

## Get out there and vote!

Democracy requires active, continual participation

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Exercise your franchise. A curious phrase, don't you think? It conjures up images of voters wheezing on treadmills or pumping iron, desperately trying to whip their flabby democratic muscles into shape.

But on reflection, the expression is really quite apt. After all, the act of voting is how citizens keep their democracy fit. Without the workout of an election, democracy would quickly sink into morbid obesity.



CREDIT: CP, Jonathan Hayward  
It's election time again.

Journalist Joe Schlesinger puts it another way. "Elections," he writes, "are to democracy what weddings are to marriage. In democracy, as in marriage, you have to work at it or lose it."

Whatever metaphor you prefer, the message is the same: voting is a right and responsibility of every citizen who values living in a democracy. But as Canadians vote today, our collective franchise is in dire need of a Participation plan. Its abs are turning to flab, its glutes are going soft, its pecs in peril.

After averaging a respectable 75 per cent for decades, turnout in federal elections started falling in the 1990s, bottoming out at just fewer than 61 per cent of eligible voters in 2004 -- the lowest in Canadian history.

In the 1990s, Canada placed 109th among 163 nations ranked for voter turnout by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, behind such democratic powerhouses as Algeria, Mozambique and Togo. But hey, at least we beat the United States, way down in 140th place. No "American-style" voter turnout here, thanks very much!

Increasingly, we seem to agree with the elderly woman who once told TV host Jack Paar, "I never vote. It only encourages them." Still, our indifference stands in stark contrast to attitudes in parts of the world that haven't yet evolved our level of democratic complacency.

Just last month, Canadians watched admiringly as more than 10 million Iraqis defied death threats to vote for their first freely elected government. A year earlier, a not-dissimilar scene played out in Ukraine.

It makes you wonder what's gone wrong here. Why does the beauty of the ballot no longer seduce us? Can we do anything to rekindle that lovin' feeling? Or is it gone, gone, gone?

In truth, many Canadians still take their responsibility to vote very seriously. In the 2000 election, more than 80 per cent of those age 58 and older say they voted, according to a study done for Elections Canada by political scientists Jon Pammett of Carleton University and Lawrence LeDuc of the University of Toronto.

For those between 38 and 57, voting rates slipped somewhat, but remained respectable. The big decline came among those 37 and younger, where the drop-off in voting levels was precipitous, falling to just 22.4 per cent for 18-to-20-year-old first-time voters.

Why is this happening? "There's no real easy answer," says Mr. Pammett, adding it doesn't appear to be related to active distaste for the political process. "The people who are most negative, the kind of 'pox on all your houses' people," he says, "are more likely to be people in their 40s and 50s. Young people are more likely to cite disinterest or impediments like registration, or being too busy."

Mr. Pammett dismisses the popular notion that young Canadians, turned off by electoral politics, have simply rechannelled their political energies into activism or other non-institutional activities. "It's a nice idea, but it's simply not true," he says. "There are a lot of young people who engage in political acts, but they're more likely to be voters than non-voters."

Non-voters, concludes the Pammett and LeDuc study, "are distancing themselves from the public sphere in many ways." They are less likely to read newspapers, watch TV newscasts, surf the Internet, sign petitions, join boycotts, attend demonstrations, volunteer or join organizations.

"That's why the voting-rate decline is so worrying," says Mr. Pammett, "because it means there's an overall participation decline, not just in voting."

Energized by such findings, Internet-based grassroots groups dedicated to re-engaging young voters have proliferated in the past two years, many of them connected in a loose coalition called Go Vote.

The groups, mostly run by people in their teens and 20s, have names like Apathy is Boring, Get Your Vote On, Rock the Vote and Vote Out Loud. Bypassing traditional political channels, they seek out their audience where it lives -- in high schools, universities, clubs and bars -- and use innovative and sometimes edgy techniques to get their message out.

An Edmonton group known as Democracy is Sexy, for example, has been distributing condoms at city bars while talking with young patrons about the importance of voting. In Toronto, Equal Voice, a group dedicated to increasing women's involvement in politics, is handing out buttons to young women proclaiming, "Voters are hot."

Montrealer Ilona Dougherty, who co-founded Apathy is Boring with two fellow artists in January 2004, is typical of this new breed of electoral activist.

"Our mandate is to use art, media and technology to re-engage young people in the democratic process," she says.

The group's website is loaded with practical information for young voters. Apathy is Boring has recruited celebrities and organized concerts and other events that bring politicians together with young voters. And for this election, it produced a public service announcement about voting that aired in Cineplex Odeon theatres across Canada.

"We figure that last election, we were able to reach about 500,000 young people," says Ms. Dougherty.

During last year's provincial election in B.C., Vancouver-based Get Your Vote On registered more than 20,000 young voters. Participation by 18-to-24-year-old voters rose to 35 per cent from 27 per cent in the previous provincial election.

In this election, Get Your Vote On has spread across the country, helping young people organize events from Whitehorse to Nova Scotia. "We just got an e-mail from Iqaluit," whoops Olive Dempsey, Get Your Vote On's communications co-ordinator.

Lecturing young people about their civic responsibility doesn't work, she says. "People don't like to be guilted into things. That's why it's valuable to have a peer-to-peer approach. They're our age, and we're talking to them on the dance floor, we're talking to them over a beer. We're not into being heavy-handed about it."

The Dominion Institute's Democracy Project has organized 68 all-candidates meetings in high schools and universities, exposing 23,000 students to the electoral process. That's important, says project co-ordinator Angela-Claire Coutts, because many young people feel they don't have enough information to cast an informed ballot. "That's why it's so important to get them into a room with local candidates."

