

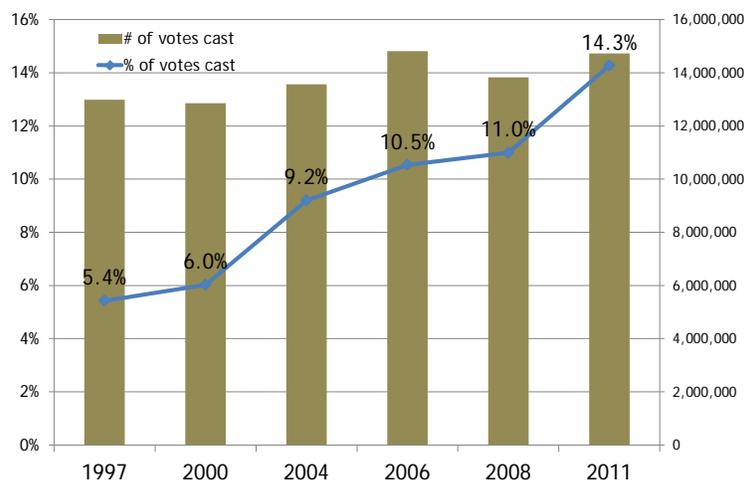
Voting Early: How Advance Polls Change Democracy

In the 2011 Canadian General Election 14.3% of all valid votes were cast at an advance poll (7 to 10 days before Election Day). This represented a 30% increase from the proportion that used the advanced poll in the 2008 election. This brief note considers the implications of this change with particular focus on who votes early and its role in both encouraging turnout and impacting the election outcome. It is clear, however, that while people interested in the campaign are more likely to vote early than those who are not, voting early is not a sign of voter interest in the campaign.

In the past five elections, voting at the advanced polls has taken off. In 1997 only 5.4% of all votes cast were at the advance poll compared to 14.3 per cent in the last election. Effectively, the advance polls (which are held on the 10th, 9th and 7th day before Election Day) could now be decisive in deciding an election if public opinion moves as a result of some event occurring in the last week.

Advance polls began as an opportunity for those who could not vote on Election Day for some reason, to still express their preference. First allowed in 1920 but restricted to few types of voters (based on occupation), it was gradually expanded to other voters.¹ In 1977, changes were made to remove the last obstacle (the requirement to swear an oath that he or she would be away on Election Day) limiting voting at advance polls. Between 1977 and 1997 not much changed.

Voting at Advanced Polls in Canada



Source: Elections Canada

¹ A History of the Vote in Canada, 2nd Edition. Elections Canada.

However, today voters “appear to regard advance voting days as simply additional days to vote, no different from Election Day.”² The notion of a particular *voting day* as an important institution has waned with the decline in turnout and suggests that *voting at advance polls is a sign of an underlying decline in attachment to the voting process* in Canada.

The increase in voting at advance polls is being fostered by Elections Canada. Consider that 665 more advance polls were set up in 2011 as compared with 2008. In rural areas there were 12% and in urban areas there were 18.5% more advance polls.³

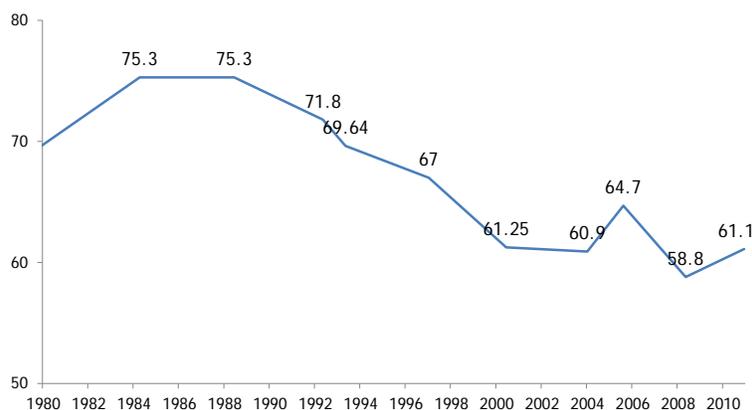
So a significant reason for the increased voting reflects the spirit of the axom, “if you build it, they will come.” Voters seem to be favouring early voting and Elections Canada is responding to this demand.

The Advance Poll and Turnout

Declining public turnout has been an issue in Canada since the early 1990s when turnout dropped below 70%. Although it has now settled in the low 60s, it is worth acknowledging a significant difference between turnout measures from before the Permanent Voter’s List (pre 1997) and today.⁴ Since we did away with a door-to-door enumeration of voters during the early days of the campaign, a disparity has emerged between the number of Canadians who are eligible based on their citizenship and age and the number eligible based on being on the voters list. Turnout is lower than even the official figures indicate.

Given the decline, it is no surprise that the record number of votes cast at the advanced poll has been cited as an indicator of voter interest in the campaign. There are two problems with this argument. First, while voting at advanced polls increased dramatically across the last four elections, turnout did not increase (except in 2006). Second, Elections Canada has been making it easier to vote in this fashion so the trend is more about availability and voter choice than it is about the election per se.

Turnout in Federal Elections in Canada
1980 to 2011



Source: Elections Canada

² Report of the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada on the 41st general election of May 2, 2011, Elections Canada, 2011, page 8.

³ Report of the Chief Electoral Officer, page 17.

⁴ Black, Jerome. 2003. “From Enumeration to the National Register of Electors” IRPP Paper. <http://www.irpp.org/choices/archive/vol9no7.pdf>

Who then Votes in Advance Polls and Why?

