

How comfortable are Saskatchewan voters with democratic politics?: A research brief

February 2012

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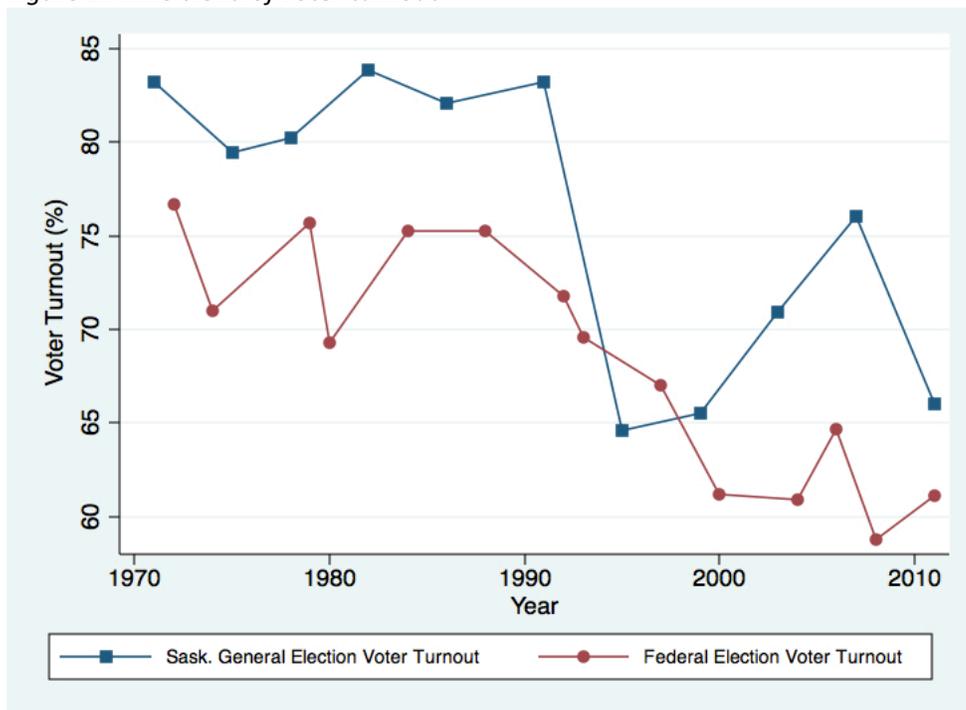
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Introduction

Across industrial democracies, observers of the political process have expressed concern regarding the declining levels of participation in electoral politics. Voting turnout, in particular, has shown marked declines over the past twenty years, occasioning worries about the legitimacy of democratic processes. Much attention has been paid to young people, but turnout is down across the board including among the birth cohorts of the 1960s and 1970s. Figure 1 shows the recent pattern of turnout in federal elections compared to elections in Saskatchewan. The slow, steady decline in federal electoral participation is contrasted with the sharp drop in participation in the Saskatchewan election of 1995 followed by a recovery in turnout, especially in 2007, and then a subsequent decline in the 2011 election. From 1945 until 1998, provincial elections were remarkable in their ability to attract more voters than federal elections (Studlar 2001), but by the twenty-first century the pattern of electoral abstinence had caught up with the provinces as well.

Figure 1: Time trend of voter turnout



Canada is by no means alone in experiencing participation declines, although there are intriguing differences across jurisdictions. Explanations for decline include institutional obstacles, such as registration requirements in some countries, and, in a more sociological vein, the observation that political knowledge has deteriorated to the point that voters no longer possess the “civic literacy” necessary to participate in electoral decision-making (Milner 2002). In this interpretation “those more informed about politics are those who can be expected to participate more frequently in the various forms of political life” (Milner 2007). Among the least informed are young people, and they are also the least likely to vote.

For the most part declining participation rates, especially among the young, are treated as serious problems. This excerpt from a Parliament of Canada (Library of Parliament 2010: 5) document is illustrative: “The low rate of youth electoral participation is a problem that requires serious attention, in order to secure the future of democracy in Canada.” This challenge of reversing current trends will be all the more imposing if declining political knowledge is an act

of wilful ignorance and the retreat from electoral participation is the product of a dislike of politics as a means of solving problems. According to Hibbing and Thiess-Morse (2002: 3), “participation in politics is low because people do not like politics even in the best of circumstances; in other words, they simply do not like the process of openly arriving at a decision in the face of diverse opinion.”

