

The Non-voting Majority:

A Study of Non-voting in the 2011 Vancouver Municipal Election

by

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Abstract

All levels of governments in Canada are seeing a continued decrease in voting during elections. The lowest voter turnout rates are at the municipal level—the 2011 Vancouver municipal election saw only 34 percent of eligible voters participate. This research examines why citizen participation is decreasing in Vancouver municipal elections and focuses that research through three theories (rational voter theory, social capital and political efficacy). The research relied on existing academic literature, and combined that with primary data yielded from focus groups made up of self-declared non-voters from the 2011 Vancouver municipal election, with the addition of several subject experts (academic and those involved in running municipal campaigns). The research revealed that many non-voters are disengaged in their communities, distrust politics, do not understand the role of municipal government, and are mistrustful that voting will make a difference or that the government will represent them. They perceive that voting is too complicated in municipal elections because of factors such as having to vote for multiple positions which is a stark contrast to federal or provincial elections where they only vote for one. The thesis also identifies solutions to increase citizen participation in future municipal elections.

Keywords: non-voter, political efficacy, social networks, social capital, voter turnout, Vancouver municipal election, political knowledge, public engagement, political communications, rational voter model, heuristic-systematic model, and democratic literacy.

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Table of Contents

Literature Review	6
Introduction	6
Internal Political Efficacy	7
Political Knowledge and Literacy	8
Civic Duty and Civic Culture	10
Cynicism and Trust.....	12
Ethnicity and the Urban Environment	14
Youth.....	16
External Political Efficacy	17
Social Capital: the impact of our connections	17
Social Networks.....	19
Media and Polling.....	21
Political Parties	22
Electoral Structure and the Impact on Who Votes	23
Theory.....	27
Introduction	27
Theories and Concepts relating to Rational Factors in Voting	29
Rational Voter Model	29
Social Capital Theory	30
Political Efficacy	31
Theories and Concepts relating to Non-Rational Factors in Voting	32
Expressive Voting Theory	32
Duty and Socialization	33
Linguistic Cues.....	33
Motivation of Emotion	34
The Heuristic-Systematic Model.....	35
Method.....	37
Framework.....	37
Method of Data Collection: Focus Groups	38
Method of Data Collection: Subject Expert Interviews	39
Ethical Concerns and Limitations.....	40
Analysis	41
Research Findings.....	42
Part 1: The Non-Voter and Municipal Politics as a Political Realm	43
Who is the Non-Voter?.....	43
How do Non-Voters Imagine the Political Realm?	43
What is the Specific Nature of the Municipal as a Political Realm?	45
Political Knowledge	47
Part 2: Non-Voting as a Function of Systems and Processes	49
Electoral Systems	49
Social Capital.....	52
Media.....	53
Political Parties.....	54
Conclusions.....	55
Future Research.....	58
Positive deviance study.....	58
Non-voters involvement in democracy.....	59
Recommendations.....	60
References.....	62

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Participation rates of citizens in elections in Canada have declined at the federal and provincial levels to under 60% of the eligible voting population (Nasrallah, 2009). These participation rates are even more dramatic at the municipal level. In the City of Vancouver, only 34% of people voted in the 2011 municipal election (City Of Vancouver, 2011), and as such a large majority of Vancouver citizens are not voting (66%). Much of the academic research regarding elections has examined the voter (Nakhaie, 2006; Stewart, MacIver, & Young, 2008). However, little is known about the non-voter—especially in municipal elections where research is even more limited and the number of non-voters is even higher. Elections provide opportunities to understand how citizens gain information, how political parties deliver messages, how election agencies attempt to control and disseminate information, and how individual citizens attempt to make sense of this plethora of information (Stewart et al., 2008; Trumbo, 2002). The non-voter, and the general phenomenon of non-participation in elections, offers an opportunity to evaluate the adequacy of such democratic processes, institutions and political culture to inform and engage the citizen. Since the problem of non-voting is most acute at the municipal level, it is here that the nature of the non-voter emerges most clearly from a welter of anxious studies and op-eds about the legitimacy and responsiveness of political systems in light of worldwide trends indicating a general decline in voter turnout. As democracy's foil and negation—its dimly understood and oft-maligned “other”—the municipal non-voter thus provides a point from which insight, critique, and recommendations for improving voter participation can be made.

This project focuses on four core areas of research into the barriers faced by non-voters. The first is around the lack of access that non-voters have to political knowledge and the belief they have in their own internal political efficacy—their ability, that is, to effectively gather, understand and act on the knowledge (Lambert, Curtis, Kay, & Brown, 1988; Nadeau, Nevitte, Gidengil, & Blais, 2008). The second is that non-voters tend to have lower social capital connections in their communities (Bevelander, 2009; McLeod & Shah, 2009; Norris, 2008). The third is the external political efficacy perceived by non-voters, as they come to believe that their participation will not have an impact on the election (Leshner & Thorson, 2000; Southwell & Everest, 1998). Non-voting has a remarkable influence on the outcomes of elections, as partisans come to be overrepresented among the electorate. It also affects the subsequent policy decisions of governments that are elected, as these then govern without an explicit mandate from the significant minority (or even majority in the case of municipal elections) who don't participate (Bennett & Resnick, 1990). Finally, the design of electoral systems and voting methods themselves can prove a disincentive to voting. For example, the current structure of the municipal electoral system and the voting process for candidates in the City of Vancouver are sufficiently complicated that, in terms of time and energy costs, they are prohibitively expensive for citizens to use and is in contrast to other Canadian municipalities that use other electoral systems.

The goal of this research is to understand municipal non-voters who are more disconnected from their communities, cynical about elections, and have very low political knowledge about their municipal government. The non-voter projects a fascinating dichotomy of hating politics but loving democracy, and yet expressing that they are failing in their own perceived sense of duty to participate as an active citizen. Non-voters in municipal politics in

Vancouver are frustrated that political knowledge—about the candidates they have to choose for the 27 different municipal positions—is so complicated to obtain and interpret and represents a significant barrier to be an active voting citizen.

This research is intended to make voting easier for all citizens. In particular, given the empirical basis of this research in Vancouver, it's hoped that this research will assist that city in understanding barriers to participation of non-voters and as such find new solutions to increase voter participation in future Vancouver municipal elections.

Literature Review

Introduction

The study of voter participation has a rich scholarly history. To a lesser extent the study of who does not vote has also been debated for decades among academics. This literature review focuses on some of the key areas of debate about non-voters: political efficacy (both internal and external), social capital, social networks, political knowledge, political parties, the media, trust and electoral structure.

Much of the scholarly debate about non-voters has focused upon a theory of voting behaviour called the “rational voter” model. The prevalence of the rational voter hypothesis means that it offers a point of constructive contrast to other theories in this literature review. The rational voter model is the theoretical construct against which most other models are compared, and purports that citizens' decisions about voting are based on their rational self-interest. The model argues that citizens weigh the costs of voting against the benefits to them of a desirable outcome to the election (Downs, 1957). For example, a citizen deciding to vote may see a candidate running for re-election whom they still support. As such, the cost (the effort) of gathering information in this case is very low and the benefit to them of their candidate being re-

elected is high, increasing the likelihood that they would vote. While voting can be a rational decision for some citizens, there is also scholarly opinion that has focused on the non-rational explanations (Carlsson & Johansson-Stenman, 2010) about citizen participation which is explored further in the Theory section of this paper.

In addition to the valuable research and debate that the rational voter model has given to academic discourse around voting, another valuable theoretical framework that is important in examining citizen participation in elections has been that of political efficacy. The concept of political efficacy emerged in the 1950s and was defined as "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process" (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954, p.187) and as such when a citizen has political efficacy they act on their belief—that by being an informed and active citizen who votes—that they can have an impact on the election personally. Scholars have further refined political efficacy into two important components: internal political efficacy and external political efficacy. Internal political efficacy "is the sense that one's participation can actually make a difference" (Carpini, 2004, p.398) because they have the knowledge—and the ability to interpret the knowledge—to make an informed decision, while external political efficacy is the sense that "the political system would be responsive to this participation" (p. 398). Both internal and external political efficacy will be further explored here in this literature review because of the important role both have played in the academic discourse surrounding the democratic involvement of citizens voting or not voting in elections.

Internal Political Efficacy

Among the major forms of internal political efficacy are (i) political knowledge and literacy, (ii) one's felt civic obligation to vote, (iii) cynicism and trust in politicians and systems,

(iv) ethnicity and the social conditions of cities and (v) youth. These all act as conditions, arising within the individual, that are likely to affect a person's likelihood to vote.

Political Knowledge and Literacy

Just as knowledge about the world can help individuals understand their social environment, it is also true that having political knowledge can help citizens to understand what is happening during an election. At the core of internal political efficacy is political knowledge. Political knowledge can enable a citizen to process information, and in some cases, act on that information. For the purposes of the research, political knowledge is the information (knowledge) that a citizen needs and/or uses to make a decision about voting or not voting in an election (Carpini & Keeter, 1993; Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2012; Lambert, Curtis, Kay, & Brown, 1988; Milner, 2001; Stewart, MacIver, & Young, 2008). For example this political knowledge could be knowing who the candidates are and what their election platform is, or it could be political knowledge about when and where to vote.

During an election, having political knowledge can help a citizen decide if they are going to vote, and ultimately, whom they will vote for. Not surprisingly, when political knowledge is more difficult to obtain or understand, and/or when political knowledge from regular information sources (social networks and media) is less prevalent, then some citizens are less likely to vote. As such, when voter turnout decreases during an election a key factor to be examined is whether or not information was more costly for individuals to obtain. For this purpose, the cost of voting is defined as the amount of effort needed to obtain and process political knowledge. So when the costs of voting exceed the benefits of voting (e.g., a favoured candidate being elected or favoured policy being advanced) then the likelihood that the individual will vote can decrease (Klofstad,

2009; Matsusaka, 1995; Stewart, MacIver, & Young, 2008). This cost-benefit analysis of voting is an important part of the rational choice model of voter behaviour.

Some citizens' abilities and motivations to vote are impacted (positively and negatively) by the knowledge that they possess and the knowledge that they are able to acquire. But simply having the knowledge may not be enough. Key to knowledge is an individual's ability to understand and process political information: political literacy. To have political literacy is to be able to decode or interpret that information (Cassel & Lo, 1997; Gale, 1994). In the case of voting, having political literacy means that a citizen is able to find relevant information to decide which of the candidates most fits their own desires. Those desires are different for many citizens and could include a sense of shared values or shared community/network ties, or even for some an endorsement of candidate by a person or organization that the citizen is influenced by might increase their sense of political literacy enough to encourage them to vote.

