

Craig McInnes: Why vote? Because it truly matters

Groups that don't speak for themselves through the ballot box tend to be ignored by politicians

BY CRAIG MCINNES, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST APRIL 15, 2013



Young voters were the least likely to cast ballots in the 2009 provincial election, according to an analysis of results by BCStats. A modern-day record low turnout of 55 per cent is part of a long-term decline in voter participation.

Photograph by: Troy Fleece, Regina Leader-Post

Between elections, political scientists puzzle over why people don't vote.

Turn on any radio talk show and you hear callers complain bitterly about the government. But increasingly fewer are taking advantage of the one opportunity they have to do anything about it.

In the 2009 provincial election, voter turnout dropped to a modern-day record low of 55 per cent of registered voters.

In four weeks, however, on May 14, it will be the people who vote that matter. The people who don't, the folks that political scientists and commentators worry about, won't be heard from.

Should we care?

The people who vote will decide which party forms the next government. And despite what cynics say, there are real differences between the parties and their leaders.

Those differences will trickle down in direct and indirect ways to the lives of everyone in B.C., whether it's in how much we pay in taxes, what we pay taxes for, whether our kids can afford to go to university and whether there will be jobs for them when they get out of school, whatever their calling.

The government will make decisions that will affect whether we get health care when we need it, whether we protect the natural environment and whether we can live in dignity when we grow old.

While none of the parties has yet to release a full platform, you can already see fundamental differences in their approach to governing.

So who will vote?

After the last provincial election, BCStats looked at the demographics of voting in B.C. and confirmed many of the characteristics identified in earlier studies about people who vote versus those who don't.

What strikes me is that many of the attributes shared by people who don't make the time to vote identify them as people who will be most affected by the choice they are leaving to others. They are people most likely to need the services of government or depend on the choices governments make to get ahead in life.

Politicians notice who votes, so groups that don't speak up for themselves may find their issues falling off the public agenda.

The most obvious factor is age. Young people are the least likely to go to the polls.

Looking at the last three elections, BCStats found that just one in three — 34 per cent — in the 20-24 age group bothered to find their way to a polling station.

The likelihood that people will vote increases with age until they pass their 75th birthday and then it tapers off.

The exception to the age factor was 18- and 19-year-olds, who voted in larger numbers, perhaps, BCStats speculated, because they would have registered to vote for the first time.

Looking at the demographics in ridings with higher and lower turnouts, the report's authors teased out some other factors in common with the choice people make about whether to vote.

In addition to age, higher income and higher education were linked to above-average voting rates.

Neighbourhoods with lower turnouts had more people who had moved in from elsewhere in B.C. or Canada. They had more recent immigrants to the country, a higher unemployment rate and more households with children at home.

While the authors found that these factors help explain the turnout in a single election, they didn't explain the long-term decline in voting. For example, the percentage of university-educated British Columbians has gone up over the decades, while the percentage of voters has continued to fall.

Voter turnout is often cited as an indicator of the health of our democracy. And it may be, although I'm not sure what it indicates. It may be that people who don't vote feel confident enough in the way society operates that they feel they have more important worries.

More likely, they don't understand what's at stake. They may simply feel that their vote makes no difference in a riding where thousands are counted.

The problem is that most of the time, if any individual doesn't vote for any reason, it won't make a difference in the outcome of an election. There are exceptions, of course; nail-biters come down to a single-vote difference.

But if that judgment made by individuals becomes the accepted wisdom, the single vote that doesn't matter becomes the tens, hundreds or thousands that always will.

So every vote does count, not just as a way we have our say in how we are governed, but as an affirmation of the importance of the system we use to govern ourselves.

On May 14, the first choice will be whether to vote.

It matters.

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