

Voter Turnout in Manitoba

An Ecological Analysis

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UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

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Introduction

Objectives

The following study is designed to provide new insights on electoral participation in Manitoba, by providing a community-level perspective on voter turnout. While the rate of voter turnout is only one measure of electoral participation, it remains one of the most reliable and valid indicators. Partial funding for this study was provided by Elections Manitoba, through its public information and education mandate. The observations and conclusions are those of the author.

Executive Summary

This study examines voter turnout variations among provincial electoral constituencies during the 2007 Manitoba General Election. It was hypothesized that various constituencies have distinct electoral turnout patterns based on their own unique geographic, demographic, and political characteristics. As the findings reveal, more competitive, affluent, stable, and homogenous constituencies tend to feature higher levels of turnout compared to those that feature lower levels of party competition, lower levels of income and education, higher levels of population mobility, and higher levels of culturally diversity. Of particular note, constituencies with high proportions of Aboriginal peoples feature the lowest levels of voter turnout in the province. More than geography and demographics, however, the closeness of the local race is by far the most important factor in determining a community's turnout rate. Indeed, "competitiveness" is such a strong predictor of turnout that it serves to "trump" many other traditionally-powerful predictors, including age, education, and income. That is, provided a constituency features a tight contest between two or more candidates for office, its demographic and geographic characteristics cease to affect its rate of voter participation; constituencies with younger, less affluent populations will feature the same level of turnout as their older, more prosperous neighbours – provided the local race is competitive.

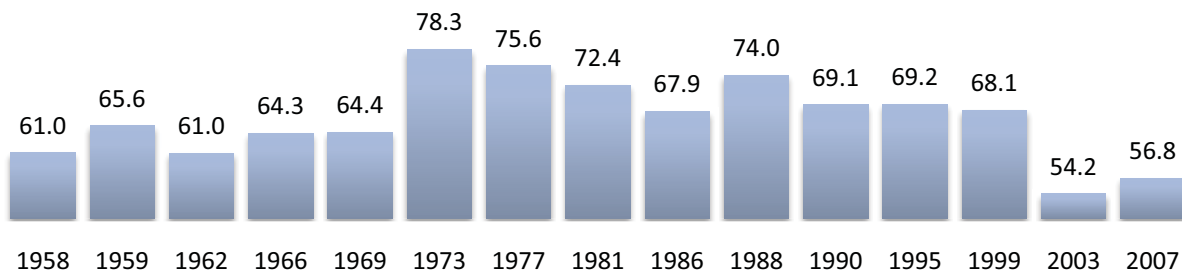
More competitive, affluent, stable, and homogenous constituencies tend to feature higher levels of turnout compared to those that feature lower levels of party competition, lower levels of income and education, higher levels of population mobility, and higher levels of culturally diversity.

While confirming many popular notions about voter turnout, these findings suggest further research is required to fully understand the nature of electoral participation in Manitoba. In particular, future studies should seek to understand why certain individuals in less-competitive districts decide to participate, when their individual votes are so unlikely to alter the outcome of the election. Understanding the attitudes of these voters is crucial, as it may lead to new insights into what differentiates participants from non-participants in Manitoba democracy. Learning what leads some residents to vote may help proponents of civic engagement convince some non-voters to consider participating in the electoral process.

Explaining Voter Turnout in Manitoba

As in much of the rest of Canada, voter turnout in Manitoba provincial elections has been in general decline since the mid-1970s. Turnout in some areas of the province and regions of the country have fallen as much as thirty percentage-points over the past two decades, prompting many to declare a growing “democratic deficit”. As in most advanced democracies, the trend remains a puzzle to even the most trained observers. Why are fewer and fewer Manitobans turning out to vote?

Voter Turnout in Manitoba General Elections, 1958-2007



In previous election years, Elections Manitoba has commissioned PRA to conduct several surveys of voters and non-voters (PRA 2004, 2008). This research produced several important findings, notably that, “compared to voters, non-voters tend to be younger, less educated, and come from households with children under 18 years of age. They are also more likely than voters to come from households where other members also do not vote” (PRA 2008, i). These factors appear to be related to the fact that many non-voters feel politically distracted (e.g., having other commitments and priorities during the election campaign), disassociated from the political process (e.g., feeling alienated from the candidates, disinterested in the outcome, ill-informed about their choices, or dissatisfied with their options), or displaced from the voting system (e.g., facing technical or administrative barriers to voting) (ibid).

These findings match those of similar studies conducted throughout the Western world. From North America to Europe, politicians, government, (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005)(Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005)(Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005)(Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005)(Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005)and social scientists have spent decades diagnosing the turnout decline, with nearly everyone employing the same methodological technique. Using public opinion surveys, Canadian analysts have linked participation to a variety of factors, ranging from one’s age, gender, income, race, or religion, to one’s level of interest, trust, knowledge, civic duty, or 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). These results have been replicated at the provincial level, as well (BC Stats 2005; Leger Marketing 2008; BC Stats 2009).

Conducting surveys to determine individuals’ propensity to vote is one way of solving the turnout puzzle. Yet this approach can only take us so far. Three important elements are missing from these

conventional accounts. First is a firm appreciation of the methodological and logistical challenges involved with surveying non-voters (Duff et al. 2007). Citizens who are unwilling or unable to participate in elections are just as unlikely to participate in (often lengthy) phone surveys about politics. (As PRA reported in 2003, “Non-voters were more difficult to find because people hesitate to admit that they do not vote and because non-voters were generally less interested in participating in any survey on voting.”)

Also missing from most conventional accounts of nonvoting is the sense that *context matters* – that environmental and historical factors have as much of an effect on a community’s level of electoral participation as its residents’ personal attributes (Kim, Petrocik, and Enokson 1975; Geys 2006; Eagles 1991). Just as there are certain types of *people* who are less likely to vote, so, too are there less participatory *communities*. These insights are not lost on scholars of international politics, whose country-by-country comparisons have shed much light on the turnout decline as a global phenomenon (Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Lijphart 1997; Crepaz 1990; Blais 2006; Blais, Massicotte, and Dobrzynska 2003; Franklin 2004). For their part, Canadian analysts have often ignored geographic variations in voter turnout.

Just as there are certain types of *people* who are less likely to vote, there are also less participatory *communities*.

