

Voting Patterns of Municipal Elections in Niagara

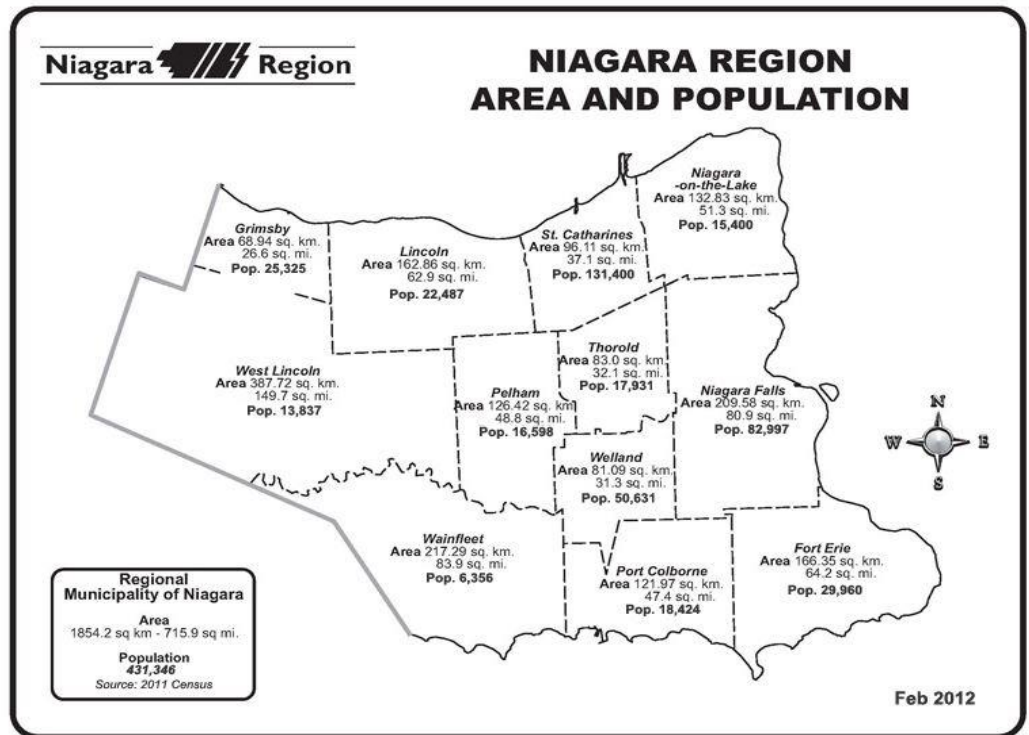
By David Siegel*

Voter turnout is declining around the world, and Canada is no exception. An earlier Observatory policy brief entitled “Canadians (not) at the polls: a local, provincial and national story” illustrated this at the provincial level. This brief looks more deeply into municipal voter turnout patterns in Niagara’s municipalities.

This is the classic bad news-good news story. The bad news is that Niagara fits the profile of low voter turnout; the good news is that while the level of voter turnout has been declining over the long run, it has become fairly stable in recent years, and in some places it has actually seen a slight increase.

The Voting Process

Niagara has 12 area municipalities. In elections held every four years, each municipality elects a mayor (who also serves on regional council), local councillors, school board trustees, and most municipalities elect at least one additional representative to regional council. Some municipalities elect councillors using a ward system meaning that one or two councillors are elected from geographic subdivisions within the municipality. In other municipalities, councillors are elected at-large, meaning that all councillors serve the entire municipality and electors vote for all councillors. The Observatory’s previous brief “Representation on Municipal Councils in Ontario” described the electoral system in more detail.



Eligible voters in a municipal election must be at least 18 years old on Election Day, a Canadian citizen, and must be a resident or own property in the municipality. Voters are only allowed to vote once in any municipality regardless of the number of properties they own, but voters can vote in more than one municipality—their place of principal residence and any municipality in which they own property.

* David Siegel is a professor of political science at Brock University, specializing in local government.

The voting process is quite simple. The returning officer, usually the city clerk, has a list of all eligible voters. Anyone who is not on the list can apply to be added, even on Election Day, if the person has proper identification.

According to the Ontario Municipal Elections Act, Election Day is the fourth Monday in October, but returning officers will usually also hold advance polls. The 2014 municipal election is October 27.