The focus of this research is confined to voting in municipal government elections, but it is a useful contrast to compare municipal elections to that of federal and provincial elections. While political knowledge and literacy is important for any citizen to make a decision about voting at the federal and provincial government level in Canada, it is also increasingly important at the municipal level. Municipal elections have been called by some the "second-order elections" (Cutler & Matthews, 2005; Norris & Reif, 1997; Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Reif, 1997), and research has documented lower levels of political knowledge by citizens about municipal governments and elections in contrast to greater knowledge about federal and provincial governments (Cutler & Matthews, 2005; Stewart et al., 2008; Young, 2006). While it is true that some citizens have low information about federal and provincial governments and elections, it is also true that many more citizens have even less political knowledge about their municipal

government. This includes even knowing what services their municipal government provides or who their elected representative is (Cutler & Matthews, 2005; Stewart et al., 2008; Young, 2006). One other common contrast between municipal elections and federal or provincial elections in Canada is the involvement and impact of political parties in elections (which will be examined later in this literature review). In many jurisdictions there are no political parties running at the municipal level; candidates run as individuals either out of choice or, in the case of Ontario municipal elections, because political parties are legislatively banned from participation. However, this research is focused on the city of Vancouver's municipal election, where political parties do play a role in political knowledge and literacy.

There are many potential sources of information that citizens rely upon during a municipal election campaign: traditional media sources (i.e., newspapers, radio and television) for political information during an election; social networks to find out what others are thinking and doing; city government for information relating to when and where to vote; face-to-face interaction with a specific candidate (e.g., a candidate knocking on a citizen's door or at a town hall meeting) that gives a voter exposure to that candidate; or, in those municipal polities where political parties run candidates, a political party where citizens can learn about what the party represents (Bevelander, 2009; Klofstad, 2009; Lambert, Curtis, Kay, & Brown, 1988; Nakhaie, 2006; Young, 2006).

Civic Duty and Civic Culture

Political knowledge is an important part of internal political efficacy. However, for some citizens knowledge may not be the reason why they are voting or not voting; they may have developed a history/pattern of participation or non-participation that guides their involvement in elections. Voting (or not voting) has become a habit, a normative behaviour that they have

always done. This normative behaviour could have developed early and be a result of their familial or educational background (Ellis, Gratschew, Pammett, & Thiessen, 2009). If a citizen has not voted before they are simply less likely to do so in the future, but this is only reinforced by the fact that they may simply not have gathered the political knowledge needed to change that habit and to vote. But in a similar way, a citizen that has always voted, is less likely to stop voting and in fact it is a normative break of their habit to stop voting. For many, elections are in many ways a very ritualized activity that follows a deep narrative of a culture of democracy through the ages. These narratives about democracy are different for each individual and in many cases are dependent on one's social and cultural background. For some there may be mental images of historical Greek society or for others a fight for the right to even have any say in their society. But the ritual of lining up to mark an X on the ballot defines for many one of the core tenants of being an active citizen.

Another societal pattern that plays a role for some citizens is their sense of duty to vote (Ellis, 2009). For some citizens their values dictate that in order to be an active citizen they have a duty to vote and for some a duty to be an informed citizen. What is unclear is whether or not there is change—a decrease—amongst some citizens in their sense of civic duty to vote. Is there a reduction in the number of citizens that share a sense of duty to be active citizens and believe voting is important? Sadly there appears to be some signs that there is a decrease in this shared sense of duty to vote as there has been a decrease in voter participation rates in the western world.

Finally, in another study researchers discovered that the patriotism of non-voters was slightly less than that of voters (Bennett & Resnick, 1990, p. 778). Is the lower amount of patriotism an emerging sign of new or already existing cracks in civil society? Patriotism is the

loyalty that one holds towards their country or local area and as some citizens sense of disconnection to their country and community increases their patriotism will decrease. Going hand-in-hand, a decrease in patriotism can for some reduce their sense of duty because they may not care what happens in the community and as such not care who is running the government.

Cynicism and Trust

In addition to the concerns of duty and the impact on civic culture there also appears to be a continuing cynicism and decline in trust for some citizens about our democratic process. As had been examined in the previous section, internal political efficacy is defined by the efforts of individuals to obtain political knowledge and use that to decode or interpret that political knowledge; this internal process assists citizens with their efforts to make an informed voting decision. However, simply having political knowledge or political literacy may not be of any worth if the citizen does not believe that he or she has external political efficacy: the belief that their participation will have an impact on the election (Leshner & Thorson, 2000; Southwell & Everest, 1998). Some citizens are cynical about voting, elections, politics and government, and as a result they do not believe that their vote will make any difference (Bennett & Resnick, 1990; Fu, Mou, Miller, & Jalette, 2011; Harder & Krosnick, 2008). Fu indicates that cynicism is about a lack of trust and that negative campaigning and a perception of media bias is adding to that cynicism (Fu et al., 2011). Previous research in the United States indicated that between 1964 and 1988 both non-voters and voters experienced an increase in cynicism about voting (Bennett & Resnick, 1990, p. 779). There is no reason to believe that this trend has slowed—that cynicism about the value and effect of one's vote has not continued to build since 1988. This decrease in external political efficacy, or rather increase in cynicism about politics, is troubling because research indicates that the non-participation of otherwise eligible voters has impacts on the

outcomes of elections. But this decrease in external political efficacy also can have an impact on subsequent policy decisions of governments that are elected by fewer citizens (Bennett & Resnick, 1990). An increase in non-voting in municipal elections also has an impact on media coverage because media perceive a decreased interest in municipal politics and related issues, and thus reduce their coverage. This creates a circular and self-reinforcing pattern where coverage of municipal politics and the public's understanding and attribution of worth to municipal governance travels downwards together (Cutler & Matthews, 2005, p. 363).

One element of internal political efficacy is trust, but is trust important in elections? According to Zhang, "political trust provides the legitimacy leaders need to launch government initiatives" (Zhang & Seltzer, 2010, p. 157) and the less that citizens trust the more that voter turnout will decrease. Perhaps one startling implication of a decrease in voter turnout from specific groups in society (e.g., youth, ethnic and racial minorities, or even the poor) could be that the government elected might not act on their needs. Furthermore, if these groups then felt the government was not representing them this could further impact their external political efficacy and as such decrease their likelihood of voting in the future.

But do elected officials even need to pay attention to non-voters? Some researchers conclude that politicians have no obligation to pay attention to non-voters (Bennett & Resnick, 1990, p. 774). As well, Turcotte referred to an observation by John Kenneth Galbraith who said that when certain groups of citizens don't vote, it can lead to politicians and campaigns ignoring them and their opinions (2007, p. 5). As well, some citizens believe that by voting they are giving elected officials and governments legitimacy and consent by voting in elections (Bennett & Resnick, 1990, p. 773); likewise, by not voting some citizens with low external political efficacy might feel they are withdrawing their consent.

So is there a decrease in voters' perception of their external political efficacy in Canada? Recent research would seem to indicate that there is. A report from Samara (a Canadian research organization) of disengaged people in Canada indicated that through their research that there was among this group a negative perception of politics (Bastedo, Chu, Hilderman, & Turcotte, 2011, p. 6). As one participant in the Samara report so aptly summarized, "Democracy's great, it's the politics I hate" (Bastedo et al, p. 6) and a similar sentiment was found in this thesis research. This finding is also supported by other research that indicates that non-voters are also just as supportive of democracy as are those that vote (Bennett & Resnick, 1990, p. 777). However, there is little information about whether or not this negativity about politics but support of democracy is also true in municipal politics; more research is needed regarding municipal non-voters and their opinions about democracy and politics.

Increased internal political efficacy can be an important part of increasing voter participation amongst all citizens and especially amongst non-voters. One positive impact of voting is that the experience of marking a ballot increases the chance that a citizen might vote again (Harder & Krosnick, 2008, p. 536). However, the opposite could also be possible in that continued non-voting would re-enforce the cynicism, trust, and disconnection of some citizens.

Ethnicity and the Urban Environment

Social capital appears to be more prevalent amongst certain groups in society. The richer an individual is or the more dependent on groups for their identity and well-being, the greater chance that they will develop more (and more diverse) social networks, and as such, draw a greater benefit from those connections (Nakhaie, 2006, p. 370). The research indicates that non-voters tend to have lower social capital connection in their communities (Bevelander, 2009; McLeod & Shah, 2009; Norris, 2008). Being a renter and moving often, for example, can have

an impact on a person not being eligible to vote because of residency requirements; it also can disconnect them from existing social networks or decrease their likelihood of joining networks in their new area.

A useful example of how social connections impacted the 2005 Vancouver municipal election is seen by how citizens from the Chinese community in Vancouver were 50 percent less likely to have political knowledge about the election than Caucasians did (Young, 2006, p. 36). As well, a citizen's cultural background can also have impact on whether they vote as seen in the 2005 Vancouver municipal election study where exit polling of voters found that Caucasians were more likely to vote than were those whose cultural background is Chinese (Young, 2006, p. 34). Little is known about the impact on minorities of social capital (the sense of connectedness to one's community) in Canada, the connection between their sense of trust and belonging, (Bevelander, 2009) and their ability to collect and analyze political knowledge or actually go and vote at the municipal level.

Ethnicity and other cultural factors apart, the very fact of the large urban environment can have a negative effect on social capital and thus inhibit voting. A 2012 study by the Vancouver Foundation—one that was focused on the connectedness of people living in the Greater Vancouver area—found that it is difficult for some people in the area to make friends and that "our neighbourhood connections are cordial, but weak" (Vancouver Foundation, 2012, p. 7). Moreover, one part of the survey indicated that 33 percent do not know if they can trust each other, and there seems to be a lack of desire in even getting to know their neighbours. This disconnection of citizens from local social networks can have an impact on a sense of belonging, on a desire to gain political knowledge, or on having a group with which to discuss local politics. All of these factors ultimately decrease voter participation.

Youth

Another area of identity to be examined is age and, more specifically, youth, a demographic group who make up a high percentage of non-voters in Canada. Young people are voting less federally and approximately only 40% of youth have been voting in federal elections since the 2000 election (Turcotte, 2007, p. 5). In comparison, the general voter participation federally in Canada according to Elections Canada is over 60%. Little information is available regarding youth voter turnout in municipal elections, but there is no reason to believe that the pattern of lower youth participation in federal and provincial elections is not also reflected in municipal politics.

