



Getting the Majority to Vote:

Practical solutions to re-engage
citizens in local elections

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Introduction

Voter
turn-out in
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Canada has
decreased at
the federal and
provincial levels
to under 60%.
In municipal
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ACROSS BC VOTING is decreasing in all levels of elections—federal, provincial and municipal. Voter turnout in federal and provincial elections is now below 60 per cent, but more dramatically we are seeing many municipal elections in which only 20 to 30 per cent of people go out to vote.

What is happening in communities where 70 to 80 per cent of the population is not voting in municipal elections? What scientific research helps us understand why this is occurring? Most importantly, what can be done to re-engage our communities? What is working in other jurisdictions to increase voting? And why should we care when some good people are getting elected in spite of so few people voting?

This paper is written with two things in mind: The first is to help municipal leaders understand the latest academic research and theories about why some people vote while others don't. The second is to provide key practical solutions to re-engage citizens.

Summary

It is not a secret that fewer people are voting. Voter turnout in elections in Canada has decreased at the federal and provincial levels to under 60 per cent of the eligible voting population.¹ But in municipal elections the number of people voting has dropped even more dramatically. Simply put, action is needed to re-engage citizens.

Substantial academic research has examined the barriers to voting and the reasons why many people are not voting. Key barriers include an increase in cynicism towards politics, a growing sense of alienation and disconnection to community and social networks, the difficulty and complexity of obtaining political knowledge in municipal elections, the decrease of visual cues that provide an incentive to vote, and a decrease in the sense of duty to vote.

The first step towards taking action is to understand the problem is very complex. As such, it is important to sort through each aspect and to identify the key areas where local governments can have actual impact. Drawing on social science research, this paper has identified key challenges that municipalities in B.C. face in getting people to vote.

Secondly, just as there are many reasons why people do not vote, there are multiple ways to get people to change their habits. Therefore, this paper has identified six practical solutions that local governments can act upon. The solutions are based on social science research and are often real-world solutions that have been used in other jurisdictions.

¹ J. Nasrallah, "Voter Turnout in Canada and Denmark," Canadian Parliamentary Review 32, no. 2 (2009), 33–37.

Why Are So Few People Voting in Municipal Elections?

1. **Voting in municipal elections is complicated.** In federal and provincial elections you vote for one person, but municipally you vote for many positions. Municipal voting requires more knowledge.
2. **Increased alienation and disconnection** means some people do not have strong networks to provide them with information and validation in deciding who to vote for, nor important cues to encourage them to vote.
3. **Some people have not developed the habit of voting or a sense of duty to vote**, and little support and few systems are in place to change that.
4. Some people have **low internal political efficacy**, believing that their single vote will not make a difference.
5. Other people have **low external political efficacy**, believing that the results of the election will not reflect their choices, so there is no reason to bother voting.
6. **Media coverage of municipal elections is sparse** compared to federal and provincial elections, which means that people have lower amounts of third party information and lower political knowledge in municipal elections.
7. **There are no supports or incentives for candidates and political organizations to reach out to less-likely voters.** While research shows that direct contact by candidates provides motivational and linguistic cues that can significantly increase the chance of a person voting, there are no structural incentives for candidates to expend resources on people who are less likely to vote.

See page 13 for more details.

Simple Solutions to Increase Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections

1. **Create lifelong habits and a sense of duty to vote through early voter registration** of youth in high schools as per the 2011 Elections B.C. report.
2. **Ask voters to wear “I voted, did you?” stickers** (given out as they leave the voting station) so as to increase visual cues, stimulated through social networks.
3. **Provide new reasons for citizens to focus on and vote in elections.** Cities could stimulate new interest through incentives used in Norway that saw voter turnout increase by 10 per cent.
4. **Increase the number of positive cues** for citizens to pay attention to the election, evaluate their choices, and vote. Each city government can provide leadership by recruiting local celebrities and the media to speak positively about voting (especially the basics of why, when and where to vote).
5. **Increase the ease of voting through secure electronic voting and an increased number of advance voting days.**
6. **Conduct research to identify which groups are voting less, and discover how best to eliminate barriers and motivate these citizens.** In many jurisdictions, little is known about who votes and who does not. Research conducted by local government could establish the demographic composition of voters and non-voters and provide the basis for informed decisions and solutions.

See page 17 for more details.

Why Don't We Vote?

Understanding what motivates people to vote is invaluable for governments when choosing only a few solutions that will have the greatest impact on increasing voter turnout.

A substantial body of social science research has focused on why people don't vote. This research has examined how people make decisions around voting and other events in their lives. While there are many differing and complex reasons for not voting, in the end there are essentially two main types of decision-making that explain behaviors. Some people make decisions based on a rational course, while others come to decisions based on a non-rational process, and most people use a combination of both.

If governments are to succeed at increasing voter turnout, they must include solutions that address both rational and non-rational reasons for voting. Understanding what motivates people to vote becomes invaluable for governments when choosing only a few solutions that will have the greatest positive impact on turnout.

> Rational Reasons

Most social science research has focused on understanding why people act or don't act based on rational reasons. There are three main areas of research that are important to understand: the rational voter model, social capital theory and political efficacy.