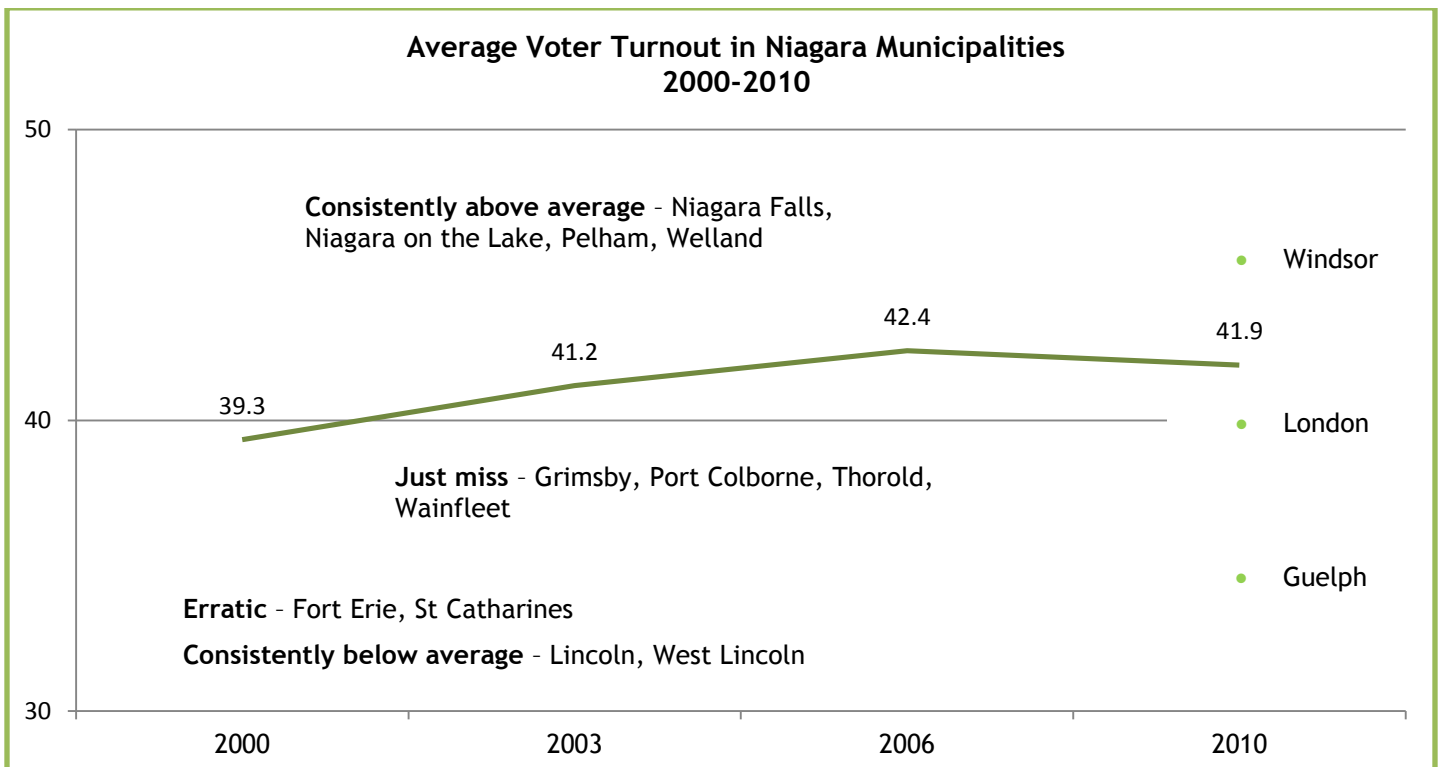
Under the Municipal Elections Act, municipalities can provide for voting by mail, telephone, or Internet. These options are in use by some municipalities, but they have not caught on in a big way in most places, including Niagara.

Despite the relative ease of voting, voter turnout in municipal elections in most places, including Niagara, is usually below 50 per cent. In other words, the majority of eligible voters choose to stay home on Election Day rather than exercise the franchise.

Voting in Niagara

The table at the end of this brief provides the voter turnout information for all Niagara municipalities in the four previous elections. The figure below illustrates this data in graphic form. The line on the graph is the average voter turnout of all 12 municipalities. It shows an increase between 2000 and 2006 to 42.4 per cent from 39.3 per cent, with a slight downturn in 2010 to 42 per cent. It also shows that Niagara's 2010 voter turnout was considerably better than Guelph's, very similar to London's, and considerably less than Windsor's.

The figure below also shows where each municipality is positioned relative to others in Niagara. The 'consistently high' group has had consistently above-average voter turnout. The 'just miss' group has been above average in every election except one. The 'below average' group has been below average in every election. And the 'erratic' group has jumped around in ways that could not be categorized.



The following table categorizes the data in terms of trends over the previous four elections. The good news here is that four municipalities have shown a steady increase, and four others have been stable. Only Grimsby is showing a consistent decline, but it started from a high enough point that it still has above-average voter turnout. The three 'erratics' are impossible to categorize.

Trends in Voter Turnout in Niagara, 2000-2010

Increasing Voter Turnout	Fort Erie, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Port Colborne, Wainfleet
Stable Voter Turnout	Lincoln, Thorold, Welland, West Lincoln
Decreasing Voter Turnout	Grimsby
Erratic	Niagara Falls, Pelham, St. Catharines

What Does It All Mean?

Trying to generalize about data from four elections in 12 municipalities is very difficult, but we can start with some of the conventional wisdoms.

