



Less Exclusion, More Engagement:

Addressing Declining Voter Turnout In Alberta



**I don't like
any of the
candidates.**



**Not
enough
time.**



**Out of
riding.**



**Does it
matter?**



**Where
do I go?**



**I am
working.**

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Trevor Harrison & Harvey Krahn
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Executive summary

Alberta's record low voter turnout in the 2008 election (40.6 percent) raised considerable concern about the state of democracy in the province. Although turnout rose to 54.4 percent in 2012, over the long-term, voting in Alberta is on a downward trend.

This report uses public opinion data collected in 2008 and 2012 by the Population Research Laboratory at the University of Alberta to examine explanations for non-voting in Alberta in 2008, and to profile non-voters in both 2008 and 2012. Non-voters are profiled by gender, age, region (Calgary, Edmonton, and other), education, household income, home ownership, and immigrant status.

Concern over voter turnout is not limited to Alberta. Declining turnout is a phenomenon found throughout Canada, both federally and provincially, and in countries throughout the industrialized world. This study compares the responses and demographic characteristics of non-voters in Alberta with what is known about non-voters elsewhere. Reasons for non-voting among Albertans are broadly reflective of the results of previous research. Chief among these explanations are apathy or indifference towards politics in general, or alienation specifically from politics in Alberta. The study also shows that lack of time or inhibiting structural factors (such as difficulty in establishing voter eligibility) contribute to non-voting.

The demographic characteristics of Albertan non-voters are similar to those of non-voters in other jurisdictions. Non-voters are often younger, less educated, and more likely to be renters. Unlike in other jurisdictions, however, household income is not a predictor of voting in Alberta. The unusually high incomes earned by some younger and possibly less educated workers in Alberta may explain this finding.

The report recommends that efforts to increase voting in Alberta should concentrate on education and advocacy efforts emphasizing that voting is a responsibility of citizenship. Such efforts cannot be left to political parties, whose interests may lie in discouraging those who support opposing parties. Instead, the media, civil society organizations, and non-partisan political institutions such as Elections Alberta and its federal counterpart should take the lead with non-partisan "get out the vote" canvassing campaigns. Such encouragement might prove successful in getting, in particular, younger people and immigrants, whose participation rates are especially low, to exercise their voting rights. The report also argues that barriers to voting cannot be overlooked. The provincial government, the Legislature, and Elections Alberta have a responsibility to ensure that all eligible voters who wish to cast a ballot are provided the opportunity to do so.

I. Introduction

This report examines province-wide survey data drawn from the University of Alberta’s Population Research Laboratory’s 2008 and 2012 *Alberta Surveys*. It highlights Albertan non-voters’ explanations for why they did not cast a ballot in 2008, and profiles the socio-demographic characteristics of non-voters in both 2008 and 2012. The study’s initial impetus was the record low voter turnout in 2008, which stood at 40.6 percent. This result, in the days that followed, drew significant comment from pundits, politicians, and academics. Most viewed the low turnout as a sign of weak democracy (Flanagan, 2008), even “rotten politics” (Thompson, 2008), though a few defended the right of citizens to not vote (Henton, 2008; Fekete, 2008a; 2008b). While turnout rose in 2012 to 54.4 percent, voting in Alberta has long been trending downward. (Table 1). Given this historical context, and assuming that one believes that a high voter turnout is necessary for maintaining democracy, it is useful to examine who among eligible voters did not cast a ballot and why they did not vote.¹

Table 1: Percentage of voters in Alberta elections, 1971-2012

Election Year	Premier Elected	Turnout %
1971	Lougheed	71.9
1975	Lougheed	59.6
1979	Lougheed	58.1
1982	Getty	66.0
1986	Getty	47.2
1989	Getty	53.0
1993	Klein	60.2
1997	Klein	53.7
2001	Klein	52.8
2004	Klein	44.7
2008	Stelmach	40.6
2012	Redford	54.4

¹ It should not be assumed that everyone agrees with this aim. Elites in the 19th century worried about the vote being given to the masses. In the American South during the 19th and 20th centuries, and allegedly again recently (see Hasen, 2013), conservative forces have imposed regulations designed to frustrate African-Americans, the poor, and university students in their efforts to exercise their franchise. Some critics have warned that recent proposed changes to Canada’s election laws (the Fair Elections Act) will have a similar impact in reducing turnout at the federal level (see Panetta, 2014; also Coyne, 2014).

