
MUNICIPAL VOTER TURNOUT

INDICATOR TYPE: *Social*

DOMAIN: Participation

DESCRIPTION

Voting in elections at all levels of government is fundamental to the democratic process in countries like Canada. The municipal voter turnout indicator was chosen as a measure of civic participation and engagement in the local political process. Voter turnout in Canada is defined as the number of cast votes divided by the total number of eligible voters on electoral lists¹. Traditionally, turnout rates in Canadian municipal elections have been low, which is puzzling for those interested in local government and communities. People ought to have a vested interest in the level of government that is closest to them, yet the statistics suggest that many are apathetic or somehow disengaged from the municipal political process.

It should be stressed, however, that voter turnout in municipal elections is not the sole barometer of public involvement in civic life. In most Canadian municipalities, residents can contact their municipal councillors, appear before council or committees of council to voice their viewpoints and concerns, participate in public consultations, become citizen members of agencies, boards and commissions, and volunteer with community groups²ⁱ. Voter turnout, nonetheless, remains an important gauge of the extent to which all segments of society participate in decision-making, as well as the commitment of citizens to the democratic political system³.

TRENDS

2000 Municipal Election Results: Voter turnout averaged 34.6% across the GTA for the 2000 municipal elections. (GTA-wide averages are weighted averages based on the number of eligible voters in each of the regional municipalities). Table 1 shows the percentage voter turnout aggregated at the regional municipal level for the 2000 elections, as well as statistics for the previous three municipal elections held in 1991, 1994, and 1997. In the 2000 elections, Toronto registered the highest voter turnout with 37.7 %, while Halton had the lowest at 27.8%. Durham and York placed a fairly close second and third standing with voter turnouts of 33.3% and 33.1%, respectively.

1997 Municipal Election Results: Voter turnout averaged 39.2% across the GTA for the 1997 municipal elections, higher than that for the 2000 election (Table 1). As was the case in the 2000 elections, in 1997, Toronto registered the highest voter turnout at 48.7%. In the 1997 election, Peel (rather than Halton) had the lowest turnout at 22.5%, and Durham, Halton and York had voter turnouts ranging between 32 and 35%. The GTA-wide average of 39.2% is a weighted average. Because Metro Toronto had slightly more eligible voters at the time of the 1997 municipal elections than Durham, Halton, York and Peel combined (1.56 million as compared to 1.55 million), the GTA-wide voter turnout of almost 40% was therefore heavily inflated by the relatively high turnout in Toronto.

The main reason for the high turnout in Toronto in the November 1997 municipal elections was the heightened interest in the future of the city as the six former municipalities in the former Metro Toronto were shortly thereafter unified on January 1, 1998⁴. Other factors were the closeness of the mayoralty race and widespread concern about provincial downloading of services to the municipalities⁵. Unexpectedly high voter turnout rates, together with an inadequate voters list, resulted in long line-ups at polling stations and some booths running out of ballots⁶.

**Table 1. Regional Municipality-Level Voter Turnout in the GTA
Municipal Elections, 1991 - 2000**

Regional Municipality	% Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections				
	1991	1994	1997	2000	Average*
Durham	32.6	35.9	32.3	33.3	33.5
Halton	31.7 ^a	35.3 ^{ab}	34.2 ^{ab}	27.8	32.3
Peel	25.7	27.4	22.5	28.2	26.0
York	34.1 ^{ct}	37.9 ^c	34.2 ^c	33.1	34.8
Toronto	33.9	35.3	48.7	37.7	38.9
Average*	32.3 ^t	34.4	39.2	34.6	35.1

* Averages are weighted by the number of eligible voters in individual regional municipalities

^a Halton Hills turnout based on Mayoralty race

^b Oakville turnout based on Mayoralty race

^c Georgina, Newmarket and Richmond Hill turnout based on Mayoralty race

^t Municipality of King 1991 election statistics not included (data not available)

Source: Local municipalities' and the City of Toronto's clerk's departments (data aggregated to regional level)

Figure 1 shows a map of voter turnout by local municipality across the GTA for the 1997 municipal elections. Several spatial patterns are apparent from the map. The first is the block of high turnout rates for all of the former cities of the pre-amalgamated Toronto. The old City of Toronto, North York and East York all topped 50%, followed closely by Etobicoke, Scarborough and York with turnout rates between 44 and 47%. The map also shows the very low turnout in the wedge formed by Mississauga and Brampton, two of the three local municipalities in Peel Region. A third pattern is the predominately higher voter turnout in the more outlying local municipalities of the GTA relative to those on the periphery of Toronto (such as Mississauga, Brampton, Markham and Richmond Hill). Halton Hills, Milton and Caledon, for instance, had voter turnout rates of between 35 and 39%. King, East Gwillimbury, Brock and Scugog all had voter turnout percentages between 40 and 49%. Table 2 shows the percentage voter turnout at the local municipal level for the 1991, 1994, 1997 and 2000 municipal elections.