The Rational Voter Model

The rational voter model focuses on how people calculate the cost (the amount of work it might take) and benefits of figuring out how to vote and casting a ballot. This cost/benefit analysis of voting, which was first suggested by Downs in 1957², is calculated on the basis of an individual's self-interest. This interest could be personal or social, including, for example, whether or not a favourite candidate will win, or whether a particular issue the individual cares about is being raised.

The bottom line for "rational" voters is whether or not the benefits of voting are greater than the cost of voting. Municipal elections in B.C. are a lot of work for individuals, mainly because people must figure out which of multiple candidates they will vote for, whereas at every other level of government their cost of calculating who to vote for is very low. Other costs for voters include learning the time and place of voting; the frequency of advance voting options; getting to the polling station; voter identification requirements; the complication of marking a municipal ballot; a potential lack of third party or electoral organization validators to help make decisions; and the difficulty of understanding the policies,

² A. Downs, "An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy," *The Journal of Political Economy* 65, no. 2 (1957), 135–150.

platforms and personalities (candidates) running in the election.

But how do the benefits of voting compare to those of another more enjoyable task? Simon Fraser University professor Patrick Smith speculated that a person might simply choose to watch the Super Bowl³ because municipal elections are difficult (a high cost to the individual) and the benefit of voting seems small compared to watching a sporting event.^{4,5}

It should be noted that many other jurisdictions in Canada have district-based electoral systems that are similar to those used for federal and provincial elections.

Social Capital Theory

Harvard University sociologist Robert Putnam⁶ has played a significant role in exploring social capital as an important factor in individuals' voting. Social capital is about people's connection to each other through personal and social networks. People who have more social capital have multiple connections and know how to use them. In contrast, those with low social capital feel disconnected and often have few connections to gather knowledge from or have knowledge validated by. They comparatively lack opportunities to have those invaluable conversations around the water cooler or over the picket fence.

A 2012 study by the Vancouver Foundation, about the social capital of people living in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), found that it is difficult for some people to make friends and that "our neighbourhood connections are cordial, but weak."⁷ Most startling was the revelation, based on a survey, that 33 per cent of residents do not know if they can trust each other, and that there is a lack of desire to even get to know one's neighbours. Those with low social capital tend to have lower incomes and move frequently. As such, it is important (for many reasons besides encouraging people to vote) for city governments to foster connection and well-being through community centres, neighbour programs and community groups, especially for newer citizens.

Another study shed light on who is participating in elections and who has knowledge about them. This research looked at the 2005 Vancouver municipal election, and found that citizens from the Chinese community were 50 per cent less likely to have political knowledge about the election compared to Caucasians.⁸ As well, exit polling revealed that Caucasians were more likely to vote than were people from the Chinese community.⁹ In the 2005 Vancouver municipal election, research found that "[65 per cent of] voters are white, only 51 per cent of the city's total population shares this characteristic."¹⁰

3 Norman Gludovatz, "The Non-voting Majority: A Study of Non-voting in the 2011 Vancouver Municipal Election" (Masters in Professional Communications, Royal Roads University, Victoria, Canada).

4 P. J. Smith and H. P. Oberlander, eds., *Restructuring Metropolitan Governance: Greater Vancouver–British Columbia Reforms* (Berkeley, California: IGS Press, University of California, 1998), 371–406.

5 K. Stewart, P. MacIver and S. Young, "Testing and Improving Voters' Political Knowledge," *Canadian Public Policy/ Analyse De Politiques* 34, no. 4 (2008), 403–417.

6 R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York, USA: Simon and Schuster, 2001); R. D. Putnam, "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America," *Political Science and Politics* 28 (1995), 664–6683.

7 Vancouver Foundation, *Connections and Engagement: A Survey of Metro Vancouver* (Vancouver, Canada: Vancouver Foundation, 2012).

8 S. Young, "Vancouver's Informed Electorate: Voter Knowledge in the 2005 Municipal Election" Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada), 36.

9 Ibid. 34

10 Stewart, MacIver and Young, *Testing and Improving Voters' Political Knowledge*, 406.



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Political Efficacy

Political efficacy is how citizens conceive of and measure the significance and effect of their political activity. This efficacy is both internal and external.

Internal political efficacy is an individual's belief that his or her actions (including voting) will actually make a difference.¹¹ However, that individual needs political knowledge in order to believe that participating will make a difference. It could also be that a particular issue that the person is impacted by or feels some affinity towards will be acted on by a candidate winning the election; as such, voting for that candidate advances the likelihood of the particular issue being acted on.

External political efficacy is an individual's belief that the political system (including the electoral system) will reflect his or her values.¹² A lack of external political efficacy can lower trust and increase cynicism.

In debating the impact of external political efficacy on voting, scholars have revealed that some citizens lack trust in the political system, and some doubt that their participation will even make

a difference.¹³ For some that means they simply stop voting. In other cases people may vote only in some elections, when the cost of obtaining political information is low.¹⁴

> Non-rational Reasons

Humans do not always process decisions and ideas in traditionally rational ways. In fact, while rational choice, social capital, and people's political efficacy explain a lot about why people do and don't participate in elections, they are not the only determinants.¹⁵ We are complex beings

¹¹ M. X. D. Carpini, ed., *Mediating Democratic Engagement: The Impact of Communications on Citizens' Involvement in Political and Civic Life*, L.L. Kaide. (New York, USA: Routledge, 2004), 398.

¹² *Ibid.*, 398.

