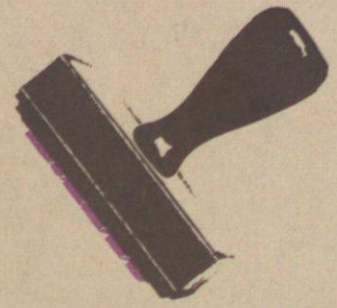




BUREAU OF MUNICIPAL RESEARCH

Suite 306, 2 Toronto Street, Toronto, Canada M5C 2B6 / Tel. (416) 363-9265

COMMENT



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LOW VOTER TURNOUT IN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS - NO EASY SOLUTIONS

Voting is at the center of our electoral and governing processes and is the most widely used form of political participation. It is the primary mechanism by which citizens choose representatives to govern on their behalf and then are able to register their approval or disapproval of decisions taken by those representatives.

Yet in municipal elections at the level of government which is theoretically at least closest to the needs and concerns of local people, little importance is attached to the act of voting. Voter turnout is low, especially in comparison with federal and provincial election figures, and what is even more disturbing, is declining over time.

Over the decade 1960 to 1970 voter turnout for federal elections in Ontario was consistently higher than for municipal elections: an average of 79% of eligible voters for federal elections as compared with 43% for municipal.¹ In 1974 the Ontario turnout for the federal election was 74%, while for the City of Toronto municipal elections it was less than one in three (31% - down from 38% in 1966 and a high of 43% in 1972) and for Scarborough 25% (down from 33% in 1966). Even the recent provincial elections (October, 1975) attracted a turnout of 65% of eligible voters.

1. See M. J. Goldsmith, "Political Structure and Voter Turnout in Local Elections in Ontario", paper presented to the Canadian Political Science Association (Montreal: June, 1972). Based on a selection of 21 Ontario cities. See also O. Thomas, "Voter Turnout at the Municipal Level", in D. Rowat (ed.), Urban Politics in Ottawa-Carleton: Research Essays (Department of Political Science, Carleton University: November, 1974).

This *BMR Comment* was undertaken to examine some of the reasons behind low voter turnout in local elections and to put forward suggestions to ameliorate this situation. The immediate issue prompting the study is the impending legislation for reform of the Municipal Elections Act. Debate surrounding the new legislation has concentrated on reforms that by nature must be limited, affecting as they do only the technical or procedural aspects of elections, such as the date.

The less pragmatic but equally important reason underlying this choice of study is the Bureau's concern for the effect of low voter turnout on a municipality's ability to govern. Local councils are being required to debate increasingly complex issues of urban growth and development and, in doing so, to come into more frequent contact with other levels of government. A council which is supported by only 30% of the electorate may have a questionable mandate in these instances.

A possible qualification to any study of voter turnout is that the comparisons drawn between election turnout at the different levels of government do not start from the same base. That is, turnout figures usually refer to % of eligible voters who voted, but the eligibility rules for each type of election -- federal, provincial, municipal -- differ. Jay-Dell Mah, CBC News Reporter, has suggested that, although there is a sizeable gap between the proportions of voters voting in municipal elections and in provincial, in terms of absolute numbers the difference is not sufficiently great to warrant the cries of non-representativeness that are directed toward local government but not provincial. He reasons that if municipal and provincial elections used the same voter eligibility rules, municipal turnouts would be much "*higher*" -- about 55% -- or provincial turnouts much "*lower*" -- maybe 50%.¹

The requirements for eligibility are not the same, of course, and therefore this type of analysis remains pure speculation. It does raise interesting questions, though, of who is eligible to vote in municipal elections and whether some revisions are necessary. Provincial

1. As broadcast on CBC news, December, 1975. Using preliminary tabulations from the 1975 provincial elections and data from the 1972 City of Toronto elections (a year of high local interest in the municipal election), Mah demonstrated that only about 30,000 more people voted provincially than locally, although the proportionate turnout would indicate far more -- 65% as compared with 43%. The real difference lay in the numbers considered eligible to vote -- 100,000 more in the City than in the province. We might also add that, from our own study, we found the municipal election rolls generally to be inaccurate. In one instance an "eligible" voter had been dead for 20 years; in other instances, eligible voters were neither Canadian nor British citizens.

