

When Niagara Falls voters were called to the polls last February in a hotly-contested provincial by-election, just under 38 per cent of registered voters actually cast a ballot. While turnout in by-elections is traditionally lower than in general elections, the participation rate is yet another sign that many Niagara-area residents -- and Canadians, in general -- are complacent about exercising a right that generations have fought for tirelessly, and in the case of our fallen veterans, sometimes at the cost of their lives.

Canadians (not) at the polls: a local, provincial and national story

By Dr. Livianna Tossutti

A substantial and growing number of Niagara residents, as with citizens in other parts of Ontario and Canada, are tuning out of electoral politics. In 1999, 58 per cent of eligible voters province-wide cast a ballot in the Ontario provincial election. By the 2011 provincial election, the turnout rate had plummeted to just 48 per cent (see Figure 1). Provincial election turnout in most Niagara ridings also declined over that same period, although some ridings have fared better than others. While turnout in the Niagara Falls and St. Catharines

electoral districts is similar to the provincial average, voting rates in the former ridings of Erie-Lincoln and Niagara Centre were higher than the Ontario average. In 2007, the Erie-Lincoln and Niagara Centre electoral districts were abolished and redistributed into other ridings, including Niagara West-Glanbrook and Welland. While the boundaries of the abolished ridings do not correspond perfectly with those of the two new ridings, turnout in these newer ridings has remained higher than the provincial average (see Figure 1).

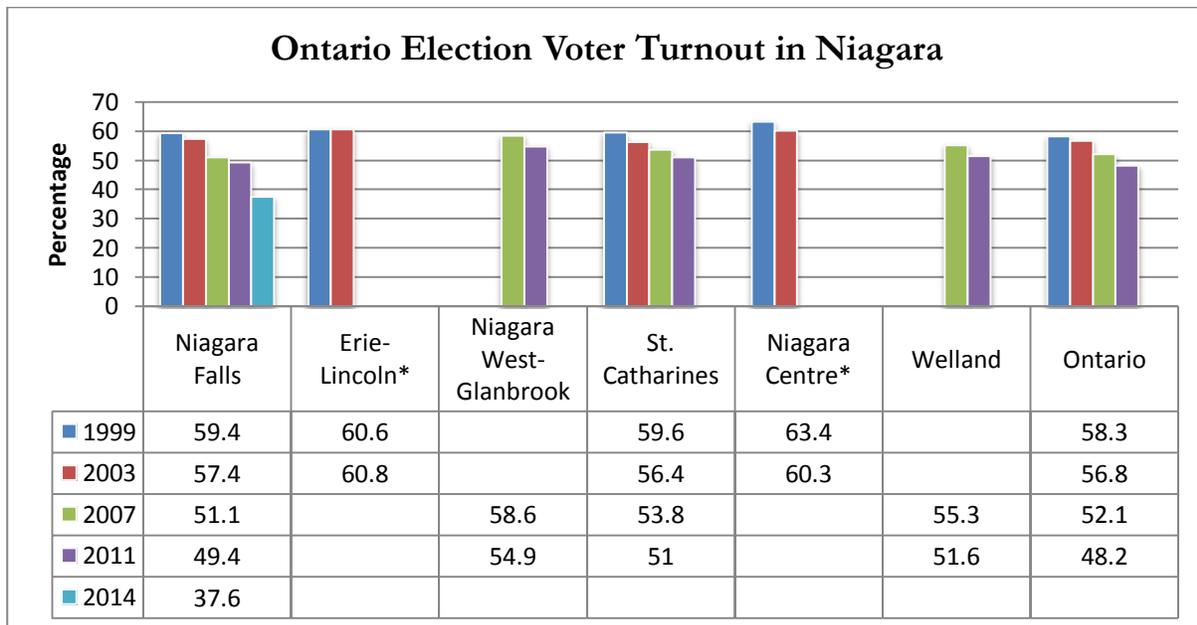


Figure 1 All graphs are by Carol Phillips, PhD, with numbers collected via www.elections.on.ca/en-CA/Tools/PastResults.htm

*Voter redistribution for the 2007 election meant the ridings of Erie-Lincoln and Niagara Centre were replaced by Niagara West-Glanbrook and Welland. Because the number of voters and their geographic location no longer exactly coincide, this graph should be used for illustrative purposes only and not for direct comparison. Also, voter turnout is determined using registered voters, not all eligible voters. Therefore the turnout could be considerable less as there would be many eligible voters who simply did not bother registering.

