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National Essay Competition Winner – 2008

**To Vote or Not to Vote**

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The Canadian Study of Parliament Group (CSPG), as part of its efforts to foster knowledge and understanding of Canadian parliamentary institutions, is sponsoring the annual National Essay Competition. College and university undergraduate and graduate students in any discipline across Canada are invited to submit essays on any subject matter broadly related to Parliament, legislatures or legislators. The winning essays are made available free of charge, in both official languages, on the CSPG Web site. The views and opinions contained in these papers are those of the authors and are not necessarily reflective of those of the CSPG.

## Essay

For centuries, people have fought for the right to vote and now we see some states more than others taking advantage of this democratic privilege. This concept is represented in understanding voter turnout, the percentage of eligible voters who in an election cast a ballot. There are many factors that exist in understanding why people vote and do not. These consist of young voters, education, mobilization, political interest, voter apathy, norm of a civic duty, electoral systems and competitiveness. In Canada, there is mostly a pessimistic view towards voting during election time.<sup>1</sup> This attitude is not met with Denmark, a country that enjoys high voter turnout.<sup>2</sup> Canada and Denmark are two countries with similar economic, social and geographical similarities, yet differ when it comes to political participation in elections. Canada continues to have a declining voter turnout while Denmark's is consistently high because Canadians have a negative attitude thus inquiring less incentive to vote from a weak sense of civic duty norm compared with positive electoral attitudes present in Denmark.

The recent decline in Canadian federal elections since the 90's is a steady reality that is displayed in past elections. In the 1993 election, voter turnout fell from 75 percent from the previous election to 70 percent. This later then fell to 67 percent in 1997 and then again in 2000 with just over 61 percent (see appendix A).<sup>3</sup> The 2008 election held on October 14<sup>th</sup> had the lowest record of Canadian votes at 59.1 percent.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Canada's highest voter turnout was experienced in 1958 with 79.4 percent when Diefenbaker returned to power.<sup>5</sup> This percentage of the highest voter turnout is not even above Denmark's average voter turnout.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Leduc and John H Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A new Survey of Non-Voters*, (Elections Canada, 2003). p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Jorgen Elkit, Palle Svensson and Lise Togeby, "Why is Voter Turnout in Denmark Not Declining?" (Washington DC, 2005). p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Leduc and Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *CBC News*, "Voter turnout drops to record low" Canada: October 15 2008.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Elkit, Svensson and Togeby, "Why is Voter..."p. 2.

In Denmark, where the voting age is the same as Canada, that being eighteen, turnout is always high, as the average percentage is 85.<sup>7</sup> Since the 1950's the lowest voter turnout was in 1990 with 82.8 percent<sup>8</sup>, still a very impressive number of voters. In the latest election of 2007, voter turnout was 86.6 percent, a rise from the 2005 election of 84.4 percent.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the people of Denmark feel differently than Canadians when it comes to voting during elections, figuring out why is important to this situation and will allow incite on how to fix Canada's declining turnout.

Examining youth and education in reference to voter turnout will show how Canadians are lacking initiative. In past recent elections, young Canadian cohorts have been participating at low levels (see Appendix B).<sup>10</sup> In the 2004 Federal Election, the turnout among those aged 18 to 29 was 15 points lower.<sup>11</sup> Mark Franklin, in his book, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies Since 1945*, explains this low turnout among cohorts as he says, "... [this] is precisely because they do not see themselves as members of such groups. Many of them are not in a position to have yet acquired the necessary social linkages, nor have they been adult long enough to have yet been mobilized by those who will attempt to enmesh them in such networks."<sup>12</sup> Evidently, when young people of a society feel a lack of civic duty they will resist voting during elections. Young Canadians generally feel they are not integrating into the political system, they presume basic attitudes of voter apathy; political distrust and a lack of information (see Appendix C).<sup>13</sup> This brings about the need for increased political education. This is important to look at because the better politically educated citizens are; the more likely they will be open to new impressions and utilizing this information to form

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Embassy in Beijing. General election in Denmark, November 13, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Leduc and Pammatt, Explaining the Turnout, p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> Ashleigh Ryan, "Fulfilling their civic duty...if they have to" Queens Journal. (Queens, Kingston, October 17, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Mark N Franklin, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945*, (USA: Cambridge Univeristy), p. 203.