¹³ G. Leshner and E. Thorson, "Overreporting Voting: Campaign Media, Public Mood, and the Vote," *Political Communication* 17, no. 3 (2000), 263-278.; P. L. Southwell and M. J. Everest, "The Electoral Consequences of Alienation: Nonvoting and Protest Voting in the 1992 Presidential Race," *The Social Science Journal* 35, no. 1 (1998), 43-51.

¹⁴ Pieter P. Bevelander, "Social Capital and Voting Participation of Immigrants and Minorities in Canada," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no. 8 (2009), 1406-1430.; Ronald D. Lambert et al., "The Social Sources of Political Knowledge," *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 21, no. 2 (Jun., 1988), 359-374.; P. F. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson and H. Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948).

¹⁵ A. Blais and R. Young, "Why do People Vote? An Experiment in Rationality," *Public Choice* 99, no. 1 (1999), 39-55.

and react to what is happening in our world all the time. Understanding some of the other motivations helps to complete the puzzle, and find solutions to inspire citizens who are motivated by non-rational factors.

Expressive Voting Theory

For some citizens, being seen to be voting by their social networks is very motivating—it can be a badge of honour. This is the theory of expressive voting, conceived by James Buchanan. For some, voting is a public act of being a citizen and earning status among peers.¹⁶ Engaging this perception before and during elections can be a powerful way to motivate some citizens to vote.

Duty and Socialization

Another powerful non-rational voting theory is an individual's sense of duty. Whether or not people have been socialized to have a sense of duty to vote becomes an important determinant of whether or not they will vote. According to Andrew Ellis, this is because “the more one participates, the more interested in politics one will be.”¹⁷ It is key to establish a pattern of voting early on in life, and for that sense of duty to be reinforced over time. Early registration programs for youth could be the start of building a sense of duty. According to a 2011 Elections B.C. report, young people (18–24) in the province have the lowest voter registration rates.¹⁸ While registration is important, it is not a magic bullet and needs to be coupled with other solutions that make voting (especially for first-time

voters) much easier. While duty is important to some citizens, new voters may lack confidence in making a choice and therefore may not vote.¹⁹

Linguistic Cues

Another notable discovery is that linguistic cues motivate some voters. For example, extensive field research revealed that voters were more likely to vote if they received a message that voter turnout was high.²⁰ Also, if the messages that individuals hear through their social circles or through the media indicate voting is important, then the likelihood of voting increases.

Municipal elections, it appears, receive far less media coverage than other kinds of elections because there is a perception that there is less public interest. Less coverage provides a circular reinforcement for a lack of political knowledge.²¹ The media could play a powerful role as a partner by increasing linguistic cues about why voting is important.

Election campaigns by candidates and political organizations also play a powerful role in providing linguistic cues for potential voters. Additional research demonstrated that “get out the vote” activities by candidates and political organizations have increased voter turnout. In fact, the more personal the contact is, the more motivated people are to vote. In other words, a candidate knocking on citizens' doors substantially increases the chances of people voting, and while contact from a candidate's volunteer or contact over the phone is not as powerful, it still provides significant motivation.

¹⁶ J. M. Buchanan, “Individual Choice in Voting and the Market,” *The Journal of Political Economy* 62, no. 4 (1954), 342.; F. Carlsson and O. Johansson Stenman, “Why Do You Vote and Vote as You Do?” *Kyklos* 63, no. 4 (2010), 495.

¹⁷ A. Ellis et al., *Engaging the Electorate: Initiatives to Promote Voter Turnout from Around the World Including Voter Turnout Data from National Elections Worldwide 1945–2006* (Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA, 2009), 14.

¹⁸ K. Archer, *Report of the Chief Electoral Officer on Recommendations for Legislative Change* (Victoria, Canada: Elections B.C., 2011).

¹⁹ John G. Matsusaka, “Explaining Voter Turnout Patterns: An Information Theory,” *Public Choice* 84, no. 1/2 (Jul., 1995), 91–117.

²⁰ A. S. Gerber et al., “How Large and Long-Lasting Are the Persuasive Effects of Televised Campaign Ads? Results from a Randomized Field Experiment,” *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 1 (2011), 178.

²¹ Fred Cutler and J. Scott Matthews, “The Challenge of Municipal Voting: Vancouver 2002,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 38, no. 2 (Jun., 2005), 359–382.



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Finally, it should also be noted that field research showed that when people were contacted and asked to visualize and describe how, when and where they would be voting, voter turnout increased by 9.1 percentage points.²² The contact from another person was a powerful linguistic cue to possible voters, but also the citizens provided their own linguistic cues to themselves by describing their plans to vote.

The Heuristic-Systematic Model

The word “heuristic” in ordinary English refers to anything that allows and assists people to learn something for themselves. Flash cards are a heuristic tool that someone might use to teach herself words from a foreign language. Scholarship relating to heuristic processing is interested in the ways in which people, when confronting information about topics that are unfamiliar or outside their expertise, use “heuristic cues” or analytical shortcuts to interpret and evaluate what they read, see or hear. The Heuristic-Systematic

Model (HSM) examines how people process information and are persuaded by it.²³

All people rely on heuristic techniques when encountering information relating to topics on which they are not already well informed. HSM provides valuable clues as to why some citizens vote when their political knowledge is low. Some people make decisions based on the views of a validator that they trust or feel is an expert, or have “a tendency to agree with consensus.”²⁴ Once again, political organizations and the media play a key role in providing important heuristic cues because they provide a pre-packaged assessment of candidates. In effect this political information can validate a voter’s decision.