One such wisdom is that contested elections increase voter turnout. In the 2000-2010 period there were two elections that attracted more than 50 per cent of eligible voters. In Port Colborne 2010, the incumbent mayor defeated a challenger by a comfortable margin of about 25 per cent. There was a close race for the regional council position, but this race should not be as likely to draw voters as the race for mayor. In Port Colborne 2006, a previous mayor defeated an incumbent by a large margin. There was no referendum vote in either election. It would seem that there was a high voter turnout in both elections despite a lack of seriously contested high profile seats. However, the fact that Port Colborne has had Niagara's highest turnout in the three previous elections says something about civic spirit in Port Colborne.

There were four occasions when voter turnout dipped below 30 per cent. In 2000, the mayors of Fort Erie (29 per cent voter turnout), Port Colborne (29.4 per cent), and St. Catharines (27 per cent) were all acclaimed. This would seem to support the relationship between weak turnout and an uninteresting election. However, in the next St. Catharines election in 2003, the voter turnout was only 29.7 per cent despite a spirited contest in which the difference between the successful candidate for mayor and the third-place finisher was just 1.2 percentage points. Thus, there seems to be weak anecdotal support for the idea that an acclamation for mayor lowers voter turnout. It would also stand to reason that a close and exciting race for mayor would, conversely, bring out more voters. The low voter turnout in the hotly-contested 2003 race in St. Catharines is, therefore, puzzling.

Another conventional wisdom is that voter turnout is higher in smaller municipalities, possibly reflecting a greater sense of community. That does not seem to fit in Niagara where two of the three largest municipalities are in the consistently above-average category, and the largest municipality is erratic, but has had high turnout. One of the smallest municipalities is in the consistently below-average category.

A statistical analysis of the 2010 election determined that voter turnout in Niagara municipalities was influenced by the median age of the population and the percentage of the population over 35. As has been found in other places, voter turnout seems to increase with age of the population. A weaker pattern was found in the relationship between higher income and higher voter turnout. A much weaker correlation was found with home ownership and voting. Thus, Niagara seems to fit some of the conventional wisdoms. It is also good news that it fits in the middle of some comparable municipalities in terms of voter turnout, and generally speaking the trend is to either a slight increase in voter turnout or stability.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Worldwide, there is a decline in voter turnout. Niagara's turnout is nothing to be proud of, but we do seem to be bucking the downward trend with a small increase, and some municipalities that have been consistently above the average. Can we do anything to improve our current position?

One frequently-discussed approach is a technological fix. Could the use of the Internet for voting increase turnout? This seems a possibility both because it aspires to make voting easier, and because it might appeal to young people, who have traditionally not voted as heavily as older people.

The Ontario Municipal Elections Act allows municipalities to provide for an "alternative voting method," which seems to refer to voting by mail, telephone, or Internet. Some municipalities have seized on this opportunity, but the number has been somewhat limited. Remote forms of voting are very useful for people who find it difficult to visit a polling place, and they could be attractive to techno-savvy people. However, remote voting can be somewhat complicated and time-consuming because of the security provisions necessary. A search of websites of Niagara municipalities indicates that "alternative voting methods" have not caught on in Niagara. Niagara-on-the-Lake provides for voting by mail and Grimsby provides for voting online or by telephone.

St. Catharines is taking a non-tech approach to voter turnout. In the 2014 election it is drastically reducing the number of polling stations on Election Day, but it is increasing the number of advance polls and encouraging people to vote in these polls. This is billed as making voting more convenient. It is also motivated by the City's concern that polling stations are no longer welcome in neighbourhood schools. This inability to obtain polling locations is a disturbing trend. Traditionally, voting was quite easy, involving a short walk. If it becomes more difficult to find locations for polling stations, then this could have an impact on turnout.

Conclusion

On a worldwide basis, there has been a great deal of concern about the declining level of voter turnout. Where does Niagara fit? It is difficult to generalize across four elections and 12 municipalities. Niagara certainly has a low level of voter turnout. However, there are some bright spots. Overall, the decline seems to have been arrested, and turnout levels have plateaued at a level comparable to other Ontario municipalities. Some local municipalities are bright spots in that they are consistently above the average for the region. Maybe an internal competition to catch up to those leaders could nudge reluctant voters out of their comfortable seat on Election Day.

Voter Turnout in Niagara Municipalities, 2000-2014*

	2000	2003	2006	2010
Fort Erie	29.0	34.0	37.0	41.0
Grimsby	46.1	47.3	44.8	39.0
Lincoln	33.4	35.8	34.0	37.0
Niagara Falls	40.3	47.8	41.3	43.0
NOTL	N/A	44.0	47.0	49.0
Pelham	42.5	49.4	48.6	45.0
Port Colborne	29.4	49.6	51.7	51.0
St Catharines	27.0	29.7	40.7	31.0
Thorold	47.6	39.0	40.7	40.0
Wainfleet	43.6	33.6	43.4	49.0
Welland	55.0	44.8	42.4	41.0
West Lincoln	38.8	39.3	37.3	37.0
Average	39.3	41.2	42.4	41.9

* All figures courtesy of Niagara Region and/or municipal websites.