Youth, like many other non-voters, have less political knowledge and interest in politics (Turcotte, 2007). According to Turcotte, young people in Canada are not interested in politics. Youth feel powerless, uninformed or without influence; they also believe that government has little interest in their opinions and that they as youth have little impact on what government does (Turcotte, 2007). Ellis indicates that the low number of youth voting is not for lack of interest, but is about youth's perception that voting is not as important (Ellis, Gratschew, Pammett, & Thiessen, 2009). One more fascinating detail from Turcotte is that youth have a different set of priorities compared to others and a different view of what government does. An example of the difference is seen in the differing viewpoints: Turcotte indicates that older voters are more concerned about health care, while young voters are more likely to identify unemployment and taxes at much higher level than those older than them (p. 10). Young people are not only voting less, they are less likely to be registered to vote. According to a 2011 Elections BC Report, young people (18-24) have the lowest voter registration rates (Archer, 2011, p. 4) in provincial elections in British Columbia. This phenomenon would also have a further impact on municipal

elections because municipal governments in British Columbia are mandated to use the provincial voters list for municipal elections; these lists already have, according to the 2011 Elections BC Report, very low representation by youth.

External Political Efficacy

A citizen's strong sense of their own internal political efficacy, in which they believe that they are capable of making an informed decision, is a major factor in their participation in an election. However, for many citizens their external political efficacy is also important. External political efficacy is a citizen's belief that the political system will respond to their voting decisions (Carpini, 2004, p. 398), including that their act of voting will actually lead to a government being elected that is responsive to their and their community's needs. There are a number of variables that constitute external political efficacy; these include (i) social capital, (ii) social networks, (iii) media and polling data, (iv) the presence of municipal political parties, and (v) the structure of the electoral system and the design of the voting process.

Social Capital: the impact of our connections

One area of external political efficacy is social capital. Robert D. Putnam, who has written substantively about social capital, defined the term as "features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (1995, p. 664-665). Social capital is fundamentally about people's connection to each other, their communities, their involvement in that community, and the ways they gain knowledge of the community around them (Putnam, 2001; Richey, 2008). Social capital theory is a useful lens to examine non-voters, and to better understand the impact that their connection to their community has on how they gain knowledge in their community specifically during and about the election.

One of the prevalent elements of social capital is the individual's involvement in their community. For example, research has documented a connection between the probability that someone will vote and how many volunteer-based organizations a person belongs to (Laskin & Baird, 1970 p. 459). Such membership in voluntary organizations is a reasonable indicator of a person's social-mindedness and support for public institutions in general. People who volunteer are also likely to be people with confidence in their own power to contribute to the public good, and it's logical that that confidence could be translated into faith in the power of voting. A view of one's own efficacy in civil society at large, that is arguably also then transferable to the political arena.

Some research indicates that non-voters simply have less political knowledge than voters (Bennett & Resnick, 1990, p. 787) and some points to the structural barriers that have a greater impact on those that move more frequently. For example, researchers discovered in one election—where residency requirements were in place—that one third of voters were disenfranchised because they had recently moved (Hadley, Steeper, & Swayze, 1978, p. 23) and as such, the more transient a citizen is the less likely they are to vote. In addition moving can also mean that some citizens are less likely to be connected to their community; research has shown that non-voters are less likely to be involved in their community or be members of group (Nakhaie, 2006, p. 366). Research indicates that renters, lower-income and less educated people are more likely to be non-voters; conversely, home owners with higher incomes and more education are more likely to vote on election day (Bevelander, 2009; Harder & Krosnick, 2008; Nakhaie, 2006; Young, 2006). However research about the impact of social capital on not voting at the municipal level is lacking and more research in this area is needed to better understand the impact and association.

Social Networks

A citizen's social capital is often shaped by those closest to them; one powerful source of political knowledge in municipal elections is thus a citizen's social networks. Citizens gather information regularly through their own social networks about a range of issues, such as what movie to watch, where to travel, or even an election campaign. With regard to politics, social networks provide political knowledge, and those networks also provide a trusted opinion from a friend, family member, neighbour, or co-worker about candidates, issues, polls, etc. But citizens draw more than information and others' opinions from their social network; such networks also assist in the processing of information through conversation. This processing of information in networks can offer a powerful channel that at times can connect members of a network with formal efforts to mobilize voters, or in other cases act as an intensifier to be more aware of the election, the issues being discussed, and even the passion of others in a social network about the election. As such, the act of just talking about the election and specific candidates within their social networks can provide voters with additional knowledge, reinforce or even strengthen their opinions and, more importantly, draw motivation from peers to cast a vote (Bevelander, 2009; Klofstad, 2009; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948).

The shared opinions and peer motivation within a network can create political knowledge, and, as Ronald Lambert so aptly put, "political knowledge can be thought of as an important precursor of political action, such as voting" (1988, p. 360). The impact of social networks in elections can also reinforce a sense of shared obligation in their community (Nakhaie, 2006, p. 366) as well as increase political literacy amongst its members. According to Harder, when a citizen is engaged in some form of cooperative interaction, the idea of voting is more likely to be attractive because of shared peer values and the potential for reinforcement of

the shared benefit of voting with others in their community (Ellis, Gratschew, Pammett, & Thiessen, 2009; Harder & Krosnick, 2008). An individual's social network can motivate him or her to believe an election or an issue might be important, as well as bring to bear social pressure that can move the citizen to care and possibly act. Citizens can learn from their social networks (Richey, 2008) and also have their opinions and ideas tested. Citizens are less likely to change opinions on their own, but are more likely to change them if their reference group's view of the issue changes (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948, p. 278). These social networks come in many forms and can include a workplace, the gym, a community group, neighbours over a fence, a religious group, family, and friends; they all can serve as a communications hub and reinforce group members' involvement in elections. The simple act of discussing politics and even current events in a social network can increase a citizen's political knowledge (Klofstad, 2009; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; Richey, 2008).

Social networks build interdependence, cooperation, and a sense of duty to others in the group and often to the larger community. The belief is that social networks motivate individuals to think and act for the group, rather than simply for their own self-interest. This sense of belonging helps to create a larger sense of duty to their community (Ellis, Gratschew, Pammett, & Thiessen, 2009), and thus can work to ensure that voting becomes a normative civic duty for that citizen. Ironically, the converse also seems to be true in that a social network could also influence members of that network to not participate. Once again a correlation can be seen between social capital and, in this case, the external political efficacy of some citizens that might feel cynical about politics; this cynicism can be also passed on through social networks and can be re-enforced within a network (Bennett & Resnick, 1990; Ellis, Gratschew, Pammett, & Thiessen, 2009).

Leaders in communities can also have an impact on increasing social capital and political knowledge. Social networks are often led by what Lazarsfeld called "molecular leaders": opinion leaders within a given social network who, by sharing political knowledge, can strongly motivate others in the group (1948). These group leaders may not be known by everyone in their community but play an influential role with those they are connected to (p. 273), and are more likely to keep themselves informed regularly through media and other social networks. These leaders play an important role in democratic discourse because they can increase awareness about issues and elections and can sometime motivate others to vote.

Media and Polling

Media are another large information source and influence on voting and non-voting, and they can have certain perverse and unexpected consequences apart from being a source of ordinary political information. For example, the lack of political knowledge of municipal voters is perceived by some local media sources as a lack of interest about municipal government and related issues. As such, some media sources don't provide the information because they don't perceive it to be of interest to their readers; this cyclical negative effect provides a circular reinforcement for a lack of political knowledge (Cutler & Matthews, 2005, p.363). From the perspective of the media that base revenue on advertising or subscriptions, covering stories that do not readily appeal to a larger and interested market does not promote sales. The result of this is that less political knowledge is dispersed through the media, fewer citizens will get the political knowledge that is necessary for them to make an informed decision, and some may consequently not vote.

As has been seen, having and obtaining political knowledge can be more costly for some citizens than for others (Cutler & Matthews, 2005; Stewart, MacIver, & Young, 2008; Young,

2006). But how can researchers assess the political knowledge level of citizens? One such means of assessment was a study of voters using exit polling during the 2005 Vancouver municipal election; this exit poll was used to test voters' political knowledge as they left their polling stations, such as recall of candidate names and where these voters gathered information (Young, 2006). Some of the studies that have been used to test political knowledge have also sought to better understand a voter's knowledge and perception of ideology, issues of concern, and who contacts and/or influences these voters (Lambert, Curtis, Kay, & Brown, 1988; Stewart et al., 2008). Data from exit polling carried out during the 2005 Vancouver municipal election is quite a rich source of information about voters; however, information learned about voters cannot automatically be applied to non-voters. Some researchers see the screening out of non-voters as a valuable way of examining voting patterns of voters (Young, 2006, p. 8) when they use exit polling. However, this data from exit polling, while it is rich information, is information only about voters and unfortunately it does not provide information to examine non-voting behaviour.

Political Parties

Another trusted source of knowledge for citizens making voting decisions can be the municipal-level political parties found in some Canadian cities. Some citizens rely on political parties because they perceive that they have shared values or ideological connections (Hinich & Munger, 1994) with them, or they perceive the political party to be more in line with a federal or provincial party that they might trust. In some cases, that connection and trust are built because a representative of a political party (one of their candidates, a campaign volunteer, or a paid campaign staff person or canvasser) connected with them during or before the election (Ellis, Gratschew, Pammett, & Thiessen, 2009). Political parties, for some citizens, act as an important source of political knowledge and for some it might be their only contact or source of knowledge

during the entire election campaign (Cutler & Matthews, 2005; Ellis et al., 2009). Political parties “allow voters to economize on political information over the long haul by developing ideological orientations that voters recognize” (Hinich & Munger, 1994, p. 363). In Vancouver, political parties such as Vision Vancouver, the Coalition of Progressive Electors and the Non-Partisan Association function as a source of political knowledge for some citizens who rely on political parties as shortcuts in evaluating candidates. For these citizens, this party-level perspective provides a values-based or ideological assessment of a candidate or policy, reducing the amount of political knowledge needed to make a decision to vote and for whom to vote (Cutler & Matthews, 2005).

Electoral Structure and the Impact on Who Votes

While political parties play an important role for some in providing knowledge and trust, all political parties work within an electoral system that provides rules for how each candidate and ultimately a government is elected. There are many different electoral structures—systems that determine how elected officials are chosen. Some systems, such as the first-past-the-post electoral system, are structured so that a government is created by the political party that gets the most seats regardless of whether or not they were chosen by a majority of voters. Other systems, such as those based on proportional representation, which allocates seats based on a formula drawn from the parties’ share of the popular vote. If a government is not chosen by a majority of citizens, or if a significant number of people voted for a party that did not yield a proportional number of seats, a tangible sense of democratic deficit is possible. There can be a feeling that the government was not reflected by their voting and as such their external political efficacy will be low; some may be cynical, may not vote, or simply not believe that the government has the legitimacy to act.