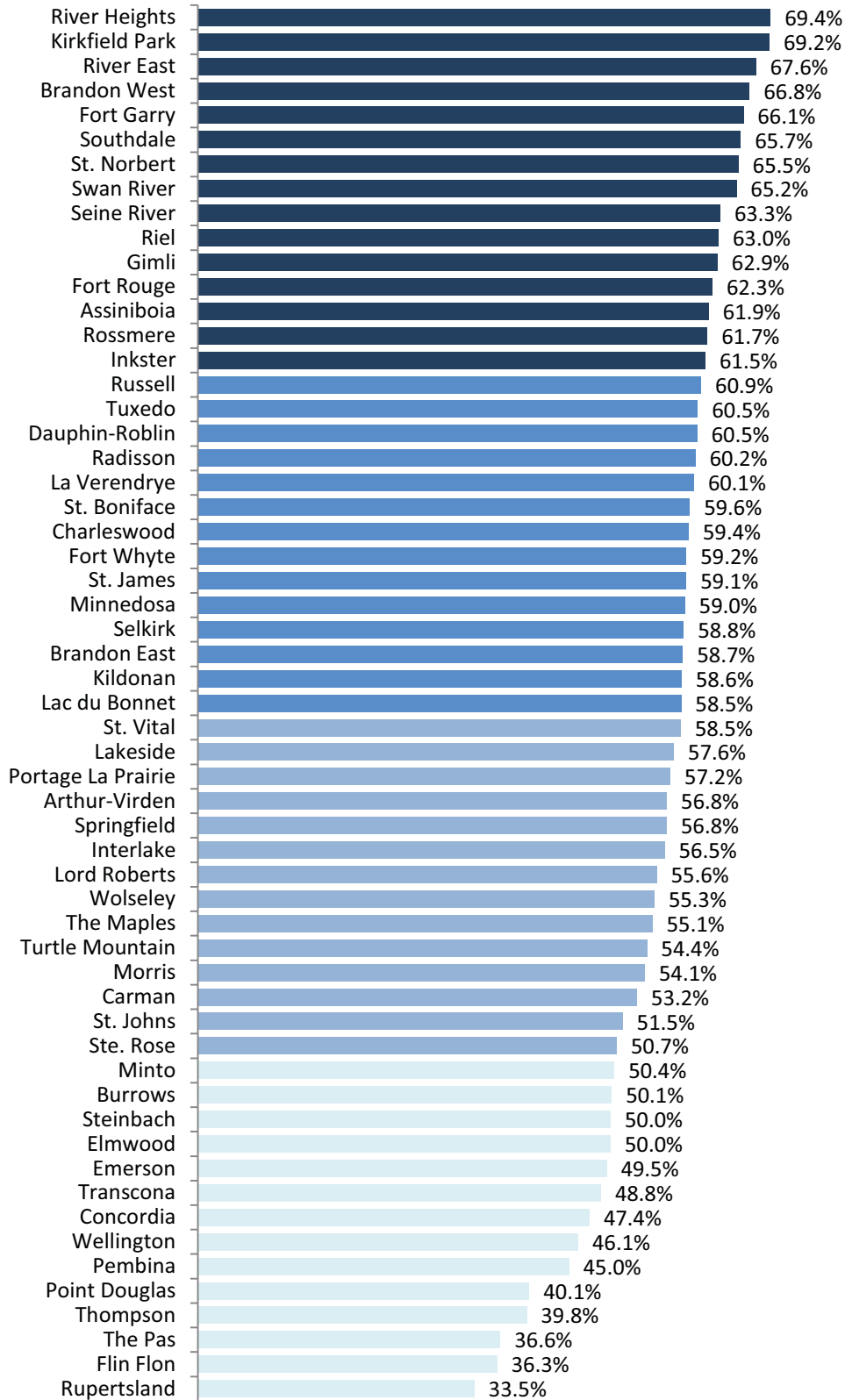
This leads to the third shortcoming of the existing research on turnout in Canada, namely that it focuses almost entirely on federal, versus provincial, politics (but see: 2008, 2004; BC Stats 2009, 2005; Leger Marketing 2008). Despite their own groundbreaking work at the national level, the lead researchers for the Canadian Election Study recently conceded, “the puzzle remains why the decline in turnout has taken longer to show up – and has shown up less consistently – in provincial elections than in federal elections” (Gidengil et al. 2004).

The few studies that have been conducted at the provincial level, including those in Manitoba, have focused on the province-wide electorate. The present study breaks the province down into separate electoral communities, offering the same contoured perspective on non-voting in Manitoba as provincial-level studies offer to the analysis of national politics.

In this vein, ecological analysis reveals precisely which factors differentiate communities with higher turnout rates from those with lower levels of voter participation. To this end, Manitoba’s fifty-seven constituencies may be grouped into four categories (or quartiles):

- upper turnout* constituencies (with at least 61 percent voter participation);
- moderate turnout* constituencies (between 58.5 and 60.9 percent);
- low turnout* constituencies (between 50.5 and 58.4 percent); and
- minimal turnout* constituencies (below 50.5 percent).

Figure 1. Voter Turnout, 2007 Manitoba General Election



Several hypotheses emerge from a cursory examination of the figure above. Constituencies in the bottom quartile are among the “safest seats” in Manitoba, such that the political party representing the district maintains a considerable popular vote lead over its opponents. In addition, many of these constituencies are among Manitoba’s most ethnically-diverse and least affluent. Underpinning all of this, there also appears to be a regional connection among minimal turnout constituencies. The bottom four districts – Thompson, The Pas, Flin Flon, and Rupertsland – are all located in Northern Manitoba, for instance, and a series of other constituencies – Minto, Burrows, Elmwood, Transcona, Concordia, Wellington, and Point Douglas – are found in Winnipeg’s North End.

These surface observations are by no means absolute or comprehensive, of course. Not *all* North End districts feature minimal turnout, for instance; voter participation is quite high in constituencies like Inkster, River East, and Rossmere. The challenge for researchers is to determine, of all the various factors that seem to be at play, which community-level characteristics have the *greatest* effect on the rate of voter turnout in Manitoba’s various constituencies.

Ecological Analysis

As an ecological (or contextual) analysis, the following study provides a deeper understanding of the *community-level* factors impacting voter turnout in Manitoba. Just as some individual citizens are more or less likely to vote, so, too, do some sorts of communities feature higher or lower levels of turnout.

Ecological analysis involves the examination of two types of data. The first involve *compositional measures*, which are calculated by aggregating the characteristics of individuals living within a given constituency. This includes, for example, socio-demographic data compiled by Census Canada and the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics. More than this, however, ecological analysis also involves the use of *contextual measures*, which refer to the characteristics of the community beyond those possessed by its individual members. These may include the location and size of the constituency; the presence or absence of an incumbent MLA; the competitiveness of the riding; the level of campaign spending; and many others.

Ecological analysis examines constituency-level data to uncover community-based factors impacting voter turnout.

Ecological analyses hold several advantages over conventional, survey-based approaches to voter turnout (Eagles 2002):

- The data required for ecological analyses is typically more cheaply and readily available than survey data. As such, the data may be collected and analyzed at a far lower cost. Along similar lines, this data is available for a much longer time span, allowing for a more in depth historical analyses than one-off surveys permit.
- Ecological analyses are also “geographically exhaustive,” offering coverage of an entire province. This is something precluded by most surveys, which struggle to draw samples representative of the entire population, yet base their findings on a province-wide electorate.
- Because they are within-case studies, ecological analyses allow researchers to hold a host of variables constant. This, in turn, allows analysts to isolate key factors that help to account for even minor differences in voter turnout, many of which may have gone unnoticed in broader studies. Rather than having to account for different electoral systems or numbers of advance

polling days, for instance, researchers can zero-in on factors like the backgrounds of individual candidates.

- Ecological analyses allow researchers to answer different types of research questions. In this study, we ask – not why individuals fail to turn out to vote, but – why certain communities have lower levels of turnout. These community-level differences are crucial when it comes to contextualizing the behaviour or individual Manitoba voters. Rather than remove them from their environments, as is the explicit objective of survey research, an ecological analysis treats voters as embedded in their surroundings.

Three general aspects of the community setting are particularly crucial, in this regard.

- First, each constituency has its own **geographic** characteristics. Some feature higher levels of population density than others. As suggested by the following analysis, the outlook and behaviour of an individual voter appears profoundly affected by the relationship between his or her home community and those around it. It is crucial to examine the impact of living in rural regions versus urban areas, for example, or in the North versus the South.
- Second, constituencies feature different patterns of social interaction. Whether measured in terms of socio-economic, cultural, or other forms of **demographic** diversity, some constituencies are more homogenous than others – a factor which may or may not lead to higher rates of voter turnout.
- Third, but most importantly according to the results of our study, each electoral district constitutes its own, unique **political** “world”. Rather than considering the 2007 Manitoba Election as a single event, an ecological analysis treats the campaign as a collection of fifty-seven local races held simultaneously. From this perspective, the factors affecting an individual voter will depend upon the political choices and forces he or she confronts, the amount of resources devoted by politicians in the district, and the unique local political culture of which he or she is a part.

*This study examines the **geographic, demographic, and political** foundations of voter turnout.*

In short, an ecological analysis allows researchers to examine voting as a *group experience*. Because politics is part of the broader social structure, these differences may manifest themselves in different levels of voter turnout (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968: 137). Fundamentally, an ecological analysis treats voting, not simply as a matter of individual choice, but as a group behaviour. Two otherwise identical individuals may well behave differently depending on where they live.