The Saskatchewan Election Study found some intriguing evidence to support Hibbing and Thiess-Morse’s assertion. While the Saskatchewan public is not uncomfortable with political discussion, there is an appetite for politicians to stop ‘talking’ and get things done, as well as a sizable minority who feel that government would run better if decisions were left up to “non-elected, independent experts.” In particular, non-voters are more likely to want immediate action instead of talking and are inclined to place their trust in experts as opposed to politicians.

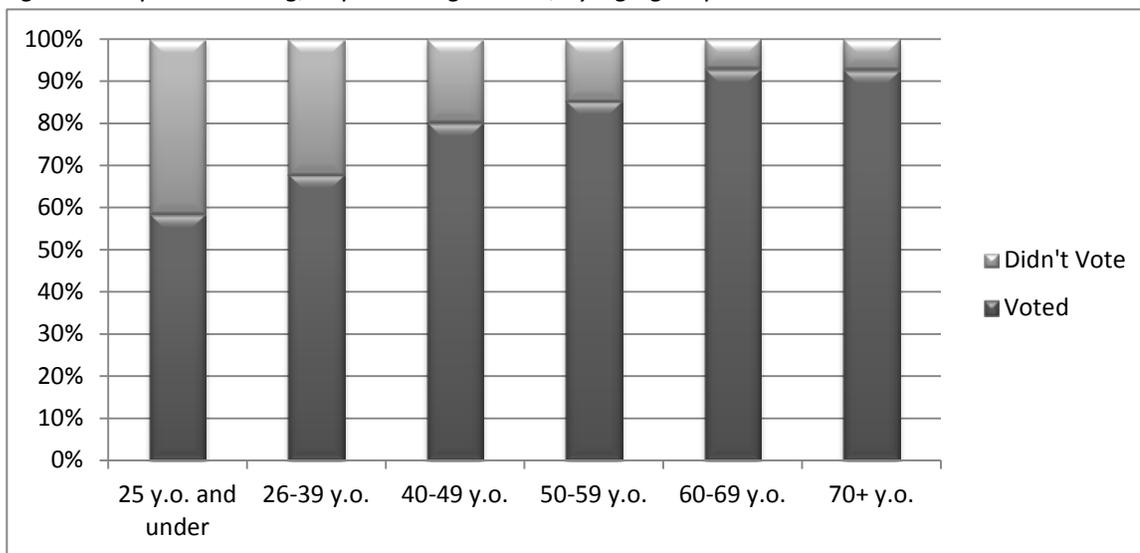
Who voted in the 2011 election?

Our Saskatchewan Election Study sample captured voters and non-voters, but 76% of survey respondents reported having voted, compared to a 66% turnout in the electorate at large. Over reporting of voting is not uncommon, and despite this discrepancy, there are enough non-voters in our sample to allow us to investigate patterns of, if not reasons for, non-voting.

Concern was expressed at the outset of the 2011 election campaign that turnout might be relatively low because the Saskatchewan Party was polling far ahead of the NDP and the latter’s supporters would be discouraged to the point of staying home. Saskatchewan Party supporters, on the other hand, might lapse into complacency and do the same thing. These phenomena may have contributed to the reduced turnout in 2007, although it is unlikely supporters constitute the bulk of non-voters.

Figure 2 confirms, in dramatic fashion, that the findings of earlier surveys apply in Saskatchewan. Within our sample, younger people stayed away from the polls in significantly greater numbers than older people. The relationship between voting and age is curvilinear, positive and statistically significant: the older you are the more likely you are to vote. The positive relationship between age and voting peters out after the age of 60, in part because by that point over 90% of respondents report having voted.