The current municipal electoral structure in British Columbia appears to increase the cost for voters to obtain and process political knowledge because its complexity forces citizens to obtain more political knowledge and vote for multiple candidates (Cutler & Matthews, 2005; Stewart, MacIver, & Young, 2008; Young, 2006) in comparison to the simpler provincial or federal elections. The municipal electoral system in British Columbia (BC), called the at-large system, obliges citizens to vote for a multiple number of candidates for a variety of positions (city council and school board) from across a given BC city. This is in contrast to federal and provincial elections where citizens vote for one candidate to represent them in their electoral district (the riding, constituency, or area they live in). According to Cutler and Mathews, citizens have to work harder in municipal elections in BC to keep track of who is running and to obtain political knowledge (2005, p. 363). So if the task of understanding political knowledge is prohibitively harder at the municipal level for those who actually do vote, it would seem that it would be just as hard if not harder for those who did not vote.

Municipal elections are more costly for citizens in Vancouver (than are federal or provincial elections) because citizens have to vote for up to 27 different positions, including one Mayor, ten City Councillors, nine School Trustees, and seven Park Board Commissioners (City Of Vancouver, 2011). Citizens have the added cost at the municipal level of having to gather political knowledge about another level of government and its responsibilities. As well, citizens have to learn a whole new set of rules about how many or how few candidates they have to vote for in municipal elections; this contrasts with the simplicity of an electoral system they may already be used to at the federal or provincial level where they only vote for one candidate.

In the United States, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination (e.g., race, color, religion), and in 1965 the Voting Rights Act outlawed discriminatory voting practices—

especially the at-large voting system (Welch, 1990). The at-large voting system was ruled discriminatory because African Americans were more likely to not get elected compared to Caucasians who were winning far more frequently in elections that used the at-large system (Engstrom & McDonald, 1981; Karnig & Welch, 1982; Welch, 1990). The study of non-voters shows early signs of revealing another type of cultural bias in municipal elections in Vancouver. Exit polling by academics during the 2005 municipal election revealed patterns about who was voting and as such some hints as to who was not voting. For example, the exit polling in the 2005 municipal election reveals that participation rates of citizens who are foreign-born or speak English as a second language were far lower (Stewart, MacIver, & Young, 2008). Additionally, while the municipal election results in Vancouver over the last decade demonstrate some increase in cultural diversity of those getting elected, but the results are still not fully reflective of the cultural make up of citizens in Vancouver. It is important to understand why citizens from non-European backgrounds are voting less in municipal elections (Bevelander, 2009, p. 1414). Questions arise: how do non-voters relate to and understand the current municipal at-large electoral system in British Columbia? Does the system—in their opinion—contribute to their non-participation?

Some jurisdictions have sought alternative means of voting in an effort to make voting easier by allowing citizens to vote electronically over the internet (Elections BC, 2011). Some discussions were held by the City of Vancouver regarding piloting electronic internet for those voting in advance of the city's 2011 municipal election (Cole, 2011a). The City of Vancouver was exploring ways to improve voter participation, but did not receive approval from the provincial government to conduct a pilot of internet-based voting for advanced voters (Cole, 2011b). Elections BC wrote a report on internet voting and highlighted the pros and cons as well

as the areas where this voting process has been used (United States, Australia and India). Some of the key concerns were regarding security, secrecy and assurance that all votes could be verified.

A significant amount of research has been done on ways to motivate citizens to vote in elections. Election campaigns send communications materials, knock on citizens' doors, make phone calls, send emails, and ultimately remind citizens to vote on election day through "get out the vote" activities (Bennett & Resnick, 1990; Ellis, Gratschew, Pammett, & Thiessen, 2009; Harder & Krosnick, 2008; Stewart, MacIver, & Young, 2008). As previously mentioned, obtaining and understanding political knowledge is an important precursor to voting, just as is the knowledge, support, and re-enforcement of peers in social networks. Both of these assist and motivate citizens to vote; they also reduce the cost to citizens to gain political knowledge and assist social networks to evaluate and share political knowledge.

Having a campaign representative or a candidate talk directly to a potential voter can play a significant role in encouraging a citizen to vote (Ellis, Gratschew, Pammett, & Thiessen, 2009; Harder & Krosnick, 2008). Face-to-face contact with a candidate on their doorstep, at work or in the community can have substantial effects on turnout. "Knocking on doors," writes Harder and Krosnick (2008, p. 540) "and reminding people to vote seems to be the most effective." This canvassing of citizens provides a real connection for the individual citizen to the candidate or political party. It can provide very practical information about where to vote, issues of concern, and also "induces citizens to make oral commitments to participating in the election, which can be self-fulfilling" (p. 540).

Municipal governments can also play a significant role in encouraging voter participation by increasing the access to information about the following factors: the election (when and where

to vote), the candidates running, the elector structure (how many people you vote for), and increasing the motivation to vote. Some jurisdictions have used creative methods to motivate voters. Registering youth in schools prior to them turning 18 has the potential—combined with education curriculum that increases their civic knowledge—to create a stronger sense of civic duty towards voting for youth. One other notable method that has been used was by the municipal government of Evenes, Norway. The municipal government in Evenes decided to use positive motivation to increase citizen participation (as opposed to mandatory voting like in jurisdictions such as Australia) in the election by conducting a lottery. Any citizen who voted was automatically entered into the lottery and the prize was a travel voucher. In this election, turnout increased by almost 10 percent (Ellis, Gratschew, Pammett, & Thiessen, 2009).

Theory

Introduction

Many scholars have sought to understand what motivates a citizen to vote, and most of that scholarly debate has been focused on the rational voter model. In 1957, Anthony Downs published a theory explaining the nature of democratic action that describes voters as making a rational decision about voting that calculates the costs of voting (i.e., the amount of work) against the benefits (i.e., the self-interest of an individual being advanced). Since Downs, many scholars have built upon his work and have added other theories to describe how citizens arrive or, alternately, are prevented from making a rational decision to vote. For example, Robert Putnam wrote about the impact of an individual's connection to their community (social capital theory) and the impact that those networks (or lack of) can have on democratic involvement (1995). Campbell, Gurin, and Miller, reflecting a different approach, wrote about the impact of political efficacy; they characterized this as the individual's perception of their capacity to make

change through political action, such as voting, and also as a measure of the actual responsiveness of the political system to accept the influence of its public and be changed.

The theoretical resources of this paper are divided between theories that emphasize the role of reason in voting and non-voting, and ideas about features of civic life that address the non-rational substance of voting behaviour. First, the choice of the rational three theories (rational voter, social capital and political efficacy) was foremost a reflection of the volume of research, both past and present, where these theories were used to understand non-voters. These theories also resonated most powerfully with the information that focus group participants shared and with the opinions of the subject-matter experts. Furthermore, the non-rational theories and concepts—speaking to issues like emotion, status, and ritual in voting and non-voting behaviours—also helped to better understand why participants were speaking about some of their decisions in ways that did not seem rational.

Voting is obviously a rational decision for most citizens: they study their options, then pull a lever or mark a ballot at election time. But there is also scholarly opinion that has focused on various non-rational explanations about citizen participation, which provide a counterpoint to and act to complement the pure rational voter model. This section will explore first three theories or major concepts with bearing on the rational dimension of voting and non-voting behaviour: rational voter theory, social capital theory, and the concept of political efficacy. Following that, it will address the less or non-rational aspects of voting and non-voting behaviour, including status, emotion, duty and civic culture, and heuristic or “low-information” reasoning. Of course, not all of the theories and concepts fall so easily and completely into the rational or non-rational categories, nor can the voter’s behaviour be divided in such a binary way. For this reason, it should be understood that the distinction here is drawn so that a spectrum characterizing the

shades of rational and non-rational aspects of voting behaviour might be developed, and so as to demonstrate the value and application of these theories and concepts to this analysis.

Theories and Concepts relating to Rational Factors in Voting

Rational Voter Model

The rational voter model has shaped much of the debate in academic literature about voting and non-voting since Downs first raised the issue in 1957 and has served as a benchmark for research into voting behaviour. The rational voter model, as stated above, has focused on citizens defining voting as a cost/benefit calculation, one guided by their rational self-interest as reflected in the election outcomes they hope might be influenced by their vote. The costs can include the amount of time it takes to gather knowledge about relevant election issues, personalities, and platforms; the time and difficulty of analyzing the knowledge gained; the task of deciding to vote and learning the time and place of voting; then, finally, the inconvenience of travelling to and marking one's ballot in a polling place. These costs of voting in the rational voter model are calculated against the amount of benefit there is for the citizen to vote. These benefits can include personal and social gains, such as whether their preferred candidate would be elected or a policy or issue they care about being advanced.

An example of the limits of the rational voter model in explaining all voting behavior is seen in an experiment conducted in the 1993 Canadian federal election. In the experiment researchers tested a rational model of voting that purported that citizens calculate the costs and benefits of voting. The research pointed to a conclusion that not all citizens take a rational approach to voting and that some of those that do vote do so out of habit or obligation (Blais & Young, 1999, p. 53). While the rational voter model has value, it does not provide a complete analysis of all voting behaviour—nor does it need to because not all actions of humans are based

on rational thought. Other theories, such as social capital theory, add intellectual depth and moral substance to the rationalist picture of voting and non-voting behaviour.

Social Capital Theory

Research indicates that social capital is fundamentally about people's connection to each other, their communities and their involvement in that community (Ellis, Gratschew, Pammett, & Thiessen, 2009; Nakhaie, 2006). Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam has played a pivotal role in exploring social capital, a concept and phenomenon he famously described in his 1995 book *Bowling Alone*; with it, he gave social scientific pedigree to such intangible virtues as trust, civility, and mutual respect, testifying to their utility in political and economic systems. In the case of voting, an individual's social networks can provide political information that might be more trusted—because the person sharing the information is personally known—or the social network might provide motivation to care (or not care) about voting or even establish that voting or non-voting is normal. Being in (or out of) a social network can impact voting behaviour. For example, there is a connection between the number of civic organizations a person belongs to and whether or not they vote (Laskin, & Baird, 1970, p. 459).

