

Does Low Turnout Matter? Evidence from the 2000 Canadian General Election*

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Abstract

Turnout in Western democracies has been in steady decline over the past decade or longer. There is a vast literature on the causes and possible explanations for the decline. Most of these studies explicitly or implicitly argue that we should be concerned that fewer citizens go to the polls. One oft stated argument is that low turnout biases election results in favour of right-of-centre parties because rich citizens are far more likely to vote than poor citizens. We test these propositions using data from the 2000 Canadian Election Study. We analyze differences in opinion between voters and non-voters across a wide spectrum of policy areas and we test the hypothesis that the outcome of the 2000 Canadian General Election would have been appreciably different if all citizens were to have voted, by simulating universal turnout. We find scant evidence of partisan effects of turnout in Canada. Voters' opinions are by and large representative of the larger population and universal turnout would not have notably changed the election result.

1. INTRODUCTION

Voter turnout in many Western democracies has been in decline for the past decade or longer (Blais, Gidengill, Nevitte & Nadeau 2004, Gray & Caul 2000). Canada has been no exception to this trend. Turnout¹ in Canadian federal elections has dropped steadily since 1988, having averaged around 75 percent after the Second World War. In the 1993 federal election turnout fell to 70 percent, 67 percent in 1997, and in 2000 slightly more than 61 percent of registered voters went to the polls (Pammett & LeDuc 2003, p. 4). The media, academics and politicians alike lament this lack of civic participation and express concern over what is generally seen as a bellwether for the health of democracy. There is a

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¹ Turnout is here measured as a percentage of registered electors who cast a ballot.

vast literature on what makes people turn out to vote (Blais & Dobrzynska 1998, Franklin 1996, Jackman & Miller 1995, Powell 1980, Powell 1986, Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980) and on the possible causes of low and declining voter turnout (Gray & Caul 2000, Pammett & LeDuc 2003). Most of this literature explicitly or implicitly argues that we should be concerned for one reason or another that fewer citizens go to the polls. Conversely, there exists a relative dearth of empirical work assessing the impact and consequences of low turnout. Many of the arguments about the importance of high levels of turnout are normative and hard to examine empirically. However, one frequently occurring contention is testable; namely that turnout has a partisan bias. That is, it is held that low turnout favours right-of-centre parties and conversely, that higher turnout would be an electoral boon for progressive or left-of-centre parties and policies. The argument tends to be that low turnout is a problem because rich and better educated citizens are far more likely to vote than poor, less educated citizens and that this makes for unequal influence and representation since voters' preferences are systematically different from non-voters'.

However, while the view that low turnout constitutes a democratic dilemma is widely held and oft stated (Lijphart 1997, Piven & Cloward 1988, Putnam 2000, Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995), few if any of these studies provide empirical evidence for the accuracy of these assumptions. Citrin, Schickler & Sides (2003) and Highton & Wolfinger (2001) are recent exceptions. Both Citrin, Schickler & Sides (2003) and Highton & Wolfinger (2001) analyse US data—Voter News Survey exit polls of Senate elections in the former and American National Election Study data in the latter—to answer questions about the partisan effects of turnout and do so by simulating higher turnout in Senate elections and Presidential elections respectively. Citrin, Schickler & Sides find that Democrats do fare better under conditions of universal turnout but that the effects are almost always too small to affect election outcomes since so few of the races are close (2003, pp. 82-3) this is even the case when they examine other possible increases in turnout such as universal turnout among registered voters, equal turnout among African-Americans and whites, and the same turnout for members of different income groups (2003, pp. 85-6). Highton & Wolfinger also simulate universal turnout using a method described in more detail below, and find similarly modest results for Presidential elections. They estimate that Clinton would have gained 2.5 percentage points while Bush would have lost 1.5 percentage points in the 1992 election had everyone voted. Their results for the 1996 election are similar (2001, p. 189). If few studies provide empirical evidence, even fewer examine the question

outside the American context. It is of value to examine this question in a non-US setting precisely because the conventional wisdom holds that the left will prosper when turnout increases. If true, this effect should be stronger in countries such as Canada where the party system includes a traditional left, or labour, oriented party.