So, during municipal elections, when motivation or ability to process systematically is low, heuristically mediated variables should exert their greatest persuasive impact. This is because recipients would be unlikely to acquire message- or issue-relevant information that might contradict a global judgment of message validity based on extrinsic cues such as communicator expertise.²⁵

²² D. W. Nickerson and T. Rogers, “Do You Have a Voting Plan? Implementation Intentions, Voter Turnout, and Organic Plan Making,” *Psychological Science* 21, no. 2 (2010), 194.

²³ Danny Axsom, Suzanne Yates and Shelly Chaiken, “Audience Response as a Heuristic Cue in Persuasion,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53, no. 1 (-01-01, 1987), 30–40.; C. W. Trumbo, “Information Processing and Risk Perception: An Adaptation of the Heuristic Systematic Model,” *Journal of Communication* 52, no. 2 (2002), 367–382.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 368.

²⁵ Axsom, Yates and Chaiken, Audience Response as a Heuristic Cue in Persuasion, 30–40.

Understanding The Majority: Who are the Non-voters?

Some in society have simply written off non-voters as people who are lazy and don't care. But the truth is that when I talk to non-voters, I soon discover that they care very much and have opinions about their governments. While they seem to be highly cynical about politics, and in some cases hate it, many of them nevertheless love democracy.²⁶ This love-hate relationship has an impact on voting and on gathering information.

> Who is the Non-voter?

In municipal elections in B.C. the non-voter is almost always the majority of citizens. In most municipalities voter turnout is less than 30 per cent of eligible voters, and this figure stands out starkly against the substantially higher turnouts of provincial and federal elections. But the bottom line is that the vast majority of people simply do not vote in municipal elections.

So who is the non-voter? Demographically the non-voter is more transient, more likely to have a low income, more likely to speak a first language other than English, more likely to lack higher education, more likely to be young, and less likely to be connected to social networks in his or her

community.²⁷ While demographics are invaluable for taking action and engaging specific sectors of society, they do not paint a complete picture of who a non-voter is.

Some non-voters choose not to vote in municipal elections because, rationally, the cost (or amount of work it takes to be informed and to vote) is too high and does not make sense. To these people, the benefits (let alone the ramifications) of voting or not voting are often unknown. Why would an individual who cannot see the benefits of voting, or even the harm of not voting, take the trouble to find out who to vote for and then go vote?

The multi-position electoral system, which obliges citizens to gain substantial political knowledge in order to vote, is certainly a barrier. However, in many cases non-voters simply have other priorities in their lives. They are not simply victims of a difficult electoral system. In some cases they are not voting because they don't want to make a bad choice. Many non-voters in municipal elections do not understand what their government does (in terms of its responsibilities). Finally, some feel unconnected in their communities (e.g., because they are new to the area) and, because of that, have a lower sense of duty to their communities.

²⁶ Gludovatz, *The Non-voting Majority: A Study of Non-voting in the 2011 Vancouver Municipal Election*.

²⁷ A. T. Hadley, F. T. Steeper and F. V. Swayze, *The Empty Polling Booth* (New Jersey, USA: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), 366.; M. R. Nakhaie, "Electoral Participation in Municipal, Provincial and Federal Elections in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 02 (2006), 366.; Young, *Vancouver's Informed Electorate: Voter Knowledge in the 2005 Municipal Election*, 34.

> What Are Non-voters Saying

In focus groups conducted after the 2011 municipal election in Vancouver, non-voters shared their overall thoughts and feelings.²⁸ Most poignant were the reactions that non-voters had to politics. “When I hear the word ‘politics’ I get angry.”²⁹ “Politics” was not only a dirty word, but invoked a strong emotional disdain: “it’s a scam,” “we don’t have much power as citizens,” “I cringe,” and “it’s just about money.”³⁰ Non-voters were indicating a very low external political efficacy, which for them was a belief that their involvement in politics would not have any impact or even matter.

Several participants indicated that they felt there was a problem in the electoral system, and that, therefore, the candidates elected would not represent the participants’ values. So why would these people even vote? Some citizens felt very cynical about politics, but, when asked if politics was just about governments, they all clearly said “no.” For these people, politics also happens every day in their workplaces, social networks and local communities. Their awareness of politics happening all around them was high.

The reaction that non-voters had to the word democracy was starkly different. Many felt that democracy was a way to balance politics to make it more fair. The belief that non-voters simply are not interested in politics is seriously challenged when they easily articulate their beliefs about what democracy is. This finding demonstrates that while some non-participation is due to a lack of political knowledge, other factors must also be accounted for. Non-voters had strong reactions to negative campaigning and negative media coverage. Ironically, when non-voters in the focus group were asked if it was important for them to have a role in democracy, they all indicated it was, but self-disclosed that they currently did not have

a role. They felt it was important to stay informed and make intelligent decisions, but felt that this was very difficult in municipal elections with so many candidates.