Social capital theory provides further explanations of the importance of the connection a citizen has in their community and how these social connections influence and have impact on their voting behaviour. Furthermore, social capital theory also helps to see the impacts of inherent social characteristics such as wealth or if an individual is from a more dominant group (e.g. Caucasians in North America vs. non-Caucasians). Dominant groups are not only more likely to have strong and plentiful social networks, but also the knowledge on how best to engage those networks and as a result are far more likely to vote (Nakhaie, 2006, p. 370). Who an

individual is and who is in their networks can, for some, play a determining role in their voting behavior.

Political Efficacy

Scholarly research on political participation has also examined how citizens conceive and measure the significance and effect of their political activity, including voting, on electoral and other outcomes. This research interest into the perceived and actual effectiveness of voting and other political activity is represented in the concept of political efficacy.. An individual's political efficacy is shaped by a variety of demographic, contextual and cultural factors (Carpini, 2004, p.398). Academics have further developed political efficacy by addressing the concept and phenomenon in two important areas: internal political efficacy and external political efficacy.

Internal political efficacy is a person's judgement that their political action, including voting, can make a difference to the outcome of a process or phenomenon (Carpini, 2004, p.398). In the case of voting behaviour, if an individual has high internal sense of political efficacy then they believe that their act of voting will have impact on the outcome of the election—such as their chosen candidate winning because they voted for them. It could also be that a particular issue that they are impacted by or feel some affinity to will be acted on by a candidate winning the election; as such, their voting for that candidate advances the likelihood of their particular issue being acted on. However, in order for an individual to believe that their participation will make a difference, they need a level of political knowledge in order to participate in making a decision about an election.

The other main form of political efficacy is external political efficacy. External political efficacy is a voter's estimation—through their own perception—of whether the political system is capable of being responsive to themselves as a citizen, including their voting decisions

(Carpini, 2004, p. 398). For examples, does voting actually lead to material changes in government and society as a reflection of the popular will expressed in election outcomes? Scholars have debated the impact of external political efficacy on voting and have revealed that some citizens lack trust in the political system, and some are cynical that their participation will even make a difference (Leshner & Thorson, 2000; Southwell & Everest, 1998). For some that means they simply stop voting, and in other cases they may only vote in some elections, or when the cost of obtaining political information is low (Bevelander, 2009; Lambert, Curtis, Kay, & Brown, 1988; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948).

Theories and Concepts relating to Non-Rational Factors in Voting

Taking a rationalist approach has merit, but does it help to shed light on why some citizens don't vote? Rational choice, social capital, and estimates of political efficacy do not appear to be the only determinants of citizens' participation in an election (Blais & Young, 1999). But if a decision to vote or not vote in an election is not exclusively defined by a voter's rationality, then what parts of voting and non-voting behaviour are non-rational? Below are some of the non-rational models that have emerged as a counter-balance, though they do not necessarily negate the rational voter model.

Expressive Voting Theory

An alternative to the rational voter model is the theory of expressive voting, conceived by James Buchanan. Buchanan had surmised that citizens are motivated by the expressive act of voting; that is, voting has performance value, demonstrating a voter's good citizenship, and earning status among the voter's peers for this visible display of their franchise (Buchanan, 1954, p. 342; Carlsson & Johansson-Stenman, 2010, p. 495). Buchanan felt that some individuals can be motivated by their social networks knowing that they were voting. Moreover, the public act of

voting, as celebrated in news coverage of elections and political conventions, in entertainment media ranging from Frank Capra's films to Andrew Sorkin's TV shows, and in political information from state and volunteer groups encouraging voting, could complement or reinforce a sense of duty to vote.

Duty and Socialization

Voting can be a powerful form of participation that has longer-term impact on one's commitment to civic values and connection to democratic process and institutions; according to Ellis, this is because "the more one participates, the more interested in politics one will be" (2009, p.14). One could surmise that the opposite would be true about the habit or obligation towards voting for non-voters, because non-voters may not have had a past habit that gives them a compulsion to vote and as such there is no internal momentum to vote. Additionally, it is important to note that while duty is important to some citizens, that others who lack confidence in making a choice may not vote (Matsusaka, 1995). A potential voter who, on deciding that their lack of confidence in making a correct or effective choice meant that *not* voting was the logical course of action, would in this sense be making a rational choice.

Linguistic Cues

Another notable piece of research that touches on the impact of voting becoming a habit and on voting being a social norm in a community is the work of Todd Rogers from Harvard University. Rogers looks at the issue from both a political science perspective and a cognitive psychology perspective (Bryan, Walton, Rogers, & Dweck, 2011; Gerber & Rogers, 2009; Nickerson, 2008; Nickerson & Rogers, 2010). Extensive field research on motivating voter turnout demonstrated that voters were more likely to vote if they received a message that voter turnout was high (Gerber & Rogers, 2009, p. 178). Additional research demonstrated that "get

out the vote” activities that meant citizens were contacted by phone, visualized themselves voting, and consequently created a plan in their heads about what voting would look like for them personally on election day, increased voter turnout by 9.1 percentage points (Nickerson & Rogers, 2010, p. 194).

Motivation of Emotion

But what is the role of emotion in elections? Does emotion have an impact on whether a citizen votes? According to Habermas, citizens can be manipulated by communications that engage emotions such as fear and insecurity (Habermas, 1991). Another researcher contests the idea that emotion is negative, arguing instead that "emotion enable[s] rationality" (Marcus, 2002). For Marcus, emotion is an important part of being motivated to vote. In many ways Marcus sees emotion as being a rational motivator, but also a way for some citizens to gain contextual meaning and connect a decision to the citizen's values (e.g., an individual with a sick child may be motivated to vote for health care).

Interestingly some would say that emotions "can lead to cognition and learning in respect of a particular issue" (Dean & Croft, 2009, p. 140). In the example of a person with a sick child being motivated by the personal emotion that they are experiencing about the safety of their child, that emotion can play a strong possible motivator for the person to seek out and vote for candidates supporting healthcare. In the last several American presidential elections abortion and gay marriage have been used to motivate those that are both strongly in favour and those strongly opposed to the issues. Often the communication messages are written to invoke a strong emotional response on the subject to motivate them to vote for candidates that match their beliefs on this or other particular issues. Emotion can be a very powerful motivational tool to engage some citizens to vote regardless of any rational element in the voting decision.

The Heuristic-Systematic Model

The word “heuristic” in ordinary English refers to anything that allows and assists a person to learn something for themselves. Flash cards are a heuristic tool that someone might use to teach themselves words from a foreign language they are learning; an example or anecdote is a heuristic device that can assist another in understanding an abstract concept. Scholarship relating to heuristic processing is interested in the ways in which people, when confronting information about topics that are unfamiliar or outside their expertise, use “heuristic cues” or analytical short-cuts to interpret and evaluate what they read, see or hear. Everyone relies on heuristic techniques when encountering information relating to topics in which they are not already well informed. Examples of heuristic cues include reference to common knowledge—such as major historical events or celebrities--in a news story to thus make an unfamiliar topic more comprehensible.

Heuristic reasoning, also often known as “low information rationality” because the person using such reasoning lacks information about a topic even as she or he engages it, is often contrasted with what is called “systematic reasoning.” Systematic rationality is critical and informed processing, where the individual is deeply familiar or informed about a topic about which they are reading, listening or viewing. A sports fan watching a sporting event is capable of interpreting the action on systematic terms; a careful student of politics is able to look past the bluster of attack ads, to consider the communication tactics used there, as well as understand the underlying policies that the candidates are proposing.

We constantly use heuristic cues, and our information environment is organized with them in mind; hence, the use of headlines, sidebars and “pull quotes” to quickly capture what’s written in a newspaper or web article, or the habit of employing talking points and resonant slogans in political ads and speeches. Much political advertising on television is aimed at the

low-information voter who may only pay attention to politics and policy during election periods, and who is not disposed to read newspapers in depth about political issues and events. Such ads, which increasingly dominate political discourse and campaign finances in North America, offer little actual information about policies, but seek to influence persuadable “swing” voters who engage with political information on heuristic terms.

An influential theory relating to heuristic reasoning, and one with bearing on voting behaviour, is called the Heuristic-Systematic Model. The Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) examines how people process and are persuaded by the information they are processing in a low-information and heuristic fashion (Axsom, Yates, & Chaiken, 1987; Trumbo, 2002).

When motivation or ability to process systematically is low, heuristically mediated variables should exert their greatest persuasive impact because recipients should be unlikely to acquire message- or issue-relevant information that might contradict a global judgment of message validity based on extrinsic cues such as communicator expertise. (Axsom, Yates, & Chaiken, 1987, p. 31)

HSM could be relevant to better understanding why some citizens vote when political knowledge is in short supply, because some "individuals use simple decision rules to help them arrive at a judgement about message validity. Such decision rules might manifest themselves as agreement with expert opinion or a tendency to agree with consensus" (Trumbo, 2002, p. 368). In the case of the Vancouver 2011 municipal election, it is possible that the role political parties play in providing important heuristic cues to individuals could provide a pre-packaged assessment of which candidates to choose for the multiple positions. In effect the political information that political parties provide can validate a voter's decision.

Social networks can also play a role in heuristic cues. Social networks can sometimes provide heuristic cues from others in the network. For example, research indicates that a citizen can be influenced to vote simply because another person in their household suggested they vote (Klofstad, 2009; Nickerson, 2008). This suggestion from the other house member does not have to be a rational argument to persuade them to vote, but simply a cue that another person they respect thinks this is important. Interestingly, when none, or little political knowledge exists, that is the point where HSM has the greatest impact and where expert opinions and known validators can influence an individual. But this influence could also be that voting is not important, or too complicated or not worth the cost to the individual.

In summary, citizens are motivated to vote or to not vote for many different reasons. In some cases they may be motivated by rational reasons such as their internal and/or external political efficacy or their social capital. Additionally, those motivations could be non-rational such as HSM or a sense of duty or even motivation by emotion. Regardless of whether these motivations are rational or non-rational they provide some theoretical insight into why some citizens vote and why others do not.

Method

Framework

This research is drawn from qualitative focus group interviews with non-voters as well as individual interviews with specialists in elections and voter behaviour in order to better understand the reasons why people don't vote. The project is especially interested in the identity and consciousness of the non-voter, with particular reference to that level of government where non-voting is revealingly prevalent—the municipal election. The empirical frame of reference for this project is non-voting in Vancouver municipal elections; for the purposes of this project,

the 2011 City of Vancouver municipal election was selected as the specific case. Additionally, there is value in extending some of the knowledge learnt about the Vancouver municipal election to non-voting in general at the municipal level, and also non-voting at other levels of government. This qualitative research strategy allowed the researcher to derive knowledge through the stories of individuals and to interpret the meaning of participants' perspectives (Warren, 2001).