The story of electoral disengagement is the same at the national level. Turnout in our federal elections is not high by international standards. In 2012, Canada ranked 127th out of 195 countries in terms of the proportion of registered voters who actually voted in the most recent parliamentary elections. Although legal restrictions on voting have been virtually eliminated for adult citizens, participation rates in federal elections are lower in the early 21st century than in historical periods when fewer Canadians had the legal right to vote. Federal election turnout rates have declined precipitously since the

late 1980s. Between 1945 and 1988 voter turnout averaged 75.4 percent. By 2011, turnout reached about 61 percent.

In provincial elections held across the country, the same pattern of decline started earlier in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Between 2009 and 2011, turnout reached historical lows in provincial elections held in Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Ontario and British Columbia. And participation rates in municipal elections are even lower than in federal or provincial elections.

Who Votes?

Political analysts have offered a complex set of explanations for these trends that are played out at the local, provincial and national levels. Generational replacement has been pinpointed as the main reason for the decline in turnout over the past two decades. Canadians born since 1970 are less likely to vote than their parents or grandparents when they were the same age. Furthermore, younger generations of voters are less likely than their predecessors to start voting as they grow older.

An individual's demographic attributes also matter, with Canadians under the age of 25 years far less likely to vote than older citizens. The retreat of young

Canadians from electoral politics has been attributed to several factors. One of them is known as the "life cycle effect," which refers to the tendency for people to vote at higher rates as they age. Once they settle down with a partner, become parents, and find a job, they will become more aware of how political issues such as taxes, economic development and access to social services affect their lives. Many young non-voters are also less likely to view voting as a civic duty and are less interested in and knowledgeable about politics.

Other demographic attributes also matter. Voters tend to be wealthier and more educated than non-voters. This may be because people who are less well-off have less time and energy for politics or because they feel the political system does not address their concerns. People with more formal education may find it easier to understand complex political messages. New Canadians who have arrived in this country since 1991 are also less likely to vote than more established immigrants and native-born Canadians. This may be because newcomers have to attend to their most pressing settlement needs before getting involved in the political life of their new country.

Canadians' attitudes about politics and their representatives, elections, and party competition also influence turnout. Canadians who are more interested in and knowledgeable about politics vote at higher rates than citizens with less interest and knowledge.

Voters are also more likely than non-voters to express trust in their elected representatives, a moral obligation to vote, and a belief that their vote will affect the outcome.

The perceived competitiveness of a race in a given district can also help boost turnout; one study of Manitoba provincial elections found that the closer the gap between

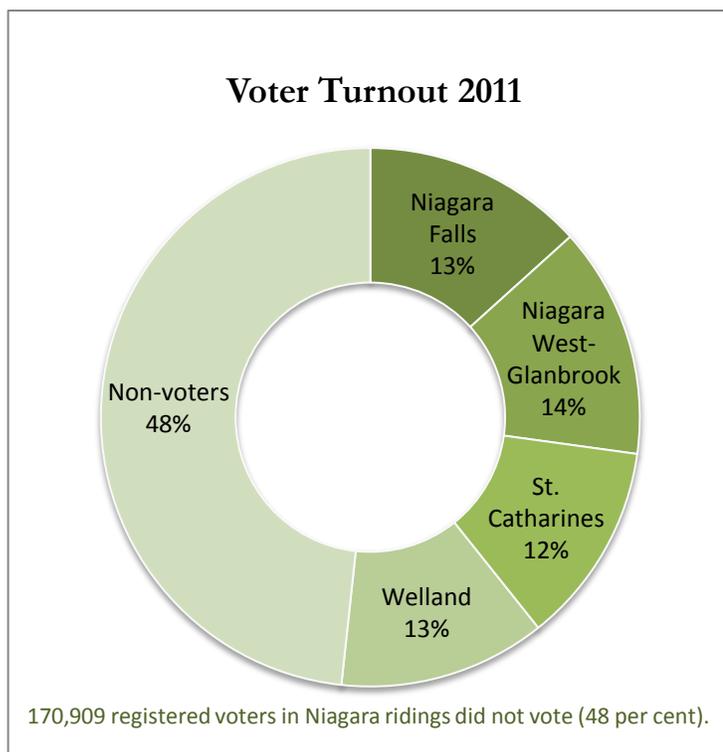


Figure 2 represents the entire (100 per cent) group of registered voters in Niagara Region. Each section represents its proportion of the total number of registered voters who actually voted, versus the number of non-voters.

