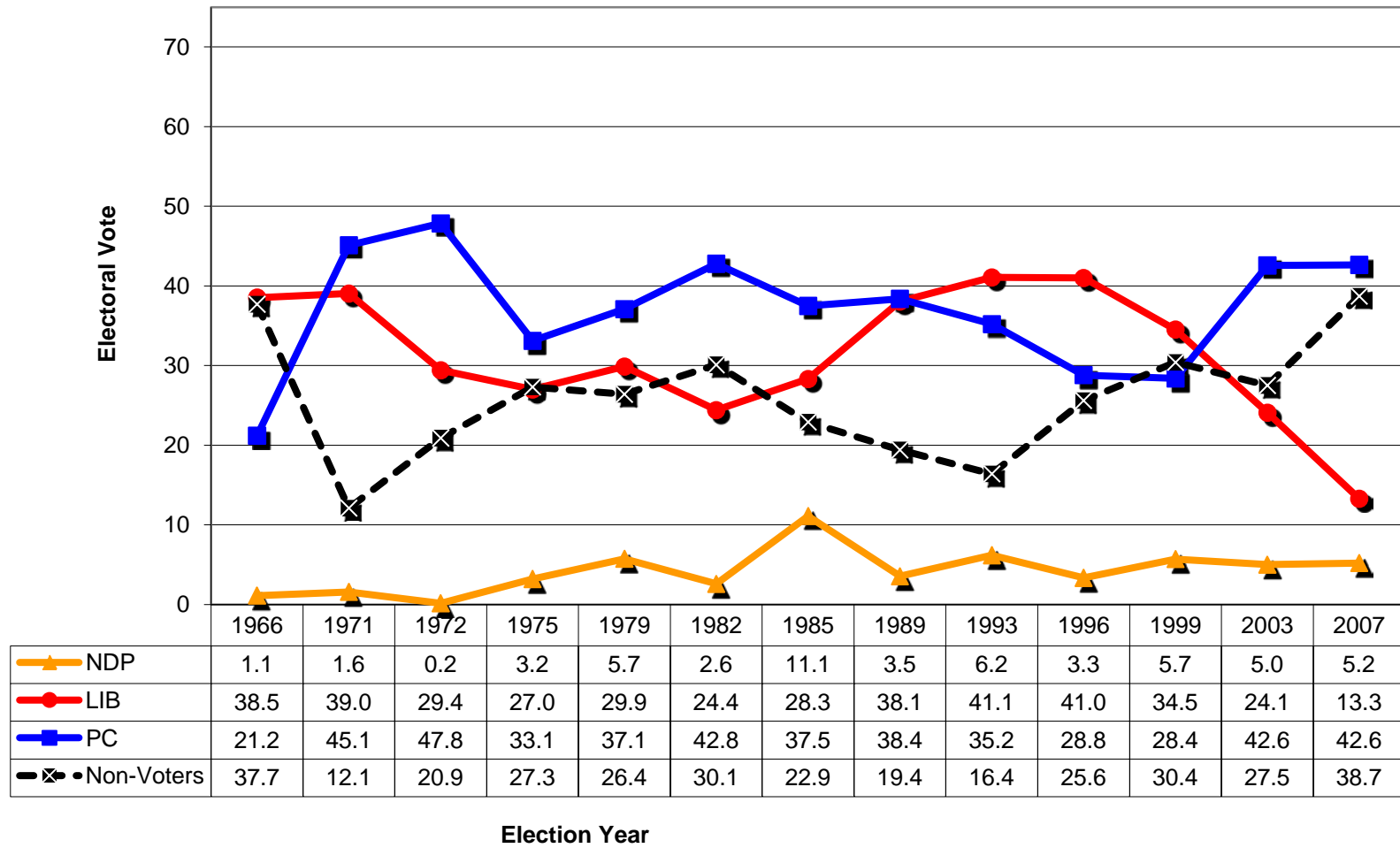


Figure 3.4: Electoral Vote in Prince Edward Island Provincial Elections (1966-2007)