Method of Data Collection: Focus Groups

The first and primary research method used was focus groups that allowed the researcher, through a group dialogue guided by a moderator, to focus and encourage discussion among a number of participants on a selected topic (Morgan, 1996; Packer-Muti, 2010). That topic was how non-voters understand their past experiences of *not* exercising their democratic right to vote in the 2011 Vancouver municipal election. The criterion sample of participants for the focus groups was recruited by a public opinion research firm, Angus Reid Public Opinion--Vision Critical, and participants were randomly selected from eligible voters in Vancouver who did not vote in the 2011 municipal election. The focus group discussions were moderated by the researcher, followed a written guidebook, and lasted no more than two hours.

The questions asked from the focus group guidebook addressed the following themes: how participants gather and process information during the election, their connection and involvement with others in the community (i.e., social capital), their political knowledge, and their sense of own political efficacy. Participants received a fifty dollar incentive for participating in the focus group; all signed a consent form assuring their privacy and anonymity, meaning that no quotes will be attributed to any named individual. Focus group participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time from the research study. This process ensured the

risk to focus group participants was low. The focus groups were recorded and the conversations there later transcribed to ensure that the resulting very rich and detailed data was accurately captured in order to code and analyze it later.

Method of Data Collection: Subject Expert Interviews

The second and supplementary research method consisted of six individual interviews with subject experts, namely three officials from political parties who were involved in the election and three academic researchers who study elections, in order to better understand their perspective on electoral participation in the 2011 Vancouver municipal election. Individuals from each of the three main political parties—Nathan Allen, COPE; Hamish I. Marshall, Non-Partisan Association; and, Matthew Smith, Vision Vancouver—that were involved in contesting that election were recruited. The trio of party officials were asked to not represent their parties' views, but rather to address the topics of non-voters and non-voting and to reflect on their experiences of the campaigns in which they were involved from their own personal informed perspectives.

An additional three individual interviews were conducted with academic researchers (Patrick Smith, Heather Bastedo, and Kennedy Stewart) who have done substantial research on voter participation in municipal elections and have written substantively on this subject (Bastedo, Chu, Hilderman, & Turcotte, 2011; Gavan-Koop & Smith, 2008; Smith & Oberlander, 1998; K. Stewart, 2006; K. Stewart, MacIver, & Young, 2008). All individual expert participants signed a consent form giving their permission to participate in this research; as per usual practice, the form outlined their right to withdraw at any time from the research.

A pre-written individual interview guidebook was used to structure the interviews; after the interviews were conducted, they were then transcribed for coding and interpretation. The

subject experts were asked to share their knowledge of the kind of outreach to potential voters (if any) that was made during the election to those who are not frequent municipal voters. The subject experts were also asked to identify what they perceive as the challenges or barriers for participation for those who did not vote, and what they believe are some of the solutions to these challenges or barriers. Finally, attempts were made to recruit a representative from the City of Vancouver to conduct an interview of the voting promotion work that the City did during the 2011 Vancouver municipal election; this was unsuccessful.

Ethical Concerns and Limitations

Ethical protection for focus group participants is of paramount importance. In this project, the identity of the participants and the sources of comments are made anonymous to ensure confidentiality. This is especially important given that each participant had self-disclosed that they did not participate—that is, they didn't vote--in the election. It's understood that some in society may have a negative view of that behaviour, and that identifying non-voters might subject them to criticism. As contrasted with members of the focus groups, whose identities and comments were made anonymous, the subject matter experts were told that their opinions would be attributed to them.

It is not the intention of this qualitative research to infer or extrapolate that all non-voters from the Vancouver municipal election share the same views as the participants. The purpose is to gather qualitative knowledge from individuals who did not vote so as to examine their rationale for not participating, to explore their understanding of elections and politics, as well as to appreciate the experiences and barriers that they faced in not voting. Insofar as conclusions are drawn and connections made on the basis of this sample, the researcher acknowledges the inherent weakness of any analysis drawn from a small sample of a large potential pool. That

weakness is that the opinions expressed by the focus group members are held to reflect, with all the usual caveats, the views of that majority of eligible voters who chose not to vote in the 2011 Vancouver municipal election. Defining the representativeness of any sample is a matter of interpretation on the researcher's part, and accepting its fidelity with the views and experiences of a larger population is an act of faith on the readers'.

Analysis

The research uses a framework analysis (Ritchie, Spencer, & O'Connor, 2003) to analyze the data collected through the focus groups and the individual interviews. Framework analysis is a method that helps the researcher to "classify and organise data according to key themes, concepts and emergent categories" (Ritchie, Spencer, & O'Connor, 2003, p.262). This method was used to better understand the information that the focus group participants and individual interviewees shared; the method helped to see the patterns of ideas between them and the important areas that they were identifying. The framework analysis took place in five stages: familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, as well as mapping and interpretation (p. 312-321).

The first stage of framework analysis, familiarization, simply features the researcher sorting and sifting through the data and becoming sensitive to its content and diversity (Ritchie, Spencer, & O'Connor, 2003, p.312). The second stage, identifying a thematic framework, involves the researcher locating patterns and key issues that have become apparent through familiarization (p. 313). The third stage is a process of indexing the data by applying the thematic framework developed in stage two; in this stage, judgments and assessments are made about the meaning and significance of the data (p. 316). The fourth stage, charting, takes the now indexed data and charts (recording the frequency of words, ideas and categories) so as to

determine frequency and relevancy of the themes (p. 317-319). Finally the fifth stage, mapping and interpretation, is a technique whereby the researcher traces the relationship of different themes to each other, contrasts those themes with the data itself, and provides explanations of salient patterns (p. 320).

The five stages are distinct but interconnected and allowed the qualitative research to be coded. The data coding process identifies key words and themes that emerge from the collected data. A framework analysis was used because it provides a way to code the research; it also allows the researcher to better understand the research data, seeing the distinctiveness of some information and the points of interconnectedness of other information (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). However, the purpose of the five stages of data analysis is not to quantify the data *per se*, but to better understand the interconnections of words, ideas and opinions beyond simply their frequency of use. This method helped the researcher to make choices about which ideas to highlight, which was based primarily on the popularity of the idea, but also how the idea was viewed and talked about by others and even if they were they sharing the same or similar meaning. This method is effective for seeing the larger frames of reference that individuals share and what they don't share, but also identifying ideas they may not be popular but add depth to understanding a perspective.

Research Findings

In November 2011, the City of Vancouver held an election for Mayor, City Council, School Trustees, and Park Board Commissioners that saw only that saw only 34% of eligible voters actually vote. One of the core tasks of this research is to give voice to those citizens that did not participate in the 2011 municipal election in Vancouver, and in so doing better understand what meaning the election held for non-voters and why they chose not to vote.

Part 1: The Non-Voter and Municipal Politics as a Political Realm**Who is the Non-Voter?**

Demographically the non-voter is more transient, more likely to have a lower income, more likely to speak a first language other than English, more likely to not have higher education, more likely to be younger, and more likely to be less connected to social networks in their communities (Hadley, Steeper, & Swayze, 1978, p. 366; Nakhaie, 2006, p. 366; Young, 2006, p. 34). While these demographics do paint a picture of who a non-voter is, this picture is not complete and is fairly uni-dimensional.

For some non-voters, they choose not to participate in municipal elections because the cost of voting does not rationally make sense; the effort to obtain political knowledge is complicated and costly and the benefits (let alone the ramifications) to them are often unknown. Why would an individual who cannot see the benefits of voting or even the harm of not voting actually do a lot of work to find out who to vote for and then go and vote?

Not all citizens are rational nor are they always acting rationally all the time. In some cases non-voters simply have other priorities in their lives and are not simply victims of a difficult electoral system. That said, the difficult electoral system does make it easier for voting municipally to be lower on their priority list. In some cases they are not voting because they don't want to make a bad choice. Finally, many non-voters in municipal elections do not know what their government does (responsibilities) and some feel unconnected in their community (sometimes because they are new to the area) and because of that have a lower sense of duty to their community.

How do Non-Voters Imagine the Political Realm?

"When I hear the word 'politics' I get angry" (anonymous, January 2012) was the sentiment heard strongly from many members of the focus groups of non-municipal voters in Vancouver. Politics for focus group participants was not only a dirty word, but invoked a strong emotional disdain: "it's a scam," "we don't have much power as citizens," "I cringe," and "it's just about money" (anonymous, January 2012). Participants were very clearly demonstrating a very low external political efficacy, that is, the belief that involvement in politics would have any impact or even matter.

Several participants felt that the electoral system was already fixed against them, meaning the candidates elected would not represent their values. So what would be the point of their participation? If some citizens are feeling cynicism towards politics, is that simply the reason they are not participating? When participants were asked if politics was only connected to government, the answer was a resounding no. Many saw politics also happening every day at work, within families and friends or even in their community, but many of them saw this politics differently. Some were recognizing politics as a place where they negotiate power and that politics between people start as early as on the playground between children. The awareness of what politics is for participants was very high, and that reaction was both emotional and rational for many of them.

In comparison to the word "politics," the word "democracy" garnered a very different reaction. Participants' knowledge of democracy was not only very positive, but it was also very robust. For many participants, they felt that democracy was about balancing politics to make it fairer. Several participants discussed issues about democracy such as the challenges of majority rule, the impact on minority communities, as well as negative campaigning used in politics to influence the outcomes of elections.

When participants were probed further asking whether they had a role to play in democracy, all felt that it was important to be involved. The key involvement identified was to be informed and thus to make an intelligent decision in an election. One participant felt that their role was to reach out to other disaffected people and engage them. Two people in separate focus groups also reflected on the importance of voting here in Canada especially when you have other people in the world fighting for democracy, making specific reference to those various uprisings in the early 2010s within Middle Eastern countries known as the Arab Spring. Several also voiced the importance of involvement between elections by talking to their elected officials about their concerns. In the words of a scholar who has written on the subject of non-voters, "they believe in the democratic project in some fashion, which is the underpinning of duty" (H. Bastedo, personal communications, January 2012) and a strong understanding and commitment to democracy was echoed by the non-voters in the focus groups.

This research did not include interviews with voters and as such it is not possible to compare voters and non-voters' understanding and commitment to democracy. However, when participants were asked if they think that their vote makes a difference, only two participants said yes and everyone else said no. Do voters share this same opinion that their participation does not make a difference? And if they do share this same opinion about democracy, why are they voting and non-voters are not? It is possible that voters have a different relationship to democratic duty than do non-voters, and that this sense of duty supersedes the rational processing of cost and benefits to voting.

