

**FOUR VICIOUS CIRCLES OF TURNOUT: COMPETITIVENESS, REGIONALISM,
CULTURE AND PARTICIPATION IN CANADA**

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The sharpness of the turnout decline in recent Canadian federal elections has rendered the country an appropriate subject for research on the phenomenon of nonvoting. From an average of 75% turnout in such elections since World War Two, a rate which appeared to be sustained as late as 1988, the turnout fell to 70% in 1993, 67% in 1997 and finally to an historic low of 61% in 2000. Voting turnout in many recent provincial elections has appeared to follow the same trend. Consequently, the issue of voter turnout, once a topic of interest to a small group of academics, has become a cause of concern to the wider scholarly community, the media, and attentive members of the general public. The generational aspects of the turnout decline, whereby young people appear to be turning away from the electoral process, has accentuated the public concern. In 2002, Elections Canada sponsored a national survey, designed by the authors, to examine nonvoting in the previous Canadian Federal Election of 2000. This survey (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003) is unique in that its design called for the collection of data from a much larger than usual group of nonvoters in the 2000 election. It accomplished this by means of a short screening interview with a large number of respondents (5637), and a longer interview continued with 960 reported nonvoters in the 2000 election, and an equivalent number of reported voters.

TABLE 1
Reasons for the Turnout Decline
(open-ended; multiple responses)

	% of all respondents	% of no n-voters
Politicians and Political Institutions		
Politicians (negative public attitudes)	26.2	24.9
Government (negative public attitudes)	13.0	16.0
Candidates (negative public attitudes)	11.7	12.4
Political parties (negative public attitudes)	6.3	6.2
Issues (negative public attitudes)	5.5	4.2
Leaders (negative public attitudes)	3.3	2.3
Electoral system (negative public attitudes)	1.0	0.5
Election administration (problems)	1.0	1.2
	68.0	67.7
Meaninglessness		
Meaninglessness of participation	15.7	14.5
Lack of competition	14.0	8.6
Regional discontent	2.8	1.8
	32.5	24.9
Public Apathy		
Apathy and disinterest	22.7	24.2
Turned attention elsewhere	5.1	5.8
Lack of knowledge, information	4.3	5.0
Cynicism	4.0	3.4
Youth not voting	3.1	1.9
	39.2	40.3
Other		
Other	3.1	5.0
Do not know	1.4	2.5
n =	4659	848

Note: In Table 1, category totals should be regarded as approximate, since respondents could give more than one response in the same category.

Table 1 reports the answers to the open-ended question, “Voter turnout has been declining in recent Canadian federal elections. In your opinion, why is turnout going down?” It provides an initial overview of Canadians’ general perception of the turnout situation and its causes, before they were asked any questions about their own behaviour, including whether they had voted or not.

The majority of Canadians attributes the turnout decline to **negative public attitudes to the performance of the politicians and political institutions involved in federal politics**. Over two-thirds (68%) give an answer in this category. The objects of perceived public displeasure run the complete gamut of personnel and institutions, but the most prominently mentioned were “politicians” and “the government”, general terms which indicate the broad nature of the attitudes people ascribe to others. There is a widespread perception that politicians are untrustworthy, selfish, unaccountable, lack credibility, not true to their word, etc. Similarly, the government, sometimes with a capital ‘G’ and sometimes without, betrays the people’s trust, and accomplishes little. Candidates are mentioned frequently, because the question asked specifically about the turnout decline, thereby placing it in the election context. As one might expect, they are perceived to have the same faults as “politicians”. Political parties are singled out as well, because some attributed the lowered voting rate to the difficulties people might have in finding any good choices, or in distinguishing between the parties which do exist. And some said that potential voters have difficulty in relating to the issues brought forward by the parties at election time, or sometimes that the policies which are proposed are misguided.

In addition to the negativity, there is a widespread feeling that political participation is **meaningless**. A number of these responses are captured specifically in the second section of Table 1, but such feelings may lie behind some of the other responses as well. Those classified under the “meaninglessness” heading commented on the lack of choice in elections, that their votes would not change anything. “It’s always the same thing over and over,” said some. Others referred to the situation of “single party dominance”, whereby it seemed that there was no realistic hope of an alternative government, or the lack of competition in the local constituency context.

The final major category in Table 1 identifies those responses which blamed **public apathy and lack of interest** for the decline in voting. We are faced with a situation where people just do not care, do not pay attention, are lazy, or do not find the political scene exciting enough. A variation of this explanation is that people see nonvoters as simply interested in other things, giving political participation a low priority. Or perhaps it is because those choosing not to vote have not bothered to get the information required to cast a meaningful vote. Some cited attitudes of cynicism, disillusionment, discouragement, frustration and hopelessness. Some specifically targeted young people as responsible for the voting decline.

Let us compare Table 1 with the open-ended reasons given by nonvoters in 2000 for not going to the polls. (Table 2) These reasons can be classified into three broad types, which are mentioned to roughly equal degrees by nonvoters. These overall types of reasons we call **disinterest, negativity, and personal/administrative**. The largest single group of responses to this question was from those who simply weren’t interested in the election (or politics more generally), didn’t care it was being held, and did not want to vote. For others in this category, however, it was the meaninglessness of the voting that counted, as they reasoned that their vote would not matter or make a difference, and that the election was a foregone conclusion.

	Total
Disinterest	
Not interested; didn't care; apathy	25.0
Vote meaningless; not count; election forgone conclusion	9.0
Forgot; unaware	2.3
Too complicated; confusing	0.9
	37.2
Negativity	
No appealing candidates/parties/issues	15.9
Lack of faith/confidence in candidates/parties/leaders	12.8
Lack of information about candidates/parties/issues	4.3
Regional discontent	1.4
	34.4
Personal/Administrative	
Too busy with work/school/family	14.3
Away from riding/province/country	10.4
Registration problems	5.5
Illness, health issues	2.9
Didn't know where or when; polling station problems; transportation	3.3
Moving-related problems	0.9
	37.3
Other	
Religious reasons	1.5
Other; unclassifiable; unclear; none	2.4
	3.9
N	1059

We have classified responses as expressing negativity rather than simple disinterest if they indicated a lack of confidence in any of the electoral contestants; candidates, parties, leaders, or said that they could find none them appealing enough to vote for. Some of these respondents also said they did not find the issue discussion involving, or they did not have enough information about the issues or other political factors to make a choice. A few of these respondents expressed grievances against the federal level of one sort or another, or stated they weren't interested in federal politics.

The third category, personal/administrative, has a variety of forms, including illness, absence from the constituency, registration problems, and being “too busy”. We have classified such reasons as “too busy” and “away” as personal/administrative reasons, because closed-ended measures of these reasons are associated with other personal or administrative reasons rather than those measuring disinterest. However, undoubtedly, some of those who said they were too busy to vote were simply rationalizing a lower level of political interest.

There are a number of apparent differences between Tables 1 and 2. While two-thirds of the general public thinks the turnout decline is being produced by negative public attitudes towards politicians, candidates, parties, leaders, political issues, etc, only one-third of non-voters cite such negative attitudes as reasons for not casting a ballot. Slightly more important are reasons of apathy and disinterest, a category of reason cited by many fewer people in Table 1 than the category of negativity. And finally, the whole category of personal or administrative reasons, which over a third of the nonvoters cited as important to their decision not to participate, is basically absent from the general characterization of the evaluation given for the nonvoting trend in general. Of most interest at the moment, however, are reasons for nonvoting dealing with **disinterest** in electoral politics, the **meaninglessness** of the vote, and the **negative** attitudes towards politicians.

Table 3 attempts to sort out the relative importance of these various attitudinal predictors of voting turnout by using a subgroup of the full set of predictors used in our previous analysis (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003: 24-28), namely those derived from a set of factor analyses of measures of political interest, political discussion, civic duty, the feeling that one’s vote made a difference in the election, a feeling that the parties were competitive in the constituencies and the country, political efficacy, cynicism, trust, and feeling of being represented by political parties. It is not the intention of this paper to give a full explanation of all of these attitudinal measures here, but simply to note the prominence of those relating to the attitudes of political interest, civic duty, and the feeling that the vote of the respondents would make a difference. Most of the variance in explaining whether people voted in the last three Federal elections can be attributed to these factors, rather than to those measuring negative attitudes toward political parties and politicians. The public propensity to identify negativity as the reason for the turnout decline is at substantial variance from these findings.