Studies of non-voting in Canada and other countries have a long history, but this phenomenon has not been systematically examined in Alberta. After examining explanations for non-voting in Alberta in 2008 and profiling non-voters in both 2008 and 2012, this report concludes with recommendations intended to address the non-voting problem. Appendix 1 contains methodological information about the two surveys upon which this report is based.

2. Non-voting: what previous research tells us

The problem of low voter turnout is neither recent nor limited to Alberta. It is a particularly long-standing problem in the United States, where presidential voting dropped to below 50 percent in the 1920s and again in 1996, with turnout often only in the mid-50 percent range (Teixeira, 1997; Carlson, 1999; Doppelt and Shearer, 1999; Patterson, 2002; Hill, 2006). Since the late 1980s, other western jurisdictions have seen a similar drop in voter participation (Cross, 2004: 9; Blais et al., 2004; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; Gray and Caul, 2000; Pharr and Putnam, 2000). Data from twenty countries, including several European countries, Canada and the United States, as well as Australia, Israel, Japan, Mexico, and New Zealand, confirm a similar pattern of declining voting for the period from approximately 1990 to approximately 2002 (Butovsky, 2003; Pammett and Leduc, 2003; Conference Board of Canada, 2013).

In Canadian federal elections, the average voter turnout from 1867 to 1997 was 71 percent. It ranged from 73 to 78 percent in each decade between the 1940s and 1980s (Coulson, 1999; Eagles, 1999). In 1997, however, only 67 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot, and in subsequent elections, the percentage of eligible votes cast has often only marginally surpassed 60 percent. Voting rates dropped to their lowest level, 58.8 percent, in the fall 2008 election before rising again slightly to 60.1 percent in 2011 (Elections Canada, 2013). Similar trends are also found at the provincial level. Looking at the Canadian data, Siaroff and Wesley (2013) recently concluded that, “non-voters now comprise the largest, and fastest-growing segment of most [provincial] electorates.

Research into the reasons for non-voting is extensive, both in Canada and internationally (Barnes and Kasse, 1979; Blais, 2000; Doppelt and Shearer, 1999: 27-40; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; Patterson, 2002: 84; Topf, 1995a; 1995b; Traugott, 2004: 169) and suggests there is no single reason why individuals choose not to vote. Among the factors most prominently suggested are: alienation from the political process; apathy or indifference towards politics in general; ineligibility; structural impediments such as problems at polling stations, including names left off the voters list, and individual impediments like advanced age or disability (Patterson, 2002: 84; Doppelt and Shearer, 1999: 27-40; Barnes and Kasse, 1979; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; Topf, 1995).

3. Non-voting: what Albertans tell us

In the 2008 *Alberta Survey*, study participants were asked, “Did you vote in the recent Alberta provincial election (March 3, 2008)?” Almost two-thirds (62 percent) of the 1211 respondents answered “yes.” Those who claimed to have voted in 2008 were also asked, “For which party do you vote?” Those who said they had not voted, which consisted of 38 percent of the total sample, were then asked, “What was your main reason for not voting?” For this question, we provided telephone interviewers with a list of nine general “reasons for not voting,” based on our review of previous research. The interviewers were able to place 73 percent of the reasons provided into these nine categories, but 27 percent (107 reasons) were recorded verbatim into an “other” category. We subsequently reviewed these “other” reasons and placed some into the original nine categories and the majority of the rest into five additional categories. One of these, “out of riding/away,” contained a substantial number of responses (Table 2), which is perhaps not surprising due to Alberta’s relatively young, mobile population.²

Table 2: Self-reported reasons for not voting, Alberta, 2008 *

Self-reported reason for not voting	(n)	%
Did not have enough time	120	27
Was not permitted to vote / ineligible #	71	16
I usually don't vote/ not interested in politics	64	15
Out of riding/ away on day of election	41	10
Did not like any of the leaders	27	6
Did not understand the issues	25	6
Did not think my vote would make a difference	21	5
Did not know where to vote	17	4
Did not like any of the parties	14	3

² In 2012, we experimented with a forced-choice format for the wording of the “reasons for not voting” question but, after analyzing the results, we were not convinced that this approach was valid. Consequently, we do not present 2012 data on reasons for not voting, even though we use both 2008 and 2012 Alberta Survey data to construct a socio-demographic profile of non-voters. Had we used the same “reasons for not voting” question in 2012 that we asked four years earlier, we believe we would have obtained results very similar to the 2008 findings displayed in Table 2.