We test these propositions using data from the 2000 Canadian Election Study (CES). Our analysis—which applies a similar method to that used by Highton & Wolfinger (2001) in their analysis of US presidential elections—entails two steps. First, we analyze differences in opinion between voters and non-voters across a wide spectrum of policy areas covering economic and social policy, national unity and others in order to assess the extent of divergent views between voters and abstainers. Next, we test the hypothesis that the outcome of the 2000 Canadian federal election would have been substantially different if all citizens were to have voted, by simulating universal turnout.

The paper proceeds by first outlining the argument for turnout’s partisan bias. Section three compares the policy preferences and opinions of voters and the entire CES sample in order to establish to what degree voters are representative of the entire population. Finally, in section four we present results of how the 2000 Canadian federal election would have looked had everyone voted, by simulating universal turnout.

2. THE ARGUMENT FOR TURNOUT’S PARTISAN BIAS

The relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and turnout is one of the most well known findings in the political participation literature. Turnout increases with income and education. Wealthier, higher earning, better educated people are more likely to vote than their poorer, less educated fellow citizens. This fact has been seen as a problem for democracy by a number of scholars arguing that citizens’ views will not be adequately represented when participation is unequally distributed (Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995, Lijphart 1997). Implicit in this line of reasoning is that SES groups differ in their preferences—both for parties and policies—and it is on this that the argument for a partisan bias in turnout rests. It is generally assumed that lower SES citizens are more likely to support left-of-centre political parties and policies. But, lower SES citizens are also less likely to vote. As DeNardo argued, the left vote tends to covary with turnout (1980, pp. 409-11). Higher-status citizens tend to vote more regularly and vote for right-of-centre parties (DeNardo 1980; Pacek and Radcliff 1995, 138). Thus, any increase in turnout will increase the number of low SES citizens in the pool of voters and since these

will tend to vote on the left, parties to the left of centre will gain. This reasoning applies not only to SES but to other correlates of turnout as well. While much of the work arguing for a partisan bias in turnout focuses on SES, and in particular income, recent work on turnout has uncovered age as an important predictor of an individual's likelihood of voting. Older people are more likely to vote than the young. Therefore, turnout will again be apt to be biased in so far as the young and the old differ in their preferences.

The claim that voters and non-voters differ to any great extent in their tendency to support various issues or hold positions to one end of the ideological spectrum or the other is not in fact supported by empirical evidence, however. Most empirical work comparing voters' and non-voters' preferences find little difference between the two groups (Gant & Lyons 1993, Shaffer 1982, Studlar & Welch 1986). If voters and abstainers are not different perhaps that is the end of the story. Lijphart, however, offers another possibility by pointing out that this finding might be an artefact caused by non-voters not having thought much about the issues (Lijphart 1997, p. 4)(Highton & Wolfinger 2001, p. 179). Lijphart's argument amounts to saying that non-voters' preferences will "crystallize" through being mobilized to vote:

Nonvoters who are asked their opinions on policy and partisan preferences in surveys are typically citizens who have not given these questions much thought, who have not been politically mobilized, and who, in terms of social class, have not developed class consciousness. It is highly likely that, if they were mobilized to vote, their votes would be quite different from their responses in opinion polls (Lijphart 1997, p. 4) (also cited in Highton & Wolfinger 2001, p. 179).

Were these abstainers to be mobilized, their opinions would be clarified and they would express their true preferences for progressive policies and cast their ballots for parties of the left goes the argument.

Thus, there are two related underlying assumptions here. The first is that voters and non-voters in fact differ significantly in their policy preferences and that non-voters are more likely to hold progressive views. The second is that if these non-voters were to turnout, election results would be appreciably different from what they are at present. In the remainder of this paper we turn our attention to an empirical assessment of these propositions.

3. VOTERS AND NON-VOTERS COMPARED

We begin our analysis by asking to what extent voters and non-voters differ in their preferences for various policies and in their opinions on an array of relevant issues. While we mentioned earlier that past empirical work comparing voters and non-voters found few differences, we contend that it is still useful to conduct such a comparison. Much of that earlier work used American data; it may be the case that Canadian abstainers actually do hold significantly different views from those who vote. While ? argument is that abstainers will alter their preferences once mobilized to vote—an argument we test later in the paper—the conventional wisdom has been that voters differ significantly in their preferences and in particular that voters are less likely to hold left-leaning opinions meaning that electoral and policy outcomes will tend to benefit better-off citizens to the detriment of others.