Several comments by focus group participants reflected that many of them felt it was their duty to vote and that voting was important. Four participants, while reflecting on their duty to vote, mentioned that many people fought very hard for the right to vote during the Arab Spring in the early 2010s in many countries in the Middle East. Some academic debate has reflected the internal conflict felt by some non-voters, who feel duty to vote, have some political knowledge, and yet do not vote. One of those academics, Heather Bastedo, was interviewed as a subject expert in my master’s thesis³¹ on non-voters and has done research on citizen participation in elections. Bastedo indicated in the interview that non-voters “believe in the democratic project in some fashion, which is the underpinning of duty”³² and this sentiment was echoed by non-voters in the focus groups, who said they had a strong understanding of and commitment to democracy.

When participants were asked if they thought their vote made a difference, only two said yes, and everyone else in the two separate focus groups said no.

28 N. Gludovatz, *The Non-voting Majority: A Study of Non-voting in the 2011 Vancouver Municipal Election*, (anonymous, p. 44).

29 Ibid. 44.

30 Ibid. 44.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid. 45.

Why are so Few People Voting in Municipal Elections?

1. **Voting in municipal elections is complicated.**

In federal and provincial elections you vote for one person, but municipally you vote for many positions. Municipal voting requires more knowledge.

In B.C. we elect municipal representatives using an at-large electoral system, in which voters from across the community (city, town, etc.) vote for every position (mayor, city councillors, school trustees, trustees, etc.). This is a different system than the one used in provincial and federal elections, where voters only vote for a single candidate that represents their specific electoral district. In most other jurisdictions in Canada, municipal elections use a district-based system (commonly known as wards), in which voters only have to vote for a single local representative (for city, school board, etc.), though all people vote for the position of mayor. The result is that the elections process in other jurisdictions in Canada requires far less political knowledge in order to vote municipally. Some opponents of district-based electoral systems suggest that local representatives would only care about their turf and not care about the larger city. However, if this were true, would the converse not also be true, that city-wide representatives would not care about local neighbourhoods? Each of these arguments certainly has its own weaknesses. The most important questions to ask are whether the electoral system is making it easy for people to vote, and, if not, what can

be done to make it easier and thereby increase participation.

2. **Increased alienation and disconnection** means some people do not have strong networks to provide them with information and validation in deciding who to vote for, nor important cues to encourage them to vote.

Without cues, some citizens simply stay home and tune out. However, some of the people who do not vote municipally do become informed

Voter turnout: 2011 B.C. Municipal Elections			
	Eligible Voters	Votes Cast	Turnout
Penticton	25,632	8,589	33.5%
West Van	30,748	7,295	23.7%
City of North Van	32,885	7,082	21.5%
New West	44,615	10,805	24.2%
Prince George	52,709	15,266	29.0%
Kamloops	65,332	19,442	29.8%
Victoria	65,468	17,249	26.3%
Coquitlam	82,855	17,961	21.7%
Kelowna	90,600	29,992	33.1%
Richmond	129,903	31,122	24.0%
Burnaby	145,781	34,035	23.3%
Surrey	279,051	70,253	25.2%
Vancouver	418,878	144,823	34.6%
Source: Union of B.C. Municipalities			

Some citizens
with low
external
political efficacy
might feel they
are
withdrawing
their consent.

and go out and vote in provincial and federal elections. The media play an important role in providing these cues, but with decreased media coverage of municipal elections there is a decrease in linguistic cues directly through the media, along with a decrease in linguistic cues in social networks that are stimulated by media stories (see the section “Non-rational Linguistic Cues”). In other words, less media coverage means fewer or no chats at the water cooler at work, over the picket fence at home, or while playing a card game at a friend’s home.

3. **Some people have not developed the habit of voting or a sense of duty to vote**, and little support and few systems are in place to change that.

Voting (or not voting) becomes a normative behaviour that some people habitually engage in and others habitually do not engage in. This duty is often developed early in life and is a result of familial or educational background.³³ The duty creates a pattern of action or non-action. If a citizen has not voted before, she is not likely to vote in the future, and not likely to gather the political knowledge needed to change that habit.

Some citizens hold strong values about voting and being active and informed. This shared sense of duty to vote is in decline, and in the case of some new voters is simply not being created. Is this decrease a lack of patriotism? Sadly another study discovered that non-voters were slightly less patriotic than voters.³⁴ Is the decrease in patriotism a sign of new, or already existing, cracks in civil society?

4. Some people have **low internal political efficacy**, believing that their single vote will not make a difference.

An essential part of internal political efficacy is trust. According to Weiwu Zhang, “political trust provides the legitimacy leaders need to launch government initiatives,”³⁵ and less trust equals lower voter turnout.

But do elected officials even need to pay attention to non-voters? Some research concludes that there is no direct obligation to pay attention to non-voters.³⁶ Regardless of whether there is an obligation, there is a risk of perceived legitimacy being decreased for governments who are elected with few citizens participating. As such, when government chooses to move forward with a policy or action that is perceived to be unpopular, public sentiment can easily deem the government to not have a mandate for that action. The government could face a surprising backlash.

5. Other people have **low external political efficacy**, believing that the results of the election will not reflect their choices, so there is no reason to bother voting.

Some citizens believe that by voting they are giving elected officials and governments legitimacy and consent³⁷; likewise, by not voting some citizens with low external political efficacy might feel they are withdrawing their consent.