Table continues on next page

Table 2 (continued)		
Self-reported reason for not voting	(n)	%
All politicians are the same	10	2
Illness / disability	9	2
Unaware of election	8	2
Democracy does not work	3	< 1
Culture / religion	3	< 1
Weather	2	< 1
Other	4	1
Total	439	100
<p>* Weighted data (see Appendix 1); 15 respondents did not answer the question.</p> <p># We included the category “was not permitted to vote” to see if some eligible voters had tried to vote but were not allowed to do so. However, our interviewers also placed some legitimately ineligible Albertans into this category.</p>		

The 2008 *Alberta Survey* results are broadly reflective of the results of previous research elsewhere investigating why people do not vote. The most frequent response – “did not have time to vote” – makes up fully one-quarter of the responses, which draws our attention to the busy pace of life for many Albertans and their families. The next largest categories – “was not permitted to vote/ineligible” and “usually don’t vote/not interested in politics” (16 percent and 15 percent, respectively) – conform to findings elsewhere, the first suggesting that structural impediments, the second that disinterest in politics, could be behind low voter turnout. The only other response to garner double-digit support (10 percent) was “out of riding/away on day of election,” a response that could be variously interpreted as, again, a lack of interest in, or perhaps a lack of knowledge of, the early ballot; the presence of structural barriers to voting, or the problems of participation faced by a young and mobile working population.

Finally, studies elsewhere have emphasized the role of alienation as a causal factor in non-voting. Compiling the responses that might suggest alienation³, we conclude that it is an important cause of non-voting. This finding is consistent with that of our earlier report (Krahn and Harrison, 2013) in which 36 percent of Albertans agreed with the statement: “The government does not care about what people like you think.” Responses to this question were sharply divided between government (Progressive Conservative) and

3 Responses of “did not like any of the leaders,” “did not think my vote would make a difference,” “did not like any of the parties,” “all politicians are the same,” and “democracy does not work,” total to 17 percent. If “I usually don’t vote/not interested in politics” is included, the total rises to 32 percent.

opposition supporters. While only 24 percent of PC supporters agreed with this statement, 33 percent of Liberal supporters, 47 percent of Wildrose supporters, and 48 percent of NDP supporters did agree. The same study found that 85 percent of Albertans strongly agreed with the statement, “Voting is an important part of democracy.” These survey results point to alienation from the governing party, but not from the democratic process *per se*. The findings reported here reinforce the conclusion that, while alienation may be a factor in non-voting, it may also be tied to more general issues of governance in Alberta and not to the narrow act of voting itself.

Methodological issues in survey research on voting behaviour

Previous surveys of voting behaviour have shown that a larger proportion of survey respondents typically report that they have voted than indicated by official voter turnout rates (Laponce, 1967: ft. 2; Godbout and Turgeon, 2012). Not surprisingly, we observed the same phenomenon in both our 2008 and 2012 surveys. In 2008, 62 percent of the survey sample stated that they had voted in the provincial election a few months earlier, while the actual voter turnout, according to Elections Alberta, was only 40.6 percent (Table 1). Four years later, in 2012, when official voter turnout was 54.4 percent, 61 percent of *Alberta Survey* respondents identified specific parties for which they had voted.