Figure 2: Reported voting, in percentage terms, by age group

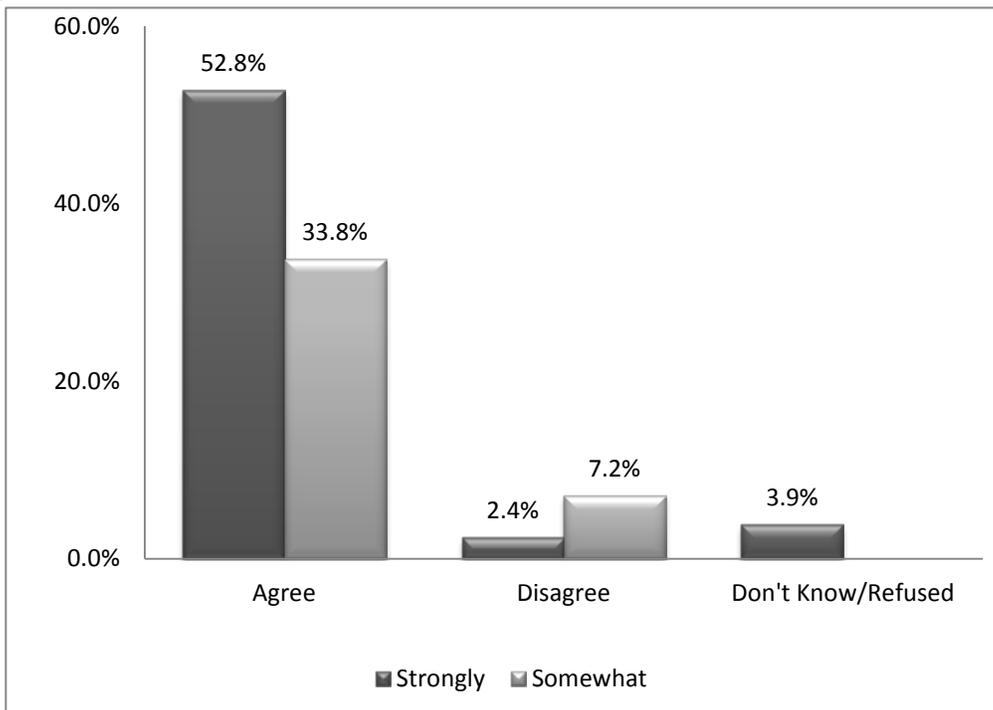


The evidence suggests that when controlling for gender, education, salary and Aboriginal identity, a positive relationship between age and voting remains statistically significant. Education was also found to have a positive relationship with voting; people who have a higher education also have a higher probability of voting. For example, in our study someone with at least a bachelor’s degree has a 6.5% higher probability of voting that someone with less education. Females and males have the same probability of voting. However, by identifying oneself as being First Nations, Inuit, or Metis, the probability of voting decreases by 9.8%, controlling for other factors. This means that taking two eligible voters—one Aboriginal, one not—who are the same age and gender, and have the same education and income, the Aboriginal person is almost 10% less likely to have voted. Only 7.5% of our sample claimed Aboriginal heritage, compared to about 12.5% of the population over the age of 15, but even with a small number the result was statistically significant.

Tolerance for politics?