Explanations of these regional variations are varied. While challenging to measure, it is difficult to discount the power of “political culture” when explaining these regional turnout disparities, however. A community’s political (or civic) culture consists of its most deeply-held principles – a series of widely-held norms or principles that help guide the beliefs, customs, and practices of its residents (Wesley 2010). This includes common attitudes toward the political system and its actors, and perceptions of the role of individual citizens in the political process. Grounded in higher levels of engagement, empowerment, knowledge, and sense of civic obligation, some political cultures are more participatory than others. By contrast, voter turnout is likely to be lower in communities featuring higher levels of alienation (or even animosity) toward the political system, its institutions, and its leaders.

Constituencies in Northern Manitoba and North Winnipeg tend to feature lower turnout.

Without the benefit of survey data, we cannot compare the northern and southern civic cultures in Manitoba. (Such research is recommended in the closing section of this report.) This said, the historic geo-cultural realities faced by certain Manitoba communities may be seen to influence their rates of voter turnout. Existing literature on so-called “peripheral” communities suggests that, due to their geographic isolation from the provincial capital, Northern Manitobans may experience a greater sense of political alienation. By the same token, theories suggest that members of traditionally disadvantaged groups – like many residents of Winnipeg’s North End – tend to disengage from politics. Again, these are hypotheses that await confirmation through further research.

More concretely, it is important to note the close, historical relationship between regionalism, socio-economics, and ethnicity in Manitoba politics. Since the first major wave of British-Canadian settlers arrived on the Canadian Prairies in the early nineteenth century, the more prosperous segments of the Manitoba population have been concentrated in the fertile farming areas of the rural south(west) and the middle-to-upper-income communities of South Winnipeg. Meanwhile, as labourers, small farmers, members of ethnic minority communities, and Aboriginals, residents of the rural North and North Winnipeg have tended to occupy lower levels of economic status. In this sense, the relationship between “region” and “turnout” may be largely the product of socio-economic differences. These additional factors are explored in greater detail below.

Demographic Environment

Existing research ties a community’s turnout rate to its socio-economic and demographic characteristics. In general, the more stable, homogeneous and affluent a community is, the more likely its residents are to participate in elections (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995).

Population Stability

Previous research reveals that, the more stable a constituency is in terms of its population, the higher its rate of turnout is likely to be. Because they feature a more deeply-rooted sense of community, stronger interpersonal bonds, higher levels of social capital, and a more vibrant civic spirit, electoral districts consisting of longer-term residents are likely to feature higher levels of electoral participation than those with more transient populations.

Interestingly, previous research conducted in Manitoba does not fully support these conclusions. According to the results of the 2007 PRA survey, there was a negligible difference between voters and non-voters in terms of their length of residency in Manitoba. That is, Manitobans who had lived in the province their entire lives were just as likely to vote (62%) as not to vote (61%); those who had lived in Manitoba most of their lives were as likely to be voters (11%) as non-voters (12%); and those who had lived in the province only part of their lives were as likely to vote (27%) as not (27%). While interesting in terms of measuring the effect of provincial-level in- and out-migration, this variable does not enable us to assess changes of residence *within* Manitoba. As stated, this may have an effect on individuals' level of attachment to their local community, and, by extension, may result in a different type of political community at the constituency level.

To capture the two main dimensions of the concept, the present study assessed each constituency's "stability" in terms of its proportion of younger and older citizens, and its proportion of migrant residents. The latter was measured in terms of the proportion of residents in each district that had changed dwellings (in the past one year, and past five years). The results suggest that a community's level of demographic stability *does* matter when it comes to determining its level of voter turnout.

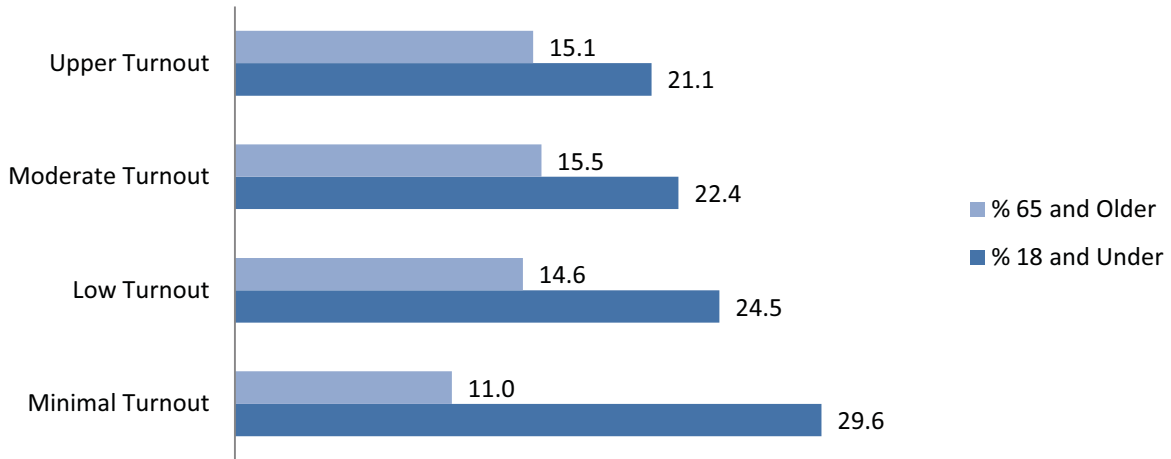
Turning first to age, previous research suggests that younger Manitobans are less likely to vote than their older counterparts. According to a PRA survey, three-quarters of Manitobans under 30 did not vote in the 2007 election. Combined with the fact that 2 in 3 members of the baby boom generation cast ballots, this means more than half of the voting population consists of Manitobans over the age of 55.

As individuals, young Manitobans are less likely to vote for a wide variety of reasons. According to national-level research, this disengagement is due to a combination of apathy, disinterest, lack of political knowledge, neglect at the hands of politicians, and a weaker sense of civic obligation (Howe 2007; MacKinnon, Pitre, and Watling 2007; O'Neill 2001; Archer and Wesley 2006; Blais and Loewen 2009; O'Neill 2007; Turcotte 2007; Gidengil et al. 2005; Turcotte 2005; Gidengil et al. 2003; Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2008). At the same time, according to PRA's 2007 non-voter survey, "Non-voters are more likely [than voters] to report having children under 18 years of age in their household. Some 40% of non-voters reported having children under 18 in their household, compared with 29% of voters." Although some theories posit that, once young people enter this stage of the life cycle they become more interested in participating in the policy-making process, the PRA research suggests that – by fostering a different set of competing priorities – family life may actually discourage young Manitobans from investing time and resources in political activity.

Based on this, it may be that constituencies with a higher proportion of persons under 30, and children under 18, would feature lower rates of turnout. Not surprisingly, according to our study, these relationships hold at the community level, as well: constituencies with a larger proportion of younger Manitobans had much lower rates of voter participation than those with older populations.

Constituencies with more people under 30, and more youth, tend to feature lower turnout.

