

## **Comparative Voter Turnout in the Canadian Provinces since 1965: The Importance of Context**

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**Abstract** The relationship between voter turnout and individual-level determinants are well known. So is the ongoing decline in turnout over time. Yet political participation is also shaped by local factors and election contexts. This is certainly true across the Canadian provinces, where there has been a broad spectrum of turnout levels ranging from Prince Edward Island at the top to Alberta at the bottom. Using data on all 134 provincial elections from 1965 to 2014, we find three additional core determinants of voter turnout across the provinces: the competitiveness and multipartism of their elections, the embeddedness (local identification) of their populations, and the progressiveness of their electorates.

**Keywords:** voter turnout; competitiveness; change of government; local identification; leftism

**Résumé** Les relations entre la participation électorale et au niveau individuel déterminants sont bien connus. Ainsi est la baisse continue du taux de participation au fil du temps. Pourtant, la participation politique est également façonnée par des facteurs locaux et des contextes électoraux. C'est certainement vrai à travers les provinces canadiennes, où il y a eu un large éventail de niveaux de participation allant de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard au sommet à l'Alberta au fond. En utilisant des données sur les 134 élections provinciales de 1965 à 2014, on trouve trois déterminants de base supplémentaires de la participation électorale à travers les provinces: la compétitivité et le multipartisme de leurs élections, l'enracinement (identification locale) de leurs populations, et la progressivité de leurs électorats.

**Mots-clés:** le taux de participation; la compétitivité; le changement de gouvernement; l'identification locale; le gauchisme

## Theoretical Framework

As in countries throughout the world, voter participation is at an all-time low throughout most of Canada. Using nationwide surveys, analysts have linked turnout to a variety of individual factors, ranging from one's age, gender, income, race, or religion, to one's level of interest, trust, knowledge, civic duty, or sense of efficacy in politics (see: Gidengil et al., 2004: 108-116; Blais et al., 2002: ch. 3; Nevitte et al., 2000: ch. 5; Pammett, 1991; Pammett and LeDuc, 2003; Rubenson et al., 2007; LeDuc and Pammett, 2006; Archer and Wesley, 2006). Yet, two important elements are missing from these accounts. The first is the sense that context matters – that environmental factors have as much of an effect on a community's level of electoral participation as its residents' personal attributes and attitudes. Just as there are certain types of people who are less likely to vote, so too are there less participatory communities and societies. However, Canadian analysts have often ignored geographic variations in voter turnout. This leads to the second shortcoming of existing research on turnout in Canada, namely that it focuses heavily on federal, versus provincial, politics (but see: Wesley, 2010; BC Stats, 2005; Leger Marketing, 2008; BC Stats, 2009; Studlar, 2001; PRA, 2004, 2008). These two shortcomings are related, in that addressing the gaps in sub-national research would improve our understanding of how context matters.

Taking up this challenge, the following analysis uncovers two leading determinants of voter turnout in the Canadian provinces: the competitiveness of their elections and the "progressiveness" of their electorates. Using an original database on turnout in

134 provincial elections from 1965 to 2014, the study confirms that turnout has declined over time, but moreover reveals that turnout is higher: (1) given certain election-specific contexts (where the competition is between two main parties that are close in vote support and that monopolize the seats between them, where the election leads to a change in government, and intriguingly where the overall result is more disproportionate); and (2) given certain broader provincial contexts (where the population is more rural, has a higher proportion of people born in the province, and has a lower proportion of Aboriginal peoples, and where the share of the vote for left-leaning parties and the rate of unionization are higher). These results confirm that 'context matters' when explaining variation in voter turnout, and suggest that each province constitutes its own unique political system with its own distinct electorate and set of competitive dynamics. More than simply an individual act, non-voting in Canada appears to have community-level determinants that require further study. The strong, positive relationship between competitiveness and turnout in Canada should come as little surprise to researchers in other parts of the world. Indeed, the maxim, 'the closer the election, the higher its turnout' has long enjoyed law-like status in the discipline (Gray, 1976: 153) (Gronlund, 2004; Blais, 2006; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Aistrup, 1993; Agasoster, 2001; Bonjean and Lineberry, 1970; Jenkins, Schickler, and Carson, 2004; Holbrook and Van Dunk, 1993; Hofstetter, 1973; Wesley and Summerlee, 2013; Campbell, 2006; Johnston, Matthews, and Bittner, 2007; Pancheco, 2008; Pattie and Johnston, 2005). Previous research finds grounding in Downs's *Economic Theory of Democracy*

