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Where have all the voters gone?

by Paul Howe

IN THE 1988 FEDERAL ELECTION, 75 PER CENT OF ELIGIBLE CANADIAN voters cast ballots. This proportion fell to 70 per cent in 1993 and 67 per cent in 1997, only to slump further still in November 2000 to 61 per cent. These figures, it now seems evident, are not random fluctuations but a sustained downward trend that deserves careful scrutiny. Where have all the voters gone?

One consistent pattern in surveys conducted around the time of the 2000 election was that younger Canadians were less likely to cast ballots. A turnout gap of roughly 30 to 35 percentage points separated the youngest and oldest voters. The research team running the 2000 Canadian Election Study – a multiwave survey that took place before and after the election – have conducted an analysis of voting patterns in federal elections from 1968 to 2000 to put this finding in context.¹ Has turnout

among young Canadians always been lower than among older Canadians, or are today's young adults especially likely to abstain? The answer, it turns out, is a bit of both. Younger Canadians have always (or at least since 1968) been less likely to vote than older Canadians, to the tune of some 15 per cent. But the tendency not to vote has intensified among young Canadians born since 1960. In addition to age differences in voting turnout, there is roughly a 20 per cent gap between those born in the 1960s and 1970s and those born before 1945. The

fact that young people are not voting nowadays is a function of both age and generation, and the generational effect is the critical one, since it accounts for much of the decline in voter turnout over the past decade. Because newer generations vote less than those that preceded them, the result over time, as these generations assume a greater weight in the electorate, is a steady decrease in overall turnout.

These findings underscore the significance of nonvoting among today's young Canadians. If it were simply an abiding tendency of young adulthood, a phase that each generation passed through on its way to attaining "normal" levels of electoral participation, it would not be especially worrisome. But newer generations are instead staying away from the polls even as they mature, pointing to a deeper problem that will not correct itself with time, and will indeed worsen as they account for an ever-increasing proportion of Canadian voters.

The demographic bases of nonvoting also cast doubt on the popular idea that a lack of competition for office is the key reason why Canadians are shying away from the polls. This idea simply does not square with the generational underpinnings of nonvot-



ing. There is no reason to think that those born in the 1960s and 1970s are especially apt to be disillusioned with the stagnation of electoral competition since 1993, and data from the 2000 election study further undermine the proposition. Indeed, young Canadians in that survey were slightly less likely than older ones to agree

with the statement, "There is no point voting for a party that will win only a few seats." The same holds true of another barometer of electoral disillusionment, "All federal parties are basically the same. There isn't really a choice."

This is not to say that one-party dominance in recent elections has had no effect whatsoever. The Canadian Election Study team did find, in its analysis of voting patterns over time, a small downward shift in turnout across all age groups. This is more the pattern that would be expected in reaction to reduced electoral competition; one-party dominance, then, probably does account for some portion of the drop in turnout in recent elections, inducing electoral apathy in a small portion of Canadians of all ages. But the greater part of the decline has been fuelled by intergenerational differences in turnout.

Paul Howe is professor of political science at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton.

Hence, to explain nonvoting, we need to identify the changes that have been conditioning the political attitudes and dispositions of rising generations. Much of the analysis and commentary in this vein, both in Canada and elsewhere, takes its lead from Robert Putnam's analysis of the evolution of American society in the postwar era. In *Bowling Alone* and other writings,² Putnam draws on a wealth of longitudinal data to argue that the past several decades have been witness to a dramatic decline in the stock of social capital in the United States. The intricate web of social connections and interpersonal trust that previously knitted neighbours and compatriots into a strong and cohesive civil society has become seriously frayed, with deleterious consequences

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for politics and other sectors of shared public life. What's more, the most important source of these changes is an elevated level of social and political disengagement on the part of younger generations of Americans.

Putnam has his share of critics, among them Canadian political scientist Henry Milner, who has recently argued that the Harvard scholar overlooks a critical dimension of democratic citizenship. The impact of "civic literacy" – the political knowledge required to participate effectively in a democracy – is conspicuously absent from Putnam's account.³ This omission is especially important, Milner contends, for those interested in understanding declining voter turnout. For political knowledge is a more

powerful predictor of the propensity to vote than Putnam's key variables. Empirical evidence from the 2000 Canadian Election Study backs Milner's claim. Voter turnout was only 10 percentage points higher among those who agreed with the statement that "most people can be trusted" than among those who disagreed. This modest relationship with interpersonal trust – one of Putnam's core variables – pales in comparison to the 32 per cent gap in voter turnout between those who scored high on a series of political knowledge questions (the top third) and those who scored low (the bottom third).