Figure 4. Age by Turnout Category(2007)



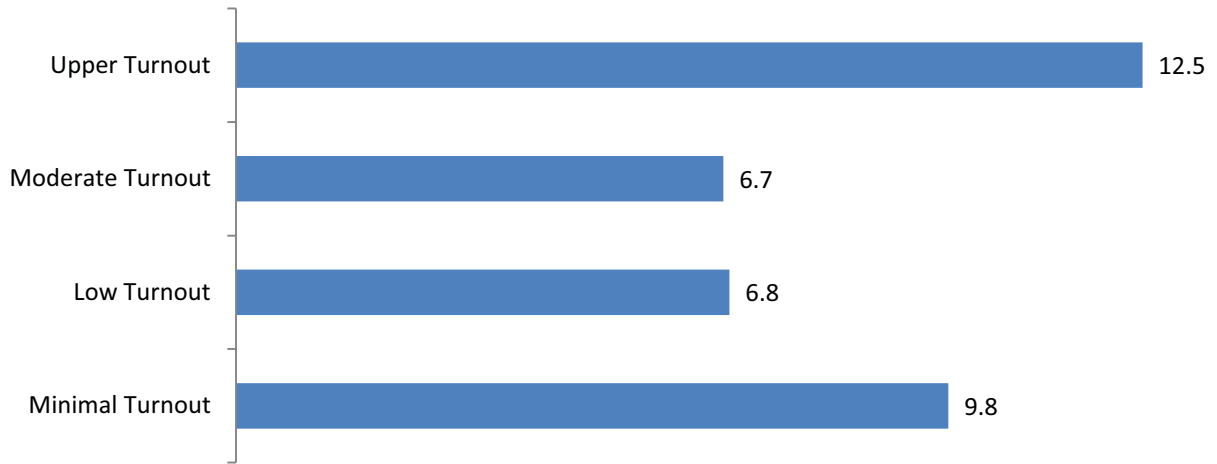
By the same token, but to a much smaller degree, districts featuring a higher proportion of “movers” had lower levels of turnout than those with more stable populations. This effect was most prominent when considering the proportion of *recent* movers in each constituency; low turnout districts were more likely to feature a large number of residents who had changed dwellings within one year of the 2006 census (or within two years of the 2007 election). The relationship between population stability and turnout is complicated somewhat by the presence of several “high growth” constituencies in the “upper” turnout category (e.g., Fort Whyte and Southdale); further research in this area – including the examination of previous elections – is required before any firm conclusions can be reached.

Cultural Diversity

Existing literature outside Manitoba suggests that, the more culturally homogeneous a constituency, the higher its level of voter turnout. In other words, electoral districts that feature high levels of diversity are assumed to feature lower levels of social and civic solidarity; without a deep sense of common attachment to the mainstream political, institutional, and democratic norms found therein, such a constituency is likely to feature lower levels of political participation (Nakhaie 2008; Tossutti 2007; Raney and Berdahl 2009).

As the PRA surveys did not report turnout variations among Manitoba’s various cultural communities, beyond immigrant status (which they concluded had little effect on one’s propensity to vote), the present study breaks new ground. In this analysis, the cultural diversity of each provincial constituency was measured in several ways, including the proportion of immigrants, members of visible minority and linguistic minority groups, and Aboriginal peoples residing therein. Our findings support those of many earlier studies, suggesting that constituencies with larger proportions of immigrants and visible minority residents did *not* feature substantially different rates of voter turnout than those with predominantly Caucasian populations.

Figure 5. Percentage of Visible Minority Residents by Turnout Category



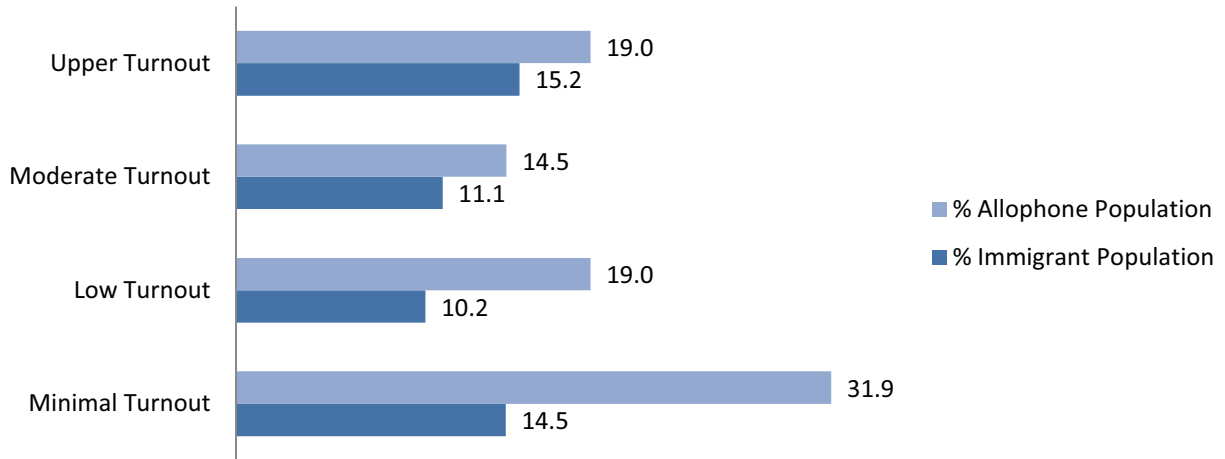
There are several possible reasons for this. Primary among them, Manitoba’s so-called “ethnic communities” have long been among the most politically-active and politically-integrated in Canada (O’Neill and Wesley 2008). From Eastern Europeans in the first immigrant wave of the early-twentieth century, to immigrants from Asia and Africa in the twenty-first, political parties and candidates have directed their mobilization efforts squarely at these groups. Most recently, this is particularly true of Manitoba’s Filipino and Sikh communities, whose influence in civic, provincial, and federal politics remains among the strongest of all visible minority groups. In addition, further research may provide some evidence of a “role model” effect, in that constituencies that featured visible minority candidates were also likely to feature higher levels of voter turnout than those that did not.

Constituencies with high levels of voter turnout also have disproportionately large visible minority communities.

Overall, the lower the proportion of English- or French-speaking, non-Aboriginal residents in a constituency, the lower its level of voter turnout. In this context, it is worth noting that communities whose residents speak *either* official language tend to feature higher rates of voter turnout. Rather than simply non-Anglophones, the presence of large proportions of *allophone* residents appears to contribute to lower rates of participation among Manitoba constituencies.

Constituencies with allophone communities tend to feature somewhat lower rates of voter participation.

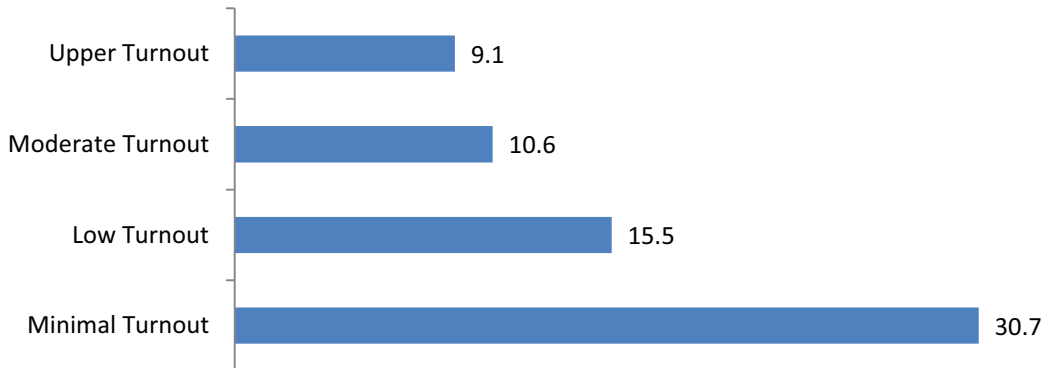
Figure 6. Allophone and Immigrant Population by Turnout Category



The demographic effect was most pronounced in terms of those constituencies with high proportions of Aboriginal residents. Indeed, “Aboriginal population” was the only community-level characteristic that persisted when controlling for the competitiveness of a constituency election. In other words, whereas the influence of other prominent factors – including age and affluence – “disappeared” when competitiveness was taken into account, the proportion of Aboriginals in a constituency retained its force. It matters not whether the local race is close; if the constituency has a high proportion of Aboriginal peoples, it is very likely to feature low voter turnout. This finding expands upon those generated through survey analyses, which suggest Aboriginal Canadians are among the least engaged in electoral politics -(Ladner and McCrossan 2007; Silver, Keeper, and MacKenzie 2005; Jacobs 2009; Alfred, Pitawanakwat, and Price 2007; Cairns 2003; Hunter 2003; Kinnear 2003). This disengagement is due to a combination of deep structural, socio-demographic, historical, attitudinal, and cultural factors, all of which are worthy of further analysis and discussion.

Constituencies with higher proportions of Aboriginal residents have far lower turnout.