(1957), which posits that voting is typically an irrational act, particularly in elections where one's vote has little chance of affecting the outcome. In cases where election results appear pre-ordained, citizens may feel like their votes do not matter or do not make a difference, and they may opt to stay home on election day as a result (Schattschneider, 1960; Key, 1955; Kenney and Rice, 1985; Rasmussen, 1966: 527-528). At the same time, close elections are also likely to draw the attention and resources of political parties and elites, thus increasing the amount of mobilization and boosting engagement.

## Methodology

We have taken a multi-pronged approach to measuring the competitiveness of each party system. In single-member plurality systems, the "margin of victory" in the election, itself, is the most straightforward measure of closeness (Blais and Lago, 2009: 95; Franklin, 2004: 57; Brown and Bruce, 2002: 643). This assumes the electorate approaches the campaign prospectively (versus retrospectively); drawing on available opinion polls and media coverage, voters would have a sense of whether that election was going to be close or not. The greater the distance between the first- and second-place parties in terms of the popular vote, the more predictable the outcome (and the lower the turnout). In this study, we also measure competitiveness using standard assessments of the number of parties in a system, and the relative concentration of votes among them. A final dimension of closeness – government vulnerability – accounts for the likelihood of alternation in government. This is also accounted for in our analysis, as we incorporate "change

of government" as an independent variable in explaining voter turnout, recognizing again that this is an imperfect measure given the prospective/retrospective dilemma.

Similarly, political scientists seem to be in consensus when it comes to the positive relationship between a polity's "progressiveness" and its rate of voter turnout. In this study, we employ two measures of "progressiveness": the levels of left-wing support and unionization in a province. (These two measures are in fact only weakly correlated ( $r = 0.390$ .) This definition is in keeping with the "power resources" of labour model, originally developed by Korpi (1974). The connection between turnout and unionization is well-established in the discipline. Historically (at least), unionization has facilitated (at times, obliged) electoral participation, whether through education, solidarity, and/or active mobilization (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995; Uhlener, 1989; Radcliff and Davis, 2000). Alongside left-wing parties, unions have tended to mobilize a larger proportion of an electorate's 'working class' population than have conservative parties and business associations (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Alford, 1963; Gray and Caul, 2000; Leighley and Nagler, 1992). In the absence of strong left-wing parties and unions, these individuals are often disengaged (but see Gallego, 2010; Fiorina, 1997). At the same time, a stronger left-wing party presence tends to lead to greater polarization, thus encouraging those on both the left *and* the right to turn out (for fear that a loss on election day would lead to a noticeably disappointing set of policy outcomes) (Coate and Conlin, 2004). Just as unions may 'push' their members to the ballot box, a wider variety of ideological options

on the ballot (relative to “traditional”, centrifugal party systems) may ‘pull’ more voters to the polls (Crepaz, 1990).

Data for this study was compiled from publicly-available sources. Election results (including turnout and vote/seat totals) were drawn from official reports of the respective election authorities, and reported elsewhere (Wesley, 2010; Siaroff, 2015). Demographic variables on population and family income are taken from Statistics Canada Census reports, except rural and small town population shares (see: Bollman and Clemenson, 2008).

## Findings

As illustrated in Table 1, voter turnout in the Canadian provinces has varied considerably both across jurisdictions and over time. Overall, Prince Edward Island has had the highest turnout since 1965, with Alberta having the lowest. Indeed, Alberta (three times) and Ontario (once) are the only provinces where turnout in a given provincial election has been below 50 percent. Since 1997, non-voting has continued to be most prevalent in Alberta, where average turnout in the most recent period stands at 50 percent. By contrast, an average of 82 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in Prince Edward Island (PEI). Indeed, by maintaining its high level of voter turnout throughout the past four decades, PEI stands as an exception to a general trend of steadily declining voter participation throughout most of Canada. What explains these differences?

A range of independent variables were tested to account for this variance. The individual regressions of these independent variables on voter turnout are reported in Table 2, with descriptive statistics available from the authors. Let

us emphasize that the dependent variable is turnout across the 134 provincial elections, not the ten provinces.

