

In Brief

## ***Youth Voter Turnout in Canada:***

### ***1. Trends and Issues***

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***Youth Voter Turnout in Canada: 1. Trends and Issues***  
**(In Brief)**

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# YOUTH VOTER TURNOUT IN CANADA: 1. TRENDS AND ISSUES\*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Few observations in the realm of political science are as axiomatic as the following statement: Ballots are cast by a far smaller proportion of young people eligible to vote for the first time, in federal or other elections, than are cast by more seasoned voters. Longstanding efforts to buoy the turnout of first-generation voters have met with little success. This fact, while viewed as disappointing, was not deemed critical to the overall health of Canada's democratic system. Conventional wisdom had it that these non-voters would grow older and with age would become increasingly engaged and participatory in each passing election.

Since 1993, however, voter turnout for Canadian federal general elections has steadily declined.<sup>1</sup> In 2008, the federal general election established a new historic low in voter turnout with an estimated 58.8% of eligible voters casting their ballots.<sup>2</sup>

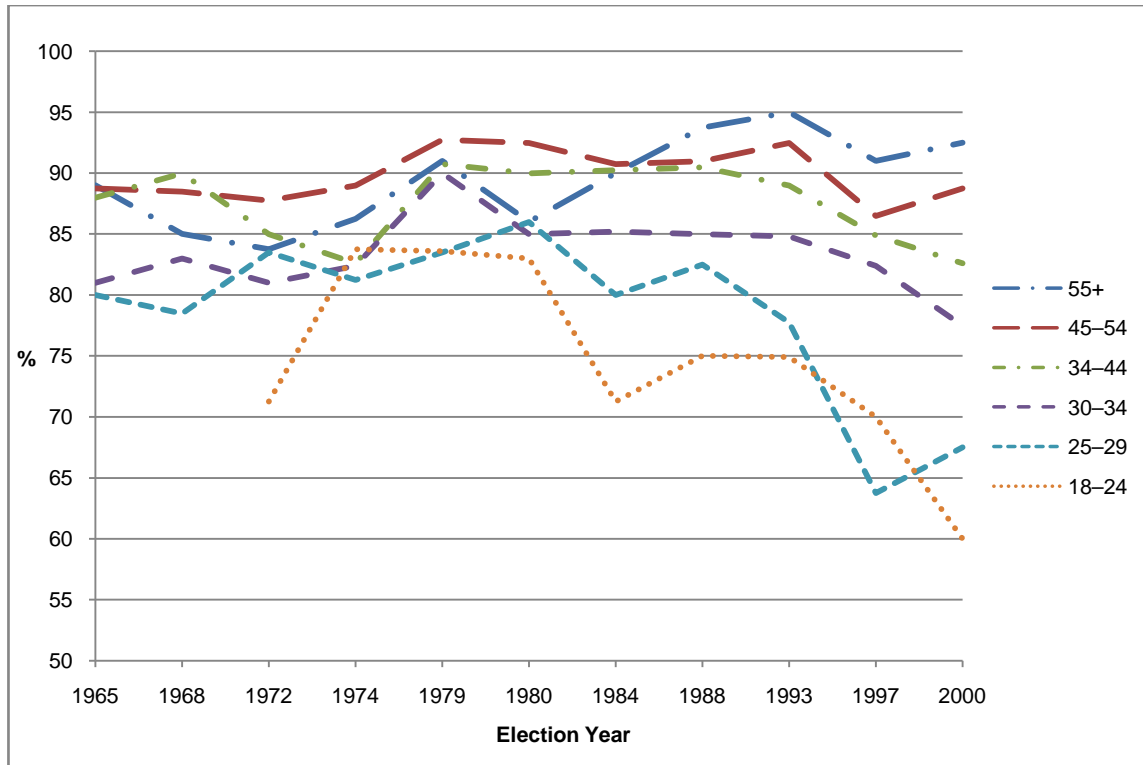
During the same time frame, Canada's youngest voters have turned out for federal general elections in numbers estimated to be well below the voter turnout rate for all age groups. This disengagement from electoral participation by Canadian young people has acted as a significant downward drag on the turnout of the general population;<sup>3</sup> in fact, findings in recent studies indicate that these youngest cohorts, as they age, are voting in lower numbers than their equivalent age cohorts did in the past.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the aforementioned conventional wisdom that non-voters become voters as they age may no longer hold, and this may have long-lasting implications for voter participation in Canada.