the first and second place candidates, the higher the turnout.

Sometimes a disappointing experience interacting with government can lead to electoral drop-out. Focus groups conducted with disengaged Canadians from different backgrounds – lower income Canadians, less educated youth, urban Aboriginal people, women, new Canadians and rural Canadians found that their political disengagement was driven more about negative experiences dealing with government, civil servants and politicians, and by a perception that the political system does not work for them.

Many non-voters report they are too busy with work, school or family obligations to make time to vote. In light of increased opportunities for advance voting and the relative infrequency of general election events, some may interpret these responses as a sign that voting is just not a priority in their lives. Some may also conclude that a lack of citizen interest in politics, as manifested in turnout decline, may not be cause for dismay. As the renowned political scientist Robert Dahl once observed “in most societies, politics is a sideshow in the great circus of life.” In this context, lower rates of voter turnout may be a

symptom, not of the poor health of a democracy, but the quiet approval by non-voters of the status quo.

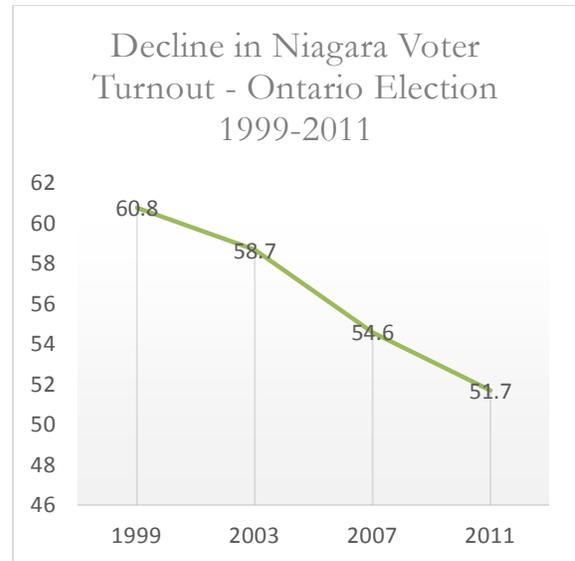


Figure 3 Percentages were calculated by dividing the sum of all who voted in each of the Niagara-based ridings by the sum total of registered voters in each of the ridings. Some ridings include non-Niagara voters.

What can our government do?

1. **Reform the electoral system.** Voter turnout is five or six percentage points higher in countries that assign seats on a proportional or mixed proportional basis, where a political party's representation more closely reflects its popular support. People are more inclined to vote when votes are converted into seats in a way that seems fairer to all parties.
2. **Introduce compulsory voting.** On average, turnout in national elections is 13 per cent higher in countries where voting is compulsory and penalties are imposed for failure to comply.
3. **Introduce e-voting.** Several municipalities in Ontario and Nova Scotia, as well as European nations, have used Internet voting in order to improve accessibility and voter turnout. However, there is no consistent evidence that e-voting boosts turnout.
4. **Improve formal civic education.** Civic education can increase political knowledge, interest and the intent to participate in elections. Civics courses that integrate community service into the curriculum have a stronger impact on intended future political participation than more traditional, cognitively oriented civic education.

Dr. Livianna Tossutti is an associate professor in the political science department at Brock University specializing in Canadian politics and comparative politics. Her research interests include political and civic participation, political parties and voting behaviour. She can be reached at ltossutti@brocku.ca

The Niagara Community Observatory is a local public policy think tank at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont. More information on our office and our research can be found online at:

www.brocku.ca/nco



[@BrockNCO](https://twitter.com/BrockNCO)