Our attention turns first to the context of the election, itself. As discussed above, the year of the election clearly matters; as in federal elections, provincial voter turnout has dropped noticeably over time. In this analysis we are measuring election years as a linear trend, however there is an argument for viewing distinctive breakpoints.

Besides the year, the timing of an election might also be considered relevant. Previous research on Canadian federal and provincial campaigns has suggested that turnout is lower in winter elections (Studlar, 2001: 310). In our analysis however, although both “off season” variables (summer and winter) do have a negative effect on turnout, neither relationship is significant, either alone or in a multiple regression. This is likely due to their very small frequencies — only five provincial elections were held in winter, and three in summer, out of 134 elections in total.<sup>1</sup>

A wide range of variables concerning electoral and legislative concentration, fragmentation, competition, and bias were also assessed.<sup>2</sup> According to this analysis, turnout is indeed lower in elections featuring more fragmented, as opposed to two-party, competition (in terms of votes or seats). Results are less conclusive in terms of inter-party competition. One party winning a *seat* landslide does not affect turnout significantly, but a party having a large *vote* lead over the second-largest party certainly does. This likely reflects the fact that, in provincial elections, opinions polls would show the latter factor in advance, while few projections would be offered by way of

seat distributions threehundredeight.com notwithstanding).

Alternatively, turnout is affected by “vote domination” – the interaction of the vote share of the largest party and its vote lead. Polarization is assessed as a dummy variable, where the system is polarized when the top two parties – one of which is the NDP or PQ – have 90 percent or more of the vote between

them; this is not significant by itself. Hung parliaments (of which there have been fourteen) do not relate to voter turnout, but an election resulting in a change of government certainly does. Finally, there is no relationship between disproportionality overall or the specific bias in favour of the lead party and turnout.

**Table 1: Turnout in Provincial Elections 1965-2014**

<i>Province</i>	<i>Minimum Turnout (Year)</i>	<i>Maximum Turnout (Year)</i>	<i>Mean Turnout (Ranking out of 10)</i>
British Columbia	55.1% (2009)	77.7% (1983)	68.6% (7)
Alberta	40.6% (2008)	72.0% (1971)	56.1% (10)
Saskatchewan	64.6% (1995)	83.9% (1982)	76.1% (2)
Manitoba	54.2% (2003)	78.3% (1973)	66.9% (8)
Ontario	49.2% (2011)	73.5% (1971)	60.8% (9)
Quebec	57.4% (2008)	85.3% (1976)	75.8% (3)
New Brunswick	65.4% (2014)	82.1% (1967)	75.5% (4)
Nova Scotia	58.0% (2009)	78.2% (1978)	70.3% (6)
Prince Edward Island	76.4% (2011)	87.6% (1986)	83.3% (1)
Newfoundland & Labrador	57.7% (2011)	87.9% (1971)	73.0% (5)
<i>All</i>	<i>40.6% (AB 2008)</i>	<i>87.9% (Nfld. 1971)</i>	<i>70.7%</i>

Several demographic measures were also assessed as part of this analysis: size of population (also as a logged measure), rural and rural/small town population share, the percentage of the population born in the province, the aboriginal share of the population, the share of the population whose mother tongue is a non-official language, the mean family income in the province, and the median age in the province.<sup>3</sup> All of these demographic variables have significant impacts on voter turnout. The most substantive and surprising effect is that of mean family income, which explains 35 percent of the total variance by itself. Contrary to theories that

suggest a positive relationship with turnout, however, our findings suggest mean family income has a *negative* effect on voter participation. In other words, provinces with higher average family incomes tended to feature lower rates of turnout. This finding emerges as a result of low voter turnout in the three relatively prosperous provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario; however, one cannot assume causality here, as these are also the provinces that (along with Quebec) are the most populated and the least rural. Alberta, BC, and Ontario also have the smallest share of their populations born in-province, due to relatively high immigration and

interprovincial migration. (Wealth is quite likely an antecedent factor.) Further analysis is required to determine the precise source of this relationship, including an assessment of the role of provincial GDP in the causal equation.<sup>4</sup>

Lastly, we also assessed a couple of measures of progressivism: the left-wing vote in an election (with the NDP, the PQ, and Québec Solidaire classified as left-wing parties), and the level of unionization (and thus potential working class mobilization). Only the unionization rate was significant in a bivariate regression.