TABLE 3
Attitudinal Predictors of voting frequency in elections of 1993, 1997 and 2000
(Multiple Regression)

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients
	B	Std. Error	Beta
1. Interest, discussion, civic duty [†]	-.531	.032	-.438**
2. Vote matters, civic duty [†]	-.350	.034	-.283**
3. Parties competitive [†]	.070	.032	.057*
4. Inefficacy/cynicism/party negative [†]	-.037	.032	-0.031
5. Trust, represented [†]	-.078	.032	-.064*
6. Party support [†]	-.035	.033	-.029
[†] = factor scores ** = statistically significant p < .01 * = statistically significant p < .05 R ² = .277 N = 1134			

We can only speculate as to why negativity is so frequently identified as the main causal agent for public distancing from the electoral process (Table 1). For one thing, it is an easy explanation, in that it essentially places the “blame” on others, namely the politicians, for people’s unwillingness to participate. “It’s not our fault”, people seem to be saying—“It’s the poor choices of parties and issues and the poor quality of the politicians and leaders that we are being given.” Another reason for the popularity of the “negativity explanation” for the turnout decline is that its acceptance makes it possible to downplay the seriousness of the phenomenon, and to believe that the solution might be a new set of party leaders, a new Pierre Trudeau perhaps, that would rekindle the spirits of a discontented public and revive electoral participation. But the decline is strongly related to generational and age factors, with younger age groups voting at extremely low levels (only about 25% of those under 25 years of age voted in the 2000 Canadian Federal Election), and the factors that younger nonvoters cite for not voting are even less related to negative opinions of political leadership than are those of older nonvoters.

It is the theme of this paper that the decline in voting turnout is indeed serious because it is related to several fundamental political developments which have affected people’s inclination to vote, and that these factors themselves are accentuated by people’s increasingly infrequent decisions to cast their votes. Some of these trends are picked up in the public consciousness, as represented by their analysis of the situation in Table 1 (changing cultural attitudes, lesser meaning of the vote) but others are not. These “vicious circles”, whereby turnout interacts with other social and political factors, produce developments which will affect the future course of the country’s politics.

Five Recent Trends in Canadian Politics

The 1993 Federal Election in Canada was a genuine political “earthquake”. It abruptly ended an era of party politics that had endured at the federal level for nearly forty years. (Carty, Cross and Young, 2000). Canada’s oldest political party, the Progressive Conservatives, which had been in power for the previous nine years, was reduced to a humiliating two parliamentary seats. Suddenly, the familiar “two-and-a-half party” system which had long been the dominant characteristic of Canadian federal politics was replaced by one in which five parties competed, with two of these parties — Reform and the Bloc Québécois — being entirely new. At the time, many thought that this election represented only a temporary aberration, and expected that the system would eventually return to the older and more familiar patterns of party competition. But the two federal elections which have taken place since 1993 have brought little real change from the five-party configuration that it produced. The Liberals have won all three elections with vote totals of around 40 percent and modest majorities of parliamentary seats. The Reform Party, renamed the Canadian Alliance prior to the 2000 election, has not succeeded in making the electoral breakthrough in Eastern Canada that it sought, and has failed to expand its political base much beyond the West. The goal of some of its key strategists to “unite the right” on a national basis remains a dubious prospect, although the party is currently in the process of consummating a formal merger with the Progressive Conservatives, and will contest the next federal election as the Conservative Party of Canada. The other remaining “old” party, the New Democrats (NDP), a social democratic party, has, like the Progressive Conservatives, continued to fight merely for political survival.

Beginning with the dramatic shift in party alignments which took place in the 1993 election, five broad trends have been observable in the Canadian political system over the course of the past decade. The first of these has been steadily **declining voter turnout**. As we have argued elsewhere (Pammett & LeDuc, 2003), the turnout decline has partly resulted from a broad demographic trend which has seen increasingly large numbers of young people participating in elections at steadily lower rates than was the case in previous entry cohorts of first time voters. When newly eligible voters fail to enter the electorate at all, or enter at lower rates and at a later point in the life cycle, turnout continues to decline in successive elections. Our findings suggest that, unless some unforeseen (and powerful) political or social events intervene to halt or reverse these trends, turnout in Canada will continue to decline for demographic reasons alone.

But changing demographics and their effects on voting participation are not the only force at work in this process. Also important is the **decreased level of competitiveness** in the Canadian party system, which has been in evidence in each of the last three elections. Canada has become, in many respects, a one party dominant political system in which the governing Liberal party faces little serious competition in the race to form a national government. In many of Canada’s single-member constituencies, the winning candidate, often the incumbent, is elected by a large plurality. In the 2000 Federal Election, the mean margin of victory for the winning candidate overall was 23.8%. In ridings won by the governing Liberal party, the average was a slightly higher 24.6%. and, in those won by the Canadian Alliance, the average

margin was 32.0%. While there is considerable variation in this regard between particular constituencies, and across certain regions of the country – a point to which we will return later – the fact remains that Canadian federal politics in recent years has become increasingly uncompetitive. As the public has become more aware over time of this major change in the Canadian political landscape, many have increasingly come to believe that voting in federal elections is no longer a meaningful political act. In the survey that we conducted for Elections Canada following the 2000 election, which forms the database for part of the analysis in this paper, large majorities of respondents stated that their vote could make “little or no difference” in the country as a whole (69%) or even at the constituency level (57%). Clearly, the reduced level of competitiveness in the Canadian political system has gradually become salient to many potential voters. (For the international salience of competitiveness, see Franklin, 2002.)

A third factor, which is also connected to these seismic shifts in the party system is the **increased regionalization** of Canadian politics at the federal level. The Bloc Québécois, which first came to prominence by winning 54 of Quebec’s 75 parliamentary seats in 1993, has continued to hold a substantial number of those seats in 1997 (44 seats) and 2000 (38 seats). But the Bloc is a party which fields candidates only in Quebec. Thus, its very existence has made Canadian politics more regional than it had been prior to 1993. But increased regionalization is not due to the presence of the Bloc alone. The Canadian Alliance (formerly the Reform party), which now forms the Official Opposition, won all but 2 of its 66 parliamentary seats in the Western provinces. Although it has attempted to expand its political base beyond Western Canada by fielding candidates in other provinces and by emphasizing ideology rather than regional interest in its campaign rhetoric, the Alliance remains largely a regional party. Even the Liberal Party, which attempts to portray itself as the only truly “national” party, wins a large majority of its seats in a single province. In the 2000 election, the Liberals won 100 of Ontario’s 103 parliamentary seats. Combined with the 36 seats it won in Quebec, it becomes evident that the Liberal parliamentary caucus heavily reflects the interests of Central Canada. This increased regionalization of politics in Canada is connected to competitiveness in the sense that the regional bases of support for several of the parties are increasingly uncompetitive. In the 2000 election, the average winning margin for Liberal candidates in Ontario was 27.6%. In the western province of Alberta, the average winning margin for successful Alliance candidates was an astounding 40.7%. Although regionalization and competitiveness are different attributes, it is clear that they are both artifacts of the 1993 shift in Canada’s party configuration.

There are two other broad trends in Canada which are connected with declining turnout. One of these is a shift in what we might call the **culture of voting**. Older generations of Canadians thought of voting in elections as part of a sense of “civic duty”, and displayed higher levels of trust regarding politics. But, as we and others have found, this culture of “trust” has undergone a substantial decline (Pammett & LeDuc, 2003; Blais et al, 2002; Nevitte, 1996). Fewer Canadians, particularly among the young, now believe that voting forms an “essential” social and political act. If voting is not important because one’s vote doesn’t really “count”, neither is it important for its own sake as a participatory act. As shown in Table 3, a factor including “civic duty” and a number of other items concerning the importance of voting and the relevance of politics to one’s life, was one of several significant predictors of non-voting in the 2000 Federal Election.