Trends over the last 4 municipal elections, 1991-2000: Over the last four municipal elections held in the Greater Toronto Area, the percentage voter turnout increased from 32.3% in 1991 to 34.4% in 1994 to 39.2% in 1997 and decreased to 34.6% in 2000 (Table 1). The drop in voter turnout between the 1997 and 2000 elections is attributable to an increase in voter turnout during

the 1997 elections in Metro Toronto that resulted from the impending amalgamation of the city. With the exception of the 1997 election for which there were unique circumstances (looming amalgamation), the above trend indicates that voter turnout in the GTA over the past decade has been slowly increasing.

The average voter turnout for the GTA as a whole over the four elections was 35.1%. At the regional level, Toronto, at 38.9% had the highest voter turnout over the four elections, while Peel, at 26.8% had the lowest voter turnout over the same period. Except for the 1997 election in Toronto, which had a turnout of 48.7%, no regional municipality in the GTA had a voter turnout over 38% in the past four municipal elections.

Table 2. Local Municipality-Level Voter Turnout in the GTA
Municipal Elections, 1991 - 2000

Regional Municipality of Durham					
Local Municipality	% Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections				
	1991	1994	1997	2000	Average*
Whitby	35.4	35.0	33.1	27.8	34.4 32.8
Pickering	35.1	38.5	37.0	30.0	37.0 35.15
Ajax	33.4	32.9	31.4	32.9	32.5 32.7
Oshawa	28.1	33.5	28.2	28.0	29.9 29.5
Clarington	38.8	33.7	28.5	41.5	33.3 35.7
Brock	43.2	44.1	42.4	47.0	43.2 45.1
Scugog	45.1	44.5	40.4	52.0	43.2 44.2
Uxbridge	47.0	47.0	39.6	50.6	44.5 46.1
Average*	32.6	35.9	32.3	38.7	33.6 34.9

Regional Municipality of Halton					
Local Municipality	% Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections				
	1991	1994	1997	2000	Average*
Burlington	37.2	35.3	34.9	22.7	35.8 32.5
Halton Hills	39.5	41.8	36.3	39.2	39.1 39.2
Milton	31.2	39.4	39.4	38.0	36.7 37.0
Oakville	23.0	32.0	31.2	27.0	28.9 28.3
Average*	31.7	35.3	34.2	31.7	33.8 33.2

Regional Municipality of Peel					
Local Municipality	% Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections				
	1991	1994	1997	2000	Average*
Caledon	44.4	42.2	35.9	38.1	40.6 40.15
Brampton	26.1	30.6	23.2	31.4	26.5 27.8
Mississauga	23.7	24.5	20.9	25.6	23.0 23.7
Average*	25.7	27.4	22.5	31.7	25.1 26.8

Regional Municipality of York					
Local Municipality	% Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections				
	1991	1994	1997	2000	Average*
Vaughan	38.8	44.9	41.1	36.4	41.7 40.3
Aurora	37.0	40.2	33.8	41.0	36.9 38.0
East Gwillimbury	42.9	43.1	42.2	43.8	42.7 43.0
Georgina	31.2	36.3	30.8	34.9	32.8 33.3
Markham	27.8	32.5	30.3	30.9	30.3 30.4
Newmarket	33.8	45.2	33.8	36	37.6 37.2
Richmond Hill	34.8	28.9	26.9	22.0	29.7 28.2
Whitchurch-Stouffville	44.5	46.9	40.9	40.0	44.1 43.1
King	No record	44.8	48.4	53.0	46.6 48.7
Average*	34.1	37.9	34.2	37.6	35.4 36.0

Toronto					
Local Municipality	% Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections				
	1991	1994	1997	2000	Average* ^b
City of Toronto (former)	43.0	39.5	50.8	-	44.5
Etobicoke	33.3	35.9	46.4	-	38.5
Scarborough	27.8	33.2	44.4	-	35.2
North York	28.7	31.1	52.1	-	37.3
York	34.6	38.6	44.5	-	39.2
East York	33.3	35.8	50.9	-	39.6
Average*	33.9	35.3	48.7	37.7 ^a	38.9

* Averages are weighted by the number of eligible voters in individual local municipalities

^a *In 1999, Bill 101 changed the distribution of wards in Toronto. New wards are not congruent with the former cities in old Metro Toronto. As a result, the 2000 election results cannot be broken down for the former cities.