## 2 YOUTH VOTER TURNOUT OVER TIME BY AGE GROUP

### 2.1 TRENDS: 1965 TO 1980

Using voter turnout data from the *Canadian Election Study* for the years 1965 to 2000, a number of observations can be made for the period 1965 to 1980 (see Figure 1). First, the youngest cohorts (18–24 and 25–29) were always among the cohorts showing the lowest voter turnout. At times, the gap between the participation of the two youngest cohorts and that of voters aged 35 and above widened to around 10%. This gap was, however, relatively modest compared to the disparity that existed during the years that would follow this period. Fluctuations among age cohorts from 1965 to 1980 were not particularly steep, with the exception of an estimated 10% increase in voter turnout by the 18–24-year-old cohort in the 1972 and 1974 elections.

Figure 1 - Estimated Voter Turnout in Canada by Age Group, 1965-2000



Note: Voting in Canada remains a confidential act. To collect data on voter turnout, the *Canadian Election Study* therefore relied upon post-election surveys. Methodologically speaking, these surveys tended to produce higher rates of turnout than official rates because, among other things, of the social desirability of responding as though one had indeed voted. The sample of respondents to the survey also tended to contain more voters than non-voters. The data shown in the graph have not been adjusted to compensate for these methodological issues.

Source: Figure prepared by Emmanuel Preville of the Library of Parliament based on Figure 1, "Reported voter turnout in federal elections by age group, 1965-2000," in Margaret Adsett, "Change in Political Era and Demographic Weight as Explanations of Youth 'Disenfranchisement' in Federal Elections in Canada, 1965-2000," *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2003, p. 251.

## 2.2 TRENDS: 1984 TO 2000

During the federal general elections from 1984 to 2000, the reported voter turnout rates for the cohorts aged 18-24 and 25-29 declined sharply (see Figure 1). The reported voter turnout for the 18-24 age group fell approximately 20 percentage points, from a voter turnout rate in the low 80s to one in the low 60s; this represents a decrease of 25%. The reported voter turnout for the 25-29 age group fell similarly during this period, though from the 1997 federal general election to the one in 2000, this age group experienced a slight bump upwards in reported voter turnout.

During the same period, the older cohorts experienced increases and decreases very much in line with those of the youngest cohorts. The fluctuations, however, were not in the same magnitude as those for the two youngest cohorts, and the decrease in reported voter turnout for the four oldest age cohorts was relatively minor. Indeed,

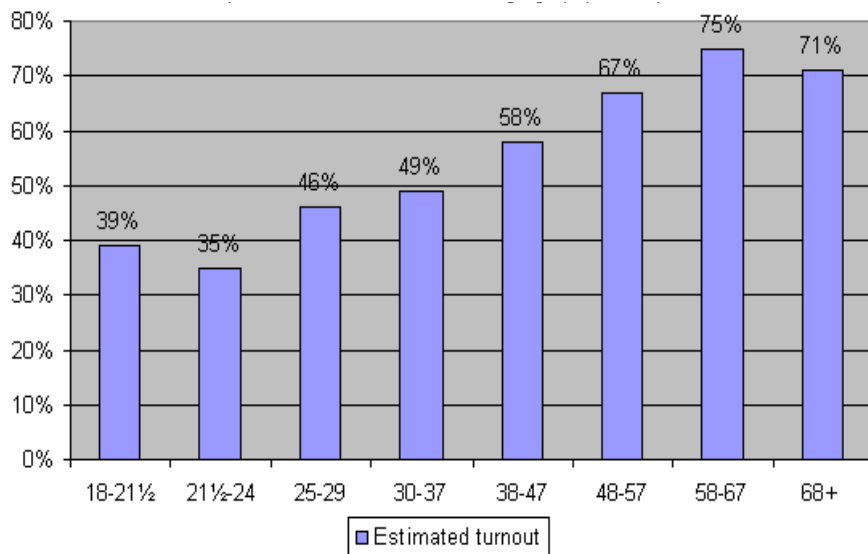
the reported voter turnout for the age group 55+ actually rose during this period, and in 1993, this cohort reported the highest rates of voter turnout recorded in the study.