To date, however, no longitudinal data, of the sort that make Putnam's work so compelling, have been marshalled to establish the magnitude, timing and demographic bases of change in political knowledge over time in Canada. Has political knowledge deteriorated in a manner that is consistent with the generational decline in voter turnout? There are sources of such data, and they can be used to provide a brief overview of the changing contours of political knowledge in this country.

The declining political knowledge of the young

The first step in probing the relationship between political knowledge and voting behaviour is to ask whether overall levels of political knowledge have deteriorated over time, in step with the decline in voter turnout. Answering this question is no easy task, however, since surveys have not asked identical political knowledge questions at different points. It is not even clear that it would be possible to come up with such questions, since most would suffer from



PRIME MINISTER LOUIS ST. LAURENT In 1956, people of all ages tended to vote regardless of their level of knowledge about politics. NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA PHOTO

variable salience – the ability to recall the name of the premier, the finance minister or the leader of the official opposition, to take just a few examples of commonly used questions, would depend at any given moment on the prominence of the incumbent, which in turn would be influenced by a host of factors not easily measured.

So we jump straight to the second pertinent question: are younger generations – specifically, those born in the 1960s and 1970s, who are responsible for much of the decline in voter turnout – less knowledgeable about politics than older cohorts? Answering this question is an easier task, since identical political knowledge questions from

different points in time are not required. All that is needed are batteries of comparable questions that can be used to determine the relative performance of different age groups. Examining comparable data from the present and the past allows for a check on whether any knowledge deficit on the part of today's younger Canadians is more pronounced than any shortfall that existed among young Canadians of the past.

Canadian surveys from three points in time – 1956, 1984 and 2000 – provide relevant data. In 1956, two nationwide Gallup polls were conducted, each containing

a sizable battery of political knowledge questions. The first (in July) asked respondents to identify the country and position of ten prominent international figures; in the second poll (in October), respondents were shown a list of the ten provincial premiers and asked to identify their provinces. In the Canadian Election Study of 1984, respondents were asked to name the premier of each of the ten provinces. For the final data point, 2000, the source is again the Canadian Election Study. This survey posed a wide range of political knowledge questions, from which the ten most comparable to those on the earlier surveys were selected for the analysis below (six asked for the identity of

prominent political figures; four asked respondents to indicate which party was making particular campaign pledges).⁴

Table 1 groups respondents from each survey into three categories of political knowledge – low, medium and high. As near as possible, this classification is done in such a way as to include roughly one third of the total survey sample in each category. The percentages of respondents within each age group falling into the three categories are shown for each point in time.

In the 1956 data, the youngest age group – those aged 21 to 29 – were moderately less familiar with prominent political figures than older respondents. Forty-seven per cent fell into the low knowledge category, compared to 39 per cent for the sample as a whole, while only 23 per cent were in the high knowledge category as against

29 per cent for the entire sample. The performance of the other age groups – 30 to 39, 40 to 49 and 50 plus – was very consistent. At this early date, then, the differences in political knowledge between age groups were modest and confined to the youngest respondents.

In 1984, some 28 years later, more significant differences were starting to emerge. This is most readily apparent in the knowledge levels of the 18-to-20 group (a group not present in the 1956 surveys). Nearly half of these youngest respondents fell into the low knowledge category; only 10 per cent made it into the high knowledge category. The 21-to-29 age group also underperformed, though not obviously by a greater margin than their counterparts in 1956. But it should be noted that education levels in this group were much higher

Table 1: Age and political knowledge in 1956, 1984 and 2000

	18 to 20	21 to 29	30 to 39	40 to 49	50 plus	Total
1956						
Low	-	47%	38%	36%	36%	39%
Medium	-	31%	29%	35%	35%	32%
High	-	23%	33%	29%	30%	29%
1984						
Low	49%	36%	27%	23%	24%	29%
Medium	40%	41%	43%	40%	39%	41%
High	11%	23%	30%	37%	37%	30%
2000						
Low	63%	51%	32%	27%	16%	29%
Medium	26%	29%	34%	35%	36%	34%
High	10%	20%	34%	38%	48%	37%

Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Sources: Gallup Polls 250 (July 1956) and 252 (October 1956), the 1984 Canadian National Election Study and the 2000 Canadian Election Survey.