Slightly more than eighty-three percent of respondents to the 2000 CES reported that they voted in the 2000 general election. However, the official turnout for that election is considerably lower—indeed more than 20 percentage points lower—at around 61 percent. Over-reporting of voting is a common problem in survey research and especially problematic in our case (Silver & Anderson 1986, Swaddle & Heath 1989). If we are interested in analysing differences between voters and non-voters and do not take into account that voters may be overrepresented we will bias our estimates. To get around this, we simply re-weight the CES sample to reflect the official turnout.

Our results show little difference between voters and abstainers when it comes to policy preferences. Table 1 contains results comparing voters' and non-voters' opinions on various issues. What we have done here is to determine whether turning out to vote is significantly related to holding opinions one way or the other these issues. The top part of the table shows results for different spending areas. Respondents were asked whether they thought the federal government should spend more, less or about the same amount on these areas.² The next part of the table displays a wide variety of issues ranging from economic and social policy to healthcare and immigration. Finally, we have included the battery of questions from the CES asking respondents how important they think various issues are in the election. The cell entries in Table 1 are logit coefficients from separate regressions. The dependent variable for all the regressions is voting (1) versus not voting (0) and all independent variables range from 0 to 1. Conventional wisdom holds that

² See the appendix for full question wordings and the coding of the variables.

non-voters have different policy views because of their SES; therefore the best test is a model with no control variables at all. Column 1 in the table reports coefficients from models where the only independent variable was the issue of interest. That is, the first entry in column 1 is the coefficient from the equation containing turnout on the left side and only opinion on defence spending on the left side of the equation; likewise the second entry is the estimate from a model with only turnout and opinion on welfare spending and so on. Column 2 reports results from models with controls for age, gender, education, income and country of origin. While we report these, we feel that the stronger and more appropriate test is one without controls, therefore we concentrate our discussion on the results in column 1. We are mostly interested in whether or not having either left or right leaning preferences is statistically related to turning out or not and as such are less concerned with the size of the coefficients in Table 1.

The results in Table 1 would seem to suggest that voters and non-voters do differ in their preferences. Of the fifty-four issues we examine, more than half (thirty-three) display significant relationships with voting when we do not include controls (only fourteen are significant with controls). However, while voters and abstainers do not share the same views on many issues, there are no clear patterns indicating that left, or right, wing preferences are more strongly related to turning out. Those who are in favour of increasing defence spending are more likely to turn out, but so too are those who want the government to spend more on healthcare and education. Respondents who believe the unions should have more power and those who believe business should have more power both have a lower probability of voting. Canadians in favour of a user fees for medical services are more likely to turnout. Given Canada's history of public healthcare, this is a relatively conservative view to take. As is being against quotas for female Members of Parliament and believing that we ought not to adapt our morals to reflect a changing world and being against same sex marriage; all of which are negatively and significantly correlated with turning out to vote. On the other hand, being supportive of increased immigration and holding the view that crime was a relatively unimportant issue in the election—two more liberal or progressive views—are also positively and significantly related to turning out. Thus, there are no real telling patterns emerging except to say that voting or abstaining seems unrelated to the opinions and preferences of respondents.

The argument that low turnout presents a democratic dilemma rests largely on the assertion that governments elected by few citizens are unrepresentative. Specifically, it is