^b The average excludes 2000 election results. (See ^a for explanation)

Source: Local municipalities' and the City of Toronto's clerk's departments

Data at the local municipality level over the four elections (Table 2) show that some jurisdictions consistently had relatively high or low turnout rates throughout the 1990s. Eight local municipalities averaged over 40% for the four elections (Brock, Scugog, Uxbridge, Caledon, Vaughan, East Gwillimbury, Whitchurch-Stouffville, and King). Five local municipalities had an average voter turnout of less than 30% over the three elections (Oshawa, Brampton, Mississauga, Oakville and Richmond Hill). All other local municipalities fell between 30 and 40%.

Turnout rates for the 1997 elections, as well as trends for the other three elections, support studies⁷. Of the eight local municipalities that exceeded a 40% turnout over the three elections, six had electorates under 16,000 in 1997 (Brock, Scugog, Uxbridge, East Gwillimbury, Whitchurch-Stouffville and King). Two other 40%-plus municipalities, Caledon and Vaughan, had electorates in 1997 of about 32,000 and 95,000, respectively. The five under-30% municipalities (Oshawa, Brampton, Mississauga, Oakville and Richmond Hill) had electorates in 1997 ranging from 69,000 to 349,000.

What factors influence municipal voter turnout?

- Municipal population size: Turnout tends to be higher in smaller communities than in larger ones⁸. Similarly, voter turnout is generally higher in municipalities with a ward system as compared to elections at large⁸.
- Election competitiveness: Close mayoralty races usually have a positive impact on electoral participation, whereas a high number of acclamations decrease turnout⁹. Municipal elections typically have a high return of incumbents, which reduces competitiveness¹⁰.
- Compelling local issues: Examples include municipal amalgamation (e.g., the 1997 Toronto elections), the adoption of a new Community Plan, or public concern over a locally unwanted land use such as a landfill.
- Questions on the ballot: Referendum questions or plebiscites generally increase voter turnout. In the 1997 municipal elections, 17 of 30 GTA municipalities had non-binding questions on the ballot¹¹.
- Electorate demographics: Higher educational levels tend to increase turnout. A greater proportion of homeowners versus tenants also increases voter turnout, since municipal governments focus primarily on services related to property¹².

Comparison with municipal voter turnout in other Canadian cities: Table 3 shows municipal voter turnout for a number of major Canadian cities during the 1990s. Winnipeg, at 55.2%, had the highest turnout rates over the decade. Fredericton, at 31.0%, had the lowest turnout percentage. The GTA average turnout of 35.4% for the three elections in the 1990s falls in the middle of the range.

**Table 3. Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections in Major Canadian Cities
1990-99**

City	% Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections (Election year in brackets)			
	1990/91/92	1993/94/95/96	1997/98/99	Average*
Fredericton	43.5 (1992)	15.1 (1995)	34.3 (1998)	31.0
Montreal	36.1 (1990)	47.5 (1994)	50.9 (1998)	44.8
Ottawa	40.9 (1991)	38.7 (1994)	26.4 (1997)	35.3
Winnipeg	58.4 (1992)	53.5 (1995)	53.6 (1998)	55.2
Edmonton	51.6 (1992)	50.3 (1995)	35.7 (1998)	45.8
Calgary	34.2 (1992)	23.4 (1995)	45.8 (1998)	34.5
Vancouver	51.7 (1990)	34.7 ('93); 32.1 ('96)	36.2 (1999)	38.7
City of Toronto (former)	43.0 (1991)	39.5 (1994)	50.8 (1997)	44.5
Average*	44.9	37.2	41.7	41.2

Source: City clerk's departments

* Simple average (not weighted by number of eligible voters)

Comparison with voter turnout in Federal and Ontario elections: Voter turnout was considerably lower in GTA municipal elections during the 1990s as compared to voter turnout in Canadian federal and Ontario elections over the decade. In the federal elections of 1993 and 1997, nation-wide voter turnout was 67.0 and 69.6%, respectively¹³. Since 1867, federal voter turnout has averaged 71%¹⁴. The three Ontario elections in the 1990s, held in 1990, 1995 and 1999, had voter turnouts of 64.4, 62.9 and 58.3%, respectively¹⁵. The GTA average municipal voter turnout of 35.4% for the three elections during the 1990s is thus only slightly more than half of the federal and Ontario voter turnout during the same period.