restrictions are much tighter than municipal, where the length of residence qualification is minimal and the heavy weighting toward property interest can entitle one elector to more than one vote. This opens up another whole area of study related to yet separate from the one at hand, which is based on the commonly accepted assumption that municipal voter turnout is too low. Even if the figure were closer to 50%, we would still need to know why 50% do *not* vote and how we could increase the public commitment which would lead to a higher turnout.

Recent Findings - Why People Don't Vote

The study of voter turnout in municipal elections is a relatively neglected one, at least in Canada. What major research there is has been undertaken in Great Britain or the United States, and most of these studies examine spatial variations in voting turnout as a function of certain demographic cultural or social factors (for example, income, ethnicity, religion, sex). They have focused on structural characteristics, which help to explain why certain groups behave as they do, but have neglected other influences which might indicate why individuals do or do not vote, and particularly now why a decline in participation by eligible voters across all groups is occurring.

Among the Canadian studies that do exist, M. J. Goldsmith's is of interest for our purposes, because it examines factors connected with the structure of the election itself.¹ Goldsmith examined data from 21 Ontario municipalities for the 1960-1970 period and attempted to relate the variations in turnout to each of four factors:

- 1) the presence or absence of a mayoralty race;
- 2) whether the election was at-large or ward-based;
- 3) the amount of electoral competition; and
- 4) the presence or absence of referenda.

He was able to show that, of these four, only the second -- a ward-based election -- had any significant effect as a single influence on voter turnout. However even this hypothesis did not hold universally, and he was obliged to conclude that it is the particular combination of these and probably other "*electoral*" variables that have an impact on voting. The presence of one variable encouraging high turnout can be nullified by the absence of others, whereas if a number of stimuli operate together to encourage interest, then turnout is likely to increase.

1. Goldsmith, op.cit.

A more recent study based on statistics from Ottawa's civic elections has confirmed Goldsmith's conclusions and illustrates more clearly how the nature and amount of electoral competition influences turnout.¹

Similarly a recent background report prepared for the Royal Commission on Metropolitan Toronto argues that another electoral variable, the complexity of the municipal voting decision (so many positions to fill and an array of candidates to choose from), suggests the necessity of certain reforms, such as the introduction of party politics. *"Although political party platforms are not always coherent wholes and party candidates sometimes disagree with elements of the platform, the existence of the party does simplify the voter's task of acquiring information about voting alternatives."*²

Since Canada has no tradition of political parties at the local level, no one has been able to study the impact of partisanship on voting turnout. Nor does the present civic climate seem at all promising for the introduction of political parties.³ Yet even if it were, much more detailed consideration would have to be given to the actual effect of municipal party politics on the decision to vote: a major qualification of the studies we reviewed is that electoral factors give only a partial explanation of the trend in voter turnout.

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1. See O. Thomas, "Voter Turnout at the Municipal Level", in D. Rowat (ed.), Urban Politics in Ottawa-Carleton: Research Essays (Department of Political Science, Carleton University: 1974). Thomas uses the concept of "marginality" to explain the level of voter turnout: "If a contest is perceived as close or marginal, public interest will be heightened through increased media coverage, greater campaigning intensity by the candidates, etc." In considering concrete ways in which turnout can be increased it might be useful to distinguish between those influences over which we can exercise some control and those which we can do little about: the vote of the media, say, falls into the former while the number and closeness of candidates in any given election race is more difficult to deal with in a constructive way.
 2. P. Milligan, T. J. Plunkett, and M. J. Powell, The Electoral System for Metropolitan Toronto, background report prepared for The Royal Commission on Metropolitan Toronto (June 1975), p. 57.
 3. For example, a recent study conducted in Edmonton found little public support for the introduction of national or provincial parties at the local level. See R. R. Gilsdorf, "The Popular Bases of Urban Political Institutions: 'Reformed' Institutions and Centralization in Edmonton", paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association (Toronto: June 4, 1974). Also, a recent Bureau of Municipal Research study on citizen participation surveyed the attitudes of both citizen "activists" and public officials on the idea of political parties at the local level. The responses were overwhelmingly negative. Citizen Participation in Metro Toronto: Climate for Cooperation? (January, 1975), p. 50.