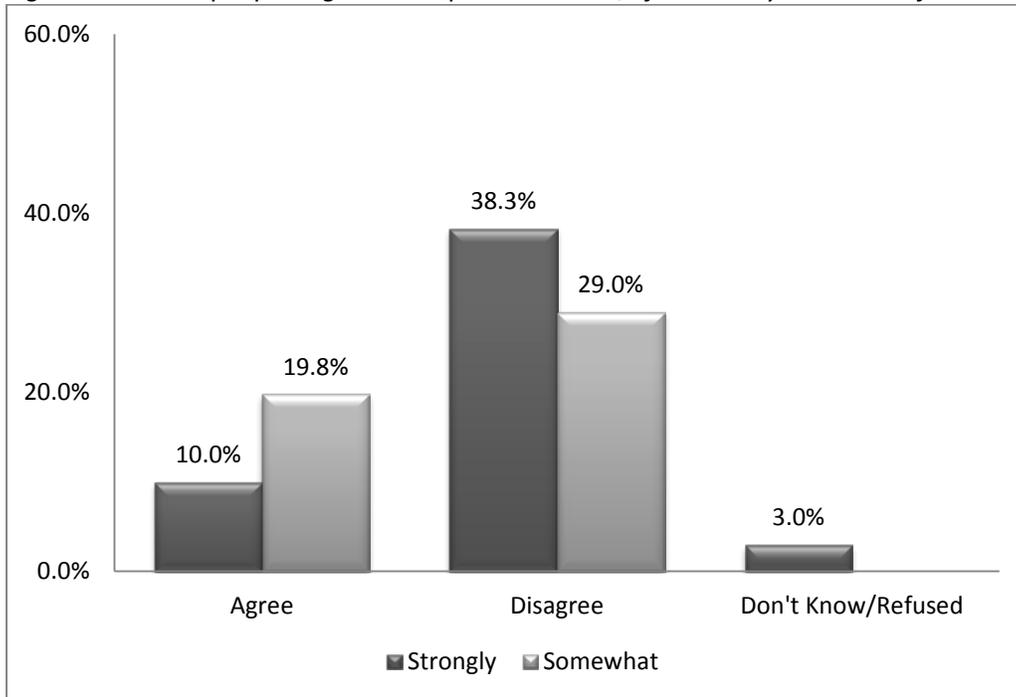
Democratic politics is associated with discourse. Decisions are supposed to be made after people have had their say. How to structure this discourse has been a traditional subject of academic debate, but most deliberative democrats acknowledge that at some point decisions need to be taken. The respondents to our survey overwhelmingly agree; in fact, they appear to have a standing preference for acting rather than talking. As Figure 3 shows, when asked if “elected officials” should stop talking and take action, the vast majority of our sample (86.6%) either ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’, with a majority of respondents in the ‘strongly agree’ category. Timing may have something to do with this finding. Our survey came at the end of an election campaign in which all respondents had been subjected to a certain degree of “talking.” A preference for action over discussion might be natural under the circumstances, although the magnitude of this preference should give democrats some cause for concern regarding the tolerance of citizens for a central feature of democratic governance.

Figure 3: “Elected officials would help the province more if they would stop talking and just take action on important problems.”



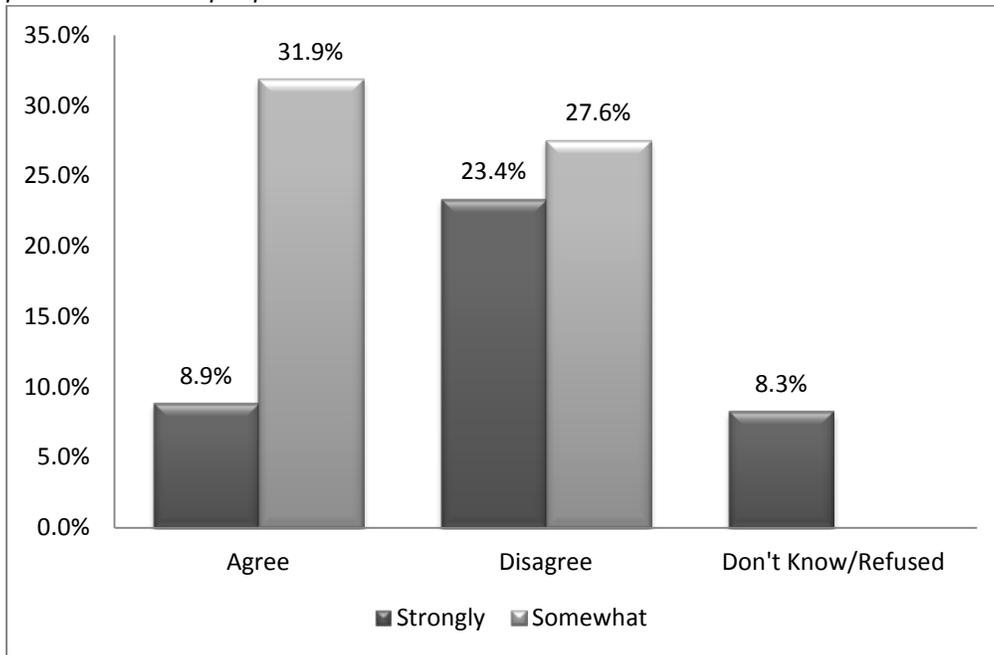
Much more encouraging, from this perspective, are the findings reported in Figure 4. Our respondents might prefer action over talk, but they are generally comfortable with political argument. More than two-thirds disagreed with the idea that they might feel “uneasy” in the presence of political argument. Taking action is satisfying, but that doesn’t mean that argument isn’t tolerable. Or maybe it’s just inevitable. In any event, Saskatchewan voters are reconciled to arguing and not feeling uncomfortable about it.