<sup>13</sup> Leduc and Pammatt, Explaining the Turnout, p. 50.

personal opinions.<sup>14</sup> Young cohorts simply do not have enough education to make informed decision relating to all aspect of electoral politics. The study on voter turnout published in Electoral Insight reported, "...that during the final ten days of the 2004 election campaign, 40 percent of those in the 18-29 age group were not able to identify Paul Martin as the Liberal leadership candidate, 53 percent couldn't name the Conservative leader and 66 percent couldn't name the NDP leader."<sup>15</sup> Clearly, there is a significant level of unawareness among young Canadian voters. After all, 83 percent of Canadians feel that schools should be doing more to educate students about the benefits of voting and political participation<sup>16</sup>. When John Pammett and Lawrence Leduc investigated this topic for Elections- Canada, they found that,

This image of uncaring youth is sometimes accompanied by a more purposeful description of youth as being actively negative toward politics or elections. Some of the respondents said young people were less likely to vote because they were cynical or disillusioned about politics, sick of the "false promises, dishonesty, hypocrisy, corruption and negativity" which supposedly characterize political life, and not willing to participate in a "meaningless" activity.<sup>17</sup>

The negative feelings that young Canadians cohorts have regarding elections is damaging the voter turnout as well as the lack of significant political education.

Individual mobilization deals with the attitudes of individuals that offer incentives to vote and political mobilization refers to social integration and civic duty, a feeling of obligation and responsibility to be politically active.<sup>18</sup> It has already been stated above that Canadians fail to have this sense of mobilization especially in young voters. On the other hand, Denmark does not seem to struggle with this to the same extent.

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<sup>14</sup> Elkit, Svensson and Togeby, "Why is Voter..."p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ashleigh Ryan, "Fulfilling their civic duty..."

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> Elkit, Svensson and Togeby, "Why is Voter..."p. 5.

Denmark recognizes the trend of young electorates voting at low levels and sees that this may be a possibility in the future. However, at the moment it does not serve to be an issue.<sup>19</sup> There is of course a high degree of integration as well as a norm for civic duty. Based on the fact that Denmark has such high percentage points in voter turnout this is not surprising. Political scientists, Jorgen Elklit, Palle Svensson and Lise Togeby, from the University of Aarhus, in Denmark have said, “Part of the explanation of the stable turnout in Denmark is, thus, that new generations have been mobilized as well as former generations.”<sup>20</sup> It appears that civic duty plays a significant role in Denmark’s political culture for all age groups. This case can be applied to Franklin’s idea that, “Turnout appears to be stable because, for most people, the habit of voting is established relatively early in their lives.”<sup>21</sup> In Canada’s case, we see that one of the reasons for the lack of votes from young people can be connected to education. In Denmark, there is only a slightly growing difference in turnout between the well and poorly educated.<sup>22</sup> Thus further showing how the reasoning behind Canadians lack of turnout is due to negative attitudes and low levels of mobilization, characteristics not met with positive Danish citizens.

One’s level of political interest and apathy are other voter turnout characteristics that must be examined as they help explain the level of incentive to vote. Canada is a unique case when it comes to this topic. In reality, a majority of Canadians do feel some sort of interest in politics.<sup>23</sup> However, not all demographics demonstrate this level of interest. A study published in Electoral Insight entitled: “Missing the Message: Young Adults and Election Issues” identifies a declining interest in politics all together among young people specifically. The study found that Canadians between the ages of 18 to 29 rated their level of political interest as 4.5 out of 10.<sup>24</sup> This once again can be applied to Franklin’s idea on the need

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Franklin, Voter Turnout, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Elklit, Svensson and Togeby, “Why is Voter...,” p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> Leduc and Pammett, Explaining the Turnout, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> Ashleigh Ryan, “Fulfilling their civic duty...”

of developing a voting habit at a young age in order to gain a stable voter turnout.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, in regards to the 2000 election, over half of the non-voters said they actually do have an interest in politics but not in the election. Suggested reasons for this were: perceived non-competitiveness, lack of appeal and confidence.<sup>26</sup> This is also true for the number of people who were interested in both politics and the election yet did not vote. In order to create a continually high and stable voter turnout in Canada, there must be little to no gap between political interest and actually voting, thus prompting a more positive outlook on the idea of voting. The way to assure such a situation is of course, adopting a norm for civic duty, an important concept that is intertwined with factors of voter turnout and is presented throughout this topic.