At the same time, various studies suggest that **patterns of participation** may be changing. Canadians, like citizens of many other advanced democracies, might be turning towards avenues *other* than voting and elections as a means of political expression, particularly if voting is considered less meaningful. While our evidence does not show that Canadians are “making up” for non voting by substituting other types of political activities, studies in Canada and elsewhere increasingly point to the possibilities of political actions outside the traditional arena of voting and elections. Of course, we need to know whether such new forms of participation might be seen by some as an alternative to voting in elections, or by others as a supplementary type of activity. Such “unconventional” participatory acts also cover a wide range of possible types of activity such as petitions, boycotts, demonstrations, or internet chat groups. They might also extend beyond the political sphere to participation in other types of groups or associations, thus representing a form of “engagement”, but not necessarily in the realm of the political.

These five broad trends are interconnected in various ways, some directly such as regionalization and competitiveness, and others more indirectly such as culture and participation. But all are connected with declining turnout in the sense that there are statistically significant relationships between our measures of these items and turnout, either at the aggregate or individual levels or both. These linkages are to be further explored in this paper. But the principal hypothesis that we wish to advance here, and that can only partially be tested in the analyses to follow, is that in each of these areas a “vicious circle” may exist with regard to declining turnout. In other words, declining turnout has contributed to the decreased competitiveness of Canadian politics, and that decreased competitiveness in turn fosters further declines in turnout. A similar argument is advanced with respect to regionalization. As Canadian federal politics has become more regionalized, non-voting (particularly for supporters of parties that are weak in certain regions) becomes a logical response. This in turn leaves the regionally strong parties even stronger in their regions, possibly leading over time to further turnout declines. The argument is more difficult to test with regard to clusters of attitudinal variables such as the culture of voting or the desirability of engaging in other types of political acts outside the arena of elections. But the same logic applies. As turnout declines, non-voting becomes more socially acceptable, and non-voters no longer need to make “excuses” for their non-participation. Such a decline in the voting culture (as evidenced by a declining sense of civic duty), will eventually bring about a further decline in turnout, particularly when considered alongside some of the broad demographic trends noted earlier. Similarly, substitution of other types of participatory political acts may render the act of voting itself less meaningful, although such a circle of redistribution of participatory activity, if it exists, would not necessarily be a “vicious” one, even if it causes the act of voting to no longer be seen as “essential”. On the other hand, voting may also encourage citizens to engage in these other types of participatory activities. If that is the case, then declines in voting turnout may ultimately lead to declines in political participation of all forms.

FIGURE 1
Four “Vicious Circles” of turnout decline

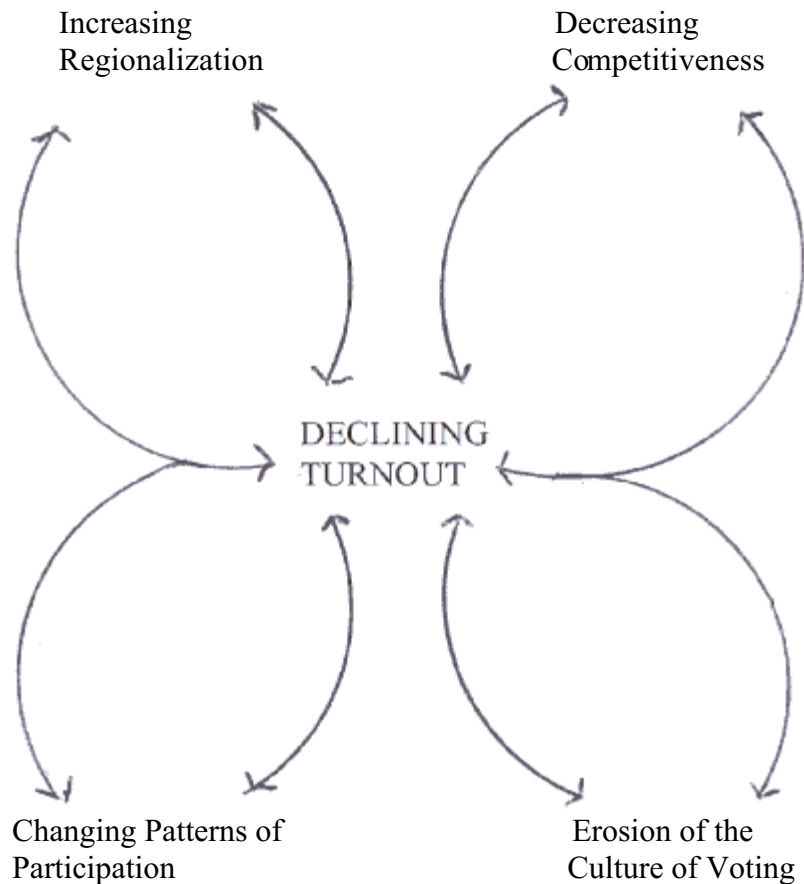


Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the kinds of “vicious circles” which we believe may be taking hold in Canadian society and politics and which, unless disrupted by other exogenous factors, are likely to lead to further declines in voting turnout, acting in tandem with predictable patterns of population replacement. Younger Canadians entering the electorate share less of the culture of voting than their elders, and might tend to see alternative means of political expression as more acceptable and perhaps more appealing. They also see around them a political world in which parties are uncompetitive, and the only realistic political choices are ones of regional expression, merely reinforcing patterns of representation that are already dominant. In a first-past-the post system of representation, the potential voter has only a single vote to cast at the constituency level. Under such an electoral system, it is easier to conclude that one’s individual vote is not particularly meaningful.

We are emphasizing here some very broad social and political trends in Canada which are only sketched in outline form. The decline in turnout is real enough, as is the pattern of regionalization and decreased party competition which has existed since 1993. But some of the other linkages remain to be more firmly established. Canada provides a suitable venue in which to test these propositions precisely because of the variations in its politics noted above. The changes which have taken place since 1993 in the Canadian party system are spread unevenly across the country. In the Atlantic provinces, the regional parties have failed to take hold, and politics still conforms to more traditional patterns of party competition. In Quebec, although the Bloc Québécois continues to hold about half of the province's seats, it does not win them by the margins attained by the Alliance in the West or by the Liberals in Ontario. In 2000, the average plurality of winning Bloc candidates was a more modest 15.1%, and the Liberals remain competitive in many Quebec constituencies. Given this extensive variation, both between provinces and regions and in many cases between individual constituencies, further insights into some of the linkages between these five variables can be gained. In this paper, we employ a combination of aggregate and survey data in an attempt to shed further light on some of the processes which have been at work in depressing voting turnout in Canada, and which may well lead to further declines in future elections, and have other undesirable consequences.

Provincial Patterns

While the decline in voting turnout over the past decade in Canada is a national phenomenon, there are some important variations in the trend found in different provinces and regions (Figure 2)¹. In part, this is because of differences in patterns of party competition as they have evolved since 1993, as well as the differences in provincial party systems. In Ontario, the decline in turnout is steeper than in the nation as a whole, reaching a low of 58.0% in 1993, more than three percentage points below the national turnout figure. Turnout in provincial elections in Ontario has historically been lower than in federal elections, and the decline there is therefore less pronounced. However, by the time of the 1999 Provincial Election and the 2000 Federal Election, the two figures are virtually equal. In the last three federal elections, Ontario has been one of the more uncompetitive regions of the country, with the Liberals winning 100 of its 103 constituencies in 2000 – many by large margins.

In Quebec turnout rose slightly in 1993 with the advent of the Bloc, and held up until the 1997 election. In 2000, it declined only to 64.1% – a level higher than in the country as a whole. Turnout in provincial elections in Quebec has generally been higher than in federal elections, but after the 1994 Provincial Election which returned the Parti Québécois to power, it also shows a pattern of decline similar to that found federally. With the Bloc Québécois

having become a factor in federal elections since 1993, many Quebec constituencies have become *more* competitive, and politics in Quebec more generally is highly polarized between federalists and separatists. Quebec, after all, has been a Liberal bastion since 1917. There are however some important within- province variations. In predominantly Anglophone ridings, the Liberals have tended to dominate, often winning the seat by an overwhelming margin. But this pattern applies to only a few constituencies, and in many other parts of the province, voters do have a real choice at the constituency level. However, because the Bloc does not field candidates outside Quebec, that choice is not reflected in the formation of a national government. Thus, Quebec voters might be more likely to feel that their votes would “count” in the constituency or within the province, but not necessarily in the country as a whole.

