

# 5 The Preferences of Voters and Non-Voters in Canada (1988–2008)<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Voter turnout has been declining in recent years in Canada and in other democracies (Blais et al. 2004). In Canadian federal elections, this trend has greatly accelerated since the 2000 election. Averaging across decades, turnout has gone from 77.2% in the 1960s, to 74.5% in the 1970s, to 73.3% in the 1980s, to 68.3% in the 1990s, and finally to 61.4% in recent years. The lowest turnout ever recorded in Canadian federal elections occurred in 2008 when it reached a meagre 58.8%. To be sure, fewer voters in Canada participate in elections today compared to a generation ago.

There has been extensive scholarly work examining the *sources* of this decline (e.g., Gray and Caul 2000; Pammett and LeDuc 2003), but not much has been done – at least in the Canadian context – on the *consequences* of low turnout on political representation. One notable exception is a contribution by Daniel Rubenson, André Blais, Patrick Fournier, Elizabeth Gidengil and Neil Nevitte (2007). In this work, the authors evaluate the claim made by Lijphart (1997) that higher turnout would benefit parties and policies of the left. Analysing survey data from the 2000 election, they conclude that voters' opinions and preferences are representative of the entire electorate; consequently, universal turnout would not affect election results significantly in Canada. Their finding that turnout does not have a partisan bias is congruent with what has been found in the United States and several other democracies (e.g., Highton and Wolfinger 2001; Lutz and Marsh 2007).

In this chapter we re-examine the claim that turnout can produce a partisan bias in Canada. We argue that although the approach of