Figure 7. Percentage of Aboriginal Peoples by Turnout Category



Affluence

According to previous research outside Manitoba, more affluent citizens are more likely to vote than those with lower levels of education and income (Gallego 2009). The 2007 PRA survey provided some support for these findings. While non-voters in Manitoba are less likely to have attained a high school diploma or pursued post-secondary education than voters, income did not have a statistically significant impact on a Manitoban's likelihood of voting.

Based on these findings, we might expect affluent communities to be more likely to feature higher levels of voter turnout compared to their less-prosperous counterparts. This assumption is grounded in the premise that a community with a higher standard of living would foster a more politically-minded atmosphere. As the resources required to follow and participate in politics place a relatively high price on civic engagement vis-a-vis other day-to-day challenges, communities with lower living standards may feature less political activity. Politics (and, by extension, voting) may be a luxury some communities simply cannot afford.

Constituencies with higher rates of turnout tend to be more affluent than those with lower rates of voter participation.

In this study, each constituency's affluence was measured in terms of its average household income and proportion of residents who attained higher levels of education. As expected, communities with a higher proportion of high-income households, and those with higher rates of high school and post-secondary educational attainment rates, also featured higher levels of voter turnout. By the same token, constituencies with a higher proportion of low-income households, and lower rates of high school completion, also featured lower rates of voter participation.

Figure 8. Mean Household Income by Turnout Category

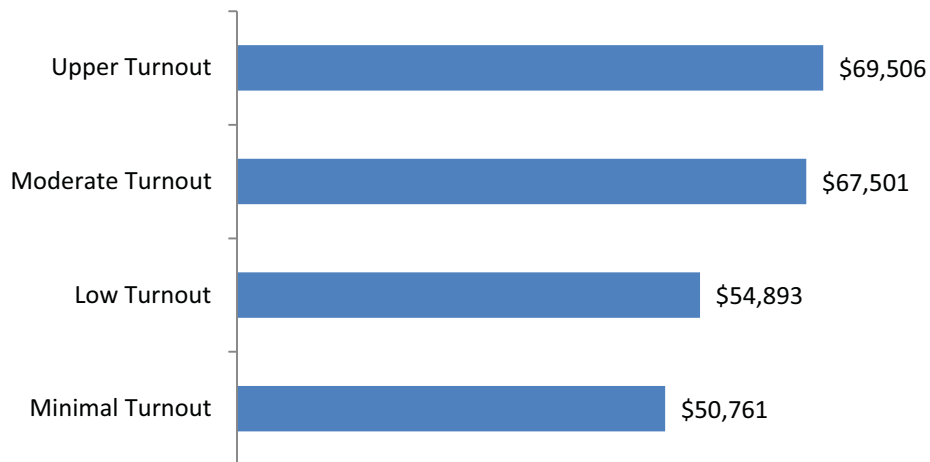
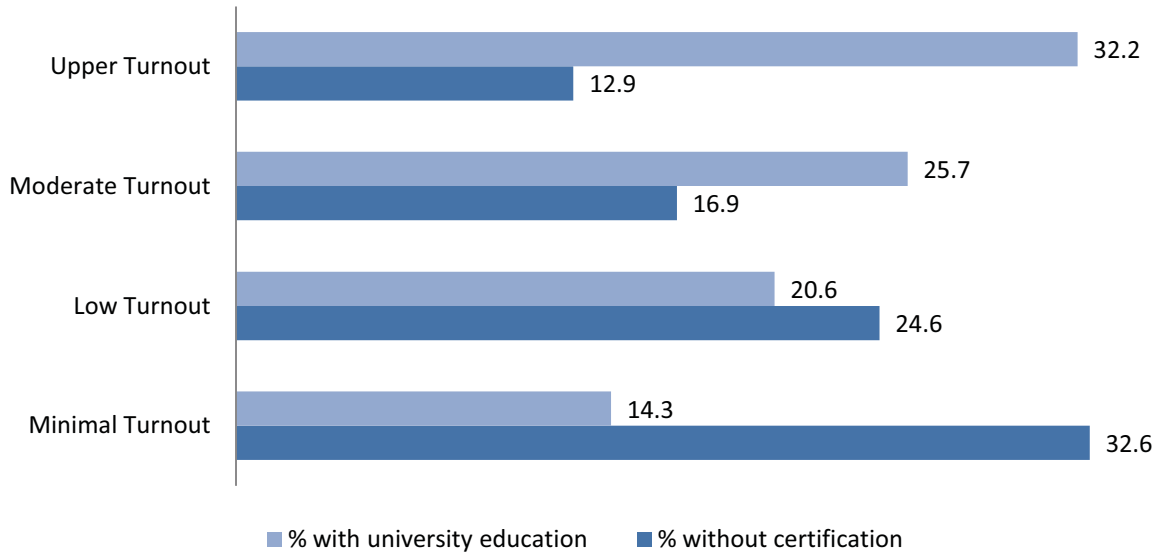
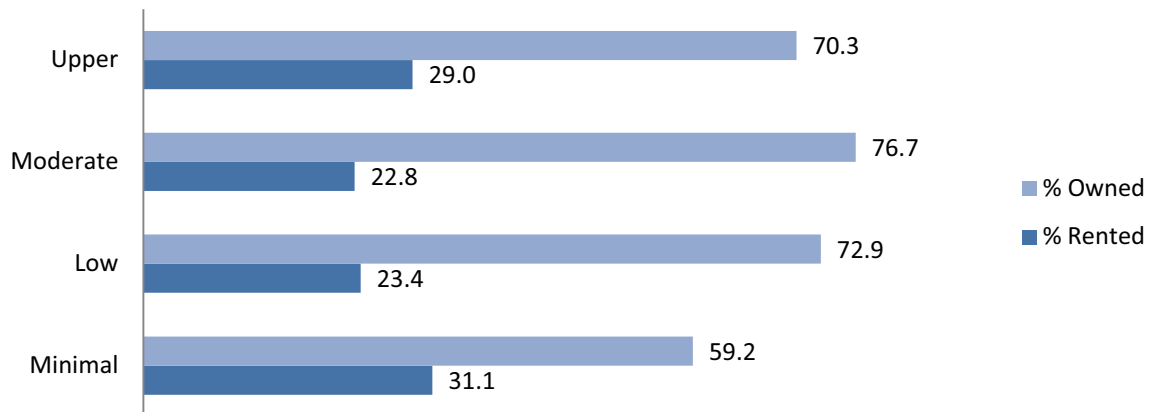


Figure 9. Educational Attainment by Turnout Category



A third component of our affluence measure involved examining the proportion of residents who rent (as opposed to own) their homes. This was based on the notion that, by virtue of the relative transience of their populations and the closed nature of apartment buildings and affordable housing communities, constituencies with a higher proportion of renters may feature a different political dynamic than those in which there is a higher rate of home ownership. Specifically, election authorities and political activists report challenges associated with accessing renters in their homes. Contrary to these perceptions, this study did *not* find conclusive evidence of a relationship between rates of home ownership and turnout. While districts with the lowest turnout did contain a much smaller proportion of home-owners (59.2) than those in the “low” (72.9), “moderate” (76.7), and “upper” quartiles, constituencies featuring high proportions of renters were no more likely to feature low levels of voter participation than those featuring a greater percentage of home owners.

Figure 10. Percentage Home Tenure by Turnout Category



Political Environment

Previous Manitoba non-voter surveys have not tested the effect of the local community's political environment on individual citizens' propensity to vote. Focusing more upon residents' attitudes toward the electoral institutions, no overtly "political" questions were asked of respondents. As such, we have no data linking residents' likelihood of voting with their personal assessment of the electoral climate in their district. As a means of partially addressing this gap, the present study examined the impact of a constituency's political environment on its rate of voter turnout.

Competitiveness

The study tested the widely-held assumption that turnout increases when the outcome of a particular election is less certain, or when the conflict between political parties and candidates is more intense (Downs 1957; Crepez 1990; Gray 1976; Holbrook and Van Dunk 1993; Blais and Lago 2009; Blais 2000; Pacheco 2008; Orford 2008; Ashworth, Geys, and Heyndels 2006; Abramson, Diskin, and Felsenthal 2007; Johnston, Matthews, and Blittner 2007). Competitive contests are more likely to generate voter awareness and interest, while attracting both media attention and increased voter-mobilization efforts on the part of politicians and strategists.