In fact, Denmark is the perfect example of voting despite low political interest or apathy. Generally, as it has been mentioned, interest does tend to be high. But, even when it is not, there is “no trend towards an increasing difference” between turnout among the least interested and those that are.<sup>27</sup> Also, the turnout among the least politically interested people is recently increasing; this is true in Denmark’s 2001 election as it was higher than the previous year.<sup>28</sup> The interesting key factor here is coming to understand why those Danes continue to vote despite having a low interest. This brings back the idea of civic duty or political mobilization.

Elkit, Svensson and Togeby offer a great explanation of the importance of political mobilization and civic duty. They say,

According to the theories of individual mobilization and social integration, we expect that the acceptance of a norm of civic duty to vote in a representative democracy is important for electoral participation. Politically mobilized citizens want to vote, and citizens who are socially integrated take

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Franklin, *Voter Turnout*, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Elkit, Svensson and Togeby, “Why is Voter...”, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*

in the norms of society and seek to follow them, because such norms are seen as reasonable and more or less self-evident.<sup>29</sup>

This concept is completely rational; why would someone pick up garbage they see in Place A on the street if they don't feel it would make a difference or if everyone else is simply by passing it? In this case, the norm is to walk by the wrapper on the sidewalk without picking it up. If this citizen were in another place, say B, where people were being seen picking up garbage here and there, as well as being in a social environment that adopts and encourages this idea of picking up garbage, he would follow along as it is the norm while inquiring a feeling of necessity to do so. To some extent, Place A is like Canada, a country with weak civic duty and Place B is like Denmark, a country with strong civic duty.

When examining civic duty among Canadians, it is important to analyze their mentality. It may be surprising to learn that a majority of Canadians do feel that it is important to vote in elections<sup>30</sup> seeing as their average voter turnout as mentioned before is weak and decreasing. The problem is that Canadians are saying one thing but doing another. After all, actions speak louder than words. In the study found in *Electoral Insight*, a Canadian was quoted as saying, "I understand the importance of voting and I understand that I should be, but I just don't care to vote."<sup>31</sup> The implementation of civic duty into the minds of Canadians is obviously failing. Their negative mentality is creating a lack of incentive to vote, thus harming Canada's voter turnout.

On the contrary, Denmark has a strong sense of civic duty among its people allowing a continuation of high turnout at the polls. A 2002 study done on Denmark found that 98 percent of the people feel it is important to have a large majority of voters for democracy and 96 percent agreed that a belief in democracy meant an obligation to vote, as well as 92% said they felt a strong obligation to vote.<sup>32</sup> The study also found a small difference in turnout between the people of strongest obligation and

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> Leduc and Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout*, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> Ashleigh Ryan, "Fulfilling their civic duty..."

<sup>32</sup> Elkit, Svensson and Togeby, "Why is Voter...", p. 16.

those with weak obligation, as well as, when factors of age and education were tested into this, the impact was very weak, allowing a strong relationship to continue (see Appendix D).<sup>33</sup> This can only mean that Danes naturally have a strong norm for the civic duty and is reinforced through a habit of voting. This allows for a powerful and autonomous impact on voter turnout for the Danish people.

Furthermore, it is essential to look at the effectiveness or meaningfulness as well as the competitiveness of elections. These factors relate to the formation of electoral systems. Understanding the influence this has on voters will allow us to reach the core root of the issue of why Canada's turnout is declining, unlike Denmark's. This will further explain why Canadians have such negative perspectives on voting compared to Danes. Canada runs under a plurality system other wise better known as first-past-the-post. Denmark, on the other hand, goes by proportional representation.