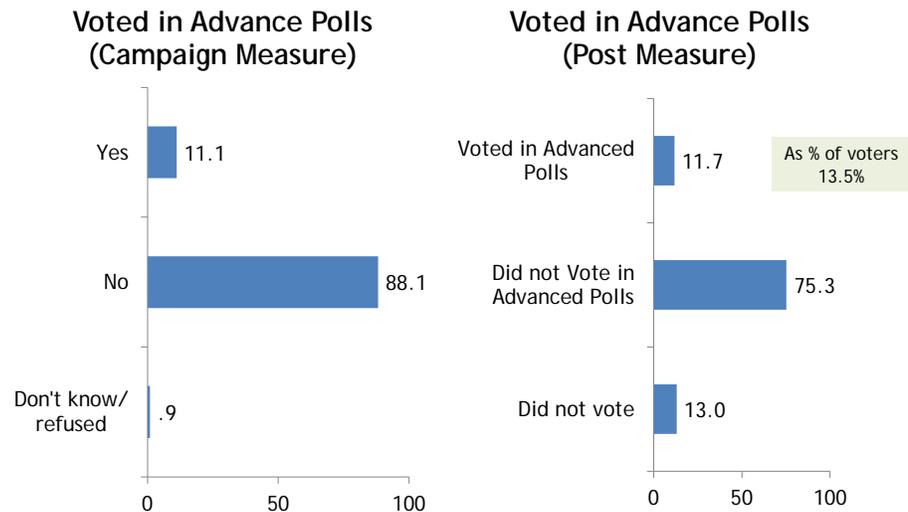
It is worth, then, considering who it is who votes early in the campaign. We can think of a number of hypotheses about early voting:

1. Voting early simply reflects the busy lives people live and is not an indicator of any other factor.
2. People who are strongly partisan will be more likely to vote early because they are less likely to be affected by the campaign (or be uncertain).
3. Voting early reflects the carrying out of a social obligation of people who believe it is important to vote but do not really follow the election.

Sorting out the alternative explanations is not easy but thankfully we have data from the Canadian Election Studies that offers some insight into who votes early. Below is the reported voting results from the 2008 study (the last available publicly). Recall that 11% of the votes cast in the election were done so at an advanced poll. In the surveys, 11 per cent of the population interviewed after the advanced polls were open said they voted in the advanced poll and 12% mentioned voting this way after the election.⁵ This is consistent with the tendency for people to overstate their voting.

Who then is more likely to report voting in the advanced polls? During the campaign it turns out that older people are the most likely (more than twice as likely than young people) but maybe this is just a reflection of their greater likelihood of voting overall.

Reported Voting in Advance Polls (Canadian Election Study 2008)



Q. [Campaign] Did you vote in the advance poll?

Q. [Post Election] Did you vote in the advance poll, at a polling station on election day, by mail, or some other way?

⁵ This gives us 209 and 290 respondents who indicated that they had voted in the advanced poll during the campaign and post-election surveys respectively.

Table 1 (next page) breaks down the reported vote as measured in the Post Election Survey wave of the survey by key demographic groups. While there is little in the way of surprise in who votes (it is the usual suspects), the story on advanced polls is clear. Seniors are the heaviest users of this method of voting (21%) and young people the least (6%) after controlling for the fact that seniors are much more likely to vote.

Notably, gender differences are irrelevant but there is a murky education effect. Those least and most educated are the ones who are more likely to vote at advanced polls, which is at least partially related to age.

If we look at occupation we find that it is retired people who are most likely to take advantage of advanced polls (if they vote). Advanced polls may make it easier for people who have busy lives with work and children but these groups don't particularly seek out this method more than others despite these commitments.

Table 1: Demographic Differences in Reported Voting in Post Election Survey (2008)

	% who voted	% of voters who used advanced polls
Age		
18 to 24	69.2	6.3
25 to 34	82.7	7.4
35 to 44	84.7	10.0
45 to 54	87.9	13.3
55 to 64	92.5	16.0
65+	94.4	21.2
Gender		
Male	88.6	13.9
Female	85.3	13.1
Education		
Less than High School	77.6	13.5
Completed HS	85.5	15.4
Some College/CEGEP	81.3	5.6
Completed College/CEGEP	85.8	9.0
University	91.1	14.5
Graduate Degree	95.9	18.0

The large age effect is a strong sign that advanced polls primarily speak to the already engaged rather than providing another outlet for traditional non-voters.

The Election Study surveys also include a number of questions that tap into voting motivations so these questions have the potential to help unlock the role that advanced polls play.

- During the campaign, those who voted in the advance polls had the highest level of interest in the campaign (mean= 7.2/10) compared with other voters (6.6) and non-voters (4.4).
- A sense of duty is a clear motivator for voting and it turns out that it does differentiate those who voted in the advance polls from other voters. The difference is not large (95% of those voting in the advanced poll strongly agree it is everyone's duty to vote compared with 87% of other voters) but is significant.

- We also know that people who voted in the advance poll are more likely to look back and say that they decided to vote before the campaign began. In fact, 65% of them had decided before the campaign compared with 50% of those who voted but did not do so at the advance polls.

There is, then, some evidence that both the second and third hypotheses likely have some validity. Early voters are interested in the campaign, likely have decided before the campaign begins, but also have somewhat higher sense of obligation (socialization into voting).

Conclusion and Implications

The increase in voting at advanced polls is clearly rising, due, in part, to the fact that Elections Canada has facilitated the trend with the expansion of the number of advanced polling stations. Three things are clear about this process:

1. **The turnout at advanced polls SHOULD NEVER be used as a proxy for voter interest in the campaign.**
2. **Early voting is as much about socialization into voting as it is about a compelling interest in the campaign.**
3. **As more and more of voters, cast votes early in the campaign, the nature of campaigns will change.** Parties will need to consider this as it seriously reduces the impact of the campaign on voter decision-making.