Table 1: The impact of policy preferences on the propensity to vote^a

	1	2
<i>Spending</i>		
Defence	0.460***	0.426***
Welfare	0.434***	0.309**
Pension	-0.621***	-0.472
Healthcare	-0.313**	-0.177
UI	-0.337**	-0.044
Education	-0.423**	0.014
Foreign aid	-0.130	0.031
<i>Issues</i>		
Union power	-0.770***	-0.207
Business power	-0.649***	-0.298
US-Canada relations	-0.539***	-0.549***
Private hospitals	0.054	0.056
\$10 Health care user fee	0.400***	0.096
\$20 Health care user fee	0.489***	0.414**
Blame yourself if you don't get ahead	0.062	-0.227
Business profits good for all	0.585***	0.277*
Free trade	0.305**	0.103
Cut funding to prov. with user fees	0.135	0.106
Private sector job creation	-0.054	-0.121
Move to find jobs	0.060	-0.278*
Welfare state leads to apathy	0.201	0.044
Environment vs creating jobs	0.187	0.078
If you want it, you can get a job	-0.435*	-0.351
Lack of women MPs a problem	-0.248	0.044
Quotas for women MPs	-0.872***	-0.551***
Lack of minority MPs a problem	-0.136	0.213
Quotas for minority MPs	-0.515***	0.053
Abortion	0.320**	0.240
Feminism	0.042	0.198
Gun control	-0.256**	-0.173
Death penalty	-0.036	-0.132
Immigration	0.503***	0.365**
Equal rights	0.426*	0.094
Tolerance toward alt. lifestyles	-0.754***	-0.523*
Gay marriage	-0.563***	-0.060
Layoff wives of working husbands first	0.101	-0.026
Discrimination a barrier for women	-0.048	0.266
Alternative lifestyles	0.279	-0.134

continues on next page

Table 1 continued

	1	2
Adapt morals to changing world	-1.235***	-0.563**
Family values	0.355*	0.110
Harder to succeed for non-whites	0.924***	0.658**
Quebec's right to separate	-0.224*	-0.075
Canada first	-0.404*	-0.154
Bible is the word of God	0.017	0.092
Special rights for minorities	-0.155	-0.027
More women in parliament	-0.130	0.356
Role of women in society	0.234**	-0.086
<i>Most Important Issues</i>		
Crime	-0.489***	-0.438**
Reducing debt	0.254*	0.164
Family values	-0.134	-0.197
Improving healthcare	-0.174	0.046
Improving soc. Welfare prgs	-0.223*	-0.097
Cutting taxes	-0.408***	-0.261*
Creating jobs	-0.449***	0.238
Defending Quebec's interests	0.054	0.050

^a Entries are unstandardized logit coefficients from separate regressions, the dependent variable is voting (1) versus not voting (0); independent variables have been recoded with values between 0 and 1. Column 1 displays coefficients from models with no controls; column 2 contains coefficients from models with controls for age, gender, education, income and country of origin; *** significant at 0.1%; ** significant at 1%; * significant at 5%.

Source: CES 2000

claimed that low turnout excludes the views of poor and less educated citizens leading to policies favouring the rich. Milner sums up this view when he writes:

A society with 40 percent of its citizens excluded by a lack of the basic resources needed for civic competence from active, informed citizenship will ultimately choose policies—and reinforce the institutions underlying these policies—significantly different from those of a society with only 15 percent excluded (Milner 2001, 29).

We now turn to a first attempt at assessing the accuracy of this sentiment. To what extent does the exclusion of non-voters' preferences have an effect on aggregate preferences? Is it the case that only taking account of the preferences of those that voted skews preferences toward the right and away from the “progressive” end of the political spectrum?³ Replicating Highton & Wolfinger's (2001) comparison of voters and the entire population in the United States—albeit with a larger number of issues—Table 2 compares preferences of voters and the entire CES 2000 sample in order to get some idea of how representative

³ We use the term “progressive” to mean what in the American context would be referred to as “liberal”.

voters are. The table presents the percentage of voters and the entire CES sample who hold progressive views on issues, the difference reported in column 3 is simply how much more (or less) progressive the entire sample is on a given issue. Again, we took the most cautious approach by re-weighted our sample to reflect the official turnout rate. Thus, as Highton & Wolfinger point out, “the result is to *overestimate* any differences between self-reported voters and the entire sample. Therefore, differences [reported in Table 2] should be regarded as the upper limits of the effects of universal turnout” (2001, p. 183, emphasis in original).

On issues of spending, voters are somewhat less progressive than the entire sample. Voters believed the government should not spend more on foreign aid, education, unemployment insurance, pensions or defence. However, the differences between voters and the entire population were never more than 1 percentage point on any of these items. Going against this pattern, voters were in favour of spending more on welfare programs by 2 percentage points over the entire population and 30 percent of voters believed business had too much power in Canada, compared to 29 percent of the entire CES sample.