The Bureau's Approach

Neither the traditional type of voter turnout study nor the more recent ones are particularly helpful in pointing out concrete ways of increasing voter turnout now, in the short term. Results from the former do indicate the structural factors which exert strong influence on behaviour generally, but because these factors operate in all elections, at whatever level, they provide only minimal explanation for increasingly low turnouts at the municipal level. Evidence from the latter has so far proved inconclusive, although it has yielded several insights into aspects of the municipal electoral system itself that might affect voter turnout. Changes made to some of these electoral variables would be possible and might produce a noticeable improvement in turnout, however much analysis and public debate, and ultimately legislative changes, are still required.

The Bureau's approach starts from the idea that an examination of the attitudes of individuals toward the act of voting is prerequisite to identifying effective solutions for the problem of low voter turnout. Further, it assumes that higher turnout *per se* is not the desired objective, but rather that increased turnout reflects a rising level of public knowledge about and concern for local government and that therefore the locally-based political system will be more sensitive to the needs it must encompass.

The study was designed to test three hypotheses and determine the relative significance of the factors involved:

1. *Technical (or procedural) variables such as election date, polling booth location, and hours of voting have minimal impact on whether a person will vote or not.*
2. *Citizens who perceive their municipal government to have little power will tend not to vote.*
3. *Citizens will tend not to vote if they lack a basic understanding of the workings of municipal government.*

Obviously hypotheses 2 and 3 are not independent, and our results show this.

The study sample was based on Metropolitan Toronto, London, Kingston, and Aurora so that respondents from different-sized communities were included. Personal interviews, telephone interviews, and mail-out questionnaires were used in the survey, but despite our efforts to ensure that a geographic cross-section was represented, most of the completed

responses came from three Metro area municipalities -- Toronto, Etobicoke, and East York. For this reason, and because the study was based on a relatively small sample, it was not possible to make precise statistical conclusions, but important observations and patterns did emerge.

Results of the Survey

1. Technical variables such as election date, polling booth location, and hours of voting have minimal impact on whether a person votes or not.

This hypothesis was supported. When asked if adverse weather had made it difficult to vote in the last municipal election, only 15 people responded affirmatively while 100 said this was not a factor. Certainly a bad snow storm similar to the one experienced by Windsor in the last election, would be a factor, but cannot be blamed for the *continuing* decline in voter turnout at the local level.

With regard to the location of polling booths, very few people mentioned this as a problem (6 out of 114) and nearly the same reaction was recorded to a question about the polling booths not being open long enough. Both voters and non-voters seem to think the polls are well located and open long enough to allow everyone to vote who wanted to.

An interesting variation in the responses, was that most of the *non-voters* suggested reforms dealing with more and better information on candidates and issues, while a surprisingly large number of *voters* (28 out of 69) thought a change in the election date *might* be the answer. Press attention to the change of date issue might account for this response from voters, especially in light of the very small number of our respondents who said adverse weather had kept them from voting. We concluded that technical variables have little impact on overall voter turnout, especially over an extended number of elections. Therefore, changes such as moving the election date to a month when the weather is better are likely to have only marginal impact on the apathetic elector.

2. Citizens who perceive their municipal government to have little power will tend not to vote.

This hypothesis is relevant to some understanding of the decision to vote. When asked a series of questions regarding why people may not have voted, more respondents mentioned a "*lack of issues*" than any other reason. While this attitude may have been taken because of an actual lack of issues, it may also have been the result of a perceived lack of issues stemming from inadequate information or a different ordering of priorities by the individual questioned.