TRUDEAUMANIA Canadians born in the 1960s and later vote less and know less about politics than earlier generations. NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA PHOTO

than they were among older Canadians – and this to a much greater degree than in 1956. Since education tends, naturally enough, to lead to higher levels of political knowledge, the figures in table 1 could understate significantly the magnitude of age differences at certain points.⁵ Judging by educational attainment alone, those aged 21 to 29 in 1984 should have been considerably *more* knowledgeable than their elders; that they were not attests to the early manifestations of a deterioration of political knowledge among rising generations.

The timing of these changes – if the early 1980s are indeed the starting point for a marked decline in political knowledge among rising generations – roughly meshes with the research findings on voter turnout. Those aged 18 to 29 in 1984 were born in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The research on voting turnout suggests that the drop in turnout has been especially pronounced among those born since that time. Knowledge has been declining among the same groups of young Canadians who are largely responsible for the drop in voter turnout in recent elections.

The 2000 data suggest that the trend has intensified: those born in the 1970s and early 1980s are even less knowledgeable about politics. Half of the 21-to-29 group are in the low knowledge category, while

only 20 per cent are in the high knowledge group. Among the 18-to-20 group, nearly two thirds are in the low knowledge category, and only 10 per cent in the high knowledge category. Compared to earlier times – and in particular to the mid-1950s – the current gap in knowledge levels between younger and older Canadians is striking.

Meanwhile, those born in the 1960s, the 30-to-39 group in the 2000 survey, have not made up the lost ground that was apparent in 1984. Although their knowledge levels on the 2000 survey look to be about aver-

age, this is somewhat misleading since the overall performance of the survey sample is dragged down by the exceedingly ill-informed 18- to 29-year-olds. A sounder comparison is to look at the knowledge levels of the 30-to-39 group relative to their elders, to see if they have made up any of the difference that was apparent in 1984. They have not: 32 per cent are in the low knowledge category, compared to 16 per cent of those aged 50 and over, while 34 per cent are in the high knowledge category, compared to 48 per cent of the over-50s. Aging is not bringing those born in the 1960s up to the knowledge levels of older adults.

All of this points to important intergenerational differences in levels of political

Canadians – newer generations especially – vote less nowadays in part because they simply do not know enough to vote.

knowledge. The persistence and magnitude of the political knowledge gaps separating younger and older cohorts indicate that young people born in the 1960s and on are exceptionally ill informed, and will, at best, only partially close the knowledge gap as they age. It is not terribly surprising, on reflection, that political knowledge should correlate strongly with people's propensity to vote. It seems logical that if people are going to cast a ballot, they must have some basic knowledge of political players, some minimal grasp of political issues; they must be able to connect their political preferences to candidates and parties. But the requisite knowledge is increasingly lacking. Canadians – newer generations especially – vote less nowadays in part because they simply do not know enough to vote.

The impact on voting turnout

And yet, this is too tidy an account. I assume that it is necessary to know something about politics to cast a ballot, but why should this be so? Some would contend that a sense of civic duty alone is enough to compel people to vote. Even if ill informed about politics, citizens should, and often enough will, exercise their right to vote, as much to affirm their commitment to democratic principles and liberties as to influence the selection of elected officials.

This manner of thinking undoubtedly resonated with many in the past, but increasingly it rings hollow. Figure 1 shows the relationship between political knowledge and voting across age groups in 1956, 1984 and 2000, and reveals how knowledge has, over time, become a more critical factor in the decision to vote.

In 1956, people of all ages tended to vote regardless of their level of knowledge about politics. Differences in turnout between the more and less knowledgeable were relatively small – in the 10 to 18 per cent range – and fairly consistent across age groups.⁶ In 1984, the relationship between knowledge and voting started to change. As with political knowledge itself, the source of the change was those aged 18 to 29. Whereas older Canadians acted much like voters of the mid-1950s, in that the less knowledgeable among them were only slightly less likely to vote than the more knowledgeable (by about 10 per cent), among those under 30, knowledge started to loom larger in the voting decision. The turnout gap that year between the top and bottom knowledge categories was, for these youngest voters, roughly 25 per cent.

