

Now, it's decision time

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So, are you going to go out today and vote?

Brave the mid-winter weather, interrupt your busy-busy routine, trek over to the polling station (the address of which you've misplaced but will find), triumphantly mark your X or scrawl a pale tick, as the case may be, beside a name, *any* name, because voting is what you do when you live in a democracy? Some 72 per cent of you have told pollsters you fully intend to. Ah, but you won't.

"The same number said that last time," says EKOS Research president Frank Graves. "It wasn't true then and isn't true now."

In the 2004 federal election, only 60 per cent of registered voters cast a ballot, the lowest turnout since 1898. Yes, 1898.

Tally the results for all eligible, not just registered, voters, as some people think Ottawa should be doing, and the rate plummeted to a lamentable 54 per cent.

Until 1988, national elections in this country averaged voting rates of 75 per cent. But they've been in free fall ever since, and analysts predict the turnout today could be as dismal as 2004, possibly worse.

A growing number of you, it transpires, now regard voting as a personal option and not, like previous generations, a necessary chore, much less a civic responsibility.

"People no longer go to church out of a sense of duty. Same with voting," says Michael Adams, president of Environics Research Group.

Canada is not unique in its electoral malaise. A "democratic deficit" has been hitting other major industrial nations too, at roughly the same rate, over the same period of time. Of the G-7 members, only Germany hasn't seen a drop-off in turnout since the early 1990s.



LUCAS OLENIUK AND CHARLA JONES PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

Will it be Liberal Leader Paul Martin, seen at left with his wife Sheila, or Conservative Leader Stephen Harper, seen with his wife Laureen, who voters make prime minister tonight.

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"There is an ill-defined increase in negativity everywhere, in the feeling that voting doesn't matter, that an individual can't have impact," says Jon Pammett, a political scientist at Carleton University.

Non-voters know the sun will still rise tomorrow, the business of government will still carry on and that no ruling party with faculties intact will dare wander too far off the social consensus.

So does it matter if 40 per cent of the electorate habitually — out of cynicism, sloth, distaste for a foregone conclusion, or self-imposed ignorance — leaves it up to the rest to decide which party governs?

Maybe not.

"Low turnouts are not a healthy thing, but I don't think they're the scourge that some people do," says Graves. "It's not an indicator of society's health. If people feel uncertain or things are bad, they do turn out. But good times beget indifference."

The democratic ideal is that everybody who can vote, does. Barring this, if the opinions of the people who do vote reflect the opinions of the electorate as a whole, then lower turnouts may not, in fact, matter.

But there is no guarantee of that. More likely, as voting declines, the seeds of inequality are sown among social groups, according to McGill University political scientist Jerome Black:

"To the extent that citizens' views are taken into account in setting policy priorities, an important consequence of non-participation is the neglect of major interests. Voices not heard are usually not heeded."

Likewise the reverse. The less people take part in shared political institutions — and voting is surely the easiest of all — the more that government appeals to common goals and values fall on deaf ears. Not just Ottawa, but the "community" of Canada, could start to lose its bearings.

A government's legitimacy, its moral authority, rests on voter turnout, say analysts, and chronic shortfalls can have major consequences.

In their 2003 report on declining turnouts for a concerned Elections Canada, Pammett and University of Toronto political scientist Larry LeDuc warned that if — more likely when — the rate dips below 50 per cent, "negative attitudes toward government may accelerate and compliance with laws and policies decrease."

A grim, distinctly "un-Canadian" scenario. So why is it happening?

Before the line forms to blame, once again, the "apathetic young," note that what's struck pollster Graves this election is the disengagement of those in their mid-30s to early 40s, so-called Generation X, not just the 20-somethings. There is a real generational divide, he says, between those who think voting is important and those who think as long as somebody does it, they don't have to.

"This age group seems to have bought the idea that big government is not all that necessary, that the private sector and local communities can handle many things. They're ceding this election to the seniors and baby boomers, who've become a grumpy, fearful Greek chorus of complaints."

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Graves isn't alone in predicting turnout today will be no higher than last time, maybe lower.