More important for explaining whether a person would vote or not were the responses indicating how the various levels of government were ranked in order of voting duty or responsibility, i.e., which level was most important. In each case the order of importance corresponded with the voter turnout pattern; federal first, provincial second, and local last.

While it is true that municipalities are creatures of provincial legislation and are thereby ultimately controlled by the provincial government, what this means in practical terms is not always widely understood. As our opening remarks pointed out, in fact a local government may exercise considerable discretion within a broader policy frame set by the province, and is likely to do so increasingly if provincial transfers of revenue become deconditionalized.

The popular view of weak municipal government is reinforced by several factors, among them: career politicians constantly strive upward within the political system; the higher levels of government "spend" more money on an absolute basis; and (importantly, in our view) media coverage of governmental affairs tends to emphasize the senior levels of government over the local.

We have concluded that these perceptions by the electorate do have a very real influence on voter turnout but because they are frequently based on a fuzzy knowledge of actual intergovernmental workings, they cannot be isolated as a major cause of political alienation. The importance of our third hypothesis as an explanation is thereby emphasized.

3. Citizens will tend not to vote if they lack a basic understanding of the workings of municipal government.

Many of our respondents readily admitted they found municipal government difficult to understand. This was verified when we asked specific questions about how the Metro Chairman is chosen and which local level (Metro or City/Borough) provided certain services. Only 24 out of 99 respondents could correctly identify the method of choosing the Metro Chairman from 6 possible answers. Questions regarding which local level was responsible for health, police, recreation, fire, roads and zoning were answered correctly on average only 36% of the time.

We can suggest at least two reasons for the discouraging scores. Our respondents indicated that they had been taught very little about local government in their school days. (This finding was verified in a previous BMR study, "The Teaching of Local Government in Our Schools", BMR Comment, No. 155, October, 1975) Secondly, in the reporting

of local governmental matters in the media, coverage tends to focus on only those facts felt to be pertinent to the news-story, with some attention given to the history of the issue. But usually explanations of the structure, operations and decision-making processes of the government involved, any or all of which may be vital to a full understanding of the issue, are lacking. To what extent the media has a responsibility to cover events in such detail is a subject requiring further assessment. We can only conclude from our investigation that the general and widespread voter apathy evident over a number of municipal elections is closely and clearly related to inadequate educational preparation and subsequent continuing information and therefore that efforts to improve voter turnout focusing on these factors will have a good chance of success.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We certainly realize that citizens can and do participate in the affairs of their local government in many ways other than voting. Indeed the rise of interest group political activity over recent years is yet another reason frequently cited for the decline in participation through voting. Nevertheless voting remains the basic institutional method of participation and the means by which our municipal political leaders are selected. If the percentage of people exercising their voting franchise is low, this has serious implications for the legitimacy with which our local representative system functions and requires that some corrections be made.

Of the three kinds of factors examined, technical variables, those pertaining to the mechanics of an election itself, appear to have very little to do with the overall motivation to vote. The second factor, the perceived power of municipal government, is significant in the decision to vote. However, it poses two types of corrective action. If the perception is based on an inadequate understanding of the extent and scope of the role of local government, then the solutions relate to information and education. But if the perception arises more from a knowledgeable and realistic assessment of the constraints and limitations of intergovernmental power relationships, then the solutions require constitutional and political changes probably involving certain specific devolutions of power. These lie with the provincial sector to effect and will only occur if and when the demand from the municipal constituency (both politicians and the public at large) for more power become compelling to Queen's Park.

While there are therefore no easy solutions to the problem of low voter turnout, for our purposes the manner in which people are educated and informed about local governmental issues is a basic cause of disinterest and voter apathy across all groups of the electorate and one which can be addressed now because it is readily within our means of control.