Figure 4: “When people argue about political issues, I feel uneasy and uncomfortable.”



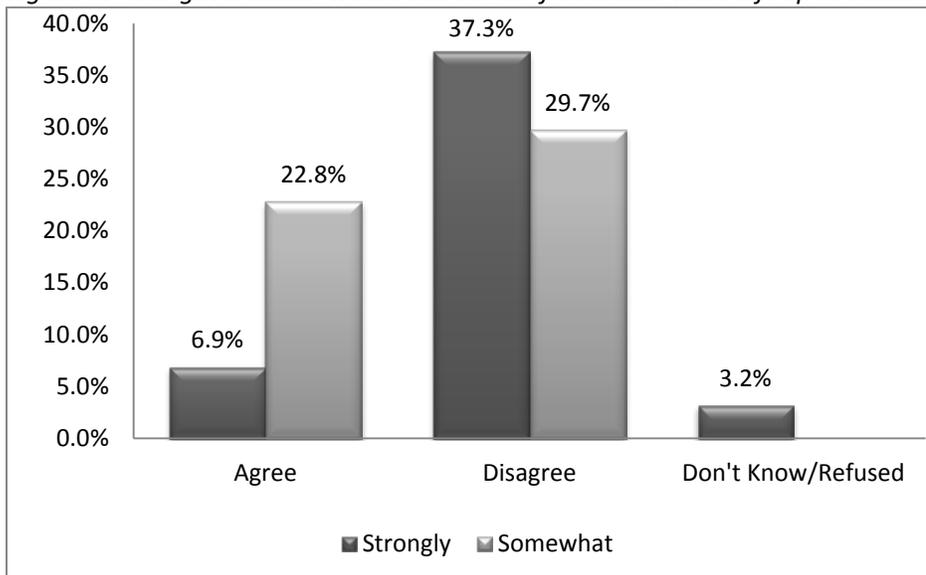
If democratic politics is to be deemed “healthy,” then tolerance for politics must extend beyond discussion. The machinery of political parties and the apparatus of electoral competition are organized to empower the elected. Even if electors might prefer one party over another, democracy requires they collectively prefer to be governed by those they have elected, rather than by those anointed on the strength of “special” qualities, including superior knowledge of public affairs. We asked our respondents if they would be comfortable leaving decisions to “non-elected independent experts.” Democrats can sigh with relief at the fact that a majority of our respondents do not find this option agreeable. But as Figure 5 shows, it is the slimmest of majorities. More than 40% of our respondents agree with the idea that non-elected experts should be taking decisions and a discouraging 8% aren’t sure one way or the other.

Figure 5: “Our government would run better if decisions were left up to non-elected, independent experts rather than politicians or the people.”



Whoever these independent experts might be, Saskatchewan voters are not inclined to think business people make up a large portion of their number. Asked if we should leave collective decisions up to “successful businesspeople” only a tiny proportion of our sample were strongly in favour and the majority, over two-thirds of our respondents, were against the idea, most of them strongly (Figure 6). The anti-democratic temptation to have independent experts simply take action, is offset to some degree by the need to be assured that “experts” are truly independent and not merely “businesspeople” whose expertise may not extend to public decision making.

Figure 6: “Our government would run better if decisions were left up to successful business people.”

