

## THE LOOMING LEGITIMACY CRISIS

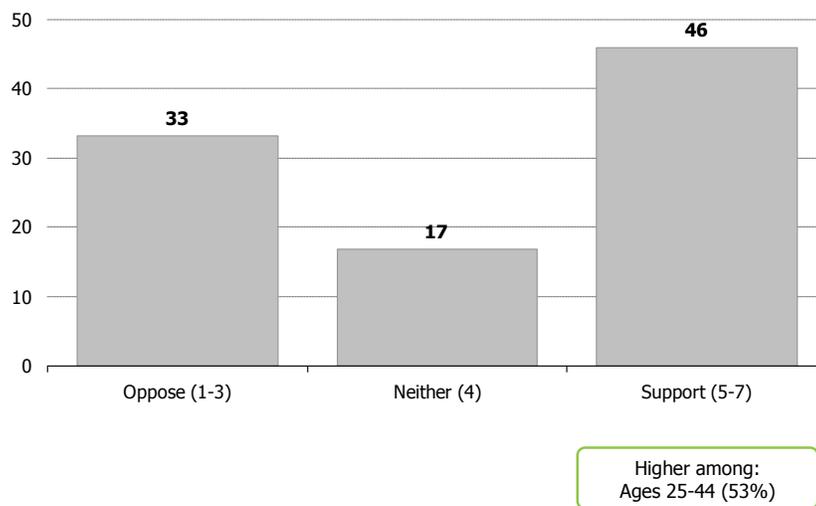
*TIME TO TAKE THE DISCRETIONARY OUT OF DEMOCRACY?*

*By Frank Graves*

[Ottawa – October 21, 2011] – In something of a nadir, the recent Ontario Election, in which a number of big issues were on the table, couldn't summon the participation of even half of the citizenry. Have we passed the brink from democracy to oligarchy? While on pattern with a disturbing downward trajectory in voter participation, this movement into the realm where the majority of citizens aren't voting may be a wakeup call for those who think that elections shouldn't becoming a fringe activity. What may make matters worse is that this democratic decline is particularly pronounced in two sectors of our society – the young and the economically vulnerable. Although these groups have always had lower participation rates, their current anaemic levels of voting make it difficult to claim that governments legitimately speak for these large and growing portions of society.

### **Figure 1: Support for compulsory voting**

*Q. A number of countries such as Australia and Brazil have implemented compulsory voting, where citizens are required to vote in elections. Would you oppose or support introducing compulsory voting in Canada?*



Indeed, many are already aware that our system is failing and politicians may soon lose what little legitimacy they still have. A recent survey of Ontario residents shows that a clear plurality (46%) would support a compulsory voting system similar to the ones used in Australia or Brazil, compared to 33 per cent who are opposed (see Figure 1). In Australia, where compulsory voting has been in place since 1924, about 70 to 80 per cent support the system and turnout is around 90 per cent. In the United States, by contrast, clear majorities oppose mandatory voting.

As our population has aged, not only are older voters (who have continued to vote in fairly healthy numbers) become numerically more significant as the age of our population rises, but their relative clout has been dramatically magnified by the declining voting rates of younger citizens. If those ages 18 to 30 and those 65 plus make up relatively equal portions of our society (numerically), they have nothing close to equal footing in the voting world. There are roughly four times as many votes registered by seniors as by younger voters. This effect is compounded by dramatic differences in political preferences with seniors being more than twice as likely to favour conservative choices as younger voters. In a decade or two, the younger voters will be in the prime of their lives and paying for the political choices of their now departed grandparents which are not likely to reflect the priorities or, one could speculate, the needs of next Canada.

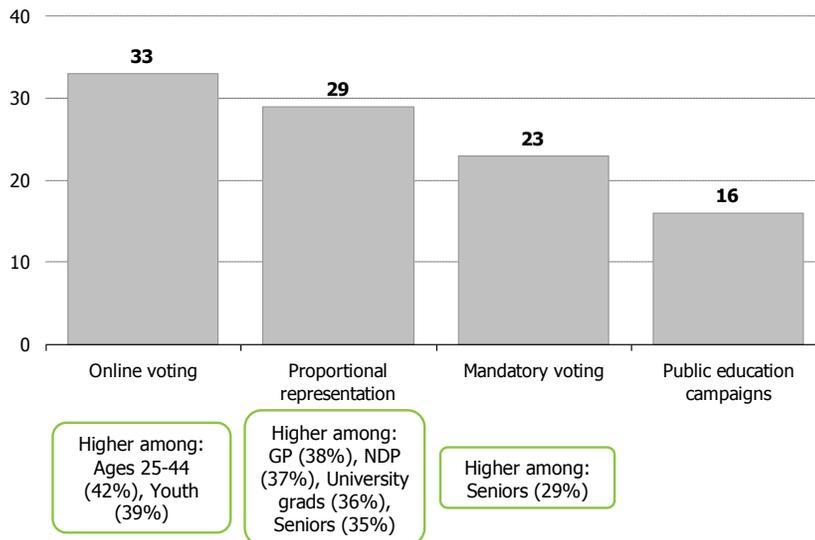
In the case of the economically vulnerable, disengagement from the political world no doubt worsens their positions of relative privation. Dealing with the burgeoning gap between rich and poor has clearly not been a priority for upper North American governments over the past thirty years and that inequality has escalated beyond the levels seen in the gilded age of the early twentieth century. It is hard to argue that income inequality has had a positive impact on our productivity, standard of living, or quality of life (Canada and the United States have slipped from jockeying around the top in standards of living thirty years ago to somewhere in the high teens in world rankings, despite drastic cuts in taxes). Even more ominously, the hard empirical evidence suggests that the social and economic costs of rising inequality will place huge pressures on health care, social services, and the criminal justice system as Richard Wilkinson has recently shown. This is quite apart from any quaint moral arguments for social justice and fairness. There is little doubt that the systematic exclusion of voting in the economically distressed portions of society solidifies the hopelessness of that sector.