### 2.3 TRENDS: 2004 TO 2008

To calculate voter turnout from 2004 to 2008, Elections Canada employed a different method than that used in the *Canadian Election Study*.<sup>5</sup> For that reason, the estimated percentages of the Canadian population that voted, by age cohort, in the 2004, 2006 and 2008 federal general elections ought not to be compared to the estimated percentages gathered in the past by the *Canadian Election Study*. Nevertheless, comparisons of trends and patterns in estimated voter turnout can still be made between the two data sets.

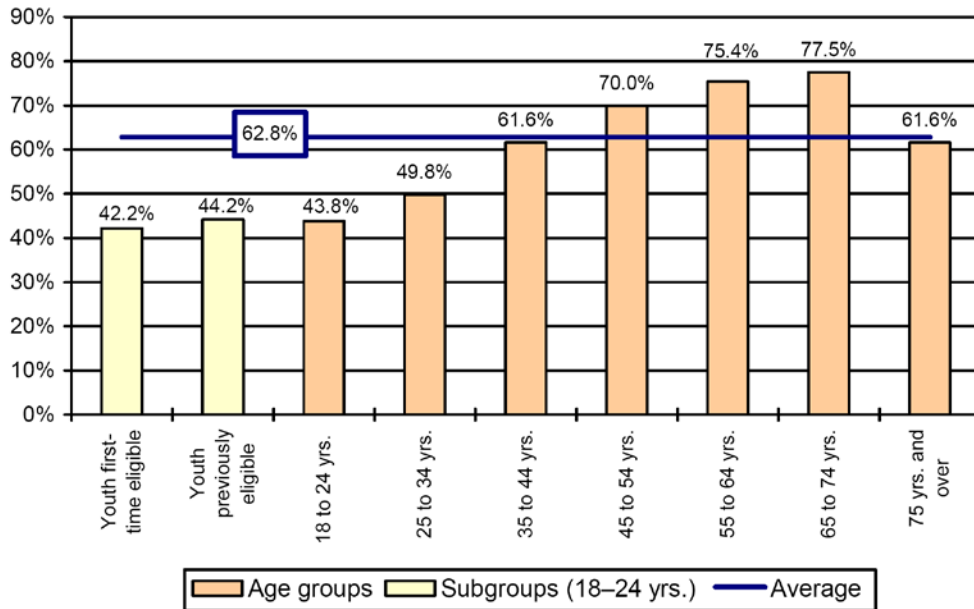
To begin with, the gaps in voter turnout between the youngest age cohort and the second youngest age cohort persist in both sets of data; they are in the order of a 6% to 11% difference from the second youngest age cohort to the youngest (see Figures 2, 3 and 4). A similar gap was reported by the *Canadian Election Study* for the federal general elections of 1984, 1988, 1993 and 2000.

Figure 2 – Estimated Voter Turnout in Canada by Age Group, 2004 Federal General Election



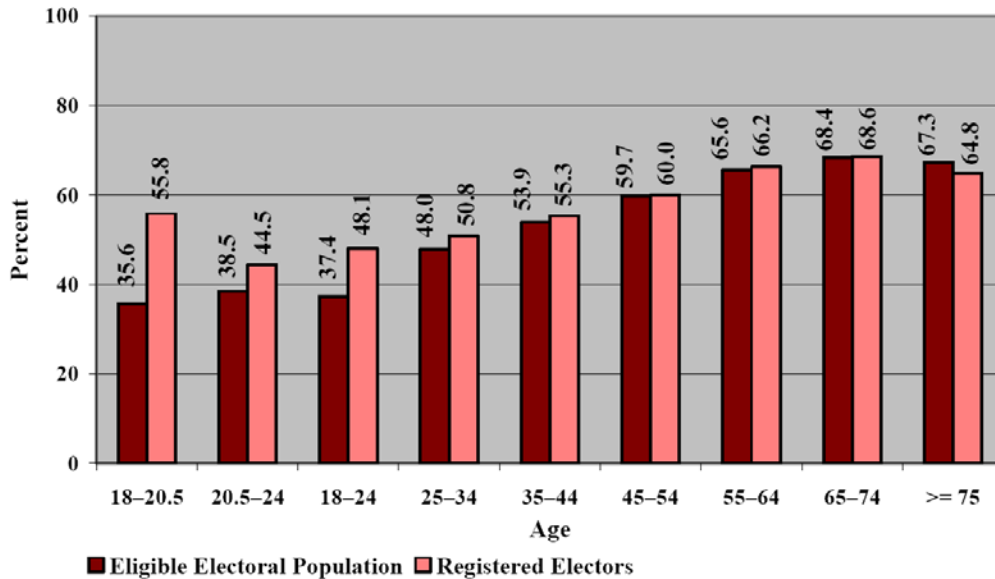
Source: Elections Canada, *Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group at the 38<sup>th</sup> Federal General Election (June 28, 2004)*, Final Report, December 2005.