The plurality system is the oldest used voting system and is becoming less common. Under this system, elections are run based on geographical defined districts. Voters base their ballot on the candidate of their riding. The party that wins the majority of votes overall is awarded power. As a result, the party that wins will be represented by those candidates who won in their selected constituencies.<sup>34</sup>

The first application of the proportional representation system took place in Denmark in 1855.<sup>35</sup> Proportional Representation (PR) is based on the principle in which the number of seats given to a specific party is determined by the percentage of the popular vote which goes to that party.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the number of seats assigned to the winning party is more or less proportional to the votes received. The PR system can apply in electing the legislature in either parliamentary or presidential systems.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Christina Holtz-Bacha, Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Juliet Roper, *The Politics of Representation: Election Campaigning and Proportional Representation*, (New York, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> John H. Humphreys, *Proportional Representation: A study in methods of election*, (London, 1911), p. 112.

<sup>36</sup> Steven Hill and Robert Richie, *Whose Vote Counts?*, (Boston, 2001), p. 3-4.

Effectiveness and competitiveness of an election depends on democracy. Principles of representative democracies are connected to modern liberal democracies.<sup>37</sup> Elections are central to democracy as this is the way citizens can choose who will represent them in regards to public policy and in governing of their country. This is why people vote. Different electoral systems have different levels of reaching the wants and needs of its citizens. The degree to which voices are heard is clearly essential and is dependent upon the electoral system that the citizens vote by.<sup>38</sup>

The plurality system that which Canada rules by serves to have some problematic factors that result in dissuading one to vote. One of the main concerns with this system is the fact that it is based on the representation of districts. In the book, *The Politics of Representation: Election Campaigning and Proportional Representation*, authors Juliet Roper, Christina Holtz-Bacha and Gianpietro Mazzoleni write, “Plurality systems can, however, and very often do, produce disproportional election results. Because governmental power is decided upon an aggregate of constituency results on a first-past-the-post basis, the winner is not necessarily the party or the candidate with the overall majority of the vote. Thus, the key interest of a majority of voters may not be represented directly in government.”<sup>39</sup> Because of this, voters have a sceptical idea when it comes to the meaningfulness of their vote as well as the competitiveness of the election. This is important because, in Pammett and Le Duc’s investigation into this topic that is found in, *Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-Voters*, they concluded that “...feelings that the vote mattered was a statistically significant predictor of having voted.”<sup>40</sup> A majority of non-voters in the Canadian election of 2000 felt their vote made little or no difference.<sup>41</sup> This creates a thought of a “wasted vote” which is a negative conception

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<sup>37</sup> Holtz-Bacha, Mazzoleni and Roper, *The Politics*, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Holtz-Bacha, Mazzoleni and Roper, *The Politics*, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> Leduc and Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout*, p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

that will only lead to the lack of interest in voting.<sup>42</sup> The effect of a Canadian vote is not as strong compared to Danes who vote under a different electoral system, permitting more proportional results.

Proportional Representation, a more modern electoral system, present in Denmark, allows a more permitting voice for citizens than those under the plurality system because the effectiveness of the vote is greater. A greater range of social representation is possible with a corresponding range of citizens' voices in a political environment and this also means parties can still represent important issues that otherwise may be ignored.<sup>43</sup> This institutional framework helps mobilize people that once felt their needs were not being represented or in other words, minority representation is presented. The PR system has many advantages to it that entice a person to vote. In, *Whose Vote Counts?* By Robert Ritchie and Steven Hill, they comment, "Because nearly every vote [in a proportional representation system] will help a party win more seats, voters have more incentive to participate and parties have incentives to mobilize their supporters." They also go on to say, "...parties and other electoral organizations have strong incentives to keep their supporters informed, and informed citizens are more likely to vote."<sup>44</sup> The PR system allows reasons for politicians to encourage voters through ways that will actually work and it reaches a point that leaves the voter no reason not to vote. This is rational based on the principles and elements of a PR system and is a good strategy to keep up a high voter turnout.

The level of competitiveness plays a role based on its electoral system. One system may foster a more competitive race while others not so much. Competition keeps things exciting and thus increasing ones level of interest. In a plurality system, it is more difficult to have a higher competitive election because the fact is, is that your vote counts toward your district area, as already mentioned. Basically, this means, if one district is constantly voting for the same parties every year, and has a strong focus on one particular view (also known as a non-competitive district), someone who feels opposite to this majority

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<sup>42</sup> Mark Franklin, Voter Turnout, p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Holtz-Basha, Mazzoleni and Roper, The Politics, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Hill and Ritchie, Whose Vote, p. 14.

may not vote due to the lack of competition they feel present thus acquiring a feeling of a wasted vote. Mark Franklin touches on the significance of competitiveness as he says, “At the time of a more competitive election, interest in politics goes up and so does the extent to which people feel sympathy toward their most preferred party.”<sup>45</sup> The level of competition in Canada is a fairly new concern for Canadians. A majority of Canadians believe that elections are not very competitive.<sup>46</sup> This is important due to the correlation of competition and participation.<sup>47</sup> This is connected to one of the reasons why Canada’s voter turnout is quite low and staying that way.