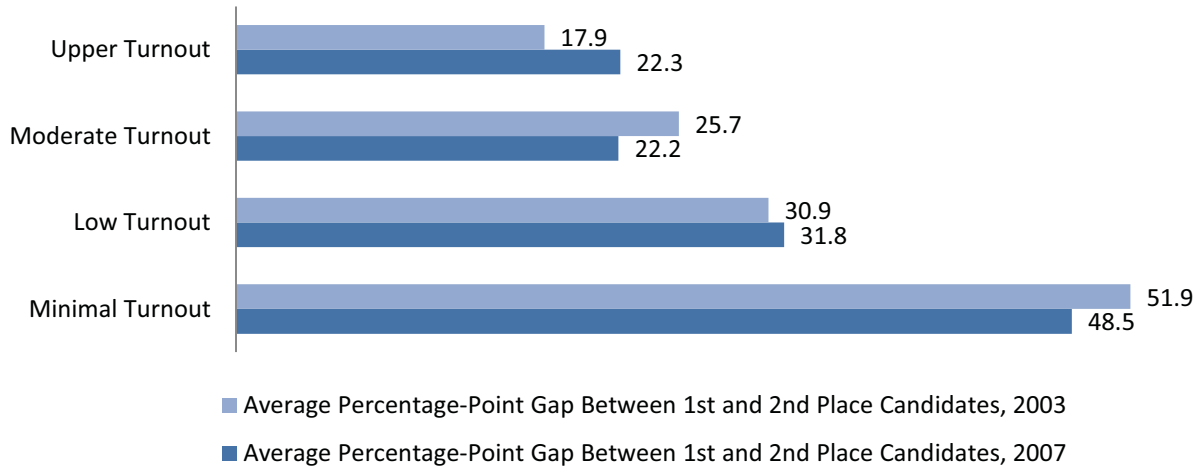
To measure the effect of electoral competitiveness on voter turnout in Manitoba, analysts compared turnout rates among constituencies with varying rates of "closeness". For the purposes of this study, "competitiveness" was assessed in terms of the gap between the first- and second-place candidates in both the 2007 and most recent (2003) elections.¹

The closeness of the local election was by far the most important factor in determining the different levels of turnout among Manitoba's fifty-seven constituencies. Controlling for competitiveness in the 2003 election, the closeness of the local races in 2007 accounts for nearly all of the turnout variance among Manitoba constituencies. Put another way, most of the variation we find among electoral districts in terms of their turnout can be explained by the fact that those with more competitive local races feature higher levels of voter participation. While the substance of this finding is hardly surprising, its magnitude is worthy of note. It appears that the closeness of the district-level campaign "trumps" most other socio-demographic and political characteristics when it comes to determining a community's level of turnout. (The single exception, worthy of second notice, is the proportion of Aboriginal peoples found in the district.)

The closeness of the local election is by far the most important factor in determining a constituency's rate of voter turnout.

¹ Measuring competitiveness using the results of the 2007 election would result in a logical misstep; members of the electorate were not cognizant of the *actual* competitiveness of the 2007 campaign when they chose whether or not to vote; as a result, most would have judged the competitiveness of their constituency in historical terms, relating it to the most recent contest (2003).

Figure 11. Competitiveness by Turnout Category



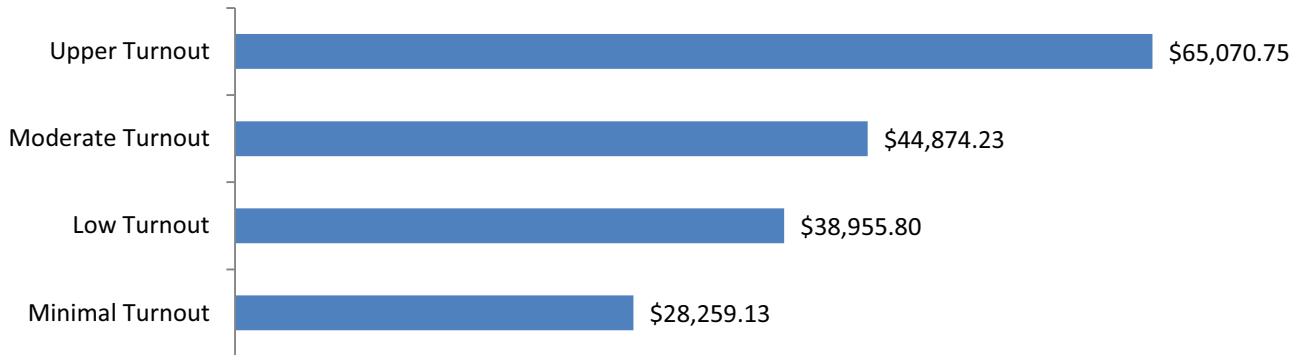
Campaign Resources

The competitiveness of a constituency is often closely tied to the amount of resources devoted by major parties to conducting local campaigns (Herrera, Levine, and Martinelli 2008). On one hand, competitive races draw more spending; with tensions heightened, constituency associations are able to raise more funds and have the incentive to spend more money to contest a close seat. On the other hand, more spending can often make a local election more competitive, as opponents expend extra resources to win important votes.

To measure the effect of campaign spending on voter turnout, this study compared the resources spent by the three major party campaigns (the Liberals, New Democrats, and Progressive Conservatives) in each constituency during the 2007 election. Figures were drawn from official election campaign financial statements filed by each constituency association. The results reveal that upper turnout constituencies drew an average of \$65,070.75 in total campaign spending by major parties. That amounts to over 2.3 times as much as spending as minimal turnout constituencies received (\$28,259.13). These findings suggest that districts with higher turnout draw an increased amount of resources from political parties in Manitoba, and/or that campaign spending has a significant, positive effect on voter participation.

Constituencies with higher rates of voter turnout feature higher levels of campaign expenditures by major political parties.

Figure 12. Total Average Campaign Spending (Major Parties) by Turnout Category

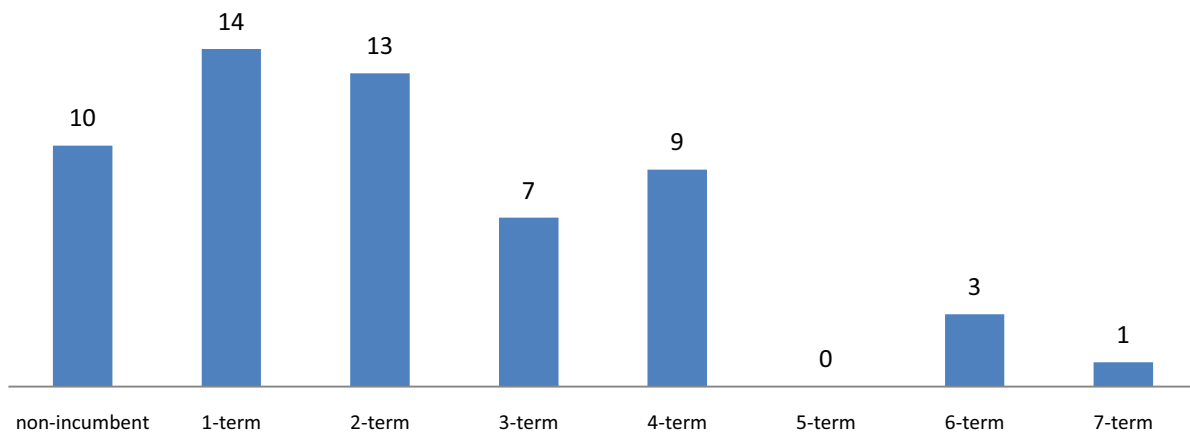


Incumbency

Intriguingly, no available research has been conducted on the effect of incumbency on voter turnout in Canadian elections. While some American studies have examined the effect of turnout on incumbent fortunes (e.g., Hansford and Gomez 2010), beyond an examination of campaign spending, few have analyzed the impact of a sitting legislator on the level of civic engagement in his or her district.