Young people don't deserve their reputation for political apathy, she insists. "They do have issues that they care about, issues that they're passionate about. What we're trying to do is bridge the gap between young people and the political process."

The message to young non-voters is simple, she says. "Young people wouldn't let their parents or their grandparents choose what kind of music they listen to or what kind of clothes they wear," she says. "So why let them choose what kind of country we live in?"

For Ilona Dougherty, "voting is a recognition of my involvement in the democratic process. If our demographic group doesn't vote, there's no reason the politicians should listen to us. That's the reality."

It's also important to remind young voters that earlier generations fought -- and sometimes died -- for the right to vote, she says. Indeed.

At the time of Confederation, only 11 per cent of Canadians were eligible to vote -- mostly white males with property. The franchise wasn't extended to all women until 1919, and they couldn't vote in provincial elections in Quebec until 1940.

Ethnic minorities such as the Japanese, Chinese and East Indians were denied the vote in parts of Canada until after the Second World War. And until 1960, native Canadians could only vote if they gave up their treaty rights.

Canadian politicians have even been known to manipulate voting rights for political advantage. In 1917, facing a dicey election over conscription, prime minister Robert Borden's government stacked the deck in its favour by extending the franchise to the spouses, widows, mothers, sisters and daughters of those who were serving or had served in the Canadian military. At the same time, conscientious objectors and naturalized citizens who were born in an enemy country, or spoke its language, were disenfranchised.

The Charter of Rights has put an end to such abuses. But neglect is just as corrosive. "The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush," American educator Robert Maynard Hutchins once observed. "It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference and undernourishment."

Unless something happens to convince younger voters to re-engage, says Mr. Pammett, voter participation in Canada is likely to continue to slide.

A few things might help reverse the trend, he says. One is allowing voters to register on the Internet. Several provinces have already tried this, with encouraging results, and the idea was endorsed by an Elections Canada study in 2003. "I don't think it's very far away," Mr. Pammett says.

Internet voting, on the other hand, is more problematic. "There have been experiments all over the place with it, and the jury is out on whether it's effective," he says. "I don't think it's a panacea, but anything that makes it easier to vote is likely to be attractive to some people."

One idea Mr. Pammett favours is lowering the voting age to 16. A private member's bill promoting the idea was debated in the House of Commons last year, but was voted down. "The parties seem to be afraid of this," says Mr. Pammett. "They think they'd all be voting Green or NDP or something."

But there's no evidence that would happen, he says. "When the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 in 1970, there wasn't any great change in voting patterns that could be attributed to age."

In the short term, lowering the voting age might further reduce voter turnout, Mr. Pammett concedes. But he believes it would pay long-term benefits, especially if coupled with a stepped-up emphasis on civics in high school. That's because the lessons students learn in school could be quickly applied in the real world.

Changing our first-past-the-post voting system might also encourage more participation, says Mr. Pammett, a view supported by international research that shows countries with proportional representation systems consistently attract higher turnouts than those with Canadian-style voting systems.

And in Russia, voters have the option of casting their ballot for "none of the above" -- a choice many disgruntled Canadian voters might find attractive.

Then there's the ultimate solution -- compulsory voting. More than 30 countries have such laws, though only a handful provide significant penalties for non-compliance. Because of that, turnout where voting is theoretically compulsory is often little better than in countries where voting is optional.

Where compulsory voting is taken seriously, as in Australia, non-voters are fined unless they can provide a legitimate reason for not voting. Consequently, the turnout in Australia is about 95 per cent of registered voters.

Some countries use other methods to penalize non-voters. In Belgium, non-voters might have trouble getting a job within the public service. In Greece, they could have problems obtaining a driver's licence or passport. In Italy, electoral slackers might find it hard to get a day care place for their child.

Though compulsory voting might seem Draconian, Mr. Pammett argues that it's a worthwhile idea. "The good of the wider community requires people to take some kind of action to express themselves on occasion in it," he says.

However, most Canadians don't share that view. "You get a fairly widespread feeling that you have a right not to vote if you don't want to."

The fact that today's election is happening in the dead of a Canadian winter does not augur especially well for an increase in turnout. Nevertheless, Mr. Pammett hopes the competitive nature of the election, along with the real prospect of change, will help re-energize voters. In 2004, he notes, turnout actually rose in Ontario and B.C., two prov-inces where the newly reunited Conservatives were back on the radar screen as a serious alternative for the first time since the 1980s.

And there are a couple of indications, little more than straws in the wind really, that provide reason for optimism. One is that voting in advance polls is up 25 per cent over 2004, though that doesn't necessarily mean overall participation will rise.

The other hopeful sign is a poll of 18-to-24-year-old voters, done by the Dominion Institute's Democracy Project, in which 64 per cent of survey participants said they definitely intend to vote today.

Perhaps they think like Brenna Hudson, a third-year psychology student at Carleton University who voted in 2004 and intends to do so again today. "If we have the ability to be in a democratic system," she says, "why wouldn't you take the initiative to use that?"

Bravo, Brenna. As U.S. Congressman Henry Hyde once said, "A monarchy requires a virtuous king; a democracy requires a virtuous people."

Oh yes, one last thing. If, for any reason, you're tempted to eat your ballot, please don't. Eating a ballot, not returning it or otherwise destroying or defacing it is a serious breach of the Canada Elections Act, Elections Canada advises on its website.

You have been warned.

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