The West presents quite a different picture, with regard to both turnout and patterns of party competition. While turnout has declined in all of the Western provinces, following the national pattern, it was not as low in any of them as in Ontario. There is also more variation in patterns of party competition. In Alberta, the Alliance won 23 of 26 seats in 2000, most of them by extremely wide margins. Historically, turnout in provincial elections in Alberta has been among the lowest in the country, again for reasons of uncompetitiveness. British Columbia displayed a somewhat similar pattern with the Alliance in the 2000 Federal Election winning 27 of 34 seats, but it had many more competitive constituencies than Alberta, and turnout was higher (63.0%). Provincially, where politics has tended to be both more polarized and more competitive, turnout has held up better, although it still displays a pattern of modest decline since 1983. In Manitoba, politics is quite competitive in both federal and provincial elections. In recent federal elections in Manitoba, the Alliance, Liberals, NDP and Conservatives have all been able to win at least some seats. But turnout has nevertheless also declined modestly in Manitoba in both federal and provincial elections since the late 1980s, and the level in 2000 (62.3%) was very close to the overall national figure. Saskatchewan likewise displays a pattern of turnout decline similar to that found nationally, with a turnout rate in 2000 of 62.3%. Provincially, however, turnout held up very well in Saskatchewan until the 1995 Provincial Election, when a steep decline occurred. In the last Federal Election, the Alliance won 10 of Saskatchewan’s 14 seats, while the Liberals and NDP each won 2.

As we move to the four Atlantic provinces, we find quite a different picture, both with respect to declining turnout and patterns of party competition. While all four Atlantic provinces experienced some decline in voting turnout in 1993, there have been uneven patterns in the last two elections (Figure 2). In all of the Atlantic provinces except Newfoundland, turnout has been consistently above the national level. Further, the decline that has taken place does not appear, for the most part, to be a sustained one, even rising in some places in the 1997 election. In Prince Edward Island, turnout appears to have levelled off at a fairly high rate of over 70%. In Nova Scotia however, federal turnout declined quite sharply in 2000 to 62.9%, and it has also declined somewhat provincially. New Brunswick likewise finds turnout declining at both levels in comparison with elections in the 1980s. It is not surprising to find

these variations in the Eastern part of the country, because patterns of party competition there have also been very different. There are no “regional parties” as such, although the remaining support for the Progressive Conservatives was concentrated in that region. The Alliance has made little headway, failing to win a seat in any of the Atlantic provinces. But politics in Eastern Canada remains fairly competitive at the constituency level, conforming to more traditional lines. In Nova Scotia, for example, the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives each won 4 seats, while the NDP won 3. In all of the provinces except Newfoundland, the average margin of victory for the winning candidate was fairly low in comparison to the rest of the country. The Atlantic provinces have not been immune from the trends that have been taking place elsewhere in Canada, but they appear here in more muted form. Regionalization has not taken hold, competition at the constituency level is generally greater, and more of the “culture of voting” remains intact.

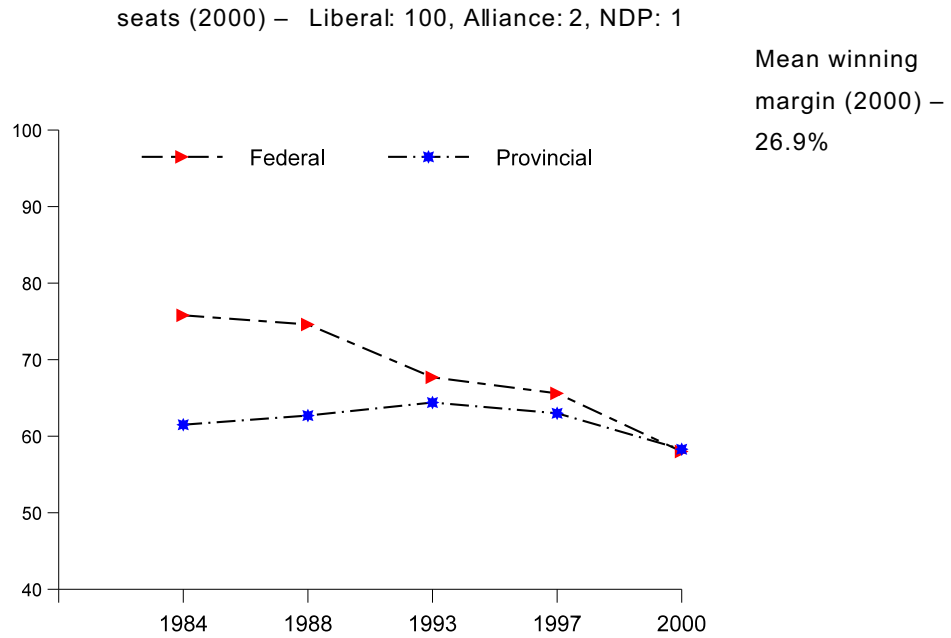
While the provincial patterns discussed above display a number of distinctive characteristics with regard to turnout, party competition, and regionalization, they are only suggestive of the possible linkages which may exist between these variables. More can be learned by examining some of the patterns *within* provinces, particularly at the constituency level, where Canadians actually cast their votes. Using the average margin of the winning candidate as a proxy for the level of party competition in a constituency we find that the overall bivariate correlation between this variable and turnout for the country as a whole was a substantial $-.31$ (Table 4). The average winning plurality of the victorious candidate in that election for the country as a whole was 23.8%. Grouping the 301 constituencies into quartiles according to their level of competitiveness, we find the expected pattern of voting turnout, with turnout declining as constituencies become less competitive, dropping monotonically from 63.4% in the most competitive quartile to 59.2% in the least competitive group. The pattern is most clearly observed in Ontario, where the Liberals are dominant and the average winning margin of candidates was 26.9%. In that province, turnout drops a full six percentage points, from 61.2% in the most competitive constituencies to 55.1% in the least competitive, and the correlation between average winning margin and turnout was a robust $-.57$.

These patterns do not hold everywhere, however. Patterns of party competition vary both between provinces and between individual constituencies. At the constituency level, there are also many anomalies, as individual candidates or the strength of local constituency organizations may play a role in increasing or inhibiting turnout in a particular election. In Quebec, for example, there is relatively little pattern across the quartiles as displayed in Table 4, but the overall correlation is still a negative one ($-.20$). But in some provinces, it is not negative at all. In Alberta, for example, turnout appears to actually *increase* slightly with decreasing competitiveness. But it should be noted that, in Alberta, 17 of the 26 constituencies

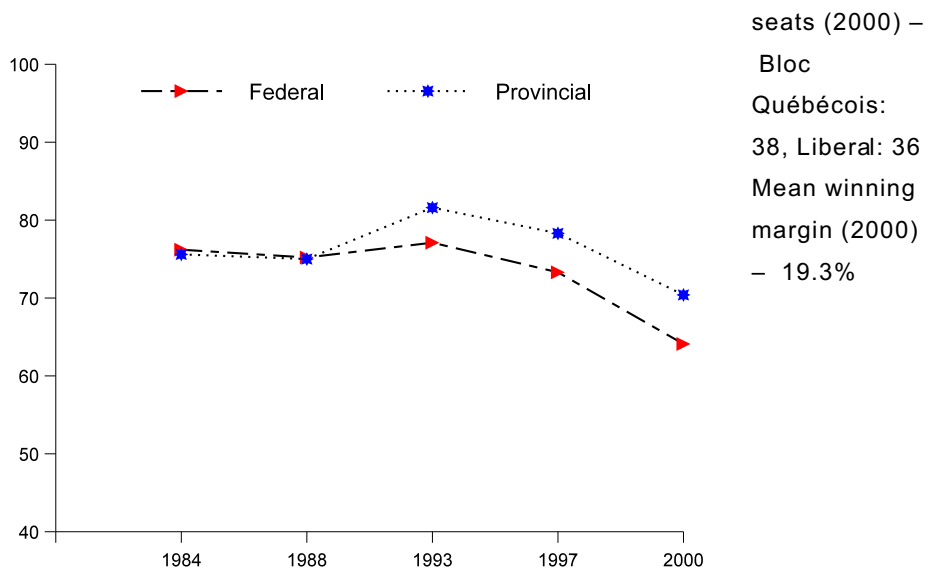
are classified in the least competitive group, and the average margin of the winning candidate is a huge 36.8%. It could well be that voting for the Alliance as an expression of regional interest has positive implications for many Alberta voters, even if that vote makes little difference in the election of the local member, or in the prospects of the Alliance forming a government nationally. But even if this interpretation may be plausible, it might also be noted that turnout, at 60.2% for the province as a whole in the 2000 election, was still quite low.