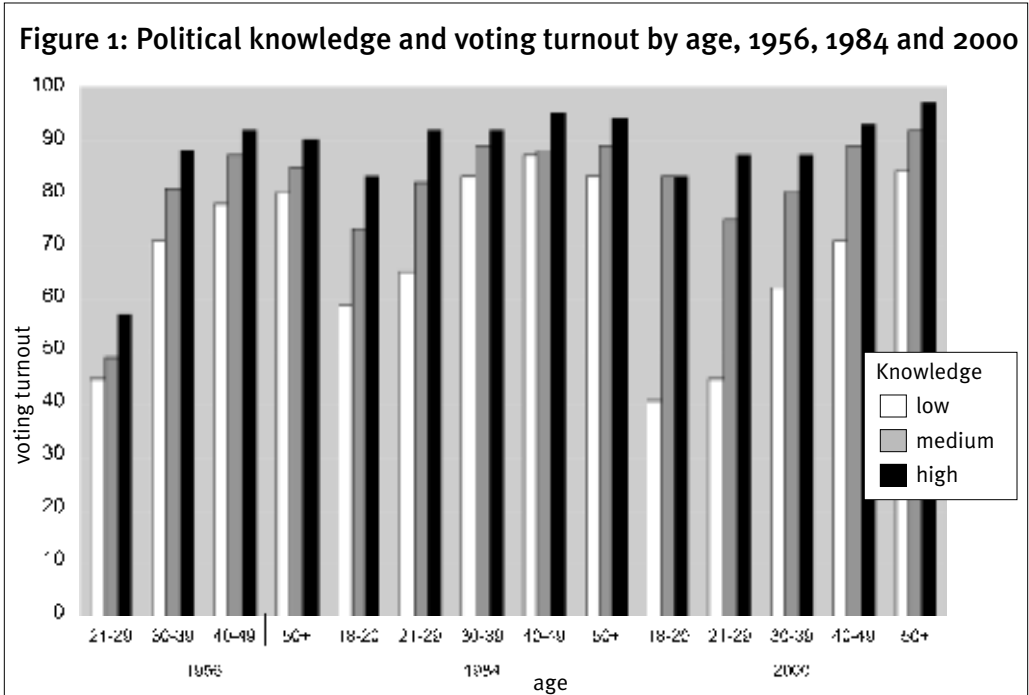
In 2000, these trends continued and intensified. Those in their thirties and forties

looked a lot as they did as 18- to 29-year-olds in 1984. Knowledge had a considerable effect (again a gap of around 25 per cent between top and bottom knowledge categories) on whether or not they chose to vote. Meanwhile, the youngest groups in the 2000 survey, the 18-to-29s, increased the gap another notch, registering a more than 40 per cent difference in turnout between the most and least knowledgeable respondents. The pattern of old does still hold, but only among those aged 50 and older, for whom knowledge continues to have only a small impact on turnout. Nowadays, then, it is only older Canadians who will vote simply out of duty. Younger Canadians think differently; without some knowledge to make the voting decision comprehensible and meaningful, they prefer to abstain.

Again, this is all consistent with, and indeed reinforces, the generational account of

declining voter turnout. In effect, two trends have joined together to help produce a sharp decline in turnout among those born in the 1960s and 1970s. First, they know less about politics. And second, their impoverished knowledge is more likely to affect whether or not they vote.

The joint effect is considerable. Consider the 21-to-29 group. If their knowledge levels could be brought up to the overall average in the 2000 survey, and if voting propensities across knowledge levels remained unchanged, estimated turnout in this group would increase by nine points (from 62 to 71 per cent).⁷ If knowledge levels were raised further still, to those of the 50-and-over category, turnout would jump 14 percentage points (to 76 per cent). These hypothetical calculations suggest that if we want to boost voter turnout, increasing the political knowledge of Canadians could aid considerably.



Another factor: Political interest

If voters were simply staying home because the outcomes of elections (at the federal level anyway) are foregone conclusions, the re-emergence of political competition could be expected to bring citizens back to the polls. But we have seen that the problem of declining voter turnout is not merely a temporary aberration of this sort. Reduced participation in Canadian elections is, in good part, the product of an abiding condition of younger generations, and is therefore neither ephemeral nor likely to prove self-correcting.