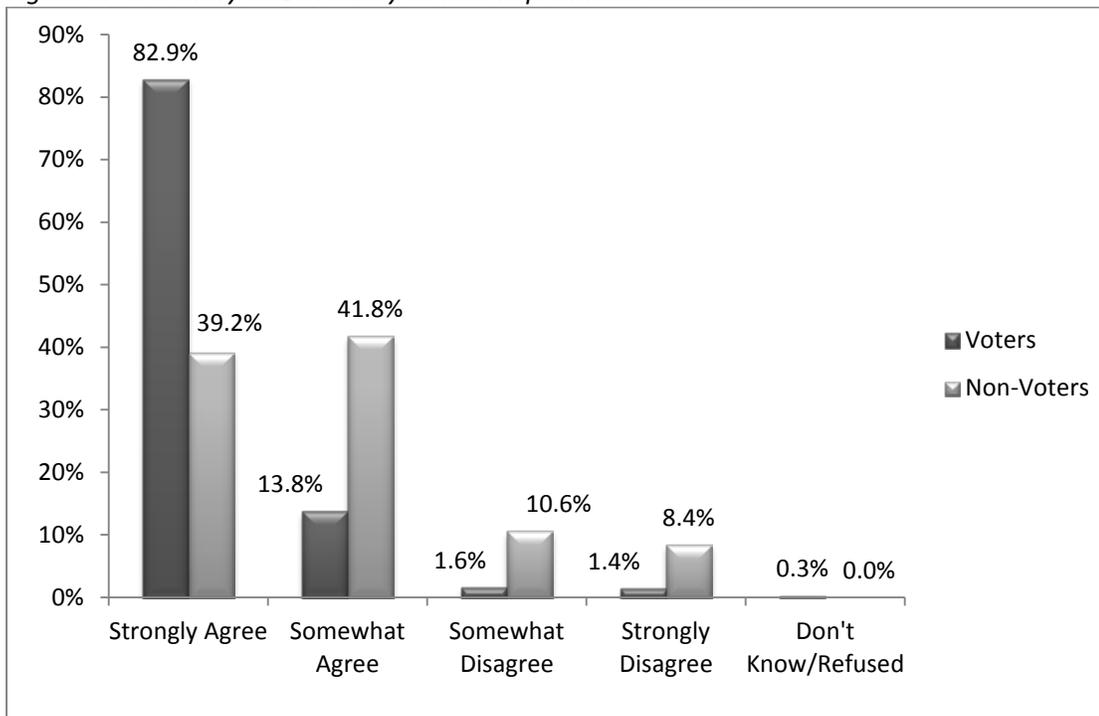


Tolerance for politics and non-voting

Intuition suggests that a tolerance for democratic politics should be associated with the belief that voting is a “civic duty.” If so, democrats will be pleased to learn that in Saskatchewan voters are overwhelmingly moved by a sense of civic responsibility (Blais 2000). Almost 73% of voters in our sample strongly agree that citizenship carries with it a duty to vote. Even non-voters are inclined to agree, although with much less enthusiasm, as Figure 7 illustrates. But the call of civic responsibility only goes so far; 7% of our sample did not accept the civic duty proposition and the vast majority of these respondents did not vote.

Non-voters are, by definition, less engaged in the political process. Are they also less tolerant of politics? In the Saskatchewan Election Survey non-voters are slightly more inclined than voters to believe action is preferable to talking (Figure 3), but the biggest difference between voters and non-voters lies in the latter’s preference for expert opinion. Those who decided not to vote in the 2011 election were much more inclined to favour having experts take public policy decisions. A majority of non-voters—53%--are content to leave governing up to the experts compared with approximately 37% of voters. These finding suggest that the act of non-voting in Saskatchewan has deeper roots than simply feelings about civic duty. For a significant proportion of the electorate, politics itself is not a welcome or entirely necessary endeavor, and many of them back up this view by declining to vote.

Figure 7: “It is every citizen’s duty to vote in provincial elections”



Methodology of the Saskatchewan Election Study

The 2011 Saskatchewan Election Study was the first study to use the newly-created survey lab in the Social Sciences Research Laboratories (SSRL) complex at the University of Saskatchewan. Deployed as a telephone survey using WinCATI software, 1,099 Saskatchewan residents, 18 years of age and older, were administered a 15-minute survey on political attitudes and behaviours in the province from November 8, 2011 to November 21, 2011. Results of the survey, which generated a response rate of 23.6%, are generalizable to the Saskatchewan population (18 years of age and older) +/- 2.95% at the 95% confidence interval (19 times out of 20). The Saskatchewan Election Study was funded by the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, with additional support from LEAD Saskatoon, St. Thomas More College and the College of Arts and Science at the University of Saskatchewan.

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¹ Research team members are listed in alphabetical order. The research team would like to thank Kirk Clavelle for his research assistance.