FIGURE 2
Turnout in Federal and Provincial Elections, by Province, 1984-2000

Ontario

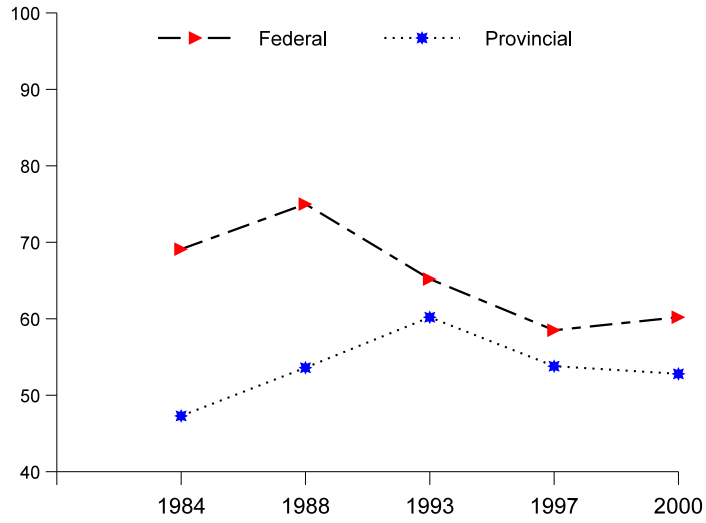


Quebec



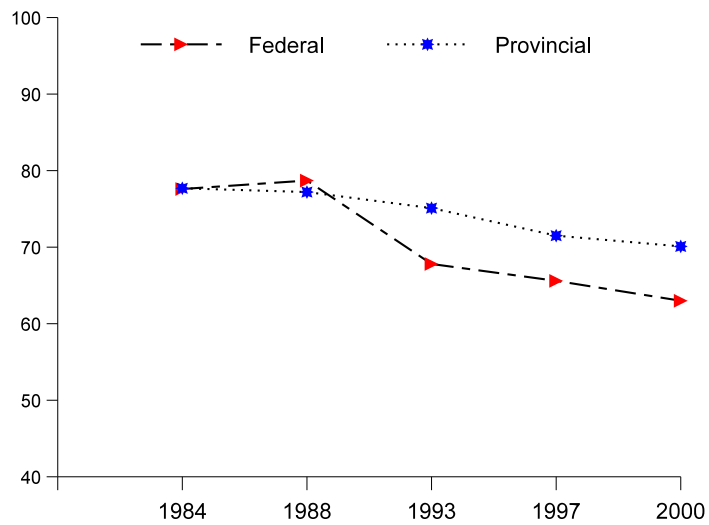
Alberta

seats (2000) – Alliance: 23, Liberal: 2, PC: 1
Mean winning margin (2000) – 36.8%



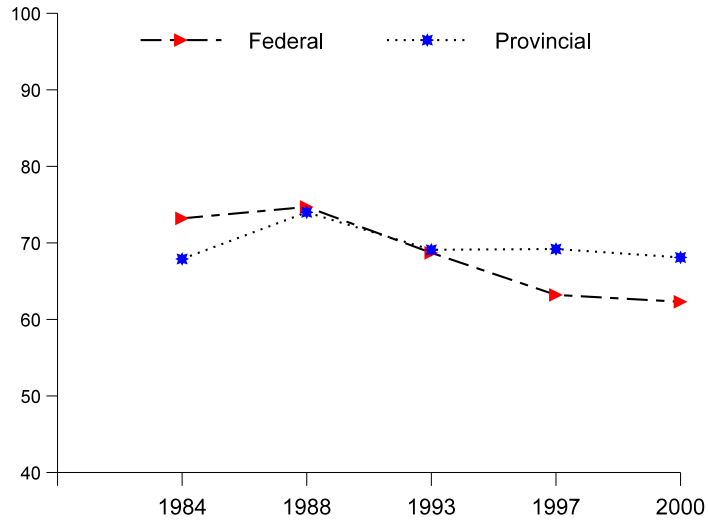
British Columbia

seats (2000) – Alliance: 27, Liberal: 5, NDP: 2
Mean winning margin (2000)



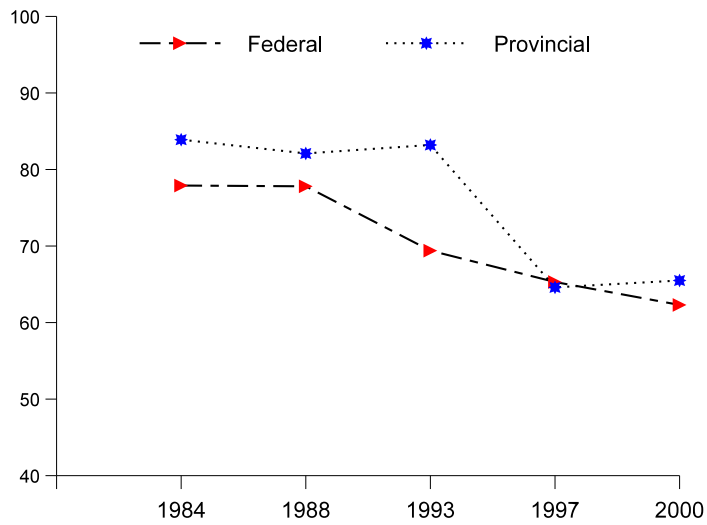
Manitoba

seats (2000) – Liberal: 5, Alliance: 4, NDP: 4, PC: 1
Mean winning margin (2000) – 17.9%



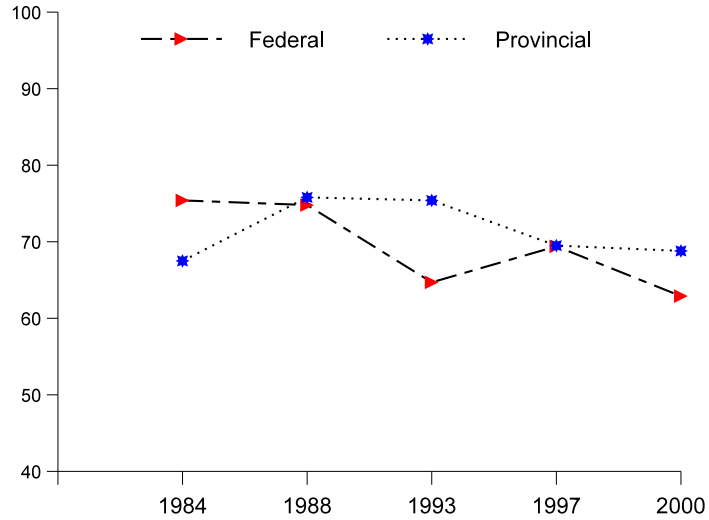
Saskatchewan

seats (2000) – Alliance: 10, Liberal: 2, NDP: 2
Mean winning margin (2000) – 20.5%



