

# The danger of apathy

Good governance requires a belief that Parliament matters



DAVID ZUSSMAN

Well, they're off and running. For the next five weeks, federal candidates in 308 ridings will be urging voters from coast to coast to support their political party's agendas. Since the outcome of the election is so uncertain, it is probably worth giving some thought to the large number of potential voters who are not likely to vote.

The issue has become the subject of considerable discussion in Canada over the last few years because of the precipitous decline in voter turnout at elections.

One example of this decline is captured in the chart below at left, which plots the participation rate of eligible voters. Rates varied between 75 and 80 per cent (with some exceptions) from the 1940s until the late 1980s, when we saw a worrisome decline in voter participation that produced a 61-per-cent participation rate for the 2000 federal election, the worst turnout in recent history. This decline in voter turnout is also found when one looks at participation rates in provincial and municipal elections.

To complicate the picture, the decline is not evenly distributed throughout the voting population, but is most dramatic among young people (see chart below right). Half of the non-voters in the 2000 federal election were under 30 years of age. The breakdown of voters by age cohort reveals a disturbing trend. In the 2000 election, two-thirds of those who became eligible to vote during the 1974-80 period exercised their right to vote. In contrast, only 54.2 per cent of those who became eligible during the 1984-88 period did so, while just 38 per cent of the cohort that entered the electorate in 1993 voted. This trend continued with the next two cohorts, with 28 per cent of the 1997 cohort voting, and 22 per cent of those eligible for the first time in 2000 actually voting.

This evidence is dramatic and reflects a growing trend among demo-



**HISTORICAL HIGH:** Modern Canadian voter turnout peaked in 1957 and 1958 when the Progressive Conservatives, led by John Diefenbaker, won a surprise victory in the federal election and then were re-elected with a huge majority.

cratic countries around the world. For example, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance ([www.idea.int](http://www.idea.int)) has reported an average decline of eight per cent in 20 countries compared with the average participation rates in the same countries during the 1980s.

These data suggest that Canadians (as well as people around the world) are less engaged in the political process to the extent that fewer eligible people are voting in elections than in the past. The data also underscore the general lack of interest among young Canadians in voting. Both of these developments could have important consequences for our political institutions.

Given our growing interest in good governance in Canada in both the public and private sector, it seems logical to ensure that our political institutions are robust and sustainable. Unfortunately, the apparent emergence of voter apathy, in particular among young Canadians, is a strong signal that Parliament, which is one of our most crucial institutions, is not perceived to

be as relevant as it once was.

Recently, Elections Canada and others have been looking for an explanation for the decline in youth voting. In general, the studies suggest a number of reasons: Many perceive that the elections have little meaning for them; people are less likely to cast a ballot if they feel that they have little influence over government actions; many do not feel that participating in an election is an civic act; and, as Lawrence Leduc and Jan Pammatt noted in an article presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association last June, there is "a widespread perception that politicians are untrustworthy, selfish, unaccountable, lacking in credibility, and not true to their word."

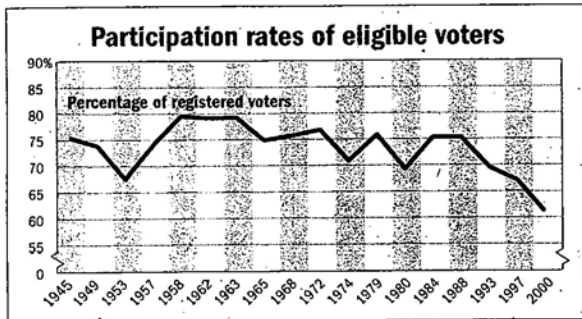
A number of websites, such as [www.studentvote2004.ca](http://www.studentvote2004.ca) and [www.rushthevote.ca](http://www.rushthevote.ca), have appeared in recent years with the primary goal of reversing this trend by encouraging young people to become more engaged in their communities and to increase youth voting during election campaigns. Elections

Canada, which is a partner in [studentvote2004.ca](http://studentvote2004.ca), has been publicizing this issue on its website ([www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca)) and inviting young Canadians to join some of these organizations.

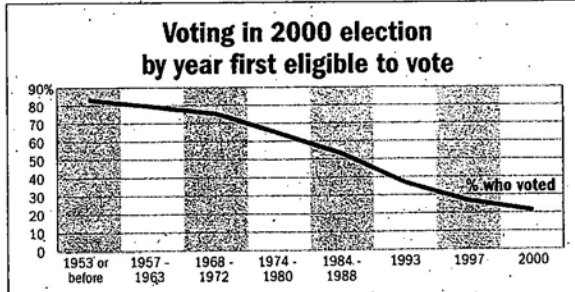
However, none of these actions will make a significant difference until members of Parliament realize they must change the way in which politics is conducted in this country. This means looking at institutional reform, persuading their colleagues to engage youths in issues of interest to them, seriously committing themselves to addressing the root causes of cynicism towards politicians through genuine engagement, harnessing the power of technology and encouraging more civics education in our schools and communities.

Who knows? This change in behaviour might produce the kind of electoral behaviour we all would like to see.

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