One startling implication of a decrease in voter turnout from specific groups in society (e.g., youth, ethnic and racial minorities,

33 Ellis et al., Engaging the Electorate: Initiatives to Promote Voter Turnout from Around the World Including Voter Turnout Data from National Elections Worldwide 1945–2006.

34 Stephen Earl Bennett and David Resnick, “The Implications of Nonvoting for Democracy in the United States,” *American Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 3 (Aug., 1990), 778.

35 W. Zhang and T. Seltzer, “Another Piece of the Puzzle: Advancing Social Capital Theory by Examining the Effect of Political Party Relationship Quality on Political and Civic Participation,” *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 4, no. 3 (2010), 157.

36 Bennett and Resnick, *The Implications of Nonvoting for Democracy in the United States*, 774

37 Ibid., 773.

and the poor) could be that the elected government might not act on their needs. Furthermore, if these groups then felt the government was not representing them, their external political efficacy could diminish further, along with their likelihood of voting in the future.

6. **Media coverage of municipal elections** is sparse compared to federal and provincial elections, which means that people have lower amounts of third party information and lower political knowledge in municipal elections.

According to some research,³⁸ the media see that there is less popular interest in municipal elections (as seen clearly in lower voter turnout), and therefore cover local elections less. But this negative cycle feeds off itself. The voting system also adds complexity for the media, who must examine, decipher and then explain the election coherently to viewers in short sound bites—this simply adds cost and disincentivizes covering the story.

Adding to this complexity, in many cases media coverage areas fall across multiple cities with different municipal governments and races; some of the cities have political parties running candidates (none of the parties are affiliated with each other), while other cities only have independents running with no political parties. Contrast this situation to a provincial or federal election, where there is only one set of political parties running candidates, often in all parts of their jurisdiction, and the job of covering municipal elections appears much harder.

Given that many voters are interpreting political information heuristically, and normally depend on political parties to assist in that process, the lack of symmetry between media coverage and political parties at the

municipal level makes determining which candidates belong to which party or are endorsed by what interest group that much harder.

7. **There are no supports or incentives for candidates and political organizations to reach out to less-likely voters.** While research shows that direct contact by candidates provides motivational and linguistic cues that can significantly increase the chance of a person voting, there are no structural incentives for candidates to expend resources on people who are less likely to vote.

At the provincial and federal government levels, political organizations have more incentives to be involved in elections and to reach out to less-likely voters. One key area is giving tax receipts for political donations, and while this encourages more citizens to donate, it is also an incentive for political organizations to engage more people. However, in British Columbia the provincial government would need to grant municipalities the power to decide whether or not to issue tax receipts.

While cynicism towards politics is high, it is important to understand the invaluable work that candidates and political organizations do to increase voter turnout in municipal elections. A significant amount of research indicates that political organizations and candidates play a major role in increasing participation in municipal elections. Having a campaign representative or a candidate talk directly to a potential voter (on the doorstep, at work or in the community) can play a significant role in encouraging that person to vote.³⁹ “Knocking on doors,” write Harder

If a citizen has NOT voted before she is NOT likely to vote in the future

³⁸ Cutler and Matthews, *The Challenge of Municipal Voting*: Vancouver 2002, 363.

³⁹ Ellis et al., *Engaging the Electorate: Initiatives to Promote Voter Turnout from Around the World Including Voter Turnout Data from National Elections Worldwide 1945–2006*; J. Harder and J. A. Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote? A Psychological Analysis of the Causes of Voter Turnout,” *Journal of Social Issues* 64, no. 3 (2008), 525–549.



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and Krosnick⁴⁰ “and reminding people to vote seems to be the most effective.” Canvassing provides a real connection between the individual citizen and the candidate or political party. It can provide very practical information about where to vote, issues of concern, and also “induces citizens to make oral commitments to participating in the election, which can be self-fulfilling.”⁴¹ Social science research indicates that personal contact from candidates or campaigns is substantially more powerful than spending large amounts of money on advertising during an election.⁴² Contact from candidates and campaigns assists and motivates citizens to vote; it also reduces the cost to citizens of gaining political knowledge, and assists social networks to evaluate and share political knowledge.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 540.

⁴¹ Ibid., 540.

⁴² Gerber et al., “How Large and Long-Lasting are the Persuasive Effects of Televised Campaign Ads? Results from a Randomized Field Experiment.” *American Political Science Review*, 135–150.

Simple Solutions to Increase Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections

1. **Create life-time habits and a sense of duty to vote through early voter registration** of youth in high schools as per the 2011 Elections B.C. report.

School boards can show leadership in their communities by working with the provincial government to create an early voter registration program in schools and a youth voting education program. Our schools are a great place to learn more about democratic involvement, but could also be the place where people begin the lifelong habit of voting. According to a 2011 Elections B.C. report, young people (18–24) have the lowest voter registration rates⁴³ in provincial elections in British Columbia.

The 2011 report from the Chief Electoral Officer for Elections B.C. suggested that the province of British Columbia create a voter registration system for youth that would start when youth are still in school—between 16 and 18 years of age.⁴⁴ This system would pre-register youth for voting (prior to their eligibility to vote at the age of 18) to encourage later participation. This idea was based on a similar model used in Australia.⁴⁵ Ensuring that all citizens receive political education is not a guarantee that they will know how to

apply that knowledge, or that they will have sufficient other influences in their lives to reinforce that elections are important, but instilling early habits and a sense of duty to vote substantially increases the likelihood that a person will vote in the future.