The margin of difference between voters and the entire sample was largest on the issue of quotas for MPs; thirty-four percent of voters believing that quotas for women MPs was the best way to ensure women’s representation while forty-two percent of the entire population was of that opinion; voters were more conservative by 5 percentage points when it came to minority MP quotas. Interestingly, more voters displayed progressive views on the question of whether it is harder for minorities than whites to succeed in Canada—the difference being 4 percentage points. Considerably more non-voters—51% versus 46%—held progressive views on whether society ought to adapt its morals to a changing world. Voters were more conservative by three percentage points when it came to spending on defence, pensions, and unemployment insurance; as well as believing that business profits were good for everyone, being tolerant toward alternative lifestyles and on equal rights.

As Table 2 illustrates, voters were more conservative than the entire CES sample on a range issues, however, excepting the few mentioned above, differences are slight. On most issues where more voters hold conservative opinions, the difference between them and the entire sample is only one or two percentage points. These include foreign aid spending by the government, union power, free trade, gun control and believing that the welfare state leads to apathy. Voters were, by 1 percentage point, also more conservative on questions

Table 2: “Progressive” preferences among voters and the entire CES sample compared^a

	Voters ^b	Entire Sample ^b	Difference	N ^c
<i>Spending</i>				
Defence	22	25	3	2753
Welfare	32	31	-1	2748
Pension	58	61	3	2792
Healthcare	87	88	1	2825
UI	33	36	3	2719
Education	82	83	1	2807
Foreign aid	18	20	2	2692
<i>Issues</i>				
Union power	12	14	2	2776
Business power	30	28	-2	2726
US-Canada relations	16	16	0	2783
Private hospitals	56	57	1	2655
Blame yourself for failure	28	29	1	2719
Bus. profits are good for all	65	68	3	2770
Free trade	33	35	2	2572
Cut fund. to prov. with user fees	35	36	1	2620
Welfare state leads to apathy	35	37	2	1431
Environment vs creating jobs	55	55	0	1331
If you want it, you can get a job	19	19	0	1444
Lack of women MPs a problem	35	36	1	1401
Quotas for women MPs	34	42	8	1315
Lack of minority MPs a problem	34	36	2	1367
Quotas for minority MPs	44	49	5	1247
Abortion	65	64	-1	2548
Feminism	68	68	0	2599
Gun Control	56	58	2	2790
Immigration	17	15	-2	2754
Equal rights	59	62	3	1345
Tolerance toward alt. lifestyles	71	74	3	1436
Layoff wives of working husbands first	88	87	-1	1465
Discrimination a barrier for women	55	55	0	1420
Alt. lifestyles lead to soc. breakdown	47	49	2	1376
Adapt morals to changing world	46	51	5	1440
Fewer soc. problems with family values	26	27	1	1448
Harder to succeed for non-whites	45	41	-4	1396
Canada first	59	57	-2	1427
Special rights for minorities	17	17	0	1423
More women in parliament	50	50	0	1378

^a See Appendix for question wordings and definitions of “progressive” preferences.^b Percentage with “progressive” preferences.^c N=unweighted sample size.

of family values, private hospitals and healthcare spending. However, the results in Table 2 also indicate that voters are more liberal or “progressive” on several issues. They are more progressive, by 1 percentage point, when it comes to abortion, welfare spending and whether women who have employed husbands should be laid off first; voters are more progressive by 2 percentage points on issues of business power, immigration, and the view that we ought to protect Canadians first. Finally, as mentioned above forty-five percent of voters hold more progressive views on whether it is harder for non-whites to succeed in Canada versus forty-one percent of the entire sample. On the rest of the issues examined, there are no differences in the prevalence of progressive, left-leaning opinions between voters and the entire sample.

As we alluded to earlier, Lijphart (1997) and others argue that such findings are a result of non-voters not having thought much about the issues and not having strong opinions on them because they have not been politically mobilized. A quick test of this proposition was conducted by simply examining the prevalence of “no opinions” among non-voters and voters on the issues analyzed in the previous tables. We find only scant differences in the prevalence of “no opinions” among abstainers and voters; non-voters are overwhelmingly more likely to have an opinion than not. While voters do tend to be more likely to express an opinion, the difference is only about 1 percentage point on the items discussed in Table 2. It should be said that the N becomes very small for these groups and it is uncertain whether we can reliably infer much from the results (that is, the differences between the two groups); nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that non-voters do seem to have opinions on issues.