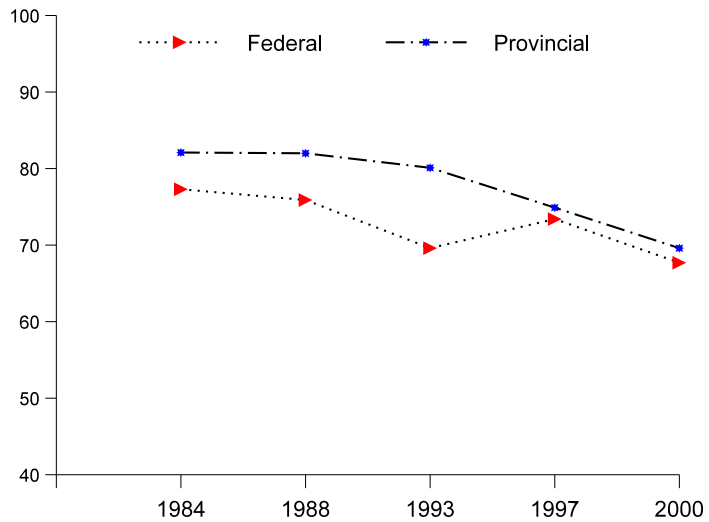
Nova Scotia

seats (2000) – Liberal: 4, PC: 4, NDP: 3
Mean winning margin (2000) – 11.3%



New Brunswick

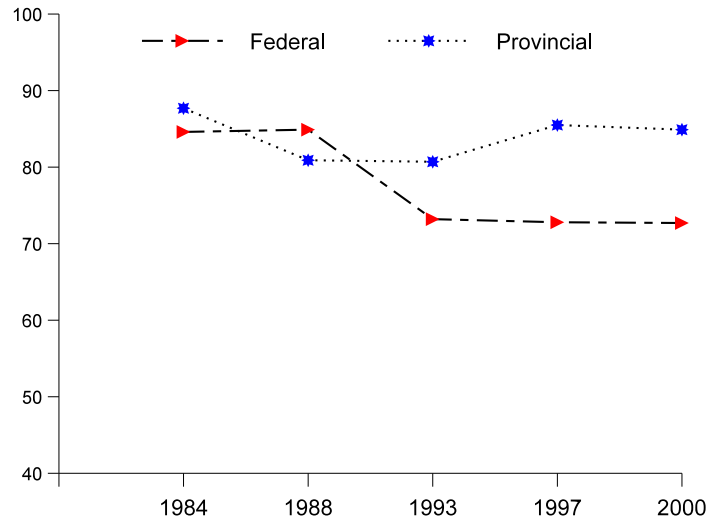
seats (2000) – Liberal: 6, PC: 3, NDP: 1
Mean winning margin (2000) – 16.4%



Prince Edward Island

seats (2000) – Liberal: 4

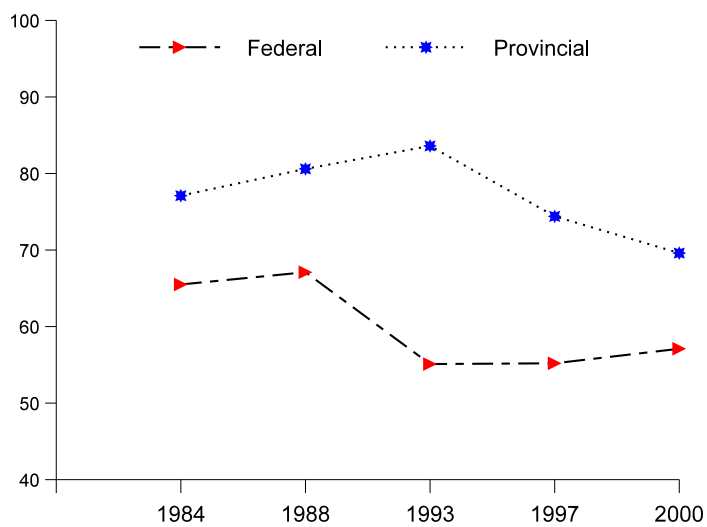
Mean winning margin (2000) – 8.5%



Newfoundland

seats (2000) – Liberal: 5, PC: 2

Mean winning margin (2000) – 28.2%



While a systematic analysis of particular constituencies is beyond the scope of this paper, some examples help to illustrate the existence of the linkages between regionalization, competitiveness and turnout as discussed above. In Ontario, there are many examples, particularly in the suburban regions of Toronto. In the constituency of York West, for example, the Liberal incumbent defeated the second-place Alliance candidate by a margin of 66.6%. Turnout in York West was 47.9%. In Etobicoke North, the winning Liberal margin was 53.0%, and turnout was 50.1%. There are also examples from Alberta, in spite of some of the anomalous patterns that also exist in that province. In Medicine Hat, the Alliance candidate defeated the Liberal by a margin of 63.8%, with turnout of 58.7%. In Yellowhead, the winning margin was 50.4%, and turnout was 60.4%.

Examples of both types of constituencies are found in Quebec, given the different patterns of party competition which exist within that province. In the predominantly anglophone riding of Westmount-Ville Marie, the Liberal candidate defeated the Progressive Conservative by a margin of 48.2%, and turnout was 54.7%, much lower than the average for the entire province. But in a very different type of Quebec riding, Charlesbourg-Jacques, where the Bloc candidate defeated the Liberal by a margin of less than 2%, turnout was a more respectable 68.1%. A similar example is found in Frontenac-Mégantic, where the Liberal candidate defeated a Bloc opponent by less than 4%, and turnout was 69.4%. We could draw many other examples from the Atlantic provinces, where competition at the constituency level is generally greater, and turnout higher. In Cardigan (Prince Edward Island), for example, the winning margin of the Liberal candidate was a thin 1.6%, and turnout was 79.2%. There are likewise many examples of competitive ridings in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick with higher turnouts, such as West Nova (68.0%), or Acadie-Bathurst (75.4%), but there are also a number of anomalies in the same provinces. Nevertheless, it is clear that an examination of the patterns of party competition at the constituency level tells us something about the factors underlying turnout decline.

TABLE 4.
Turnout in constituencies with high and low levels of competitiveness, by Province (2000 Federal Election)

	Mean margin	– Level of competition (quartiles) –				Pearson r*
		<u>1</u> <u>High</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u> <u>Low</u>	
Alberta	36.8	57.3	61	59.1	60.8	0.29
N		4	3	2	17	
Newfoundland	28.2		57.1	57.1	56.5	-0.47
N		0	1	5	1	
Ontario	26.9	61.2	59	58.1	55.1	-0.57
N		17	21	35	30	
British Columbia	25.6	60.3	63.1	62.9	63.5	0.19
N		5	11	7	11	
Saskatchewan	20.5	60.7	64.9	62.8	62.8	0.34
N		6	2	2	4	
Quebec	19.3	65.5	63.7	62	63.4	-0.2
N		26	24	15	10	
Manitoba	17.9	62.7	62.6	61		-0.11
N		4	4	6	0	
New Brunswick	16.4	68.7	69.4	65.8	62.7	-0.39
N		4	3	2	1	
Nova Scotia	11.3	61.8	66.2	65.3		0.48
N		7	2	2	0	
Prince Edward Island	8.5	76.2	70			-0.86
N		2	2	0	0	
CANADA	23.8	63.4	62.4	59.9	59.2	-0.31
N		76	75	75	75	

* bivariate correlation between size of margin and turnout

By combining the aggregate variables of turnout and constituency competitiveness with attitudinal variables in our survey of non-voters, it is possible to gain some further insights into the interaction between the objective competitiveness of constituencies and respondents' perceptions of the choice presented to them in an election. Of course, voters do not always perceive accurately the competitive situation in their local riding, particularly if their level of interest in politics is low. But when they do perceive it, it is likely to have an effect on the decision whether or not to cast a vote. Those who understand that the choice being presented to them in the local constituency is not very meaningful are more likely to feel that their vote will not make any difference in the outcome. And those who feel this way are often less likely to vote.

Table 5 shows substantial variations in the levels of voting turnout in constituencies with different levels of competitiveness. Here, we combine the objective level of competitiveness in constituencies (quartiles) as measured by the size of the winning candidate's margin of victory, with responses to the survey question "How much chance was there that your vote would make a difference in your electoral district?" In the most competitive constituencies where respondents perceive that their vote can make "a lot" of difference, voting levels rise above 80%. At the other extreme of the table, where constituencies are relatively uncompetitive and respondents feel that their vote can make little or no difference, turnout rates begin to fall towards 40%.²

The implications of this pattern are clear. If Canadian federal politics *does* continue to become more regionalized and less competitive, as the trend since 1993 suggests, citizens will increasingly perceive that their vote can make little difference. As this happens, turnout rates will continue to fall, not only because of the demographic patterns which have been depressing them, but also because the perceived effectiveness of one's vote has also diminished.

TABLE 5.

