

A Lack of Commitment: The Key to Voter Turnout

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Not since confederation has turnout in a Canadian federal election been as low as it was in 2004. This paper examines the decision to vote—or not—through a unique lens called the Conversion Model™. The Conversion Model™, applicable to any choice situation, is based on a theory of commitment. People who are committed to voting are more likely to vote (e.g. they are loyal). The underlying results show a disengaged, uncommitted electorate. The lack of a large committed group of Canadians, combined with the large pool of people with a low commitment (non-voters) is key to understanding how turnout could have dropped so significantly, so fast.

Introduction

In the days leading up to the 2004 federal election, pundits and pollsters observed almost universally that the election was “too close to call.” Theory would suggest that close elections have a positive impact on turnout by increasing the likelihood that each voter will see his/her vote as being meaningful, and because a close race leads to greater activity to mobilize voters on behalf of the parties. In 2004, the expectation for higher turnout was further fuelled by the record high turnout at the advance polls, reported by Elections Canada only days before the election. In the end, the election was not as close as it seemed, and turnout was again lower.

Why did turnout not rise under these conditions and why has it declined overall? Political scientists have devoted considerable effort to try to understand why turnout has declined, and the reasons why some people turn out while others do not (see Pammett, 1991; Franklin, 1996; Blais, 2000). These studies have found that turnout is related to structural (turnout is lower in first-past-the-post electoral systems), contextual (time of year and competitiveness of election) and individual (e.g. age and education) factors.

The decline in turnout in western democracies has been accompanied by shifts in public attitudes about politics that have been variously categorized as a decline in trust or confidence (Pharr and Putnam, 2000) or, in the Canadian case, as a “decline in deference” (Nevitte, 1996). One of the most frequently cited explanations for the cultural change clarifies it in terms of the development of post-materialism; postwar generations grew up in a time of economic prosperity and are, therefore, less concerned with traditional political con-

flicts and participation (Iyengar, 1997). As the research here shows, alienation from current modes of political participation and cynicism about politics are central to low turnout in Canada.

Rather than probing directly into why some people vote and others do not, we approach the question by looking at the underlying commitment Canadians have to voting. By starting with commitment, we can better understand the fundamental structure of public opinion that sets the context for the decision to participate or not. The evidence here indicates that we have a disengaged electorate that is not committed to voting. Many still vote, but most are at least at some risk of not voting in any given election. The lack of commitment among voters is clearly driven by the general disengagement from politics and rise in cynicism that has taken place in Canada, which affects younger voters in particular.

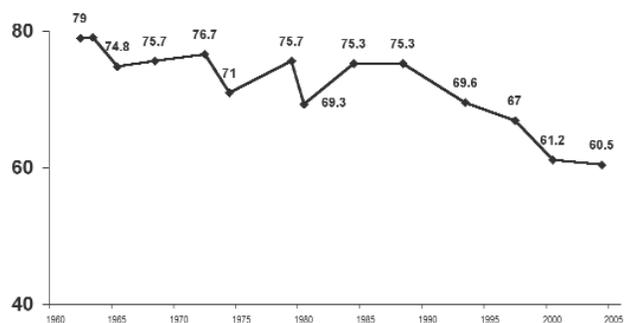
Turnout in Canada: The Evidence

Elections Canada reports that turnout in the federal election was 60.5 percent, based on preliminary numbers. This represents a new all-time low for federal participation. Though only marginally lower than in 2000 (61.2 percent, the previous low), this is the fourth consecutive election in which turnout has declined. In the 1984 and 1988 elections, turnout was as high as 75 percent. As a percentage of voting age rather than registered voters, the actual turnout is even lower (57% according to Johnston, 2000).

The last three elections have been very low from a turnout perspective. Before 2004, it was tempting to attribute some of the decline to the context of the elections in the 1990s

and 2000, which seemed to offer Canadians little choice and little drama. The Liberals easily won majorities in each election, and Canadians expressed high levels of satisfaction with the direction of the country throughout their period of government. If this explanation makes sense for the elections in 1997 and 2000, it does not for the 2004 election when the Liberals were no longer as popular and the Conservative Party had been formed to present a united right-wing alternative.