Belli, et al. (1999), provide two explanations for this recurring problem. The first is *social desirability*: respondents know they did not vote but do not want to admit it. The second is *memory failure*: they cannot remember with certainty, and so assume that they voted. These factors may interact; if someone is uncertain if they voted, they may fold from the pressure of social desirability and claim they had. A third possibility shifts focus away from measurement error to sample bias; it might be that survey samples over-represent people who are more likely to vote.⁴

As with other random digit dialing (RDD) public opinion surveys, response rates have been declining in the annual *Alberta Survey* (Appendix 1). Comparisons with census data reveal that younger and less educated Albertans, two groups known to have lower voting rates, are less likely to participate in the surveys. However, when 2011 census data on age and university completion were used to weight the 2008 and 2012 samples, the discrepancy between the surveys and official voter turnout rates remained, although it did decline by about five percentage points in each survey. So we are left with measurement error as the primary explanation. Given the short, four-year time frame between the elections and the surveys in both 2008 and 2012, it is reasonable to assume that social desirability is more likely than memory failure to have generated the results observed in the two *Alberta Surveys*.

⁴ The authors thank both anonymous reviewers for emphasizing this third possibility.

4. A profile of non-voters: what previous research tells us

Previous research from other countries reveals that non-voters, in general, have a distinct socio-demographic profile. Age is a strong predictor, with younger people voting at lower rates than older people (Blais, 2000). Low education and low income are also associated with non-voting. Single individuals, those belonging to minority groups, and those who are residentially mobile are also less likely to vote (Teixeira, 1987; Doppelt and Shearer, 1999; Patterson, 2002; Hill, 2006). Nevitte et al. (2000) observe that voting is highly correlated with four factors: age, education, religious attendance and income. Correspondingly, Godbout and Turgeon (2012: 2) have recently noted that older, wealthier, and more highly educated people are more likely to vote, with non-voters being “predominantly found in lower socio-economic strata of the population.” Canadian studies reflect these broad findings. Younger individuals (Coulson, 1999: 19; Butovsky, 2003; Law Commission of Canada, 2004: 40-41; Anderson and Goodyear-Grant, 2008), recent immigrants and non-Christians (Coulson, 1999: 19), and those who have not completed university are more likely to be non-voters. Likewise, non-voters in Canada are more likely to be unemployed, working class, and unmarried (Butovsky, 2003: 4).

5. A profile of non-voters in Alberta: what the 2008 and 2012 Alberta Surveys tell us

As shown in Table 3 (below), the characteristics of non-voters in Alberta are similar to those of non-voters found in studies conducted elsewhere. Gender differences were not found to be significant in either year, while region (measured as Edmonton, Calgary, and other) was not significant in 2008 but was significant in 2012, perhaps as a result of the rise of the Wildrose Alliance party whose support was strong outside the two main cities.

As found in other studies, age, education, and home ownership were significant. Voting increased with age and education, and home-owners were more likely to vote than renters.

We did find one result out of keeping with past studies, however. Based on previous research, we would expect household income to be correlated positively with home ownership, education, and age and therefore in turn also associated with voting. But in Alberta, household income is not correlated strongly with these other demographic variables and thus is not significantly associated with voting rates. We speculate that the relatively weak correlation of home ownership, education, and age with household income in Alberta reflects the high salaries that younger and less highly educated workers may obtain in the province's oil- and gas-dominated economy. Being younger and perhaps more transient in their work, as is implied by the lack of correlation with home ownership, this population's attachment to the electoral process may be weaker than that of the populations in other provinces.

While not statistically significant, it is worth noting that immigrants were somewhat less likely to vote than Canadian-born residents in 2012. (The question was not asked in 2008.) Unfortunately, the survey data cannot tell us if there are differences between immigrants who arrived recently and those who came to Canada many years ago. Such data would provide important information on the success over time of integrating immigrants into the political process.

Table 3: Profiles of Non-Voters, Alberta, 2008 and 2012 *

		2008 (%)		2012 (%)	
		"Voters"	Non-Voters	"Voters"	Non-Voters
Gender	Female	61	39	79	21
	Male	64	36	76	24
Age #	18 – 29	59	41	67	33
	30 – 44	56	44	71	29
	45 – 59	73	27	83	17
	60 and older	80	20	92	8
Region @	Calgary	61	39	80	20
	Edmonton	65	35	81	19
	Other Alberta	61	39	71	29
Education #	High school or less	58	42	66	34
	Some post-secondary	60	40	83	17
	University degree	65	35	81	19
Household income	Less than \$50,000	59	41	79	21
	\$50,000 - \$99,999	65	35	73	27
	\$100,000 - \$149,999	60	40	80	20
	\$150,000 or more	65	35	80	20
Home ownership #	Yes	66	34	82	18
	No	45	55	60	40
Immigrant status	Canadian-born	-	-	78	22
	Immigrant	-	-	71	29

* Weighted data; survey respondents who did not answer the question about voting or who stated that they were ineligible to vote are excluded.