What is the Specific Nature of the Municipal as a Political Realm?

Municipal elections have substantially lower voter turnout with many municipalities lucky to even get one third of their citizens voting. Municipal elections, in Canada, stands in

stark contrast to provincial elections where voter turnout continues to be above fifty percent and federal elections where voter turnout has been hovering around sixty percent. All the elections results of the three levels of government (the highest being sixty percent voter turnout) are all still failing grades. The federal results, while they are double that of many municipal elections, only look good in comparison to such low municipal results.

Municipal governments play an important role in shaping the communities that citizens live and work in, and as such many of the responsibilities that municipalities have directly affect the daily lives of its citizens. Municipal governments play an important role in shaping cities through planning and development legislation as well as providing community services like recreation facilities or safety (fire and rescue) or even the basics that keep cities flowing such as water, sewage, recycling and waste. Ironically, political knowledge about the functions of municipal governments seems to be unknown to many (Cutler & Matthews, 2005, p. 363). Additionally political knowledge about who the current elected officials are is low and especially low amongst non-voters that took part in the focus groups. In fact only two City Councillors and one Park Board Commissioner could be named by focus group participants and none could name a School Board Trustee. In comparison many focus group participants knew many of the functions of the federal and provincial governments and many also knew the name of their Member of Parliament.

Municipalities in British Columbia are governmental bodies that are a product of provincial legislation and do not have any recognition in the Canadian constitution. As such, municipalities do not have independent authority to change their structure without the approval of the provincial government. This condition makes adjustments to municipal electoral systems a difficult and timelier process. Many municipalities do not have permanent staffing or in some

cases departments to focus on municipal elections. Even in the case of Vancouver, which does have a department of that kind, some of the ability to act on the challenges of increasing voter turnout is hampered because the government does not always have the authority to make structural changes to elections.

Citizens have to work harder to obtain and understand municipal political knowledge, and as such have lower levels of trust in themselves as citizens to make informed voting decisions at the municipal level. The municipal realm is undervalued and underreported in media; often possesses electoral structures and voting processes that are unusually complex relative to higher levels of government; and confronts the potential voter with candidates who are often not well known even to the informed citizen. It is not surprising, given these obstacles, that voter participation is so low at this level of government, even though it is at this level that the lives of citizens are likely to be most directly affected by investment in public works infrastructure like water and sewer systems, by social policy relating to poverty and homelessness, and by quality of life initiatives to improve transit and policing or support recycling.

Political Knowledge

One focus group participant remarked that "stupid people vote and stupid things happen" (anonymous, January 2012). While this comment is rather cynical, it also captures a concern for some that if they do not have much political knowledge that they may not make a "correct" decision. Almost all focus group participants had indicated that they received little or no contact from anybody during the campaign. There were, however, a few exceptions with one participant indicating that they had received many contacts from political parties and another who had seen canvassers on the street. However, all participants indicated that they had not received any

information from the City of Vancouver about the election, were not aware of the election, and did not know key information such as when and where to vote. Interestingly, as the conversations evolved, many participants thought that it would be good if the city could gather basic information about the candidates in one place and make it easier for citizens to evaluate their choices. It is ironic given that the City of Vancouver put together a booklet of candidates and info on when and where to vote (this booklet was mailed out to all residents). Focus group participants were asked if they had any conversations with anybody about the Vancouver municipal election that encouraged them to vote. Several had remembered getting information for the federal election that had happened in May 2011, but few remembered any material regarding the municipal election. One participant indicated that their apartment's recycling bin (beside the mail area) was full of some election pamphlets.

An understanding of the nature of municipal government, its responsibilities and activities, and its general presence in the lives of citizens is a factor in non-voting. One of the people working on the election campaigns indicated that many citizens don't know what they are voting for because "people don't understand municipal governments and its importance, so they care about it less" (N. Allen, personal communications, January 2012). Similar sentiment was shared by two of the other former campaign staff interviewed for this project; when participants' political knowledge about the role and duties of municipal governments was tested, they had considerably less knowledge about municipal government than they did provincial or federal. Focus group participants had difficulty identifying the responsibilities of a municipal government, but their knowledge of federal and provincial responsibilities was much higher. Many indicated that they felt that municipal elections were not as important as federal or provincial elections because they either didn't know what the municipal level of government was

responsible for or, as a few thought, that the responsibilities were not as important. Is there a role between and during elections for city governments to increase the knowledge for citizens about city's role and duties?

Part 2: Non-Voting as a Function of Systems and Processes

Electoral Systems

Focus group participants had indicated that democracy is about balancing politics to make it fairer and also participants demonstrated that their literacy about democracy was high. But why were they not voting? Participants identified two main critiques about voting in Vancouver's municipal election: the at-large voting structure, and the first-past the post voting system. In addition they also identified their own perceived lack of access to political knowledge—this last point will be discussed in the “Political Knowledge” section of the findings. The at-large voting system is a system where the whole city is a single constituency where multiple candidates compete against each other for multiple positions (Stewart, MacIver, & Young, 2008, p. 405); this compares with federal and provincial elections where a single member is elected to represent a single constituency.

The first challenge participants identified was the impact of the at-large voting system because it makes gathering of information more onerous and the evaluation of candidates very complicated. When participants were asked if voting in Vancouver municipal elections is easy one participant summed up many people's sentiments by responding with "no, it's like the Middle Ages here, I find it so complex" (anonymous, January 2012). That is a lot of work in comparison to federal or provincial elections where they only had to gather info about one person. Interestingly, the at-large voting system was not one of the questions that were probed in the focus group, but was brought up by participants. In some cases participants knew the name (at-

large) and others simply referred to it as this complicated task of choosing so many people at one time. While several academics have critiques (see “Literature Review” for details) of the at-large system and how it has been shown to discriminate against some cultural groups, the main critique among participants was how it made a very hard job for them. In reflection of the choices available to a rational voter faced with voting in an at-large election, Simon Fraser University professor Patrick Smith wondered if they might simply choose to watch the Super Bowl (personal communications, January 2012). In other words, Smith felt that voting by a rational voter in an at-large election was difficult (a high cost to the individual) and the benefit of voting seemed small in comparison to the benefit of watching a sporting event like the Super Bowl.

This task is further complicated if you are new to the community and your external political efficacy is low. So if a voter's social capital is very low due to recent or frequent residential moves and their external political efficacy is also low, the at-large system presents them with a daunting task. That's because the at-large system makes it "much harder for parties and candidates to supply information and much harder for eligible voters to collect information" (K. Stewart, personal communications, January 2012). While this research project did not have the scope to investigate a comparison of non-voters who are new residents and those that are more permanent residents, there would be value in testing further the impact of movement on how these transitory citizens collect and process political information. On the surface it would seem very likely that because Vancouver has many new citizens that the impact of the at-large system would be much higher, but there is little data to probe this further.

The at-large voting system has been debated for years in Vancouver and political parties and individuals have historically taken official positions both for and against the system—there is

certainly a diversity of critique about it. Interestingly, in individual interviews with those involved in running three of the political campaigns for the three main parties (Vision Vancouver, the Non-Partisan Association, and the Coalition of Progressive Electors), there was differing opinions of the at-large system, but all of them had some critique. The critiques ranged from the complexity of the ballot to the amount of work voters had to do to gain knowledge. But some also feel that the at-large system does not give citizens a sense that they have local representation and accountability for their specific community because elected officials must represent the whole city and not simply their local area (M. Smith; H. Marshall; N. Allen, personal communications, January 2012). This final critique concerning representation was also raised by some participants during the focus groups. While many focus group participants felt that information gathering for up to 27 candidates was a lot of work, and would be made easier if they voted for a single local representative, some also said it is important to find a balance between local representation and elected officials representing the whole city (anonymous, January 2012).

The first-past-the-post system, an electoral pattern for determining winners in races at the municipal, provincial and federal levels in Canada, was also identified as a problem by the focus group participants. Under this system the candidate with the most votes is elected even if they do not have 50 percent of the vote—they are only required to get the largest number of votes. (The first-past-the-post system is often contrasted with a major alternative system, proportional representation, in which a party earns seats in proportion to the quantity of votes cast for them.) The perceived unfairness of the winner-take-all nature of the first-past-the-post system left some of the focus group participants feeling cynical about whether their vote really mattered, and if any of their choices of candidates would get elected.

Additionally, many participants spoke about the importance of increasing the voting opportunities. None of the participants said they were aware that there were multiple advanced voting days before the election, and they all felt that if there were opportunities that they would be more likely to vote. Additionally when participants were asked for ideas on improving access to voting, most quickly voiced support for online voting (especially the younger members of the focus groups). One commented: "I could have voted on Saturday, but I did not have the time to stand in line—online voting would have been faster" (anonymous, January 2012). However while support for online voting was high, many participants expressed how important it is that if online voting was allowed that safeguards must be in place to ensure it is fair and completely secure.

The non-voters in the focus groups also confessed a lack of knowledge about the mechanics of the election. These mechanics include basic knowledge of when and where to vote, what identification is needed, how to find out if one is registered, and how does one fill out a ballot. One participant aptly remarked, "I didn't know where to go. By the time I realized, it was too late. I didn't hear anything about it" (anonymous, January 2012); this same sentiment was spoken by many participants. Publicity about advanced voting days was recognized as a crucial piece of information and something that participants felt that the city needed to improve.

Social Capital

Focus group participants were asked about how they were involved in democracy, and they were allowed to define that involvement in any way they wished (e.g., voting, being informed, or even voicing opinions). Ironically, when participants were asked how they were doing in fulfilling their role in democracy many indicated that they were not doing well. A few participants indicated that they were involved in democracy at other levels such as contacting

elected officials about concerns and attending meetings. One participant commented that "I would be happier if I did, feeling more engaged, feeling more ok in the community" and another that they would feel more connected (anonymous, January 2012). Both participants were indicating a degree of disconnection in their community, and dissatisfaction with that disconnection. To add to this, several participants indicated that they have moved recently and some were new to the city. This example is an excellent demonstration of the connection between voting and movement into an area where a citizen has fewer social networks and political knowledge and is less personally invested in the local area. Several focus group participants felt that Vancouver was a difficult place to make friends and that it was difficult to get involved in their community. This is also seen in the 2012 study by the Vancouver Foundation that found that it is difficult for some people in the area to make friends and that "our neighbourhood connections are cordial, but weak" (Vancouver Foundation, 2012, p. 7). This disconnection from community is in many ways a sense of alienation that some citizens are experiencing and is further underscored by the same research that found that one-third of the population does not feel that they can trust each other (p. 7). Migration (frequent movement or newness to community) is having an impact on some citizens' sense of connection to community and voting; with Vancouver having a large population base who were born somewhere else, this disconnection is troubling for democracy.