Percent voting, in constituencies with high and low levels of competitiveness, by perceived effectiveness of vote¹

Vote can make a difference	– Level of competition (quartiles) –			
	<u>High</u>			<u>Low</u>
	1	2	3	4
a lot	82.5	81.4	75.6	74.4
some	72.5	71.5	65.9	66.7
a little	50.8	56.9	59.3	53.6
none	44.1	49.1	46.7	40.0

χ^2 sig. < .001

Cramer's V = .26

N=1902*

1. Text of question was: “How much chance was there that your vote would make a difference in your electoral district?”

* Table is weighted to simulate entire electorate.

Effectiveness of the Vote

We have already pointed out that the regional dominance of certain parties in Canada creates an overall impression of noncompetitiveness nationwide. In addition, we have seen that there are a large number of ridings in all parts of the country where the gap between the first and second place finishers is substantial enough that potential voters might have felt their votes would not count for much in deciding the outcome. Of course, those with high levels of political interest or “civic duty” were likely to cast a ballot regardless of the competitive situation at the time, but those with more marginal feelings about the importance of voting may have felt that there wasn’t much point to it.

TABLE 6
How much chance was there that your vote would make a difference in the country?

	Voted in 2000?		Total
	Yes	No	
A lot	14.4	7.0	10.4
Some	22.7	18.9	20.6
A little	34.9	33.4	34.1
None	28.0	40.8	34.9
	100	100	100
V = .116 p < .000			

TABLE 7
How much chance was there that your vote would make a difference in your electoral district?

	Voted in 2000?		Total
	Yes	No	
A lot	23.1	10.1	16.2
Some	32.3	22.9	27.3
A little	26.1	34.4	30.5
None	18.5	32.7	26.1
	100.0	100.0	100.0
V = .243 p < .000			

Tables 6 and 7 show that a substantial majority of the sampled respondents believed their votes would make little or no difference in either the country as a whole, or in their own electoral district. This feeling that their votes would not matter was stronger in the larger arena of the whole country, as we might expect given the large number of votes involved. More telling are the figures for the respondent's own riding. Here, the feeling that their vote would make no difference is felt particularly strongly by those who did not vote (Table 7). The table shows that two-thirds of nonvoters felt their votes would make little or no difference in their local constituency contest, as opposed to less than half (44.6%) of those who voted who felt this way.

TABLE 8

Correlations (tau b) between belief that vote would make a difference in the electoral district, and selected variables

Likelihood of Voting in the Next Election	.33**
Importance of Voting in Elections (Civic Duty)	.27**
Interest in Politics	.25**
Interest in the 2000 election	.26**
Satisfaction with the way Federal Elections Work in Canada	.14**
Satisfaction with the Present Electoral System	.12*
Support for Proportional Representation	.04*

** statistically significant at <.01

* statistically significant at <.05

The feeling that one's vote would make a difference in one's electoral district has a number of substantial relationships with electoral consequences. First and foremost, those believing that their votes were effective were more likely to express the intention of voting in the next election. The "vicious circle", however, is the reverse relationship. Those who do not feel their votes will make a difference are much less likely to say they will make the effort to vote the next time. They are less likely to take an interest in politics, thereby making it less likely they would be informed of any potential change in the competitive situation. They also have a substantially lower feeling of civic duty, which might have gotten them to the polls regardless of the competitive situation in which they consider the political forces to be. In fact,

those who do not feel their votes can make a difference are generally less satisfied with the operations of Canadian elections.

The attitudinal measures in the survey did not include evaluations of the performance of many Canadian political institutions. However, a few measures directly related to the electoral system and regulations were included. People who feel their votes are not effective in making a difference in the election show some indications of dissatisfaction with the electoral system as it currently exists (Table 8). However, they are not more inclined to favour proportional representation as a potential solution to “wasted votes”. Those who currently feel their votes are effective are actually marginally more favourable to PR.

Culture

A small section of this paper cannot hope to do justice to the full range of attitudes which define the political culture, even that subsection devoted to beliefs about representative institutions, especially elections. In Table 3, we have seen that feelings of political trust and being represented are associated with voting, and that low feelings of efficacy are associated with not voting. The most often discussed cultural characteristic associated with elections has been civic duty. (Blais, 2000) Civic duty is the feeling that participation is to be valued for its own sake, or for its contribution to the overall health of the polity, and does not need to be justified on instrumental grounds. For the believer in the importance of participating out of duty, neither is it important that the prospective voter be enticed to cast a ballot by a particularly attractive bevy of candidates, parties, or policies, nor is it essential that the race be close and the vote more likely to “count” in determining the outcome. Rather, the conscientious voter motivated by civic duty feels that voting is important for its own sake. Conceptualized in these terms, a sense of civic duty may be measured by the question reported in Table 9, “in your view, how important is it that people vote in elections?” with the alternatives starting with “essential” and working their way down to “not at all important”.

TABLE 9
CIVIC DUTY BY VOTE IN THE 2000 FEDERAL ELECTION

	Total	2000 voters	2000 non voters
In your view, how important is it that people vote in elections?			
Essential	36.2	55.9	19.2
Very important	37.6	37.9	37.3
Somewhat important	20.5	5.4	33.6
Not at all important	5.7	.8	9.9
		V = .475 (p<.000) N = 2029	

The overall results in Table 9 show that a majority of Canadians still thinks voting in elections is either “essential” or “very important”. Only about a quarter of the total sample gives it a “somewhat important” or “not important” rating. The breakdown offered in the table, however, shows that there is a strong relationship between having an attitude of civic duty and having voted in the 2000 election. Among voters, almost everybody thinks it is at least “very important” if not “essential”, whereas nonvoters show a much lower level of civic duty. This bivariate finding is very much what we would expect after viewing the importance of the factors involving civic duty as predictors of voting/nonvoting in the last several elections (Table 3). The conditions exist for a “vicious circle” involving voting and civic duty, whereby nonvoters decrease their belief in the importance of voting, and therefore are less likely to vote in future elections.

Participation

It is sometimes said that nonvoters, particularly among the young, are not turning away from participation or losing interest in politics, just from electoral participation and conventional political action.(Norris, 2002) We have referred to this possibility as productive of a cycle whereby political action may change form but not necessarily diminish overall. A “vicious circle”, however, would exist if nonvoting was connected with lower participation in other kinds of public action or group involvement.

Table 10 shows the connection of a variety of factors with the number of groups respondents report being actively involved in, and the number of participatory activities they report having engaged in during the last year. The groups involved in this set of questions were: a political party or association; a trade union or professional association; a church or other religious association; a sports group, hobby or leisure group; a charitable organization or service club; a neighbourhood association; an artistic, musical or cultural group, or an environmental or human rights group. Participatory activities asked about were: signing a petition; joining in a boycott; attending a demonstration; writing a letter to a newspaper; calling in to a talk show; attending a political meeting or rally, or joining a politically-related Internet discussion or chat group. In the case of each one of the groups or participatory activities, people who voted in 2000 were more likely to engage in it than people who did not.

Table 10 shows that the mean number of groups a person was active in was lower for those who did not vote in 2000. Participatory activities engaged in over the last year were similarly fewer in number for 2000 nonvoters, or those who voted in fewer of the last three federal elections. Furthermore, there is a significant correlation between such group or participatory activity and the professed likelihood of voting in the next election. When the factor scores on the attitudinal factors already mentioned in Table 3 are correlated with group membership and participation, there is a moderately strong relationship with interest, discussion, civic duty and the feeling that the vote matters. The pieces are therefore in place to hypothesize the existence of a “vicious circle” of nonvoting and abstention from participation in other social and political action. Those who vote less engage less in other types of group and socio-political action, and those who participate less vote less. They are also less interested, less imbued with feelings of civic duty, less likely to think their votes would be effective, and more negative about politics.