Turnout in Federal Elections: 1962 to 2004



Source: Elections Canada

The decline in turnout is not unique to Canada, though Canada is relatively low, especially when it comes to turnout as a percentage of voting age population (Johnston, 2000). Turnout is declining in most established democracies (Blais, 2000). What, then, is the cause of this observed decline in turnout?

In a recent paper, Blais *et al.* (forthcoming) separate out the impact of period effects (something unique to a particular time that inflates or deflates turnout), life-cycle effects (a change in the effect of aging on voting) and generational effects (the process of being born in a particular time and place because the relationship between age and voting is central to potentially understanding who votes).

Older people have traditionally voted at a higher rate, so it is important to understand whether this is a life-cycle or generational effect. If there is a generational effect, then some portion of the decline in turnout may be a function of generational replacement (older generations with a higher propensity to vote are being replaced over time by generations with a lower propensity to vote). Blais *et al.* conclude that, between 1968 and 2000, the main reason for the decline in voting is caused by generational replacement. There is also a period effect, whereby all groups are less likely to vote (about 3 points) in elections after 1990.

Finding that the decline in voter turnout is a product of generational replacement is, as the authors of the study note,

consistent with the findings from the U.S. (Lyons and Alexander, 2000). That said, generational replacement as an explanation for the decline does not really explain why younger generations are less likely to vote. Blais *et al.* suggest that the most recent generations are less likely to vote because they pay less attention to politics, and because they do not see voting as a moral duty. As such, the decline in turnout “reflects a larger cultural change” (Blais *et al.* forthcoming).

Methodology

This examination of turnout during the 2004 election campaign is based on a telephone survey conducted early in the campaign. The survey was in field between May 31 and June 6, 2004, with a random sample of 1,018 Canadians. With a sample of this size, the results can be considered accurate within plus or minus 3.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Data were weighted by household composition, age, gender and region.

Examining the Likelihood of Voting in 2004: A Methodology

Turnout is an elusive concept when measured in surveys, because people tend to either intentionally or unintentionally misreport their previous voting history and their likelihood of voting in future elections (Bernstein *et al.* 2001). In addition, turnout is a dichotomous variable (one either votes or one does not) that does not capture the underlying relationship between the attitudes people have and the decision to vote or not. It may be interesting to observe that a person did not vote, but we cannot be sure whether this choice is a product of a fundamental lack of caring about voting or more superficial matters. Nevertheless, self-reports do provide a respondent’s perspective on voting.

For these reasons, rather than focusing on self-reports and on correlates of voting such as age, education or political attitudes, the starting point here is to see voting as flowing from a more general theory of human behaviour. In effect, we replace the question, “why do some people vote?” with, “how committed are Canadians to voting?” To answer the latter question, we apply a theory of commitment in the Conversion Model™ (for further elaboration of the model, the reader is invited to see Hofmeyr and Rice, 2000). The Conversion Model™ is based upon the idea that there is a “general process whereby people develop commitments in order to satisfy needs and values” (Ceurvorst, 1993). The theory of commitment is general, so it applies to any situation where people make choices either to do or not do something, or to choose one brand of a product rather than another (Hofmeyr and Bennett, 1994). The Conversion Model™ segments people based on their commitment to their current choices and potential for change.

Commitment is a function of a number of psychological dimensions: satisfaction, involvement, the attraction of the alternatives or ambivalence.

Satisfaction refers to the extent to which someone is happy with the choice he/she is making. Is the choice making him/her happy or not? If one is satisfied, one is more likely to continue to make the same choice. In this case, we operationalize satisfaction in terms of an evaluation of the politicians and parties that people must choose to elect. All other things being equal, someone is more likely to cast a vote for a person whom he or she likes. Liking something does not, however, guarantee loyalty or, in this case, continued voting, so we need to understand the other aspects of commitment.

Involvement is the degree to which the choice matters to the person. Different people think that different choices they make are important. The more important the decision is or the more involved a person is, the more he or she has something at stake in changing his/her position. People for whom the act of voting is important are more likely to vote. If a choice is important, the person has a greater degree of involvement in the choice he or she has made. Changing one's course of action will not likely be done lightly for someone who has a lot invested in terms of involvement.