In terms of a multiple regression of the independent variables, initially let us focus just on the election-specific effects that shape turnout. Table 3a combines the six variables here that are the most relevant in a multivariate analysis. These reflect aspects of a clear choice and a biased outcome. First is two-party vote concentration, with turnout being higher the more the competition (measured by vote spread) is focused between two parties as opposed to being multiparty. However, turnout is even higher where the competition is most evenly-balanced between the two parties. In other words, to the extent that there is one party that is highly dominant (with a large vote lead over the second largest party), this will lower turnout. Third, if indeed the election reflects multiparty competition in that more than two parties each win two or more seats, this will decrease turnout by almost five percentage points (in this model) compared with a non-multiparty system. Fourth, turnout is much higher in elections that produce a change of government — in this model, by over five percentage points compared to when this does not occur. Fifth and finally in terms of election-specific effects, in this multivariate model turnout is

higher the greater the disproportionality. This finding goes against the general view that proportionality, or more precisely proportional representation electoral systems, have higher turnout due to more choice, a fairer outcome, and so on. Instead, it appears that in Canadian provincial elections, disproportionality translates as the decisiveness of the outcome, and voter turnout correlates positively with this. This counter-intuitive finding suggests that when voters visit the polls at higher rates, it tends to coincide with disproportionate results and often decisive victories for the lead party.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, elections that feature greater alignment between parties' share of the popular vote and legislative seats tend to feature lower levels of voter participation. In short, turnout would be lowest in a multiparty outcome without (or with little) electoral bias, and highest in the opposite scenario.

That said, these five election-specific variables explain barely one-third of the variance in turnout among Canadian provincial elections. Adding key broader provincial contextual variables allows us to explain fully 70 percent the variation, as is shown in Table 4. Interestingly, in this broader model two-party vote concentration is no longer a significant predictor. The other four election-specific variables remain relevant, however. To these we add the election year, reflecting the ongoing drop in turnout over time. We also add three aspects of provincial demographics. As noted, turnout is higher where the province is more rural and where the province has a greater percentage of the population born there (and thus more "rooted"), and lower where the Aboriginal share of the population is higher. These patterns all remain substantive in this multivariate model. Lastly, turnout is

higher the greater the level of each of the two different aspects of power resources: left-wing vote share and rate of unionization.

It is worth emphasizing that turnout is higher in provinces with more “embedded” electorates, whether measured in terms of a high rural population share or proportion of the population born in the province. The latter contextual finding reinforces previous research that linked local community integration to voter participation through the importance of social capital (Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2008; Cho, Gimpel, and Dyck, 2006). Communities with a lower proportion of longer-term residents are more likely to feature lower levels of voter engagement, as mobility tends to disrupt its members’ sense of “social connectedness – that network of family, work, and friendship groups that lowers information costs and rewards good citizenship” (Gimpel 1999: 332) (see also Rosenstone and Hansen 1993: 23-24). Provinces with higher proportions of Aboriginal peoples feature lower rates of turnout.

Finally, Table 4 illustrates how each of the factors that are relevant in the multivariate analysis vary across the provinces. Multiparty dynamics in terms of seats won have never occurred in Prince Edward Island, almost never in New Brunswick, and rarely in Saskatchewan and Newfoundland; yet they have been ongoing in Ontario and almost always present in Nova Scotia. Margins of victory have been largest in Alberta and Newfoundland, and lowest in

Manitoba — the least and most competitive provinces by this measure, respectively.

By the same token, post-election changes in government have been most common in Quebec (the only province where these have occurred over half the time) followed by New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, and least common in Alberta (only once) and Newfoundland (three times). Prince Edward Island is the most rural of all Canadian provinces (with the majority of the population living outside urban areas), followed by the other Atlantic Provinces and Saskatchewan; not surprisingly, Ontario and the three next largest provinces are the most urban.

The share of the population born in-province has been highest in Newfoundland followed by Quebec, and lowest in British Columbia followed by Alberta and Ontario. The Aboriginal share of the population has been highest in Saskatchewan and Manitoba and lowest in Prince Edward Island. Finally, in terms of the power resources of labour, the left-wing share of the vote has been highest in Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Quebec, and lowest in Prince Edward Island, and the rate of unionization has been highest in British Columbia, Newfoundland, Quebec, and Manitoba, and lowest in Alberta and Prince Edward Island.