Young people are voting less, federally, and approximately only 40 per cent of youth have been voting in federal elections since 2000.⁴⁶ Little information is available regarding youth voter turnout in municipal elections, but there is no reason to believe that the pattern of lower youth participation in federal and provincial elections is not also reflected in municipal politics.

2. **Ask voters to wear “I voted, did you?” stickers** (given out as they leave the voting station) so as to increase visual cues, stimulated through social networks.

The local electoral office administering the municipal election (city council, school boards, trustees, etc.) would, as part of its planning for the election, have these stickers printed and then distributed by the electoral clerks at the polling stations after the vote is cast. Giving voters a simple tool to demonstrate to their social networks (at home, in the community

“Young people (18-24) have the lowest voter registration rates.”
- 2011 Elections BC Report

⁴³ Archer, Report of the Chief Electoral Officer on Recommendations for Legislative Change, 4.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ André Turcotte, “What do You Mean I Can’t Have a Say?” Young Canadians and Their Government: Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation (Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2007).



and at work) that they have voted can be a powerful visual and linguistic cue for others to go and do the same. Multiple electoral districts could choose to print these stickers together and get cheaper bulk rates.

While this could save money, it could also be a way of encouraging multiple municipalities to engage and encourage their citizens.

For some citizens, voting has performative value, demonstrating their good citizenship and earning them status among their peers.⁴⁷ One of the most common reasons that non-voters give for not voting is that they simply forgot, so a simple visual cue can be a reminder and a motivation. For governments, it is a simple and inexpensive way to encourage voters to motivate each other.

Engaging social networks is a powerful tool and is based on social capital theory. Social capital is fundamentally about people's connection to each other, their communities, their involvement in those communities, and the ways people gain knowledge.⁴⁸ Engaging these networks is an important counterbalance to the erosion of trust and increase in cynicism identified in the 2012 Vancouver Foundation report, that discovered that one-third of residents in the Lower Mainland do not trust their neighbours.

3. **Provide new reasons for citizens to focus on and vote in elections.** Cities could stimulate

⁴⁷ Buchanan, *Individual Choice in Voting and the Market*, 342; Carlsson and Johansson-Stenman, *Why Do You Vote and Vote as You Do?*, 495.

⁴⁸ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*; S. Richey, "The Social Basis of Voting Correctly," *Political Communication* 25, no. 4 (2008), 366–376.

new interest through incentives used in Norway that saw voter turnout increase by 10 per cent.⁴⁹

The municipal government in Evenes, Norway, decided to use positive motivation (as opposed to mandatory voting, as practised in jurisdictions such as Australia) to increase citizen participation in the election by conducting a lottery. Any citizen who voted was automatically entered in the lottery; the prize was a travel voucher. In this election, turnout increased by almost 10 per cent.

Governments can raise awareness about the municipal election by creating incentives. This suggestion of a lottery is only one possibility, but the beauty of the contest is that it is fun and gives people a personal incentive to pay attention and to vote. It helps those voters who might be calculating the cost of voting (the amount of work they will have to do to figure out who to vote for) by adding the benefit of a chance to win a prize. Local governments can also see this as an opportunity to get community partners involved. Partners might donate prizes, write articles about the election and the prizes, and encourage social networks to spread awareness. One possibility is that the local government could announce the winner on election night along with the results of the election. This could increase the number of people who pay attention to the election results, which could have a lasting impact on less-likely voters, by increasing their knowledge for future elections.

While a lottery may seem to some like an attention grab, it is a real-world solution that has been proven to work. There are no prohibitions against municipal governments' advertising and encouraging citizens to vote;

⁴⁹ Ellis et al., *Engaging the Electorate: Initiatives to Promote Voter Turnout from Around the World Including Voter Turnout Data from National Elections Worldwide 1945–2006*.

many municipalities already do so come election time. But people are more likely to get excited and to cast their first ballot if advertising and promotion inspire the imagination and go beyond simply providing information.

4. **Increase the number of positive cues** for citizens to pay attention to the election, evaluate their choices, and vote. Each city government can provide leadership by recruiting local celebrities and the media to speak positively about voting (especially the basics of why, when and where to vote).

Social science research has revealed that some people are highly motivated by visual cues. When these cues come from respected sources, they can compel people to action (often for reasons other than democracy). Each city government can provide leadership by recruiting local celebrities and the media to give positive cues about voting. These celebrities can be from sports or entertainment, but they can also be community leaders. However, they need to be recruited to deliver positive messages about voting that fit in to a larger election communications strategy.

Working with the celebrities to deliver focused information well before the election (in early September) will help to establish early awareness of the election to come, and will also help to establish these celebrities (within the larger population and in their local community) as important and trusted sources of information. While the larger message of these celebrities is that democracy and voting are important and fun, there are also some very important core details of the voting process that they need to communicate: when, where and how to vote. These core voting details are often identified by non-voters and infrequent voters as key pieces of information that they did not have during the election.

5. **Increase the ease of voting through secure electronic voting and an increased number of advance voting days.**

One of the most frequent reasons people give for not voting during municipal elections is that they simply forgot or did not have time to vote. Increasing the opportunities and the possible ways for people to vote breaks down this perceived barrier.