Finally, there is ambivalence, which is the extent of uncertainty felt about what is the right choice. If a person feels there are good reasons for voting as well as good reasons for not voting, he or she is being pulled in different directions. This undermines one's commitment to voting. The impact of this ambivalence will, of course, depend on one's satisfaction with the current choice and the level of involvement.

These different dimensions interact, and a person's level of commitment is a product of the three different psychological processes. For example, low levels of satisfaction may not necessarily mean that people will not vote, if they are also highly involved and lacking in ambivalence. The person who sees voting as a moral or social obligation will be involved and therefore more likely to vote in spite of low satisfaction, especially if he or she does not feel ambivalence.

By categorizing Canadians in terms of their commitment, we can isolate those who are strongly committed from those who are weakly committed or ambivalent about voting. The relative sizes of these groups provides the basis for understanding how turnout could be low and could decline under various scenarios.

Findings

Self-reports

Segments Derived from Following Questions:

Q1. When you take into account everything that you expect from politicians and political parties, how do you rate the politicians of Canada as a whole, on a scale from one to seven, where one is "extremely negative" and seven is "extremely positive?"

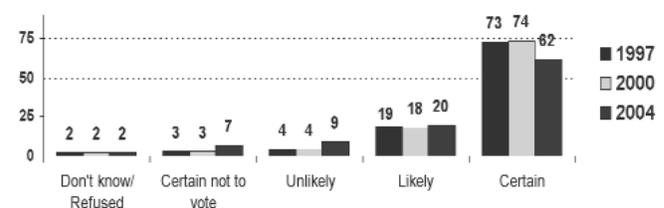
Q2. How important is voting to you personally? In other words, to what extent, if at all, do you care about whether you vote or not? Please use a five-point scale with 'Going to vote is extremely important to me' at the one end and 'I don't care at all about whether I vote or not' at the other.

Q3. Please indicate which one of the following three statements comes closest to your view:

- There are many good reasons to vote
- There are many good reasons not to vote
- There are both good reasons to vote and good reasons not to vote

Just over six in ten people say that they are certain to vote in the election. Another one in five say they are likely to vote during the campaign. This is down significantly from almost three in four (74%) who were certain to vote prior to the 2000 and 1997 elections (as measured by the Canadian Election Study). Although there is not as big a discrepancy between the early campaign self-reports and the final outcome in these data as compared with earlier elections, there remained a high level of self-expressed intention to vote. The self-report question was asked after people were asked about the importance of voting, which may account for some of the difference.

Likelihood of Voting



Q: On election day, are you certain to vote, likely, unlikely or certain not to vote?

Conversion Model™

The Conversion Model™ breaks people into four different segments, and the distribution shows a weak level of commitment to voting in the Canadian population. Only a very small percentage (5%) is in the most committed segment (entrenched), compared with more than one in four who are in the least committed segment (convertible).

ENTRENCHED: One in twenty (5%) Canadians are strongly committed to voting in elections. It is extremely likely these people will vote when given the opportunity.

AVERAGE: Just over one in four (28%) are weakly committed to voting. They are likely to vote (that is their standard position) but they are not as strongly committed to this position as the entrenched group.

SHALLOW: Almost two in five (41%) are uncommitted and should be considered at risk of not voting. They are at risk of not voting because they are more likely to be ambivalent about voting (they see reasons for not voting), are less likely to think that voting is important to them, and less likely to think positively about their choices.

CONVERTIBLE: One in four (26%) is highly uncommitted to voting and highly unlikely to vote on election day. It would be surprising if members of this group voted in any election, given their views.

The distribution of Canadians across the groups shows why turnout can be as low as it has been in recent elections. Even if all of those with any propensity to vote (the members of the shallow, average and entrenched groups) decide on election day to vote, only three in four Canadians would cast ballots. Of course, the shallow group is at a high risk of not voting, and even those who are entrenched or of average commitment can be impacted by events out of their control on election day (e.g. family emergency or responsibility; poor weather).