As such, observers are left with two competing hypotheses. First, constituencies in which an incumbent politician is contesting the seat may feature higher levels of turnout than districts in which there is no incumbent. This may be based on the assumption that would-be voters cast ballots in favour of politicians they recognize, and are reluctant to turnout to support those they do not. (By virtue of serving in office, incumbents are more readily-identifiable by voters, and may thus both prompt supporters and encourage detractors to turn out.) On the other hand, incumbency could have a negative effect on turnout, in that a larger proportion of the electorate may opt to tacitly endorse the government by staying home on Election Day. (This assumption follows the adage that voters use elections to defeat governments and remove incumbents, rather than endorse them explicitly.)

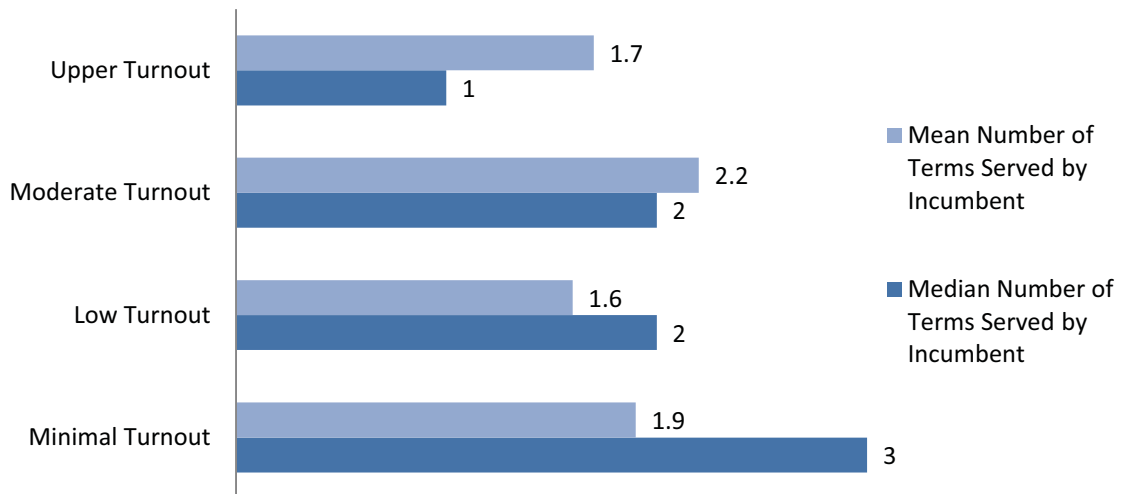
Figure 13. Incumbents as Candidates, 2007



Evidence from the present study is inconclusive when it comes to establishing the effect of incumbency on turnout. In the 2007 Manitoba Election, races in a total of ten (10) constituencies did not involve an incumbent, and turnout in these districts varied widely. Three of these races were in “upper” turnout districts (Fort Rouge, Kirkfield Park, and Rossmere); one was in a “moderate” turnout constituency (Fort Whyte); four were in “low” turnout districts (Carman, Ste. Rose, The Maples, Turtle Mountain); and two were in “minimal” turnout constituencies (Emerson, Wellington).

Some incumbents have served in office longer than others, of course. One MLA entered the 2007 Election having served seven consecutive terms, for instance. By contrast, the election saw twelve members elected for the first time, and fourteen, first-term MLAs re-elected. On the surface, it would appear there is a negative relationship between the *length* of incumbency and turnout. Among “minimal” turnout constituencies, the median incumbent had served three (3) consecutive terms. By comparison, incumbents in “low” and “median” turnout constituencies had served a median of two (2) terms, and those in “upper” turnout districts were typically running after their first term. This relationship is not statistically significant, however.

Figure 14. Turnout by Average Length of Incumbency



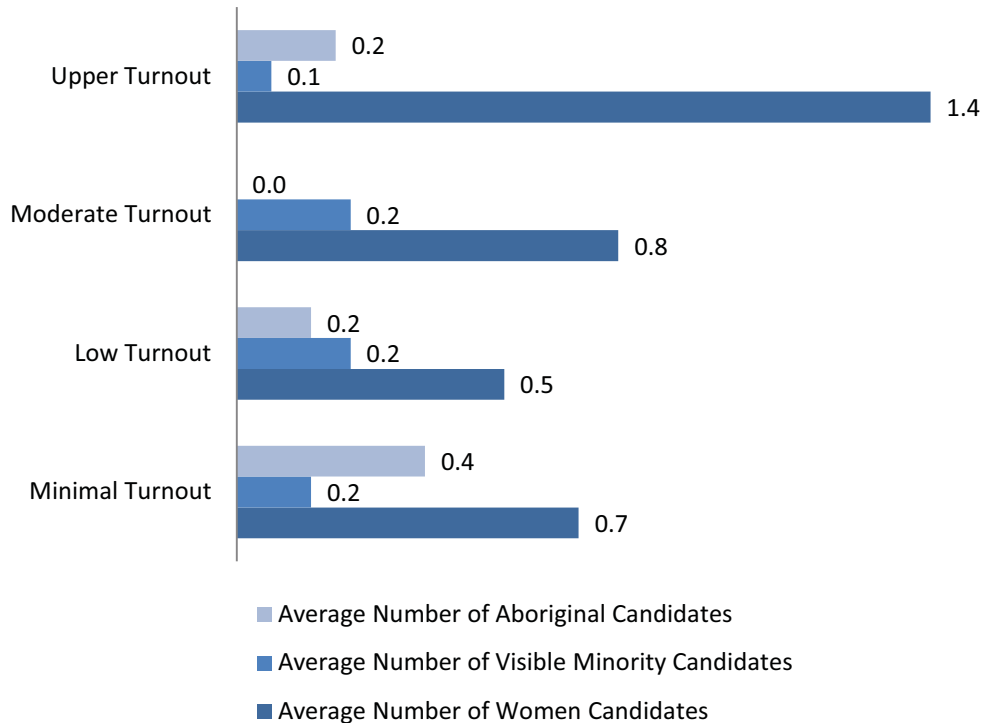
Diversity of Candidates

Some speculate that a broader array of candidates involved in a particular constituency campaign may help to bolster voter turnout. This is based on the notion that candidates who represent traditionally disadvantaged groups – including women, visible minorities, and Aboriginal peoples – may serve as political role models for other members of these communities, thus encouraging fellow members to vote.

The results of this study suggest that having visible minority or Aboriginal candidates has no discernible effect on the level of voter turnout in a district. There is a strong, statistically significant relationship between turnout and the presence of female candidates, however. Whereas an average of 1.4 women represented major parties in “upper” turnout constituencies, this number was significantly lower among “moderate” (0.8), “low” (0.5), and “minimal” (0.7) turnout districts, where an average race did not feature a woman. This finding suggests one of two possibilities: female candidates are more likely to run in high turnout constituencies or, more plausibly, that having at least one woman as a major party candidate can help encourage voter participation.

“Upper” turnout constituencies featured over twice as many female candidate as those districts with lower rates of voter participation.