Increasing the number of advance voting days assists those with complicated lives to prioritize voting in their busy schedules, but it also means that every person who votes in advance can potentially become an advocate and remind others to vote. Additionally, advance voting lowers the pressure on election day for officials to process people through the polling stations, thereby making voting faster.

Making voting easier is important, especially for first-time or less-likely voters, and that also means not simply hoping they will go vote, but taking the process of voting to them—to where they are already comfortable and often interacting with others through newer online social networks. Elections B.C. wrote a report on Internet voting⁵⁰ and highlighted the pros and cons, as well as the areas where this voting process has been used (United States, Australia and India). Additionally, a 2010 Canadian study by Elections Canada, *A Comparative Assessment of Electronic Voting*,⁵¹ indicated that six provinces had passed legislation allowing municipalities to use electronic voting, and that several municipalities had already conducted elections safely using this method.⁵² Addressing security concerns, ensuring secrecy and making sure all votes could be

Non-voters were more inclined than voters to vote online.

⁵⁰ Elections B.C., Discussion Paper: Internet Voting – August 2011 (Victoria, B.C.: Elections B.C., 2011).

⁵¹ N. J. Goodman, J. H. Pammett and J. DeBardeleben, *A Comparative Assessment of Electronic Voting*. Elections Canada, 2010).

⁵² Ibid.



verified were important considerations in the municipal electronic voting trials elsewhere in Canada, and those lessons and practices can be applied. Furthermore, this research found in numerous election surveys that non-voters were more inclined than voters to vote online.⁵³

Further Research: What Information do Local Governments Need

Local governments often do not have access to deeper demographic information about who participates in elections. A strategy of simply putting out an ad announcing the election (with details of when and where to vote) is a seemingly neutral way of informing citizens, but it may only work for the portion of the population that reads newspapers regularly and that often is already going to participate. This being perceived as a neutral decision is because of the lack of research and understanding of who is and who isn't voting. There are better and more informed decisions that allow delivery of information in a truly neutral way while motivating new voters.

> Positive Deviance Study

Positive deviance is a research methodology that is used by social scientists to identify individuals or groups who have succeeded or found successful strategies when their peers or other members of their communities have not.⁵⁴

This approach has been used especially in the health care field to identify patients or health care professionals who succeed—these are people for example who do not get sick, who live longer, or who have higher success rates. The knowledge of how these positive “deviants” succeed can sometimes be the map to finding new solutions and innovations.

More research is needed to understand the specific demographic profile of groups and communities who are not voting (e.g., youth, new residents, citizens whose first language is not English, or renters). Additionally, members of these groups and communities who are highly motivated, informed and active voters could be identified and engaged to better understand what influences encourage them to vote when others in their community are not voting. This knowledge may help generate solutions for motivating the community, and could be used to shape future election communications and to create messaging that might encourage improved turnout.⁵⁵

54 . Singhal, “Communicating what Works! Applying the Positive Deviance Approach in Health Communication,” *Health Communication* 25, no. 6–7 (2010), 605–606.; A. Singhal, S. Shirley and R. Frost, eds., *Turning Diffusion of Innovations Paradigm on Its Head: The Positive Deviance Approach to Social Change*, A. Vishwanath & G.A. Barnett ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 195–205.; J. Sternin, ed., *Practice Positive Deviance for Extraordinary Social and Organizational Change*, D. Ulrich, M. Goldsmith, L. Carter, J. Bolt, & N. Smallwood ed. (New York: Best Practice, 2003), pp. 20–37.

55 Singhal, *Communicating what Works! Applying the Positive Deviance Approach in Health Communication*, 605–606.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why fewer and fewer are voting in municipal elections, but we do not need to accept that this decline is inevitable and permanent. There are beacons of light and practical solutions that have re-inspired and re-engaged people, and can continue to do so.

Ultimately when we re-engage people in voting, they also re-engage in their communities. A decline in voting can serve as an alert to us as decision makers that a growing number of people are feeling disconnected. This is especially true in communities with fast-growing populations, where new residents often do not have or have diminished social networks. The challenge is that local communities are seeing an increase in cynicism towards politics, and a growing sense of alienation and severance from important social networks.

While the task of re-engaging citizens is large, the six practical solutions outlined in this paper will help local governments address some of

the challenges. Local governments can make it easier for citizens to get political knowledge, increase the visual cues that provide incentives for people to vote, and ultimately foster a sense of duty amongst new voters to form lifelong habits of participating.

As I have said, there are many reasons why people don't vote, and while some of those reasons (such as the structure of our electoral system) are beyond the control of municipal governments, there are areas they do have the power to act upon, where they can make real changes. The choice that we have is whether to act and inspire change or do nothing and let the decline continue.

My proposal is, let's get engaged. Before you are six practical, real-world solutions that you can use to get more citizens to vote.

**VOTE HERE
VOTE AQUÍ**

在此投票

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Norman’s professional experience includes working with government and non-profit sectors (international and local), businesses and trade unions to engage citizens, members and their supporters.

Norman has a master’s degree in professional communications from Royal Roads University. His master’s thesis was a study of why people don’t vote. His research included focus groups of non-voters in the 2011 Vancouver municipal election and subject expert interviews. Norman studied sociology at the University of British Columbia, and for over 14 years has been an independent consultant running two businesses in Vancouver: Tactical Outcomes and IT Republic.

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