LINKAGES

Voter turnout is interrelated with poverty issues and the health of the social environment¹⁶. Canadian studies of federal voter turnout behaviour suggest that youth, low-income or unemployed people, and those with limited formal education are less likely to vote¹⁷. If these trends are true municipally, vulnerable segments of society are being systematically excluded from the local decision-making process.

ACTION

Changes to the Ontario *Municipal Elections Act* in 1996 have given municipalities more flexibility in terms of utilizing new forms of voting, such as by telephone, mail and computer¹⁸. A number of GTA municipalities utilized alternative methods of voting in the November 2000 municipal elections in order to reduce elections costs, provide faster results, and increase turnout rate.

The Town of Gravenhurst used telephone voting in the 1997 municipal elections¹⁹. Eligible voters were mailed an information package with security code numbers, a list of candidates, the phone number to call to cast their vote, and voting instructions. The voting period was extended to 12 days. The telephone system affords voters a great deal of flexibility, since votes can be placed from anywhere in the world, 24 hours a day. Gravenhurst found that voter turnout did not increase under the telephone system, but this may have been because there was no mayoralty race. North York also used telephone voting in 1997 for a non-binding referendum question on the “megacity” concept²⁰.

One Muskoka township experimented with mail-in ballots in the 1997 municipal elections²¹. The State of Oregon has found that vote-by-mail has increased voter participation from 38 to 61%. In New Zealand, postal voting has increased turnout rates by 50%²². In the future, voting over the internet is a possibility.

The “Kids Can Vote” Program

An innovative approach to promoting voter turnout is a program called “Our Kids Can Vote Canada, a pilot project of the not-for-profit organization The Learning Partnership²³. In the program, students are exposed to classroom activities related to democratic process and given the opportunity to vote on a specific question at a children’s voting booth at advance polling stations. The objectives of the program are to instil in children the civic importance of voting in the future and to increase the adult vote today as a result of their children’s interest and through accompanying them to advance polls where they can also cast their vote.

Richmond Hill, Burlington, Newmarket and Toronto are expected to take part in the program for the November 2000 municipal elections.

Municipalities can make the process of voting more convenient for people in other ways. In the 1997 Toronto elections, the polls were open only from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., which meant that most people were not able to vote before work. Many polls were deluged with people between 5 to 8 p.m.²⁴.

DIFFICULTIES

Data on municipal voter turnout in the GTA is not easily accessible. Currently, neither the provincial government or the regional municipal governments, nor any non-governmental organizations keep centralized municipal election statistics. The only source of data is the city clerks for the individual local municipalities, thus making the process of data collection time-consuming and difficult. One clerks department (King) could not locate election records for the 1991 elections. Several clerks offices submitted official election results in lieu of the requested statistics (i.e., percentage voter turnout, number of eligible voters and number of cast votes) and, therefore, estimates of voter turnout were made based on the number of votes cast for the Office of Mayor. The number of votes cast for Mayor should be, however, a close approximation of actual voter turnout.

The Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasures of Ontario, a professional association dedicated to serving the needs of municipal employees in Ontario, has been charged with the responsibility of tabulating voter turnout for municipal elections for the GTA²⁵. The results of the 2000 election will be available for a fee from the Association in February of 2001.

In addition, the academic literature is lacking in the area of municipal voting behaviour in Canada. Most studies on voting trends have focussed on the federal and provincial levels²⁶. More municipal-oriented studies are needed to determine what factors influence voter turnout, who are the non-voters, what steps can be taken to increase turnout rates, and the effect of alternative forms of voting on turnout.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Vital Signs plans to add another civic participation indicator in future reports. A second indicator is needed since we vote municipally only once every three years, and Vital Signs are to be measured annually. Also, the municipal voter turnout indicator by itself cannot possibly capture the multi-faceted dimensions of civic participation.