**Table 2. Regressions on Provincial Turnout, 1965-2014**

	unstandar- dized B	standard error	t	signif. level	adjusted r <sup>2</sup>
year of election	-0.314	0.055	-5.695	0.000	0.191
winter election dummy variable	-1.369	4.694	-0.292	0.771	-0.007
summer election dummy variable	-0.853	6.015	-0.142	0.887	-0.007
seats in legislature	-0.122	0.029	-4.227	0.000	0.113
ENPP	-4.201	2.018	-2.081	0.039	0.024
number of parties with at least two seats	-7.205	1.291	-5.580	0.000	0.185
multiparty system dummy *	-9.332	1.586	-5.885	0.000	0.202
two-party system dummy	8.254	1.628	5.069	0.000	0.157
one-party seat concentration	0.060	0.062	0.962	0.338	-0.001
one-party vote concentration	0.262	0.128	2.043	0.043	0.023
two-party seat concentration	0.454	0.116	3.920	0.000	0.097
two-party vote concentration	0.507	0.085	5.973	0.000	0.207
seat lead largest party by seats over second largest	0.001	0.034	0.017	0.987	-0.008
vote lead largest party by seats over second largest	-0.189	0.086	-2.195	0.030	0.028
vote domination of largest party by votes (vote share x lead)	-0.260	0.141	-1.842	0.068	0.018
polarization with 90 percent of the vote dummy variable	6.024	3.346	1.800	0.074	0.017
hung parliament dummy variable	-2.824	2.899	-1.974	0.332	0.000
post-election change of government dummy variable	5.733	1.807	3.173	0.002	0.064
disproportionality	-0.012	0.098	-0.125	0.901	-0.007
seat bias lead party	0.000	0.093	-0.003	0.998	-0.008
population (thousands)	-0.001	0.000	-4.664	0.000	0.135
population logged	-9.389	1.416	-6.633	0.000	0.244
rural population share	0.419	0.051	8.277	0.000	0.337
rural and small town population share	0.377	0.056	6.760	0.000	0.252
share of population born in province	0.394	0.056	6.996	0.000	0.265
aboriginal share of the population	-1.070	0.262	-4.090	0.000	0.106
non-official language mother tongue share of the population	-0.595	0.085	-6.986	0.000	0.264
mean family income (as ratio of Canadian value)	-0.477	0.057	-8.363	0.000	0.341
left-wing share of the vote	-0.101	0.055	-1.829	0.070	0.017
unionization rate	0.337	0.155	2.184	0.031	0.028
power resources (interaction of previous two variables)	-0.146	0.148	-0.987	0.326	0.000
age ratio versus Canada as a whole	-0.143	0.146	-0.974	0.332	0.000

\* three or more parties each with at least two seats

n=134



**Table 3a. Multiple Regression on Provincial Turnout, 1965-2014, Election-Specific Variables**

	unstandar- dized B	standard error	t	signif. level
two-party vote concentration	0.376	0.115	3.270	0.001
vote domination of largest party by votes (vote share x lead)	-0.484	0.149	-3.240	0.002
multiparty system dummy	-4.269	2.140	-1.995	0.048
post-election change of government dummy variable	5.117	1.542	3.358	0.001
disproportionality	0.219	0.102	2.138	0.034
constant	38.082	10.918	3.488	0.001
			adjusted r <sup>2</sup> = 0.336	
			n=134	

**Table 3b. Multiple Regression on Provincial Turnout, 1965-2014, Full Model**

	unstandar- dized B	standard error	t	signif. level
vote domination of largest party by votes (vote share x lead)	-0.329	0.106	-3.101	0.002
multiparty system dummy	-5.036	1.104	-4.560	0.000
post-election change of government dummy variable	3.821	1.042	3.669	0.000
disproportionality	0.202	0.070	2.894	0.005
year of election	-0.208	0.037	-5.682	0.000
rural population share	0.266	0.051	5.218	0.000
share of population born in province	0.182	0.048	3.779	0.000
aboriginal share of the population	-0.628	0.195	-3.219	0.002
left-wing share of the vote	0.123	0.046	2.660	0.009
unionization rate	0.289	0.102	2.845	0.005
constant	449.426	72.586	6.192	0.000
			adjusted r <sup>2</sup> = 0.705	
			n=134	