4. SIMULATING UNIVERSAL TURNOUT

Our simulation is a slightly modified version of the approach taken by Highton & Wolfinger in their analysis of the effects of turnout on US presidential election outcomes (2001). As they argue, simply comparing non-voters’ stated political preferences with the revealed preferences of voters does not directly address the argument that the act of voting actually crystallizes preferences and heightens awareness (2001, p. 198). Therefore, we begin by disregarding non-voters’ stated preferences as given by answers to survey questions and instead ascribe to them the preferences of voters—i.e. citizens who had been mobilised—who are similar to them along other dimensions. While income is seen as the most salient dimension in the US work on this topic (Highton & Wolfinger 2001, Lijphart 1997), we

take a somewhat broader approach. The effect of age on turnout is an important one (Blais 2000, Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980) and there was a considerable age gap in voter participation in Canada in the 2000 election. While rates of non-voting for people born prior to 1970 have remained fairly steady in elections since 1988, those of the post-1970 generation have declined markedly. Non-voting increased by 14 percentage points between 1993 and 2000 for the post-generation X cohort (Blais, Gidengill, Nadeau & Nevitte 2002, p. 48). Given this gap between generations, we want to test the proposition that increasing the number of young voters will influence election results. Therefore, instead of only dividing the electorate into income groups to ascribe preferences to non-voters, we used income (above and below \$30,000) as well as age (above and below 30 years) and gender to create eight groups. Thus, non-voters who are low income, young and male were assigned the preferences of low income, young male voters; high income, young male non-voters those of high income, young male voters and so on. The method for creating a simulated population, introduced by Highton & Wolfinger (2001, p. 189), involved first determining the distribution of vote choices for voters in each of the eight groups. Next we ascribed these choices to non-voters in that group. Finally, we combine the preferences of voters and non-voters. The electoral choices presented to citizens differ somewhat between the province of Québec and the rest of Canada; the Bloc Québécois party does not run candidates outside Québec. Therefore, we conducted separate simulations for each of these regions and then combined the two by weighting the estimates according each region's share of the population.

According to the conventional wisdom on the effects of low turnout on the vote, we ought to expect a change in the fortunes of both left and right wing parties. Again, to recap the argument, people with high SES are more likely to vote. While low SES citizens may be no less likely to express conservative views on survey items, this is because they have not reached class consciousness, been mobilized and crystallized their views. Once low SES non-voters turnout, the left will gain. Our expectations from conventional wisdom is that the vote for right-of-centre parties such as the Liberals, Progressive Conservatives and Canadian Alliance ought to decline when turnout rises. At the same time, the left wing New Democratic Party (NDP) should see its share of the vote increase when more citizens turnout to the polls. In Québec, with its somewhat different constellation of parties, conventional wisdom has long held that the separatist Bloc Québécois (BQ) is punished by low turnout to the electoral advantage of the Liberals. Therefore, in our

Québec simulation, we expect the BQ to make significant gains at the cost of the Liberal vote share if conventional wisdom holds.

Table 3: Simulated universal turnout in 2000

	CES results ^a	Simulated results	Official results ^b
Liberal	39.0	40.2	40.8
Conservative	12.9	10.6	12.2
Alliance	25.8	26.1	25.5
NDP	9.9	10.1	8.5
Bloc	10.4	11.0	10.7
Other	1.9	2.1	2.2

^a Source: CES 2000.

^b Source: Elections Canada.

The results from our simulations of full turnout in Canada are presented in Table 3. We compare the simulated population to the CES sample and also present the official Elections Canada results. The conventional wisdom as well Lijphart’s (1997) and others prediction is that full turnout will mean an increase in the vote share of left-of-centre parties at the expense of the right. Had everyone voted in Canada in the 2000 general election, the NDP, the traditional party of the left, would have gained .2 percentage points, moving from 9.9 to 10.1 percent. Not a large shift by any measure. Likewise, the shares of votes for the rest of the parties do not change markedly. The Liberals gain 1.2 percentage points nationally and the western-based right-wing Alliance Party gain .3 percentage points. The Progressive Conservative Party experiences a drop in support by 2.3 percentage points under universal turnout. Finally, the separatist BQ party would have received .6 percent more votes had everyone voted. This is somewhat misleading however, as what we have here is a national measure of support and the BQ did not compete outside the province of Québec.