The Vital Signs team is considering adding a deputations indicator. Municipalities across the GTA have committees, community councils, boards, agencies and other organizations that provide many essential services to city residents. During meetings of council committees, councillors hear the opinions and concerns of citizens, business owners and community groups. These are called *deputations*. The committees discuss budget, service and administration issues that are then passed on to councils for discussion and approval. The City of Toronto is planning on developing a database during the next 12 to 18 months that will track the number and nature of deputations made to its committees.

¹ Coulson, Tony. (1999) Voter Turnout in Canada: Findings from the 1997 Canadian Election Study. Electoral Insight, Nov.: 18-21.

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- ² Graham, Katherine A. and Susan D. Phillips. 1998. Urban Governance in Canada: Representation, Resources and Restructuring. Toronto: Harcourt Brace; City of Toronto. (2000) <http://www.city.toronto.ca>
- ³ Sustainable Seattle. (1995) <http://www.scn.org/sustainable/>
- ⁴ Infantry, Ashante. (1997) Voters galore – but only in Metro. The Toronto Star. Nov. 14. p. F1.
- ⁵ Spears, John and Gail Swainson. (1997) It's Mayor Mel: Lastman leads new unified city. The Toronto Star. Nov. 11. p. A1.
- ⁶ Moloney, Paul and Bruce DeMara. (1997) Furor over vote chaos. The Toronto Star. Nov. 12. pp. B1, B5.
- ⁷ Kushner, Joseph, David Siegel and Hannah Stanwick. (1997) Ontario Municipal Elections: Voting Trends and Determinants of Electoral Success in a Canadian Province. Canadian Journal of Political Science 30(3): 539-553. Graham, Katherine A. and Susan D. Phillips. 1998. Urban Governance in Canada: Representation, Resources and Restructuring. Toronto: Harcourt Brace.
- ⁸ Tindal, C. Richard and Susan Nobes Tindal. (1995) Local Government in Canada. 5th ed. Toronto: McGraw-Hill.
- ⁹ Tindal, C. Richard and Susan Nobes Tindal. (1995) Local Government in Canada. 5th ed. Toronto: McGraw-Hill.
- ¹⁰ Graham, Katherine A. and Susan D. Phillips. (1998) Urban Governance in Canada: Representation, Resources and Restructuring. Toronto: Harcourt Brace.
- ¹¹ Chamberlain, Art. (1997) GTA voters reject gambling, tax sharing. The Toronto Star. Nov. 11. B1.
- ¹² Tindal, C. Richard and Susan Nobes Tindal. (1995) Local Government in Canada. 5th ed. Toronto: McGraw-Hill.
- ¹³ Elections Canada. (2000) <http://www.elections.ca>.
- ¹⁴ Coulson, Tony. (1999) Voter Turnout in Canada: Findings from the 1997 Canadian Election Study. Electoral Insight. Nov.: 18-21.
- ¹⁵ Elections Canada. (2000) <http://www.elections.ca>.
- ¹⁶ Sustainable Seattle. (1995) <http://www.scn.org/sustainable/>
- ¹⁷ Coulson, Tony. (1999) Voter Turnout in Canada: Findings from the 1997 Canadian Election Study. Electoral Insight. Nov.: 18-21.
- ¹⁸ Graham, Katherine A. and Susan D. Phillips. (1998) Urban Governance in Canada: Representation, Resources and Restructuring. Toronto: Harcourt Brace.
- ¹⁹ Maher, Cindy Anne. (1998) Telephone Voting – An Alternative Voting Method.
- ²⁰ Robertson, R.W. (1999). Alternative Forms of Voting: Opportunities for citizen engagement. Municipal World 109(9): 13-16.
- ²¹ Van Rijn, Nicolas. 1997. Familiar faces returned to office across Ontario. The Toronto Star. Nov.
- ²² Robertson, R.W. (1999). Alternative Forms of Voting: Opportunities for citizen engagement. Municipal World 109(9): 13-16.
- ²³ The Learning Partnership. 2000. <http://www.tlp.on.ca/KidsCanVote>.

²⁴ Toronto Star. 1997. Toronto the bad. The Toronto Star. Nov. 12. p. A28.

²⁵ Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks, and Treasurers of Ontario. 2001. <http://www.amcto.com/home.asp>

²⁶ Kushner, Joseph, David Siegel and Hannah Stanwick. (1997) Ontario Municipal Elections: Voting Trends and Determinants of Electoral Success in a Canadian Province. Canadian Journal of Political Science 30(3): 539-553.