**Table 4. Provincial Variations on Relevant Variables**

**A) Multiparty System Dummy**

	N	elections with	elections without
Newfoundland & Labrador	14	4	10
Prince Edward Island	14	0	14
Nova Scotia	14	12	2
New Brunswick	13	1	12
Quebec	14	9	5
Ontario	14	14	0
Manitoba	13	8	5
Saskatchewan	12	3	9
Alberta	13	8	5
British Columbia	13	5	8

**B) Margin of Victory in the Popular Vote (1<sup>st</sup> Place over 2<sup>nd</sup> Place)**

	N	mean	standard dev.	minimum	maximum
Newfoundland & Labrador	14	18.4	13.0	0.4	48.4
Prince Edward Island	14	11.2	7.2	1.0	24.9
Nova Scotia	14	10.0	6.5	0.7	19.3
New Brunswick	13	10.0	10.3	0.0	31.8
Quebec	14	9.4	7.8	0.4	24.5
Ontario	14	9.1	5.7	0.9	21.6
Manitoba	13	6.5	4.1	0.9	13.2
Saskatchewan	12	11.6	9.3	0.6	32.2
Alberta	13	23.0	13.0	4.8	44.5
British Columbia	13	8.9	8.5	2.2	36.0

**C) Change of Government Dummy**

	N	elections with	elections without
Newfoundland & Labrador	14	3	11
Prince Edward Island	14	5	9
Nova Scotia	14	6	8
New Brunswick	13	6	7
Quebec	14	8	6
Ontario	14	4	10
Manitoba	13	5	8
Saskatchewan	12	4	8
Alberta	13	1	12
British Columbia	13	4	9

**(D) Disproportionality**

	N	mean	standard dev.	minimum	maximum
Newfoundland	14	17.7	6.4	3.2	31.1
Prince Edward Island	14	23.1	12.2	2.4	41.8
Nova Scotia	14	17.1	9.1	3.2	34.2
New Brunswick	13	18.7	12.2	2.5	39.6
Quebec	14	19.3	6.9	7.7	38.0
Ontario	14	15.7	6.7	5.1	25.8
Manitoba	13	13.9	3.5	5.5	19.0
Saskatchewan	12	20.9	6.3	13.7	32.3
Alberta	13	27.9	6.4	16.9	40.0
British Columbia	13	18.3	8.8	6.2	39.9

**(E) Rural Population**

	N	mean	standard dev.	minimum	maximum
Newfoundland & Labrador	14	42.4	1.6	40	46
Prince Edward Island	14	59.6	3.9	53	64
Nova Scotia	14	44.2	1.2	42	46
New Brunswick	13	48.7	2.1	44	52
Quebec	14	20.7	1.1	19	22
Ontario	14	17.1	1.9	14	20
Manitoba	13	29.2	1.7	28	33
Saskatchewan	12	40.0	5.1	33	50
Alberta	13	21.8	3.7	17	30
British Columbia	13	19.8	3.9	14	25

**(F) Population Born in Province**

	N	mean	standard dev.	minimum	maximum
Newfoundland & Labrador	14	93.8	1.1	92	96
Prince Edward Island	14	80.2	3.5	74	87
Nova Scotia	14	79.9	2.7	75	84
New Brunswick	13	82.7	1.8	79	86
Quebec	14	86.1	2.0	83	88
Ontario	14	65.0	2.3	61	68
Manitoba	13	72.4	1.3	70	74
Saskatchewan	12	79.3	2.1	75	82
Alberta	13	56.8	2.6	52	62
British Columbia	13	47.8	0.7	47	49

**(G) Aboriginal Share of the Population**

	N	mean	standard dev.	minimum	maximum
Newfoundland & Labrador	14	2.2	3.0	0	10
Prince Edward Island	14	0.6	1.2	0	4
Nova Scotia	14	1.6	1.1	1	4
New Brunswick	13	1.5	0.7	1	3
Quebec	14	1.1	0.3	1	2
Ontario	14	1.3	0.5	1	2
Manitoba	13	8.1	4.8	4	20
Saskatchewan	12	8.5	5.2	4	21
Alberta	13	4.3	3.0	2	12
British Columbia	13	2.8	1.3	2	6

