

The Vector Poll™

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Voting with Their Feet: How to Boost Voter Turnout

By Marc Zwelling and Adrian Macaulay of the [Vector Poll](#)™

The October 21 federal election is attracting abundant coverage in the news media.

But millions of eligible voters will mark no ballots for anybody.

Nearly seven in 10 eligible voters turned out in 2015 (68.5%), the largest turnout since the 1993 election. But why did eight million voters (31.5%) choose to opt out?

Turnout is even lower in municipal elections. In the last municipal election in Toronto (in 2018) four in 10 eligible voters (41%) cast a ballot while in 2017 Montréal saw a turnout of 43%.

Since the 1990s voter turnouts globally have decreased and are not “showing any signs of recovery,” according to a [recent report](#) from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (an intergovernmental organization aiming to “advance sustainable democracy worldwide”). The Institute calls the trend “worrying.”

Many polls have found that the most frequently mentioned excuse no-shows give for abstaining is that they don’t follow politics closely or don’t know enough about the issues to cast an informed vote.

We might feel better if everybody voted, but a bigger turnout wouldn’t change election outcomes. Research shows that — in national elections — non-voters would have distributed their votes the same way voters do.

It would be hard to shift the forces driving people to vote with their feet. Those who are younger, single, have lower incomes, move a lot and have the least formal education are the most likely to stay home on election day. Research shows you’re more likely to vote if you’re older, married, better educated, wealthier and don’t change your address frequently.

Most non-voters are really just inconsistent voters. In a recent national Vector Poll™ fewer than 5% of eligible voters said they wouldn’t vote in October. In pre-election polls, up to nine out of 10 eligible voters say they definitely or probably will vote. In post-election polls as many as eight in 10 say they did, a signal that Canadians feel there’s virtue in voting.

Earlier this year *The Economist* [reported](#) that in the UK and the US “the propensity to vote rises as people become happier.” Studies of twins in the US reveal the urge to vote is inheritable; some of us have a voting gene.

So what can be done to boost voter turnout?

Holding elections on holidays and having more advance polls or a two-day voting period would only make it more convenient for people who would have voted anyway. Mail voting raises turnout slightly. Online voting might increase turnout.

In 2016 when NRG Research Group [asked Canadians](#) about making voting mandatory, 34% were in favour. But mandatory voting won't necessarily improve turnout.

According to the International Institute for Democracy, in countries with compulsory voting, turnouts in national elections average only nine percentage points higher than in countries without mandatory voting.

Australia is among two dozen democracies with mandatory voting. Its turnout doubled after voting became compulsory. However, a [website](#) for the Australian state of New South Wales concedes that some people feel “majorities in Australian elections include the votes of many uninterested and ill-informed people who vote just because they have to.” Moreover, some feel compulsory voting reduces “the legitimacy of elected representatives.”

The penalty for not voting might have to be high to get devoted non-voters to mark a ballot. In Australia the fine for not voting (“without a valid reason”) is around \$50 Canadian. If they're not really interested in politics millions might show up to avoid a fine but spoil their ballots.

Mandatory voting could be risky in Canada. Imposing fines on sovereigntists for boycotting the election of a country they don't recognize could ignite separatist forces in Québec. And what if they don't pay the fine? Would a federal government jail the non-voters?

Turnouts are generally higher in countries with proportional representation. (If they want more people to vote, PR proponents should stop claiming millions of votes are “wasted” in the current voting system.) But Canada doesn't have to wait for PR to get more people to vote.

Election officials could bring back enumerators, who once went door-to-door to compile the voters' list. To save money the federal government and most of the provinces eliminated enumeration and instead use electronic voter lists.

Enumerators could leave cards that say “I promise to vote on” whatever E-day is. Enumerators wouldn’t collect the cards. But the cards still would serve as a nudge and boost turnout because psychologists know we feel good about keeping our commitments.

Lowering the voting age to 16 might improve turnout because it would permit high schools to integrate voting with class work.

What won’t boost turnout is trying to make no-shows feel guilty about shirking their civic duty. Rationally, there’s no reason to vote. A single vote almost never changes the outcome of a local contest and has never decided the winner of a national election.

A better election turnout requires better politicians. Today’s politics drives millions of eligible voters to ask, “What’s this got to do with me?”

High-tech campaigning via social networks allows political parties to identify and provoke their target voters. The candidates customize their policies and messages to mobilize their base and reach clones of their target voters. The result is that instead of voters’ picking their parties, parties are picking their voters.

Federal Conservatives, for example, make no attempts to lure union members. The federal NDP makes no effort to appeal to voters who are shareholders (half the electorate).

Candidates compete to defame each other. Yet no politician gets an advantage by calling an opponent a liar because the public thinks all politicians lie.

Earlier this year, research from the Vector Poll™ found just 29% of voters said Justin Trudeau is “honest and ethical.” Only 29% said the terms “honest and ethical” apply to Conservative leader Andrew Scheer while 27% said they apply to NDP leader Jagmeet Singh.

Parties should give up their addiction to attack ads, which suppress turnout by portraying opponents as too loathsome to support. Research in the United States found that from 100+ studies and experiments conducted during the 2016 election “advertising, negative or positive, appears ineffective at increasing turnout or persuading voters.”

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