Figure 3 - Estimated Voter Turnout in Canada by Age Group, 2006 Federal General Election



Source: Elections Canada, *Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group at the 39<sup>th</sup> Federal General Election (January 23, 2006)*, Working Paper Series, March 2008.

Figure 4 - Estimated Voter Turnout in Canada by Age Group, 2008 Federal General Election



Note: Two estimates of voter turnout are shown, because Elections Canada considers that, when measuring voter turnout among young people, numbers based on *eligible electoral population* are more reliable than those based on the official measure using *registered electors*: the official measure may overestimate youth participation, since youth voter registration is low. For more information on this calculation, see the source of this figure, Elections Canada, [Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group at the 2008 Federal General Election](#), February 2010.

A further gap between the voter turnout rate of the two youngest age cohorts and the average voter turnout rate, for each federal general election, also persists in both the Elections Canada voter turnout estimations and the *Canadian Election Study* estimations. Since 1984, the estimated voter turnout of the two youngest cohorts<sup>6</sup> has been lower than that of all other age cohorts. In the three most recent federal general elections, the gap between the estimated average voter turnout and the estimated turnout of the second youngest age cohort was in the order of 15%, while the same gap for the youngest cohort was in the order of 20%.

Clearly the broad trend over time for youth voter turnout has been downwards without much respite. The youngest age cohort did experience a bump upwards in estimated voter turnout from 37% in the 2004 federal general election to 43.8% for following election, before descending to 37.4% for the 2008 federal general election. These numbers remain distantly below the Canadian average voter turnout of 60.9% in 2004, 64.7% in 2006 and 58.8% in 2008.<sup>7</sup>

### **3 ISSUES: THE “LIFE CYCLE EFFECT” AND “GENERATIONAL REPLACEMENT”**

Research on voter turnout seems to indicate that the usual upward turn in voting habits with age (the “life cycle effect”) is undergoing change and may ebb away as new generations of voters replace the previous ones (“generational replacement”).

#### **3.1 “LIFE CYCLE EFFECT”**

As mentioned earlier, according to conventional wisdom regarding electoral participation, most people travel along the arc of a cycle. By reason of a variety of structural, social, moral and economic circumstances, a smaller proportion of young people vote than do older people.<sup>8</sup> As these young non-voters age, they become more likely to vote. This is known as the “life cycle effect.”

A number of recent studies have indicated, however, that this expectation no longer holds to the same extent as it has in the past. A study commissioned by Elections Canada found that the life cycle effect was less pronounced among people born in the 1980s than it had been among those in earlier generations.<sup>9</sup> Based on this study and other studies which produced similar results, Elections Canada has stated that “not only are young people participating less than their elders, their willingness to participate appears to be declining over time.”<sup>10</sup>

This pattern, which studies identify as being inconsistent with the transformation inherent in the life cycle explanation of voting habits, of non-voters into voters,<sup>11</sup> is likely to have far-reaching effects when “generational replacement” sets in.