The information also suggests that the problem runs deeper than mere electoral abstinence. And it should make us wary of technical fixes like mandatory voting. Forcing people to vote would treat the symptom and not the cause, bringing people to the polls who know little about politics and are not likely to immerse themselves in anticipation of the experience. Worse still, the treatment of the symptom would mask the underlying disease, leaving us without a critical gauge that tells us something is amiss with the Canadian body politic.

So governments and others in a position to influence the relevant policies should consider measures to improve levels of political knowledge: developing a more rigorous and extensive civics curriculum in schools, promoting newspaper reading, improving the quality of political news coverage on television, encouraging political



TRUDEAU AND MULRONEY Significant differences in political knowledge between older and younger Canadians began to emerge in a 1984 survey. NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA

parties to educate voters instead of simply vying for their votes. Good ideas all, and all proposed before by authors such as Milner.

But a caveat is in order. While political knowledge certainly looms large in the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of democratic disengagement, larger than Putnam and others have allowed, it surely is not acting alone. One important parallel trend to the evolving state of political knowledge is changes in levels of political interest. Younger Canadians tend to be less interested in politics than their elders, much as they are less knowledgeable, and political interest, just like knowledge, is a good predictor of political participation.

But how do the two interact? Do people take the time to become informed about politics because they are interested in the subject? Or does knowledge of politics, which renders political events more intelligible and meaningful, generate interest? Or

do the two interact in a virtuous circle, knowledge breeding interest, and interest knowledge? The answer clearly matters for policymakers. For if political interest is the driving force, then improvements to political knowledge may only produce citizens who know a lot about a subject for which they care little – and do nothing to raise levels of political participation. If the figures and calculations above strongly suggest that political knowledge is a principal cause of declining voter turnout, without further assessment taking into account other social and attitudinal trends that influence voting behaviour, it would be premature to conclude that knowledge is the key.

So there are other important dimensions of the problem to be explored to be sure we are on the right track. Yet I strongly suspect that when all is said and done, political knowledge will emerge as one of the principal forces underlying declining participation and political engagement in Canada. Revitalizing Canadian democracy will require sustained attention to this burgeoning problem from politicians and policymakers alike. ■

Notes

¹ André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Neil Nevitte and Richard Nadeau, “The Evolving Nature of Non-Voting: Evidence from Canada,” presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, August 30–September 2, 2001.

² Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

³ Henry Milner, “Civic Literacy in Comparative Context: Why Canadians Should be Concerned,” *Policy Matters*, vol. 2, no. 2 (July 2001); Henry Milner, *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work* (Hanover,

NH: University Press of New England, 2002).

⁴ The 1956 Gallup data were collected by the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion. Codebook preparation and data cleaning were completed by the Carleton University Social Science Data Archives, which also provided copies of the data to the author. Data from the 1984 Canadian National Election Study and the 2000 Canadian Election Survey, both funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), were made available by the Institute for Social Research at York University. The Principal Investigators for the 1984 study were R.D. Lambert, S.D. Brown, J.E. Curtis, B.J. Kay and J.M. Wilson; for the 2000 study, André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte. The original collectors of the data, the data archives and SSHRC bear no responsibility for the analyses and interpretations presented here.

⁵ Comparison of knowledge levels *within* educational categories gives a sense of this. In 1956, 46 per cent of those 21 to 29 with a university education were in the high knowledge category versus 53 per cent of those 50 and over with the same level of education. In 1984, the respective figures for the same two groups were 42 per cent and 58 per cent – clearly a growing gap.

⁶ The reader will no doubt notice a quirk in the 1956 data – the low turnout for the 21-to-29 age group as a whole. The voting question asked whether respondents had voted in the last federal election, in 1953. Since the voting age at the time was 21, the youngest survey respondents in 1956 would not have been eligible to vote in that election. But since respondents were not asked about their eligibility in 1953, and since the age data for the Gallup polls are by broad category only, it is not possible to exclude ineligible voters from the calculations. None of this matters for current purposes, however, since the issue of interest is the difference in voting turnout across levels of political knowledge, which should not be materially affected by the foregoing.

⁷ Calculated simply by applying the proportions in different knowledge groups (taken from table 1) to the turnout figures (in figure 1).