If we break down the simulation to look at Québec separately, we get a more accurate picture of how the BQ—in addition to the other parties in Québec—would fare under conditions of universal turnout. Folk theory has it that the BQ are traditionally punished by low turnout while the Liberals in Québec are rewarded when citizens stay away from the polls. Table 4 gives a somewhat positive verdict on this proposition.

While the BQ would not benefit massively if everyone voted, they do gain 2.1% in our

Table 4: Universal turnout in Québec

	CES results ^a	Simulated results
Liberal	37.8	35.0
Conservative	5.1	4.4
Alliance	6.9	7.1
NDP	3.1	4.1
Bloc	43.4	45.5
Other	3.7	3.9

^a Source: CES 2000.

simulated results. This is more or less in line with other empirical work on this question. Martinez & Gill, using a different simulation method, estimate a gain of 3.9% in the BQ's vote margin (2003, p. 12). While this is slightly higher than our estimate, we do not feel the divergence would translate to a striking difference in the number of seats in Parliament. The Liberals experience a somewhat larger effect than our estimate for the BQ. Moving to universal turnout would entail a loss of 2.8% of support for the Liberals across the province of Québec. For a difference in vote share to occur in our simulations a given variable (here age, income and gender) must be strongly related to both voting and vote choice. The effect of universal turnout on the BQ and its virtual non-effect on the NDP illustrates the differing impact of these factors on voters for these two parties. For the NDP, it seems these variables are quite weakly related to vote and vote choice. The fact that we find very small differences between the votes for parties as measured by the CES, the actual vote and our simulated population indicates that the overall link between age, income and gender and the vote is a weak one.

5. CONCLUSION

According to conventional wisdom, low turnout biases election outcomes such that right-wing parties gain at the expense of left-of-centre alternatives. The logic behind this reasoning is that electoral participation is unequal; better-off citizens are more likely to vote than less well-off citizens and there is assumed to be clear differences in policy and party preferences between these groups. We tested this argument using Canadian Election Study data by first comparing the opinions and preferences of voters and non-voters as well as comparing voters to the entire population. We found scant evidence for the contention that voters and abstainers hold significantly different views or that voters are less likely

to hold progressive views on issues. This is consistent with the empirical evidence from the United States and elsewhere. Second, we simulated universal turnout to determine the effect of higher turnout on election results in the 2000 Canadian general election. Again, our results fail to confirm the conventional wisdom that increasing turnout would bring with it a shift in the electoral fortunes of the main parties in Canada. At the national level, party support shifts at most by 2.3 percentage points for the Tories and considerably less for the other parties. When we looked at Québec separately, we found somewhat more positive results for the conventional wisdom that the Bloc Québécois gains and the Liberals lose votes when turnout goes up.

Given the arguments presented in favour of a turnout bias, we would expect this effect to be stronger in countries where class cleavages are stronger. That is, where there exist left-of-centre parties who traditionally have as their constituency lower SES citizens we ought to see more pronounced shifts as more of these conventional non-voters are added to the pool of voters. While Canada may not stand out as a country with massive class cleavages, it is safe to say that the party system in Canada reflects stronger socio-economic cleavages than its southern neighbour. The presence of the NDP, a party that is a natural home for lower-SES citizens ought to mean that the effect of higher turnout on election results will be larger than in, say, the US where neither major party has these citizens as its natural constituency. However, as our results show, universal turnout in Canada would not have a radically greater effect than in the US.

Does low turnout matter? When it comes to the question of whether turnout skews election outcomes one way or the other, the answer appears to be no. While our results from Québec indicate that turnout has an effect, it is a marginal one. It would seem that the alarm bells sounded by proponents of the partisan bias theory of low turnout are more of the Chicken Little variety than Cassandra.

