

Voter turnout a concern

BY JANE SEYD, NORTH SHORE NEWS MAY 12, 2013



AS polls open around the North Shore on Tuesday, there's a good chance a large number of voters will be voting with their butts rather than their ballots - by choosing to stay home.

In a trend that's been growing for the past three decades, elections are being decided by a shrinking percentage of eligible voters.

A study on declining voter turnout by Elections BC noted that 30 years ago, about 71 per cent of registered voters cast ballots province wide. In the last provincial election, that figure was down to 55 per cent.

While the North Shore as a whole usually has a better turnout than many areas of the province, the trend of more voters sitting out elections is also evident here.

Voter turnout in the most closely contested riding on the North Shore, North Vancouver-Lonsdale, went from 68 per cent in the 2001 election to 55 per cent in 2009. Turnout in West Vancouver Sea to Sky slipped from 68 per cent to 53 per cent in the same time frame.

"It is worrisome," said Dermot Travis, executive director of the political watchdog group Integrity B.C. Across the province, "Nearly half of the population is checking out of the political system."

The reasons for people choosing not to vote are complex, and have been studied by everyone from party strategists to election officials.

Part of the answer is demographic. Simply put, older people are much more likely to vote than young people. According to the Elections BC study, "Who heads to the polls," three-quarters of people 70 to 74 cast ballots while less than one third of those 20 to 24 voted.

Older people are more likely to see voting as a duty, while younger people see it as a choice, said Greg Lyle, a political strategist and pollster with Innovative Research.

Older people also matured at a time when events like the Second World War were pivotal in creating a sense of collective responsibility. Young people today are plugged into their iPods and tend to be more isolated from political events, Lyle said.

Travis said he's heard the argument that young people are simply rejecting the political system, preferring to get involved in activities like the Occupy movement or other protests.

He doesn't buy protest as a substitute for voting. "There's nothing wrong with casting a ballot and then critiquing that party if it makes a mistake down the road," he said.

Age is only one factor in voting behaviour.

The Elections BC study also found neighbourhoods with higher median incomes and a greater proportion of university-educated citizens are more likely to vote - both factors in why some North Shore ridings have higher than average turnout.

Neighbourhoods with high proportions of people who recently moved into the area, high unemployment rates or people who aren't in the workforce with kids at home are more likely not to cast a ballot.

Also, the closer the vote is perceived to be, generally the higher the turnout. People are more inclined to vote if they think their vote will make a difference to the outcome.

The fact many people don't vote has changed the way campaigns are run, said Lyle, making them more extreme.

Parties don't spend as much time as they used to trying to engage the large middle ground of voters and sway them, for example. Instead, they concentrate on getting their own identified supporters out.

As a party strategist, "What you're rewarded for is mobilizing your base, not going after swing voters," said Lyle.

That quickly feeds into a cycle. Negative ads are one way Travis said parties manage to turn off average voters. They get so inundated with political attacks, "They decide 'What's the point?'" said Travis. "They end up staying home."

It's no surprise, then, said Travis, that large segments of the population feel election campaigns aren't talking to them.

Travis shies away from the idea of mandatory voting. But he says it's a huge loss for democracy as a whole when average citizens don't vote. "They pay significant taxes. They play a significant role in their communities," he said. But if they don't vote "They disenfranchise themselves.

"We're ultimately going to be leaving our province in the hands of fewer and fewer people."

jseyd@nsnews.com

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