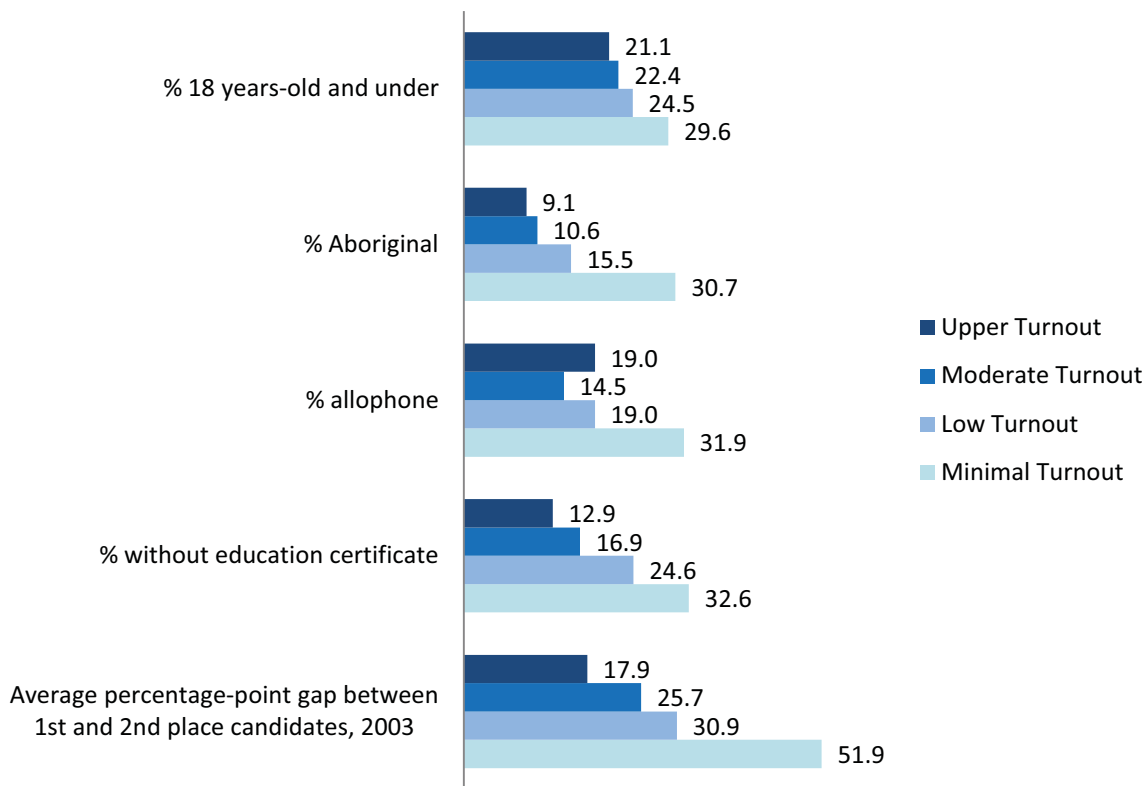
Figure 15. Candidate Diversity by Turnout Category



Conclusions

By examining electoral participation at the constituency-level, observers gain a better appreciation of how *context matters* in determining voter turnout. The results of this study confirm that, for nearly all constituencies in the 2007 Manitoba election, the closeness of a local campaign was the primary factor driving a district’s rate of voter participation. While affluence, stability, and homogeneity all played a role in determining turnout, regardless of its relative socio-economic status or ethnic diversity, if a constituency featured a close contest between two or more candidates, its rate of voter turnout was likely to be higher than those in which the outcome of the race was more predictable. The one notable exception to this trend was found among constituencies with high proportions of Aboriginal residents. Regardless of the competitiveness of the local race, if a district featured a large Aboriginal population, its level of voter turnout was likely to be among the lowest in Manitoba.

Figure 16. Key Ecological Factors by Turnout Category



These findings raise serious challenges, and important questions, for those who wish to improve the quality and quantity of electoral engagement in Manitoba. If the closeness of the local race is the primary determinant of voter turnout, increasing the level of voter participation in low-turnout communities becomes difficult. Boosting competitiveness – whether through electoral reform or changes to electoral laws and regulations – will require legislative action. This leaves many proponents of change with few options when it comes to addressing the leading cause of low turnout in many districts. It may not be enough to encourage youth and Manitobans with lower incomes and less

education to vote; this study suggests that, if these individuals do not live in a competitive district, they are less likely to participate in elections.

In essence, proponents of higher turnout must work to find ways of encouraging individuals in less-competitive districts that their vote “counts”, regardless of whether it has an impact on the eventual outcome of the local race. Previous research demonstrates that appeals to civic duty and political obligation may be effective for some (particularly, older) members of the population. Other Manitobans (especially youth) may be persuaded by the prospect of other forms of gratification (including the fact that their political party of choice is eligible for an annual per-vote subsidy). To discover new ways of persuading these individuals, it is necessary to delve more deeply into the reasons *voters* in these uncompetitive districts have decided to cast ballots. Discussed below, this requires further research.

Recommendations

Further Research

The present study has revealed the need for further research on the topic of non-voting in Manitoba. Researchers and students at the University of Manitoba are prepared to assist election authorities in addressing these gaps. Specifically, Manitobans would benefit from the following:

1. Past and future Manitoba elections should be analyzed to substantiate the results of this study. It is particularly important to examine elections prior to 2003, as this is when voter turnout fell below 60 percent for the first time in modern history. Explaining the *decline* in electoral participation requires a broader historical scope. The raw materials for this analysis are readily available, although resources are required to assemble it into usable data. Census data would need to be broken-down into provincial electoral districts, as follows:

General Election	Census Data	Provincial Electoral Boundaries
1990 Manitoba Election	1986 Census	1988 Decennial Boundaries
1995 Manitoba Election	1991 Census	1988 Decennial Boundaries
1999 Manitoba Election	1996 Census	1998 Decennial Boundaries
2003 Manitoba Election	2001 Census	1998 Decennial Boundaries
2007 Manitoba Election (✓)	2006 Census	1998 Decennial Boundaries
2011 Manitoba Election	2011 Census	2008 Decennial Boundaries

2. The results of this study suggest that elections are community events, and are experienced quite differently in constituencies across the province. To study non-voting in its proper perspective, then, researchers should consider convening focus groups in various communities throughout Manitoba. This qualitative, group-based approach would complement the broad-based, quantitative survey conducted by PRA, while supplementing the present ecological analysis with much-needed input from Manitobans, themselves. Considering the results of this analysis, separate focus groups should be convened in constituencies with varying rates of competitiveness, affluence, ethnic diversity, and Aboriginal populations.
3. Much attention has been paid to the question of why non-voters choose not to participate in elections. In order to better persuade these individuals to engage in the electoral process,

researchers must reverse their inquiry by asking: *Why do some citizens decide to vote?* The act of voting, itself, is considered a “paradox” by many in the academic community (Downs 1957). Participating in elections is viewed as an irrational activity, considering the infinitesimal chance that one’s single ballot could affect the outcome of the election. (These chances are even lower in uncompetitive districts, but remain very slim even in closely contested constituencies.) Under these circumstances, it makes little (“rational”) sense for individuals to assume the costs of casting a ballot (e.g., taking time off work or foregoing other responsibilities and priorities), when the outcome is unlikely to change regardless of their participation. Given this, researchers might better place their focus on understanding why some people vote (at all), rather than simply asking why non-voters choose not to participate (Engelen 2006; Fowler and Kam 2006). Future election surveys should incorporate questions along these lines, as the responses may help officials devise new means of persuading non-voters (particularly those in uncompetitive districts) to engage in the political system.

4. In addition to focusing on citizens’ attitudes toward electoral institutions, future voter / non-voter surveys should address several key issues raised by this study. In particular, more attention should be paid to the demographic and political aspects of non-voting. This means incorporating a more comprehensive battery of personal background questions, including those related to ethnicity, immigration status, Aboriginal identity, and length of residency (in current constituency). Future surveys should also assess respondents’ perceptions of the competitiveness and general political atmosphere of the campaign, both at the province-wide and local levels; and include a section devoted to measuring the “civic culture” of various communities across Manitoba (i.e., respondents’ attitudes toward, interest in, and knowledge about the political system). Canadian Election Study questionnaires provide an excellent template for these types of analyses.
5. The foregoing study concluded that the competitiveness of a district is the leading factor in determining its level of turnout. This finding is hardly groundbreaking. Yet, it begs a further question: if the closeness of a local election affects voter participation, then which factors contribute to competitiveness? In other words, to understand turnout, researchers must understand why certain constituencies are more hotly contested than others. To this end, researchers will embark on a separate study (to be presented at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association).

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