^ Comparisons to voter turnout data reveal that not all survey respondents who said they had voted had actually done so (see methodological discussion, page 7).

Relationship statistically significant in both 2008 and 2012 ($p < 0.01$).

@ Relationship statistically significant in 2012 only ($p < 0.01$).

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This report has examined province-wide survey data drawn from the University of Alberta's Population Research Laboratory's 2008 and 2012 *Alberta Surveys* to highlight the explanations of Albertan non-voters in the 2008 provincial election and to profile the socio-demographic characteristics of non-voters in both 2008 and 2012.

As in studies conducted elsewhere, Albertans gave numerous explanations for why they did not vote in the 2008 election. Many of these reasons suggested apathy or indifference towards politics in general, or alienation specifically with politics in Alberta. But the 2008 study also shows that lack of time or inhibiting structural factors (such as difficulty in establishing voter eligibility) contribute to non-voting.

Our study also suggests that the demographic characteristics of Albertan non-voters are similar to those of non-voters in other jurisdictions (e.g., younger, less well educated, renters), but with the interesting qualification that household income in Alberta is not a predictor of voting. The unusually high incomes earned by some younger and possibly less educated workers in Alberta may explain this finding.

The report recommends that efforts to increase voting in Alberta should concentrate on education and advocacy regarding voting as a responsibility of citizenship. Such efforts cannot be left to political parties, however, whose interests may lie in discouraging opposition supporters. Instead, the media, civil society organizations, and non-partisan political institutions such as Elections Alberta (and its federal counterpart) should take the lead with non-partisan "get out the vote" canvassing campaigns. Renewed efforts to encourage voting might provide particular dividends in the case of younger people and immigrants, whose participation rates are particularly low. The report also argues that barriers to voting cannot be ignored. The government, the Legislature, and Elections Alberta have a responsibility to ensure that all eligible voters who wish to cast a ballot are provided the opportunity to do so.

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Appendix 1

Research design, sample characteristics, and measurement

Research Design: Since 1987, the Population Research Laboratory (PRL) at the University of Alberta has annually conducted the *Alberta Survey*, an omnibus survey in which a number of different researchers share the costs of data collection by pooling their specific questions on a single survey.

The PRL uses a Random-Digit Dialing (RDD) approach to ensure that respondents have an equal chance of being contacted whether or not their household is listed in a telephone directory. The PRL has developed a database of eight-digit telephone banks covering the Edmonton and Calgary metropolitan areas, as well as the remainder of the province. Both the 2008 and 2012 *Alberta Survey* samples were generated from these databases by using a computer program to select, with replacement, a simple random sample of banks for each area and appending a random number between 00 and 99 to each number selected. Duplicate telephone numbers were deleted from the computer list. Within sampled households, one eligible person was selected as the respondent.

Contacted by trained and supervised interviewers, adult residents (age 18 and older) were then invited to participate in the 20-minute survey. A quota sampling system was used to obtain equal numbers of female and male respondents. To ensure regional representation, a disproportionate stratified sampling approach was used, with targets of 400 interviews each in metropolitan Edmonton, metropolitan Calgary, and the rest of the province.

Data collection for the 2008 survey (N = 1185) was completed between May 14 and June 20, 2008. The 2012 survey (N = 1207) took place between June 5 and June 27, 2012. Response rates for the two surveys were 28.5 percent and 27.6 percent, respectively. Comparisons to 2011 census data revealed that younger and less-educated Albertans were significantly under-represented in both surveys. Consequently, 2011 census data for age (six categories; 18-24; 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; 65 and older) and university degree completion (yes / no) were used to weight both samples for all results presented in this report. The estimated sampling error for both surveys is 2.8 percent 19 times out of 20.



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