#### **3.2 “GENERATIONAL REPLACEMENT”**

In studies that grouped the electorate into approximate “generations” according to age and tracked their voting propensities over time,<sup>12</sup> it has been noted that the



voters of the middle generations (born between 1945 and 1959) and those of the oldest generations (born before 1945), which both have a propensity to vote, are being replaced by younger generations (born after 1960) that do not. Some of the studies' authors have proposed that this "generational replacement" could account for the decrease in voter turnout since the 1993 federal general election.<sup>13</sup>

Owing to this trend, the life cycle effect – as it is currently known – would disappear. From election to election, as older age cohorts are succeeded by younger age cohorts, the visual hump found in the columnar graphs prepared by Elections Canada (see Figures 2, 3 and 4) would eventually experience a flattening or levelling out that would creep along the horizontal axis from left to right, reflecting the fact that voter turnout is becoming fairly constant across age cohorts.

The implication of this generational replacement is that the voter turnout rate will continue to decrease. Indeed, if present trends persist, as younger cohorts with a lower propensity to vote replace older cohorts with a higher propensity to vote, there may be a dramatic decline in average voter turnout over the next decade or two. This would be due to the loss of the age cohorts who at present inflate the overall rate of voter turnout. If these cohorts are replaced by subsequent generations with voting propensities far lower than theirs, there will be no generation to buoy the average voter turnout.

## 4 CONCLUSION

A precipitous decline in electoral participation of those eligible to vote in their first one or two elections began after the 1984 federal general election. Analysis of trends in voter turnout and research into the non-voting behaviour of Canada's youngest eligible voters suggests that simply aging will not increase their propensity to vote, as might have been the case with past generations. Further, as these youngest non-voting generations do age, they are replacing older generations who have displayed a much higher propensity to vote than their replacements. The implication of this trend is that the overall voter turnout in Canada will continue to drop.

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## NOTES

- \* This publication is the first of two recent Library of Parliament publications on youth voter turnout in Canada. The second publication is Marion Ménard, *Youth Voter Turnout in Canada – 2. Reasons for the Decline and Efforts to Increase Participation*, Publication no. 2010-21-E, 20 April 2010. See also Marion Ménard, *Youth Civic Engagement*, Publication no. 2010-23-E, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, Library of Parliament, 8 April 2010.
- 1. To be accurate, voter turnout did rise slightly in 2006 to 64.7% from 60.9% in 2004. The 2006 voter turnout was, however, the fourth lowest in Canadian electoral history.
- 2. [\*Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group at the 2008 Federal General Election\*](#), Working Paper Series, Elections Canada, February 2010, p. 4.

3. This drag on the general turnout was estimated at about 7% for the 1993, 1997 and 2000 federal general elections. André Blais et al., "Where does voter decline turnout come from?" *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 43, 2004, p. 222.
4. André Blais et al., "The Evolving Nature of Non-Voting: Evidence from Canada," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 30 August to 2 September 2001, p. 5.
5. The method for estimating voter turnout by age group employed by Elections Canada did not involve a survey but instead cross-referenced a large sample of electors who voted in the federal general election with data from the National Register of Electors. For more information on this methodology, see Elections Canada, [Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group at the 38<sup>th</sup> Federal General Election \(June 28, 2004\)](#), Final Report, December 2005.
6. It should be noted that the age cohorts in the *Canadian Election Study* for the federal general elections of 1965 to 2000 differ from those used by Elections Canada for its data sets. Elections Canada's data sets also differ in their age cohorts between the 2004 and 2006 federal general elections.
7. Elections Canada, [Voter Turnout at Federal Elections and Referendums, 1867–2008](#), 12 March 2009.
8. See Ménard (2010), *Youth Voter Turnout in Canada – 2. Reasons for the Decline and Efforts to Increase Participation*.
9. Jon H. Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc, [Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters](#), Elections Canada, March 2003, p. 21.
10. Elections Canada, [Youth Electoral Participation – Survey and Analysis of Canadian Trends \(October 2003\)](#), October 2003.
11. *Youth Electoral Participation – Survey and Analysis of Canadian Trends (October 2003)*, Elections Canada, October 2003.
12. See Blais et al. (2004), pp. 221–236, and Richard Johnston, "Political generations and electoral change in Canada," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 22, 1992, pp. 93–116.
13. Blais et al. (2004), p. 226–227.