DATA APPENDIX

Question wordings and coding of variables (the coding of “progressive” opinions for Table 2 are described below each variable’s coding):

SPENDING

The same question was asked for defence; welfare; pension and old age security; health care; unemployment insurance; education; aid to developing countries. Answers were coded as follows:

- 0 spend less
- .5 about the same as now
- 1 spend more

[progressive coded as 1]

ISSUES

Union and business power

How much power do you think unions/business should have:

- 0 much less
- .25 somewhat less
- .5 about the same as now
- .75 somewhat more
- 1 much more

[progressive coded .74 or 1 for unions; 0 or .25 for business]

US-Canada Relations

Do you think Canada’s ties to the United States should be:

- 0 much more distant
- .25 more distant
- .5 about the same as now
- .75 somewhat closer
- 1 much closer

[progressive coded 0 or .25]

Private hospitals

- 0 oppose
- 1 favour

[progressive coded 0]

\$10 user fee

- 0 oppose
- 1 favour

\$20 user fee

- 0 oppose
- 1 favour

Lack of women/minority MPs a problem

0 not a problem at all
.33 not a serious problem
.66 quite a serious problem
1 very serious problem

[progressive coded .66 or 1]

Quotas for women/minority MPs

0 oppose
1 favour

[progressive coded 1]

Abortion

Getting an abortion should be:

0 very difficult
.33 quite difficult
.66 quite easy
1 very easy

[progressive coded .66 or 1]

Feminism

0 not sympathetic at all to feminism
.33 not very sympathetic
.66 quite sympathetic
1 very sympathetic

[progressive coded .66 or 1]

Death penalty

0 oppose
1 favour

[progressive coded 0]

STATEMENTS

Respondents were asked whether they agree with the following statements:

1) People who don't get ahead should blame themselves; 2) when businesses make a lot of money everyone benefits; 3) overall, free trade with the US has been good for the Canadian economy; 4) Quebec has the right to separate no matter what the rest of Canada says; 5) Federal government should cut funding to provinces that allow user fees for medical services; 6) we have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country; 7) we should be more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own standards; 8) the first workers to be laid off should be women whose husbands have jobs; 9) the welfare state makes people less willing to look after themselves; 10) discrimination makes it extremely difficult for women to find jobs equal to their abilities; 11) protecting the environment is more important than creating jobs; 12) newer lifestyles are contributing to the breakdown of our society; 13) the world is always changing and we should adapt our view of moral behaviour to these changes; 14) this country would have many fewer problems if there was more emphasis on traditional family values; 15) it is more difficult for non-whites to succeed in Canadian society than it is for whites; 16) if people really want work, they can find a job; 17) we should look after Canadians born in this country first and others second; 18) the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally word for word; 19) minority groups need special rights; 20) the best way to protect women's interest is to have more women in Parliament. All items coded:

0 strongly disagree
.33 somewhat disagree
.66 somewhat agree
1 strongly agree

[progressive coded 0 or .33 for statements 1-3, 6, 8-9, 11-12, 14, 16-18; coded .66 or 1 for statements 5, 7, 10, 13, 15, 19, 20]

POLICY

Respondents were asked whether they agree with the following policies:

1) Society would be better of if more women stayed home with their children; 2) gays and lesbians should be allowed to get married; 3) government should leave it entirely up to the private sector to create jobs; 4) only the police and military should be allowed to carry guns; 5) if people can't find work in the region where they live, they should move to where there are jobs. All items coded:

0 strongly disagree
.33 somewhat disagree
.66 somewhat agree
1 strongly agree

[progressive coded 0 or .33 for statements 1, 3, 5; coded .66 or 1 for statements 2, 4]

Immigration

0 Canada should admit fewer immigrants
.5 about the same as now
1 more immigrants

[progressive coded 1]

IMPORTANT ISSUES

Respondents were asked whether various issues were important to them personally:

1) protecting the environment; 2) fighting crime; 3) reducing the Federal debt; 4) promoting traditional family values; 5) improving health care; 6) improving social welfare programs; 7) cutting taxes; 8) creating jobs; 9) defending the interests of Quebec. All items coded:

0 not very important
.5 somewhat important
1 very important

[progressive coded as 0 for issue 4 and 7; coded as 1 for issue 1-3, 5, 6, 8]

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