It is generally observed that younger age cohorts and those with lower levels of education and income are less likely to vote. Consistent with this expectation, we find an overrepresentation of these groups in the convertible and shallow segments. For example, almost four in ten (39%) youths (under 25) have the lowest level of commitment. This is important, because it would suggest that younger generations are not developing a personal involvement with voting and are actually seeing reasons for not voting.

Table 1 shows that self-reported vote intention does not discriminate very well between those likely and unlikely to vote. In fact, the self-reports leave one with the conclusion that there is a large group of people who are going to vote in most elections (they are certain), which directly contrasts with the commitment results. Though the “certain” category is very close to the reported turnout, there are two dilemmas evident when considering this distribution of responses. First, the re-

sults would suggest that the group that is unlikely to vote is actually quite small (7%), which seems to cry out for an explanation, since, in fact, about 40 percent do not vote. Second, there is no way of digging deeper into this category to understand the degree to which people who said “certain” are truly likely to vote on election day.

In considering the results of the self-reports by commitment level, one can see that some of the people who claim to be certain are actually quite likely to not vote. A large majority of the entrenched, average and shallow groups say they are “certain” to vote consistent with their attitudes. In comparison, of those who are unlikely to vote based on their commitment level (the convertible group), there is much less, but still some, overstatement of vote intentions.

In summary, when Canadians’ commitment levels to voting are understood, one can see the reason why turnout is low and declining. Though more than six in ten claim to be certain to vote, this confidence belies their underlying support for the system.

Table 1
Self-reported Likelihood of Voting by Segment

	Total	Entrenched	Average	Shallow	Convertible
Certain	62	71	80	72	22
Likely	20	26	14	20	28
Unlikely	9	2	3	4	29
Certain not to vote	7	2	2	3	18

The Drivers of Commitment

When it comes to turnout, commitment is a better discriminating factor between people than self-reported likelihood of voting. While the commitment questions provide some answers as to why some people are more committed to voting than others, the survey contained questions in three areas—the health of democracy, political engagement, and the democratic deficit—that would allow one to understand what drives commitment. Analysis of these areas shows how commitment is picking up on the underlying structure of Canadian attitudes about democracy.

Health of Democracy

Canadians are not particularly satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada. Fewer than one in ten (8%) say that they are very satisfied, and more than one in ten (14%) are not at all satisfied. Together, more people are on the satisfied side (57% compared with 40%), but many people are not satisfied. Significantly, there has not been much change in the level of satisfaction across the last three election campaigns.

It is evident that the Conversion Model™ findings identify the underlying structure of Canadian attitudes about politics and electoral democracy when we compare the satisfaction with democracy within the four segments. Entrenched voters are satisfied (84% are fairly or very satisfied). The convertible group (the non-voters) is dissatisfied (less than half are fairly or very satisfied). The satisfaction of the middle groups shows their different perspectives and the reason why those in the shallow group are at risk of not voting; half of this group is satisfied and half is not.

While satisfaction is important, it is not the only factor in understanding the choices people make. In fact, if one relied only on satisfaction, one would remain confused about why people do not vote. Consider that only a quarter of those who are not likely to vote (convertible) are not satisfied at all. Even fewer of those who are at risk of not voting (shallow) say they are not at all satisfied. How is it that people can express fairly positive attitudes about how democracy works and still be susceptible to not voting?

	Entrenched	Average	Shallow	Convertible
Very satisfied	25	11	6	3
Fairly satisfied	59	65	44	41
Not very satisfied	7	20	32	28
Not satisfied at all	6	4	16	27
Don't know/refused	3	0	2	2

Political Engagement

Part of the answer to this latter question is that politics—and therefore whether the person votes or not—is of low importance to these people. Several of the questions directly tap into the degree to which people are engaged in politics and, in particular, elections. First, we find that there is modest interest in the federal election. Second, we find that one in four (24%) of Canadians says that they often discussed the federal election in the past week.

Entrenched voters are more engaged in politics, as reflected in their talking about it and their interest in the election. As we move to groups with lower levels of commitment, we find a drop off in interest, so that those with a shallow commitment differ from those with an average level in being less engaged with elections. Consider that on a ten-point scale, the group most likely to not vote has an average value of less than three. This group is so disengaged that it would be a remarkable effort to move them to the shallow level of commitment.