TABLE 10

Group Membership and Participatory Activity of Various Categories of Voters and Nonvoters, and Constituencies

	# of Groups Active In	# of Participatory Activities in Last Year
<u>2000 Voting behaviour</u>		
	(Mean/8)	(Mean/7)
Voted in 2000	1.65	.91
Did not vote in 2000	1.10	.69
	F= 78.9 p<.000	F= 19.9 p<.000
<u>Voting Frequency in Last 3 Federal Elections</u>		
	(Mean/8)	(Mean/7)
Voted in all 3	1.70	.90
Voted in 2	1.28	.83
Voted in 1	1.31	.78
Voted in none	1.09	.62
	Pearson r= .171**	.096**
<u>Likelihood of voting in next election</u>		
	Taub= .175**	.136**
<u>Attitudinal Factor Scores</u>		
Interest; discussion; civic duty	r=.275**	.297**
Vote matters; civic duty	.105**	.039
Parties competitive	.000	.041
Inefficacy/cynicism/party negative	-.105**	-.046
Trust/represented	.027	.174**
Party support	.041	.060*
<u>Constituency context</u>		
2000 election turnout	r= .03*	.02
Winning margin	-.03*	-.02

* statistically significant at <.05

** statistically significant at <.01

Table 10 also provides an illustration of the way the general electoral context interacts with public attitudes and behaviour. At the bottom of Table 10, a significant relationship is displayed, albeit a small one ($r=.03^*$) between the turnout level in the respondent's constituency in 2000, and the number of groups a respondent is active in, and also a similar small negative correlation between the winning margin in 2000 and the number of such groups a respondent joins. If we treat turnout as an independent variable, there are some indications that living in a low turnout constituency may affect the actions and beliefs of individuals living in this setting.

Conclusion: Can the Vicious Circles Be Broken?

Five converging trends have contributed to Canada's democratic malaise over the last decade and a half. Decreasing voter turnout, an increasing regionalization of the party system, decreasing party competition, increasing public apathy towards politics (particularly among the young), and changing patterns of participation have worked in concert, each affecting the others, in a nest of vicious circles. The growth of regional political parties has decreased party competition, and decreased party competition has removed meaning from elections, thus driving turnout down. In turn, the low turnout has helped to perpetuate the existence and dominance of regional parties. Young people, newly eligible to vote, have perceived a party situation where meaningful choices, even where they exist among party ideologies, do not have a realistic chance of achieving parliamentary representation. As young people hesitate to go to the polls, so too do they fail to substitute other participatory or group activities in numbers that would suggest a culture shift in the nature of participation. Voting is positively related to participation of all sorts, but the negative side of this relationship creates a vicious circle of declining participation of all types.

This paper has begun the task of demonstrating the mutual impact of the variables involved in the four "vicious circles" we have identified. The growth of regional parties since the 1990s, and the solidification of regional bastions of the Liberal Party which, at times makes it also appear to be a "regional party", has created the image of uncompetitiveness, which in turn has persuaded increasing numbers of citizens that exercising their voting choice is a waste of time. Concluding that voting is meaningless has in turn affected feelings of civic duty, and diminished the public consensus that electoral participation is essential to the health of the country. While space, time and data limitations have made it impossible to document all of these linkages fully in this paper, substantial support has emerged for the conception of mutual reinforcement of the five trends we have identified.

The **consequences** of the five trends, both currently and in future if they continue to operate, are alarming, not only because of the diminished legitimacy that results from a **lower voting turnout** rate. Once that rate drops below 50% of registered voters, which we project will eventually occur if present demographic trends continue, a symbolic threshold will be reached whereby negative public attitudes toward government may accelerate, and compliance

with laws and policies decrease. The increasing **regionalization of the party system** has already led to the lack of a viable national opposition to the Liberal Party. The Bloc Québécois has no pretensions of being a national party, and it remains to be seen whether the new Conservative Party (recently formed from a merger of the Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives) will overcome its predecessor's image of being a regional representative of the West. Those potential voters who do not wish to support the Liberals have no obvious, moderate, national alternative at the moment. **Decreasing party competition** means that the representation of alternative interests and policy alternatives, particularly those not associated with the agendas of the regional parties, is less evident, both inside and outside of Parliament. The consequence of **decreasing feelings of civic duty** is that young people, potentially entering the electorate, see little reason to do so, and a youth culture of political apathy and political ignorance is in danger of becoming entrenched. Finally, the association of nonvoting with **lower levels of participation**, either individually or in group activity, raises the spectre of declining levels of community commitment, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as social capital.

Can the vicious circles connecting the five trends be broken, and the trends reversed? The directions of possible solutions are not hard to discern, but it is impossible to predict whether they can be accomplished. The problem with the regionalization of the party system can be alleviated by the creation of a new national opposition party, one which appeals to Quebec as well as the West and the rest of the country, one which is necessarily moderate on social as well as political issues and does not espouse extreme fundamentalist conservative values. Whether the new Conservative Party can become such a party remains to be seen, but it has been the goal of both the Reform Party's founder, Preston Manning, and its most likely future leader, Stephen Harper, to create such a party. The Progressive Conservative Party, which has merged into this party, may help to soften the negative image associated with the Alliance in the Centre and East of the country. But the prospect remains highly uncertain, at least in the short run.

The problem of decreased party competition and the ensuing lack of representation has already served to put the issue of electoral reform on the nation's policy agenda. Citizen movements like Fair Vote Canada are publicizing the possibilities of implementing an MMP electoral system in the hopes of energizing those currently feeling unrepresented. While there is no large-scale dissatisfaction with the current electoral system *per se*, survey evidence shows that there is, at the same time, an interest in implementing proportional representation in some form (over 70% are supportive). Several of the largest provinces, (Quebec, British Columbia, Ontario) are studying the possibility of implementing electoral system changes at the level of provincial elections. While electoral system reform is no panacea for increasing turnout (see New Zealand), it does have the potential to demonstrate the responsiveness of politicians to public concern about lack of effectiveness of voting in the current system, and to attract the attention of the disaffected, and/or the young.

Cultural attitudes involving the apathy of the population towards politics and towards the essential nature of electoral participation present a particularly intractable problem. Because of the circular nature of the relationship with other factors, any of the institutional changes described above might help to reverse this trend as well. In the meantime, efforts to improve the nature of civic education can help (Milner, 2002). Improved civic education curricula in the schools, implemented by better qualified civics teachers employing participative methods can make a difference in interesting young people in electoral politics. Innovative advertising campaigns employed by the electoral authorities (e.g. Elections Ontario in 2003) can help to draw the attention of those hesitating about voting to the desirability of making their own choice of representatives rather than leaving this choice to others.

Finally, the possibility exists that new forms of technology can allow and encourage participation in ways that engage the interest of those who feel marginalized from the current forms of electoral participation. Experimentation with methods of electronic voting is occurring simultaneously in many countries, (e.g. Britain; United States) and we have some indications that their use, if security concerns can be addressed successfully, would have a small/modest upward impact on the turnout rate (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003; 55-59). More important than their actual use, however, might be the implied responsiveness to public demands.

The circularity of the relationships between the forces surrounding the phenomenon of the turnout decline makes it possible to be optimistic or pessimistic about the future. At the moment, the pessimistic view seems more realistic. Declining turnout, increasing regionalization, decreasing party competitiveness, lesser cultural importance given to civic attitudes and participation—all of these appear to be contemporary Canadian trends. And all of these developments appear to reinforce each other. But it is difficult to believe that these trends can continue indefinitely. Sooner or later, voting turnout will stabilize, a coherent national alternative government will emerge, competitiveness will improve, and exhortations toward civic-mindedness will have some effect, and such developments in one area can affect the others. The prospect of a trend reversal, operated by a virtuous circle as opposed to a vicious one, could be just beyond the horizon. Or farther away.

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Notes

1 In Figure 2, turnout in provincial elections is for the provincial election closest to the date of the federal election as shown on the x-axis. For example, the turnout figure for the 1999 Ontario Provincial Election is shown in comparison with that for the 2000 Federal Election. We wish to thank Peter Szpunar and Professor Robert Williams of the University of Waterloo for compiling the provincial turnout information. For his assistance with managing the aggregate data on federal elections, we would like to thank Jean-Sebastien Bargiel of Elections Canada.

2. The pattern becomes stronger if a control for subjective perceptions of party competition is added, using responses to the question "How competitive do you feel that the political parties were here in this electoral district?" In the most competitive constituencies, where respondents perceived them as such and also felt that their vote could make a difference the turnout rate was 88%. At the other end, where the constituency was in the most uncompetitive quartile, and respondents perceived that the riding was "very uncompetitive", the turnout rate was 26%. Because of the problem of small cell sizes, a complete breakdown of these combinations is not given here. But the overall direction of the pattern shown by the combination of objective and subjective indicators of competitiveness is quite clear.