Participants were also asked about who in their lives has the most influence when they are trying to make a decision. Most mentioned family members (especially spouses) and co-workers; it was these same social networks that have played a role when they have voted in other elections.

Media

While this research did not focus on the media it would seem, according to some of the literature reviewed (Cutler & Matthews, 2005, p.363), that the media see less interest by citizens (through lower voter turnout) and then in due course the media provide less coverage of local elections because of a perceived lack of interest. The voting system can add to the decrease in coverage and depth of coverage as well, because the complexity of the at-large system means the media is also faced with greater costs of obtaining and analyzing information before they can write a story. But add to this the complexity that the media faces when having to cover municipal elections in multiple cities across the Lower Mainland or even across BC that may fall within their coverage area, and the job of collecting information becomes very daunting.

In many cases many of the media's coverage areas fall across multiple cities with different municipal governments and races; some of the cities have political parties running candidates (none of the parties are affiliated to each other); other cities only have independents running with no political parties. Contrast that to a provincial and federal election where there is only one set of political parties running candidates often in all parts of their coverage areas, and the job of covering municipal elections becomes much harder. This view, that there is decreased media coverage of municipal elections, was also reflected by focus group participants who cited low media coverage which made it harder for them to collect political information and also a greater burden on political parties to supply information. Given that many voters are interpreting political information heuristically, and normally depend on political parties to assist in that process, the lack of symmetry between media coverage and political parties at the municipal level makes determining which candidates belong to which party or are endorsed by what interest group that much harder.

Political Parties

As discussed earlier, political parties can play an important role in disseminating election information and also in validating messaging and candidates for some voters (especially those that rely on the heuristic cues). But for some other citizens the heuristic cues from political parties (providing validation or endorsement of candidates) are less meaningful. They may not know what the party stands for or they may seek (and often not find) connections between municipal parties and the parties (that they might be more familiar with) at the provincial or federal levels. In addition, it is also very costly for political parties to disseminate information to the whole city; some critique the growing spending of political parties in Vancouver municipal elections that are alleged to make elections less financially accessible (P. Smith; N. Allen, personal communications, January 2012). One of the additional impacts of the increased cost of disseminating political knowledge by political parties is that many of them make choices to target only those citizens that indicate they are voting and to stop contact with those that say they will not be voting. The longer term impact of this strategic practice means that citizens that do vote get increased motivation to vote and greater access to message and candidate validity, and as such the political information and motivation gap between those that often do not vote increases over time with election. Conversely, there is little outreach to those who have previously indicated they do not intend to vote, deepening their alienation from the electoral process. Past voting increases the likelihood of voting and past non-voting decreases it.

Conclusions

There are many reasons that some citizens vote or don't vote. Some citizens are compelled or repelled to vote for very rational reasons (like the cost of voting being high or low), but also there are many non-rational reasons such as civic duty or issues of trust (see "Theory" section for more details). Many citizens in the Lower Mainland of Vancouver are feeling

alienated and disconnected from their communities. Many of the non-voters in the focus groups have an extreme dislike of politics and some have mistrust in elected officials and the electoral system, and in general don't believe that their voting will make a difference.

Low voter turnout is the proverbial canary in the coal mine that points to a disengaged and sometimes very cynical citizenry. The concerns that this disengagement has are far beyond the ballot box, but the implication to our democratic society is an increasing disconnection and as was seen in the Vancouver Foundation study where a stunning mistrust by some was seen of not only politics but even their neighbours. While there is certainly a moral reason to care about an increasingly disconnected society and decreasing participation in elections, there are also practical and self-protective reasons to care and to act. The implications for governments are not only that people are not voting, but also the potential for a decrease in legitimacy of future governments. It is simply pragmatic for governments to be part of re-building trust, increasing social cohesion and boosting a sense of ownership of their own communities by more citizens.

But the task is not simply that of government because there are others that also bear the responsibility—the media, political parties/candidates, and non-voters as well. Firstly, the media's coverage — as was reported in this paper—of municipal elections is low and is perceived to be decreasing. The media provide an important role in disseminating information and in some cases providing heuristic clues, motivating participation and interest but also sometimes validating candidates through the power of editorial endorsement. Additionally the media also has a role to play in how campaigns are perceived (positively and negatively) and while negative campaigns seem to make for an interesting news story, they also increase cynicism and mistrust. The media can play a very positive role in disseminating information and encouraging positive and spirited debates. But again pragmatically, a disengaged and cynical

citizenry could also just as easily be a lost reader/reader/viewer/listener and that means lost advertising revenue.

Secondly, political parties play an important role for some citizens in disseminating political information in municipal election campaigns where sources of political knowledge are more costly to gather. Political parties and individual candidates provide real motivation for citizens to care about the election through direct communications (e.g., phone calls, on the door step and on the street) and indirect communications (e.g., leaflets and advertising). But also important is that political parties provide for some citizens heuristic clues that validate candidate selection. In complicated municipal races, that validation can become invaluable for those that see an alignment of their values with a political party or a candidate's third-party endorsers such as a conservation, anti-tax, or other specialized interest groups. However the full benefit of what political parties bring to municipal elections in Vancouver is not being felt by all citizens. That's because political parties—through the necessity of finite campaign funds—stop focusing on citizens that say they are not going to vote. Sadly, the electoral system provides no incentives for political parties to care about non-voters (other than moral reasons). Despite the fact that municipal parties face a greater burden in disseminating information and mobilizing voters than other parties, there are no political tax receipts for those who contribute to municipal parties. Providing political tax receipts at the municipal level can create more equal incentives for citizens to contribute financially to a municipal election campaign regardless of their financial ability.

Thirdly, citizens that do not vote also need to take responsibility for gathering information and participating in elections. While there are barriers to participation, it is also the

responsibility for citizens to care about their own community. If non-voters do not like the system then they should choose candidates that will change it.

Finally, the electoral system used in municipal politics in British Columbia is a major part of the problem. At the federal and provincial level citizens are asked to make one choice only—they are asked to choose one candidate to represent their local area. While there may be other problems with the federal and provincial electoral systems the ease of choice of a single candidate for a single position is undeniable. To contrast, the complexity of the municipal at-large voting system biases those with more social capital, more political knowledge, more permanent residency and those with more time to process that knowledge. The provincial government needs to act to allow municipalities to choose other systems that make it easier for all citizens to gather and interpret information and vote because our society is strengthened when more people take ownership and participate in shaping their community. Other jurisdictions in Canada use a ward system—people vote for a candidate or sometimes more than one candidate to represent their district in the city government. One important criterion to include in evaluating how to change the electoral system is to ensure that any new electoral system must lower the amount of information that citizens need to gather in order to make an informed decision as opposed to the existing system that requires them to vote for up to 27 different candidates.

Future Research

Positive deviance study

Positive deviance is a research methodology that is used by social scientists to identify and recognize individuals or groups who have succeeded or found successful strategies that their peers or other members of their community could not (Singhal, 2010; Singhal, Shirley & Frost, 2011; Sternin, 2003). This approach has been used especially in the health care field to identify

patients or health care professionals that succeed –these are people for example who don't get sick, live longer, or have higher success rates. The knowledge of how they succeed can sometimes be the map to finding new solutions and innovations.

More research is needed to specifically understand the demographic profile of groups and communities who are not voting (e.g., youth, new residents, citizens whose first language is not English, or renters). Additionally, members of those groups and communities who are highly motivated, informed and active voters could be identified and engaged to better understand who and what are the influences that they have in their lives that encourage them to vote when others in their community are not voting. Positive deviance can be used to identify and engage those members of communities (who succeed while other members do not) and would engage these positive “deviants” to generate solutions for motivating their community (Singhal, 2010).

This method (positive deviance) would select voters who belong to groups (e.g., youth, new residents, citizens whose first language is not English, or renters) that do not traditionally vote. These voters could be engaged in identifying solutions for their own community based on their own knowledge of why they vote, and despite the fact that they belong to a group that does not traditionally vote. The knowledge gained from this research could be used to shape future election communications and to create messaging that might encourage improved turn-out from the under-represented communities.

Non-voters involvement in democracy

Through the primary research conducted with self-declared municipal non-voters was their belief that they were not doing well in fulfilling their role in democracy. Many questions arise from this and future research would be valuable to better understand this sentiment. Why are some non-voters, if they feel that they are not fulfilling their role well in democracy and yet

are concerned about democracy, not seeking more ways to engage? Is this simply an extension of cynicism, lack of trust or a sense the system does not represent them? This area for future research also reaches beyond involvement in the municipal democratic process but also to provincial and federal jurisdictions that have declining voter participation rates.

Recommendations

This research has identified several solutions from the literature and also specific recommendations from focus group participants. The first solution is that participants wanted more voting opportunities such as more advanced voting days and a very secure online voting option. Secondly, participants also recommended that the city increase and improve voting information availability prior to the next Vancouver municipal election in 2014. It would be advised that the city conduct further opinion research of past non-voters to determine the best method of delivery of the information and the messaging specific to communities that have lower voter participation rates. Thirdly, the city should consider incentives for voting to increase voter awareness and participation. Suggestions of incentives are found in the “Literature Review” section and of note is the success of municipal government of Evenes, Norway that saw almost a 10 percent increase in voter turn-out because of a city-driven incentive.

Finally, in some jurisdictions the education system plays a role in providing political information through social studies classes to youth about voting. This could also play a motivational role for a future voter to begin a habit of becoming a voter. One influential scholar in the area of education—Paolo Freire—focused his work on literacy and its value in empowering the learner through active learning and involvement. He believed that the act of processing and learning with others was an important part of an authentic communication

process, as well as empowering the individual to be involved in shaping their community and taking an effective role within elections (Freire & Macedo, 1993; Freire & Macedo, 1996).

The City of Vancouver should work with the Vancouver school board and the provincial government to establish a youth voting education program and registration in schools. The 2011 report from the Chief Electoral Officer for Elections BC suggested that the province of British Columbia create a voter registration system for youth that would start when youth are still in school—between 16 and 18 years of age (Archer, 2011). This system would pre-register youth for voting (prior to their eligibility to vote at the age of 18) and when they reach the age of 18 they would already be registered. This idea was based on a similar model used in Australia (p. 4). Ensuring that all citizens receive political education is not a guarantee that they will know how to apply that knowledge or have other influences in their lives that establish why elections are important to them.

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