In order to do so we must examine three of the main vehicles for information flow:

1. *the educational system*
2. *the media*
3. *direct contact between local government and people*

1. the educational system We must have a comprehensive programme from kindergarten to grade 13 designed to give students not only a basic understanding of how all governments work and inter-relate but also to develop an ability to critically analyze the variety of issues with which municipal politicians must grapple. The instruction must be imaginative as well as pragmatic with the dual goal of stimulating lasting interest and providing a basis for the confidence necessary to make the system work for each individual when they need it. This is obviously a heavy order. The recent BMR Comment on the teaching of local government in schools (op.cit.) sets out the general guidelines for initial action: a series of seminars held around the province which would bring together teachers, administrators, faculty of education representatives, government representatives, students and the general citizenry to develop new terms of reference for curriculum and resource materials.

2. the media The media already plays an important role in the continuing education of our citizenry but unfortunately, in our view, it is not functioning as well as it might in regard to local government. As mentioned earlier, we find that important aspects of the background to a given issue are frequently taken for granted. For example, an article about the Metro Police Commission might not include how the members are chosen and who must approve the budget, but rather will concentrate only on the facts of the issue at hand, which could be employee arbitration or a new police station.

Representatives of the media will, of course, argue that limited time and/or space is a problem. Newspaper people, especially, will say they are in the business of selling news and not necessarily involved in educating for education's sake. However, it is our contention that the stakes are sufficiently high, in terms of ensuring a stronger basis for local representative and participatory democracy, that this attitude should be re-examined. There are already inquiries underway examining the role of the media on subjects such as violence, although here the problem reached a crisis level before any action was taken. The Bureau believes the role of the media in relation to local government affairs to be sufficiently important to merit further research and will itself produce a report later in 1976, in an attempt to define proper responsibilities.

3. direct contact between local government and people This can include meeting candidates, attending a council or committee meeting, getting a permit, needing help in an emergency, or receiving a tax bill. Each of these is a learning experience, but because they are not designed for that purpose they may remain just a series of small isolated contacts which give only a partial view of the local system. Specific efforts have been made to improve general awareness of local issues and municipal operations -- for example, displays in public places and booklets listing or explaining municipal services -- but, while laudable, they are inadequate. They give some information, but not all that might be necessary in a given situation, and they usually represent just one-way communication. They present an administrative view of local service delivery, and this may or may not coincide with a consumer's needs. They also assume a literate and in many respects homogeneous public well-accustomed to operating a system to obtain specific benefits. They may therefore be inappropriate means of communication with, say, residents new to the city or the country.

We must decide then what the local municipality's responsibility is concerning the education and information of its citizens and in what ways this responsibility should be exercised. Is it to be left to individuals to seek out the information they want on given matters? Or should local governments be making special efforts to find out the information needs of the variety of publics they affect, to get this information to them in forms they can use, and to ensure that the local decision processes are sufficiently accessible so that the information does encourage participation?

Current cynicism with government generally and concern over the priorities for and levels of expenditure in the public sector expresses the need for a much broader programme related to this issue than is now the case. We can suggest ward offices for aldermen and neighbourhood -- or community-wide expositions (held as the need arises, and organized through existing community/interest groups or an ongoing area planning process where possible) as two means by which specific grievances could be dealt with and a longer-lasting awareness be imparted.

When a commitment to improving these three areas of information flow is accepted and acted upon, voter turnout will probably increase. By how much we are not willing to predict, first because turnout *per se* should not be the objective, and secondly because broader systemic factors as well as certain aspects of any given electoral arrangement will influence behaviour to an as yet unquantifiable extent. What we are willing to state is that the kinds of information individuals have or have not received will influence their perceptions. It follows that various efforts to heighten their level of understanding of local government structure and functioning through a continuing educative process represent not just those methods of influencing voter turnout that can be implemented with least fuss all round, but rather those methods that will result in both a stronger motivation to cast a vote and an expanded knowledge of what that vote is about.

Charles K. Bens, Executive Director
Anne Golden, Research Coordinator
Pam Byrant, Research Associate
Linda Mulhall, Research Associate
Ron Antonio, Student Assistant