	Total	Entrenched	Average	Shallow	Convertible
Discussed Federal Election in Past Week					
Often	24	20	30	26	14
Occasionally	44	53	52	44	34
Not at all	32	27	18	30	52
Interest in Federal Election					
Average (0 to 10 scale)	5.7	8.1	7.4	6.1	2.9

Democratic Deficit

Finally, a number of questions directly asked about the degree to which the current political system is meeting the needs of Canadians. The evidence suggests that Canadians are quite cynical about the political system in which they find themselves. For example, three in four think that those elected to Parliament soon lose touch. In general, these beliefs, if acted upon, would undermine the likelihood of voting, and the evidence does suggest that those most committed to voting are less likely to share these views.

The results in Table 4 are quite remarkable in further showing what makes a person have a low commitment to voting and therefore be at risk of defecting from the process of selecting a leader. Cynicism about representation is a key driver, as is the view that one's vote does not count.

Not surprisingly, those who are least likely to vote (the convertibles) express particularly negative views across all questions. However, on three of the five questions, this group is not particularly different from those who are merely at risk of not voting (shallow). Those people with a shallow level of commitment strongly agree that government does not care and politicians lose touch. Where they differ from the convertible group is in being less negative about whether their vote counts or whether there is any choice. Because they see the value in the choice they are making, the shallow commitment group is only at risk.

These findings about the system are also evident when it comes to political parties. A high level of commitment is associated with more positive attitudes about the actors (politicians and parties) and the institutions. Entrenched voters are almost unanimous in believing that parties keep their promises most or some of the time. Lower commitment is associated with less support for this position.

Summary and Implications

The use of commitment as the lens through which to view non-voting is instructive. By focusing on the underlying

structure of how Canadians link their values and interests to their choices—using a measure of commitment—we are able to show that there is only a small contingent of Canadians who are deeply committed to voting (a group that is also older, on average). This means that the electoral system and politics in Canada will not exhibit a high level of loyalty as evidenced by people voting regularly in federal elections.

Table 4
Agreement with Statements by Segment

	Total	Entrenched	Average	Shallow "At risk"	Convertible "Non-voters"
I don't think the government cares much what people like me think.	62	46	46	70	77
Those elected to Parliament soon lose touch.	77	75	66	83	85
All federal parties are basically the same; there isn't really a choice.	44	34	24	46	65
So many people vote that my vote hardly counts for anything.	30	32	20	28	41
Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.	49	34	43	51	54
Political parties keep their promises % most /some of the time	52	78	70	50	30
% who agree strongly or somewhat					

The commitment findings place into context the fairly steep decline in turnout over the past four elections. A public that was not committed to voting no doubt made the decline possible, since the "period" effect that Blais *et al.* (forthcoming) report is really a function of the weak attachment felt by Canadians. While we may see higher or even lower turnout in future elections, unless there is an increase in commitment, any gains are unlikely to be lasting.

The democratic deficit is clear. More and more Canadians who are eligible to vote are choosing to stay home each election. Commitment is strongest among those who are politically engaged and who identify less with the negative characterizations of the political process. Building commit-

ment to voting would require engaging people in politics, as well as changing the way we conduct politics. Non-voters don't vote because, compared to voters, they have lower opinions about politicians and parties, place less personal importance on voting and see reasons for not voting.

The significant investment on the part of Elections Canada to encourage participation is falling on deaf ears as Canadians, particularly young Canadians, disengage from electoral politics. Youth, who historically vote to a lesser degree, are less likely to have negative attitudes about the political process but tend to be more ambivalent about the value of voting and less engaged in electoral politics.

If the closeness of the 2004 contest mattered, it did so by preventing turnout from falling even further. The possibility of returning to the 1980s levels of turnout, when three-quarters voted, is bleak. The current nature of campaigns as media events, and the current manner of reporting them, are no doubt contributing to the declining commitment that Canadians are expressing. These findings reinforce the calls for structural reforms to strengthen the bonds between citizens and their governments. Proportional representation, because it provides a higher value for every vote, may be a solution whose time has come. Even that change may only halt the decline we have witnessed over the past four elections.

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