As unemployment and underemployment rise to alarming levels in the younger parts of society, these two problems may be coalescing. The prospect of years of stagnant economic growth (or worse) due to global economic troubles may make the economic problems of the young a more permanent problem. And the net impacts of a voting system skewed to the older and more economically secure may be tilting our democracy towards a gerontocracy and a plutocracy when it desperately needs innovation and dynamism. This may not be simply the product of indifference and laziness, but part of a newly effective political marketing strategy which discourages or even suppresses democratic participation in these sectors.

Most would agree that these levels of disengagement aren't healthy for our polity or economy. So what, if anything, can be done? Beyond the support for mandatory voting noted earlier, Figure 2 shows some additional polling we did on this question at the end of 2009.

**Figure 2: Best method for improving voter participation**

*Q. Which of the following options do you think would be the best way to improve voter participation in Canada?*

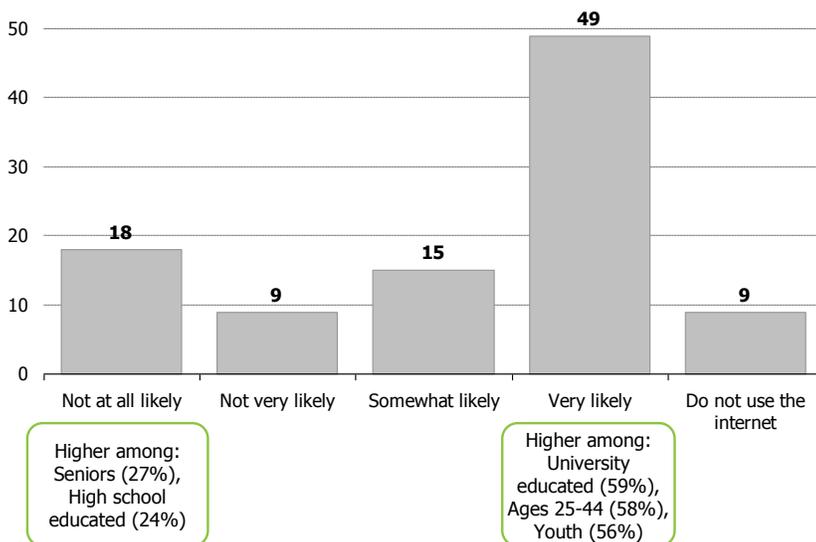


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BASE: Canadians; December 9-15, 2009 (n=3,386)

### Figure 3: Popularity of online voting

*Q. If Elections Canada offered a safe way of voting online – that is, on the internet – how likely is it that you would vote online in the next federal election?*



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BASE: Eligible voters; December 9-15, 2009 (n=3,300)

One option is a secure online ballot. Young voters grew up in a digital world and one could reasonably posit that this could well solve the at least part of the problem. If we can bank online, buy stocks online, and even file our taxes online, then surely the tech geniuses can figure out a secure online ballot. As Al Gore knows, paper voting is not totally secure either. Yes we should go ahead with such a reform and our polling shows the clear majority of Canadians – particularly youth – strongly support moving to an internet ballot (see Figure 3). The evidence from places where this has been tried, however, is not that encouraging and it is unlikely that online voting could alone solve the problem of low voting.

Many also speak of the need for ending our first-past-the-post system and moving to some form of proportional representation. It is hard to quarrel with that as we see minorities of voters finding effective hegemony over the majority of voters who didn't vote for them in many jurisdictions (the NDP majority victory in Manitoba with a roughly equal share of the popular voter as the Progressive Conservatives is a recent vivid example). It is little wonder that the Green Party's share of actual vote has been cut in half federally and in Ontario (from the previous election) as there is growing awareness that enjoying the support of around ten per cent of all voters and easily twice that among younger voters gets almost zero per cent representation. Despite these flaws, it is still unclear as to whether shifting to proportional representation would solve the problem of declining voter participation and the best guess is that it wouldn't.

Many have made laudable efforts to "rock the vote" or use other forms of social marketing/public education campaigns to stimulate youth voting. Despite some modest achievements, the overall results are inauspicious. Young people may love vote mobs and Facebook petitions and the

Twitter verse, but the net impacts on voting rates are inauspicious at best. It may be that the lure of click democracy is producing something more akin to Neil Postman's notion of "amusing ourselves to death" than genuine democratic renewal.

So although it isn't the most popular, it would seem that mandatory voting is the most sure fire way to solve this insidious form of democratic decay. Drawing from the successful examples of Australia, we could take a bold step and make voting mandatory. While recognising that this will not be a panacea for all democratic ails, it would clearly and swiftly solve this core problem. While this clashes somewhat with some personal freedoms, it does seem to be a plausible antidote for at least one expression of growing rot in our democratic institutions. Is voting any less important to the shape and health of our future society than completing a census? Filing taxes? Jury duty? The time may be right to remove the discretionary from democracy.