**(H) Left-Wing Share of the Vote**

	N	mean	standard dev.	minimum	Maximum
Newfoundland & Labrador	14	7.0	6.0	0.2	24.6
Prince Edward Island	14	3.3	2.7	0.0	8.4
Nova Scotia	14	22.1	11.3	5.2	45.2
New Brunswick	13	7.7	3.7	0.2	13.0
Quebec	14	34.7	11.6	0.0	49.2
Ontario	14	23.5	6.1	12.6	37.6
Manitoba	13	38.8	8.7	23.1	49.4
Saskatchewan	12	43.4	6.3	32.0	55.0
Alberta	13	14.4	6.5	8.0	29.2
British Columbia	13	38.8	6.0	21.6	46.0

**(I) Unionization Rate**

	N	mean	standard dev.	minimum	Maximum
Newfoundland & Labrador	14	38.4	4.5	29	45
Prince Edward Island	14	27.9	5.4	14	33
Nova Scotia	14	31.0	2.6	27	34
New Brunswick	13	31.6	4.3	25	40
Quebec	14	37.3	4.7	26	44
Ontario	14	30.9	2.6	27	34
Manitoba	13	35.1	2.2	31	38
Saskatchewan	12	33.8	2.8	28	38
Alberta	13	26.0	2.5	22	30
British Columbia	13	38.8	4.8	31	44

Examining, again, the two polar extremes of provincial voter turnout — Prince Edward Island and Alberta — largely confirms these overall findings. Prince Edward Island has never had a multiparty system, has relatively competitive elections, has frequent changes of government (though not as many as Quebec), is the most rural province, has a large share of its population born in the province, and has the smallest Aboriginal share of the population. (On the other hand, PEI has the smallest left-wing share of the vote and the second-lowest unionization rate.) For its part, Alberta has had a multiparty system more often than not, clearly has the most lopsided elections in terms of vote margins, has had but a single change of government in the period under examination (1971, when the turnout peaked at 72 percent), has a low rural population share, has the second smallest share of the population born in the province, and has had a below average level of support for the political left and the lowest level of unionization of the provinces. In these two extreme cases – as reflected in the multivariate regression analysis – competitiveness,

‘embeddedness’, and progressiveness all emerge as important factors in explaining voter turnout in the Canadian provinces. Looking forwards, provincial competitiveness could certainly change and progressiveness possibly so, but ‘embeddedness’ (or local attachment) arises from demographic features that are quite constant. Demographics by themselves, then, mean that Alberta cannot be “made into” Prince Edward Island as a means of, say, increasing voter turnout in Alberta.

**Implications**

Decades of survey research have confirmed the strength of individual-level attitudinal and socio-demographic determinants of voter turnout. Missing from many accounts is the sense that “context matters” in determining rates of political participation. Following in the ecological analysis tradition, the results of the present study confirm three additional, core determinants of voter turnout in the Canadian provinces: (1) the competitiveness of their elections; (2) the “embeddedness” of their populations; and (3) the “progressiveness” of their

electorates. Provinces with more closely contested campaigns (i.e., with tighter, two-party contests) tend to feature higher rates of voter turnout. So, too, do provinces where the population is more “rooted”, being more rural and more born in the province. Lastly, provinces with stronger left-wing parties and higher rates of unionization also have higher turnout. These findings appear to be in part the product of the fact that more competitive provincial elections tend to feature stronger left-wing parties and higher rates of unionization. This is consistent with theories based in rational

choice and public choice traditions, and serve as a useful foundation for further comparative research on voter turnout in Canada. Returning to demographics, we found that overall wealth of a province in terms of average family income is not a relevant explanatory factor, but rural population share, the share of the population born in the province, and the Aboriginal population share all are. Each of these factors speaks to the level of identification with the provincial community.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For season of election, winter is defined as December, January, and February, and summer as July and August.

<sup>2</sup> For information, the number of seats in a legislature was found to have no significant effect on turnout.

<sup>3</sup> For both mean family income and median age, to be consistent over time the value is always determined as a ratio with the value for Canada as a whole in a given year set to 100.

<sup>4</sup> Research by Huckfeldt (1979) and Giles and Dantico (1982) may be helpful, as they suggest low-income individuals in high-income communities are less likely to vote than their more affluent neighbours.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in Canadian provincial elections disproportionality is almost exclusively a matter of seat bias in favour of the lead party ( $r = 0.983$ ), and using this alternative measure produces essentially the same multiple regression.