

Many Canadians aren't voting. Have they stopped caring about democracy?

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It wasn't long ago that Canadians voted in large numbers. Just a few decades ago it was normal to see turnout rates for federal elections in the mid-70s. In some contests nearly 80 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot. Since 2000, however, turnout rates have hovered around 60 percent.

Six in ten may still sound fairly respectable, but the generational trends are striking. While about three-quarters of those aged 65 to 74 voted in the 2011 federal election, the turnout rate for the 18 to 24 cohort was under four in ten. According to Elections Canada, this pattern has been evident in every election since 2004, the year they started performing generational comparisons.

If these trends continue, the decline of voting in the 21st century may become as striking a phenomenon as the decline of church attendance in the latter part of the 20th. Baby Boomers left the church; their children and grandchildren seem to be drifting away from the state.

Why is this happening? One reason for declining turnout is a deep shift in social values away from deference to institutional authority. It used to be that if society's leaders told us to do something, we did as we were told. Now people are more likely to make personal calculations about whether voting is worth the effort. Canadians are also less driven by a sense of duty than they once were. Eighty-three percent of Canadians over 60 say voting is a duty; 48 percent of those 18 to 39 agree.

Those tempted to blame the current government's tactics or tone for turning people off politics should hold their horses; turnout began to decline in the 1990s, when the Liberals were in power. Whereas political parties were once important drivers of turnout, courting voters and thus drawing them into the political process, today parties are more vinegar than honey. Political parties are now the least trusted of all our democratic institutions.

If Generation X (born mid-1960s to 1979) and Millennials (born since 1980) persist in their low turnout rates, when Boomers leave the scene Canada stands a real chance of becoming a democracy where only a minority show up on election day.

If deference and duty have lost their power to draw people to the polls, can self-interest do it? Maybe, but young people might be forgiven for assuming there's not much on offer for them in public policy debates. Canadians tend to hear more about pensions and waiting lists for hip replacements than about education or student debt. As Frank Graves has argued, youth political disengagement can be a vicious cycle: politicians offer little for young people because their low turnout means low payback on election day; and as the public conversation increasingly excludes young people's concerns, their turnout declines further.

It's not all bad news. Just as disengagement from traditional religious practice did not mean that Canadians were abandoning the quest for spiritual meaning, the decline of voting does not mean Canadians are entirely politically indifferent. Indeed, recent research conducted by the Environics Institute as part of the biennial Americas Barometer survey, supported by the Ottawa-headquartered Institute on Governance, found Canadians expressing civic engagement in a number of ways besides voting. These included signing petitions, sharing political information online, and participating in demonstrations and protests.

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But much as there are valid modes of political participation outside of traditional party politics, Canada still has mature institutions of parliamentary democracy. These institutions will continue to be run by someone—and wield great power—whether or not the majority of citizens are actively and thoughtfully guiding them.

One stand-out finding from our recent study was the growing proportions of Canadians who say that if the country were facing “very difficult times” it would be justified for the Prime Minister to close down parliament (23%) or dissolve the Supreme Court (17%) and rule alone. These remain minority views, but both have grown over the past few years; the proportion saying it might be acceptable to shut down Parliament has doubled (from 11% in 2010) and growth in this authoritarian sentiment has been most marked among the young. (Our survey was conducted before the October attacks on Canadian soldiers in Quebec and on Parliament Hill.)

A Canada in which a strongman rules without interference from Parliament or the courts is not exactly imminent. (Canadians’ only taste of any such override was during the October Crisis of 1970; in those frightening times the public gave permission and leaders exercised the extraordinary powers of the War Measures Act only briefly.) Still, disengagement from politics, shrugging about the concentration of power, and low trust (just 20% of Canadians say they respect our political institutions a lot) is a combination to take seriously.

What measures might shift the tide and increase trust, engagement, and participation? Some favour mandatory voting. Others proportional representation. Still others think a change as simple as letting people cast ballots online would help a lot. One or all of these might make a difference. Or we might be entering an era in which politics and government are no longer at the heart of civic participation.

One can imagine a world in which people express their democratic values at home, at work, in the marketplace, and through volunteer and other projects, not by marking a secret ballot. But the stubborn question remains: if Canadians truly unplug from politics, who will guard the guardians of the political institutions it took our civilization a thousand years to build?

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