Surprised he may be, of course, if the 25 per cent increase in advance polling over 2004 is a sign of people's interest rather than mass forestalling of bad weather. Or, if the return of the Conservatives to the national scene after 12 years of Liberal dominance ignites an unexpected voting surge.

But don't bet on it, says U of T's LeDuc. Long-term demographics are relentlessly driving turnout down, he says, and Canada will just have to weather it for another decade or so.

He isn't taken aback by Generation X's withdrawal from the political front because he and others saw it coming: "The disengagement — not apathy — of young voters started 15 years ago. Those people are now in their mid-30s and they're still voting in lower numbers than any group before them."

And always will. A 3 to 4 per cent drop in turnout can be expected in every election for the next 10 years, says LeDuc (possibly less in today's vote because it's barely 19 months since the last). Then, the decline should start to level off and a slow reversal begin.

Richard Johnston, a political scientist at the University of British Columbia, says people in their 20s and 30s have had three chances to vote in the past nine years and chose not to in large numbers. In large part it's because they grew up in the politically uncompetitive 1990s, he says, when the non-Liberal vote was fragmented and even competitions at the constituency level collapsed into lethargy.

"Voting patterns are like geology; you can see past conditions in the sediment," says Johnston.

"Some call this group the Nirvana generation, but I disagree. I think they're savvy, waiting to be plucked. They're disengaged from party politics, not the political world."

Problem is, voting is a habit, best acquired when young. Not developing it early on, this group won't ever catch up to the turnout rates of those older than them, he says, *or* to younger cohorts now coming of age in more politically competitive times. Like various politicians over the years, Johnston thinks the voting age should be dropped to 16 — an age when first-time voters are still in school and can be taught about civic responsibility, still living at home, so parents can get them out to a polling station.

"By 18, 19, they're away at university or travelling, in their first job and in a rented apartment," he says, and marking that first-time, habit-forming ballot becomes too complicated.

While changing generational attitudes explain most of the voting decline, Johnston says another demographic factor is the lower turnouts of new Canadians. "It matters if people have come from a democracy and are used to voting. You see higher turnouts with those from India, say, than people from mainland China, Hong Kong or even Singapore."

The second generation picks up the voting shortfall, but it's balanced out by the next group of newcomers.

What it all means for the foreseeable future, says LeDuc, is that attempts to get out the vote via advance ballots, websites for young voters, and so on, may be less than successful: "Should Elections Canada do it anyway? Yes. Will they have an impact on turnout? Probably not."

It's become conventional wisdom that more people, especially the young, are substituting alternative forms of political activity for traditional party politics. It's happening in Europe, but LeDuc's and Pammett's study found no evidence for it in Canada.

After asking voters and non-voters if they'd signed a petition, joined a boycott, gone to a demonstration, even written a letter to a newspaper or signed on to an Internet political chat group,

they concluded that "those who vote less also engage less in other types of group or socio-political activity."

No surprise to Environics' Michael Adams, who says the high-profile economic summit protestors, "the New Aquarians, the Naomi Klein crowd," make up only 15 per cent of the population.

"But people live an extended adolescence today. They used to get married and have their first child at 20, and that got them involved in health care, schools, in the broader community. Now with people marrying later and deferring children, there's a delay in civic engagement."

Some will mature into it; others — and it's their numbers that are the concern — will not. Sensing an inexorable downward trend after the 2000 election, Chief Elections Officer Jean-Pierre Kingsley mooted the idea of compulsory voting: "The idea is repugnant to me, but if we start dipping below 60 per cent, I may have to change my mind."

Along with dozens of other countries, Australia famously has a mandatory system, introduced in 1924 after turnout fell to Canada's current 60 per cent level. With fines or other penalties for non-compliance, voting rates are in the plus-90 per cent range, albeit with large numbers of spoiled or blank ballots.

In guaranteeing higher turnouts, a compulsory system could counter the languor that's gripped so many nations, Canada included, in recent years. But could it also infringe too far on people's democratic rights?

Yes, say analysts, which is why the chances of it here are slim to nil. Any new law would likely be challenged under the Charter with the speed of summer lightning. Like it or not, Canadians will always have the right *not* to vote, not to pull their weight as citizens. Even if it's unfair to the rest when they don't.

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