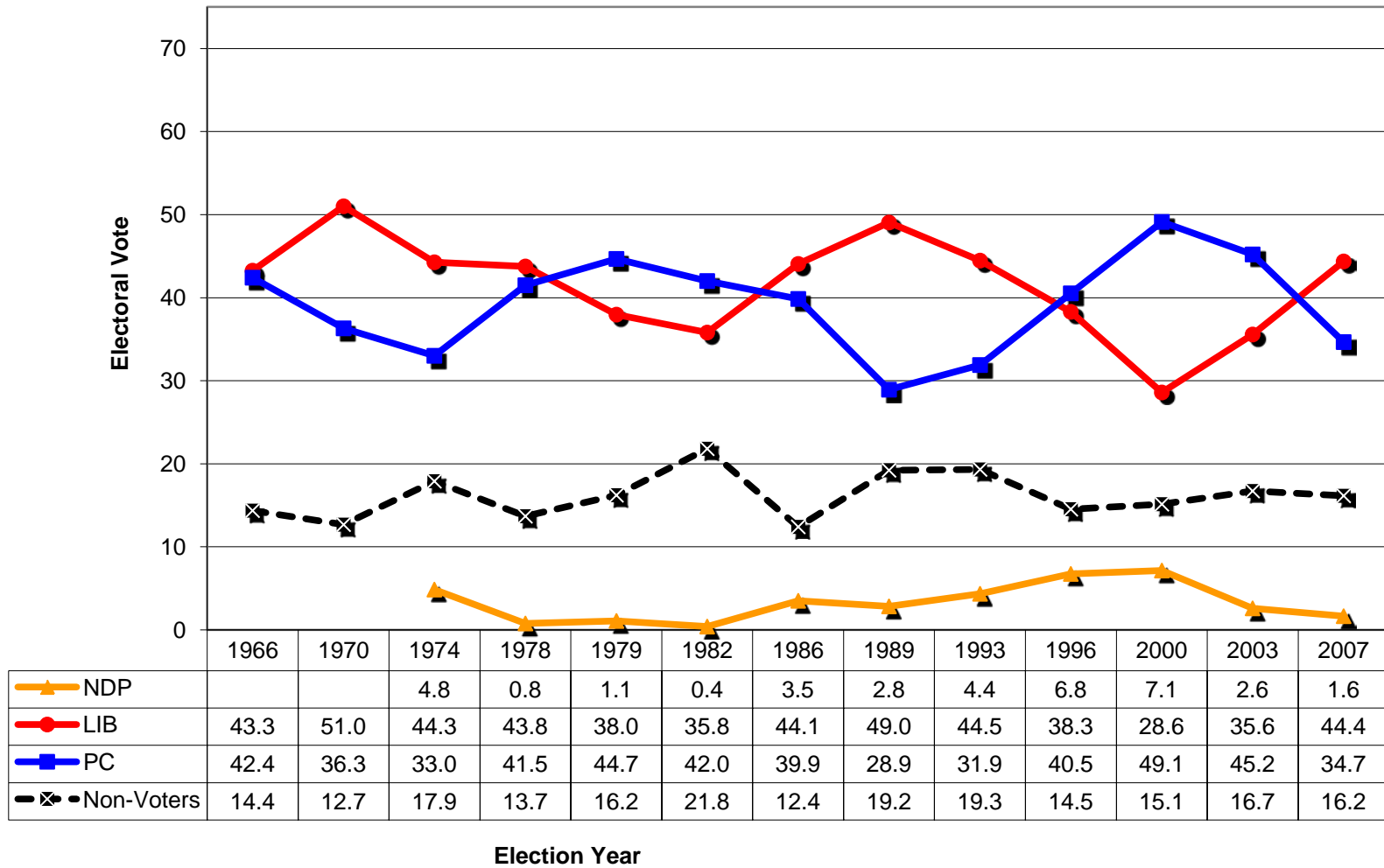


Figure 4.1: Mean Support for Provincial Governing Parties (1965-2009)

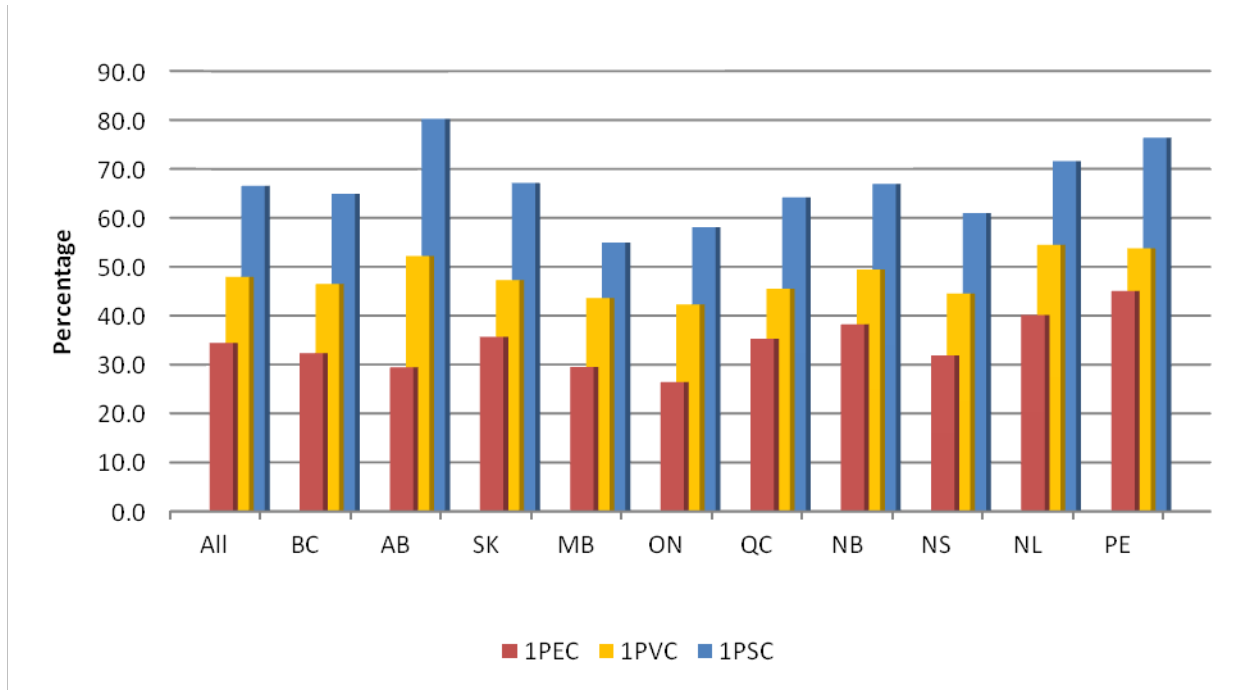


Figure 4.2: Mean Disproportionality “Payoffs” (1965-2009)