Under proportional representation, competitiveness in elections is not lacking to the same extent as it is in the plurality system. John Stuart Mills, an early supporter of PR has spoken about how this system increases the chances that a legislative majority has support from the most voters, this allows for voters to elect representatives that reflect a range of opinions and views.<sup>48</sup> Elklit, Svensson and Togeby have concluded, “The Danish electoral institutions have facilitated the mobilization of weak groups, and the high competitiveness in the national elections has maintained the high level of mobilization.”<sup>49</sup> In Denmark, a low level of competition among parties is not an issue for voter turnout because of the PR system that offers a win to the majority. People want to vote. The feeling of a ‘wasted’ vote is not possible in this case. Because of this, voter turnout is not sacrificed, unlike most Canadians who fail to participate in an uncompetitive district.<sup>50</sup>

Canada and Denmark are both industrialized liberal democracies but have opposite voter turnout characteristics. Denmark’s consistently high turnout does not begin to compare to Canada’s embarrassing low voter turnout. The negative feelings Canadians feel towards elections and voting does not provide enough incentive to vote especially when the norm for civic duty is lacking. There are many reasons to

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<sup>45</sup> Mark Franklin, *Voter Turnout*, p. 208.

<sup>46</sup> Leduc and Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout*, p. 41.

<sup>47</sup> Hill and Ritchie, *Whose Vote*, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Elklit, Svensson and Togeby, “Why is Voter...”, p. 18.

<sup>50</sup> Leduc and Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout*, p. 41.

suggest why this is. As already mentioned, young Canadian voters have a low turnout rate. This is not true for young Danes. In order to increase Canadian votes, the youth need to be targeted in terms of political education. Their lack of concern and knowledge on elections is too low.<sup>51</sup> They need to feel part of a political society in order to establish a norm of civic duty so that they will feel obligated to vote. This idea of integration relates to political mobilization. Without this citizens would not feel the need to vote or have established a norm for civic duty. This quality is very high in Denmark, as already mentioned, even those that fail to be interested still go out to vote.<sup>52</sup> This is not true in Canada. As a result mobilization among Canadians needs to be worked on. Because the norm for civic duty is low in Canada, political interest must increase and voter apathy must decline. Since it has been proven that there is a correlation among Canadians in regard to political interest and actually voting, this is essential.<sup>53</sup> Parties need to mobilize citizens to vote to create feelings of obligation and interest, but this has to take effect soon, because if new generations do not start developing a habit of voting, improvements in turnout will not be made. This habit has been in place for Denmark for a long time now and so civic duty is strong and continuing. Danes do not have a negative outlook on elections and voting. Most Canadians feel their votes do no count because of the way their system is, that being plurality.<sup>54</sup> This is not the case in Denmark where they run by proportional representation. Level of competitiveness of elections is applicable to the electoral system. Not as practical but significantly helpful to Canadians voter turnout would be a change to PR, where effectiveness of votes and competitiveness is higher.<sup>55</sup> The more positive outlooks Danish people have and their norm of a civic duty allow them to continue high voter turnout under a PR system. Where as, in Canada, under a plurality system, citizens struggle to find motives to vote creating poor political habits that result in very low turnout. If Canada intends on improving voter turnout, they must look to their friends in Denmark as a role model.

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<sup>51</sup> Leduc and Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout*, p. 50.

<sup>52</sup> Elkit, Svensson and Togeby, "Why is Voter...", p. 16.

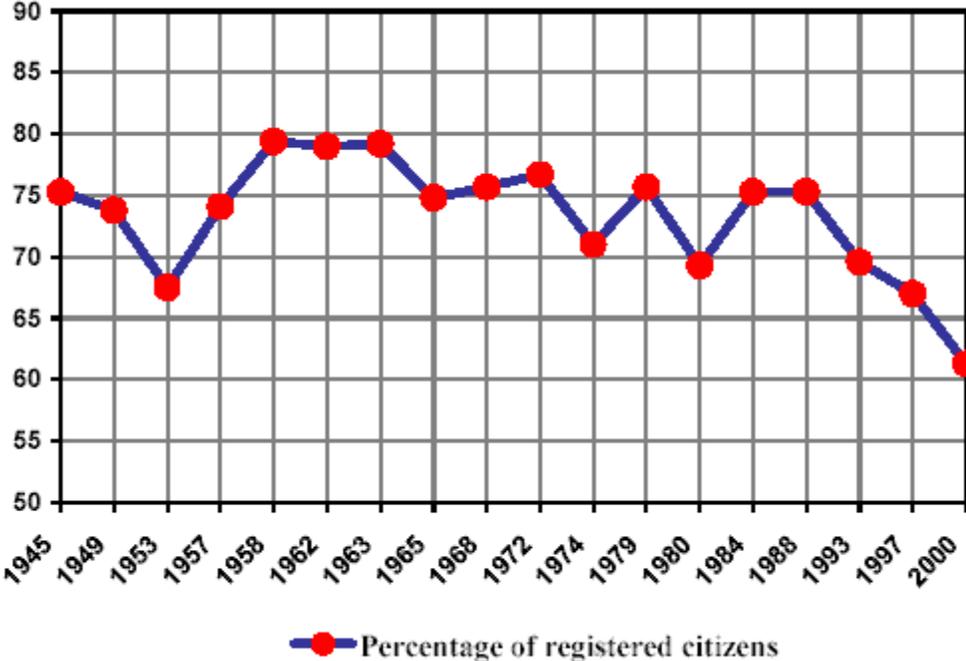
<sup>53</sup> Mark Franklin, *Voter Turnout*, p. 131.

<sup>54</sup> Holtz-Basha, Mazzoleni and Roper, *The Politics*, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> Holtz-Basha, Mazzoleni and Roper, *The Politics*, p. 7.

Appendix A

Figure 1. Voting Turnout in Canadian Federal Elections (1945–2000)<sup>56</sup>



<sup>56</sup> Leduc and Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout*, p. 5.

**Appendix B**

Table 14 Voting and Not Voting in 2000, by Age Cohort<sup>57</sup>

Voted in 2000	Age in 2000								Total percent
	68+	58-67	48-57	38-47	30-37	25-29	21-24	18-20	
Yes	83.3	80.4	76.4	66.2	54.2	38.2	27.5	22.4	61.3
No	16.7	19.6	23.6	33.8	45.8	61.8	72.5	77.6	38.7
N = 2 467 V = .392 p < .000									

<sup>57</sup> Leduc and Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout*, p. 20.

## Appendix C

Table 42 Perceived Reasons Why Young People Less Likely to Vote (Open-ended; multiple responses)<sup>58</sup>

<b>Not Integrated</b>	<b>Under 25 years old</b>	<b>25 and older</b>
Distanced from politics by age; not feeling represented, connected	40.4	36.6
Lack of information, understanding, knowledge	33.9	27.1
Lack of encouragement	2.0	4.2
Too busy, too mobile	3.3	3.2
	79.6	71.1

<b>Disengagement</b>	<b>Under 25 years old</b>	<b>25 and older</b>
Uninterested, apathetic	31.3	30.4
Negativism, cynicism, disillusionment	9.2	13.5
Distrustful of system, politicians	6.7	8.7
Irresponsibility, rebelliousness, laziness	4.3	6.4
	51.5	59.0

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<sup>58</sup> Leduc and Pammett, *Explaining the Turnout*, p. 50.

## Appendix D

<b>Table 6. Turnout and Civic Duty, 2002.</b> <b>Survey data. Percentages<sup>59</sup></b>	<b>Without Control</b>	<b>After Control for Age &amp; Education</b>	<b>N</b>
<i>“How much do you feel obliged to vote at a parliamentary election?”</i>			
Very large obligation	97	96	629
Fairly large obligation	82	83	192
No and Rather small obligation	58	61	58
All	91	91	879

<sup>59</sup> Elkit, Togeby and Svensson, “Why is Voter...”, p. 26.

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