

Ontario electoral dysfunction: Award for most apathetic riding goes to...

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If you live in Ontario and are 18 or over, you're about to help choose the next provincial government.

But chances are you won't bother.

Fewer Ontarians cast a ballot during the 2011 election than ever before: Only 48.2 per cent made it out to the polls, the culmination of a steady 13-year decrease in turnout.

Not all voters are equally apathetic, however.

[Mississauga-Brampton South](#) boasted the province's lowest voter turnout: Only 36.4 per cent of eligible voters made it to the polls in 2011, according to [Elections Ontario](#).

All the ridings with the lowest turnout, in fact, were in the 905 – swiftly growing, dynamic urban areas where all parties have dedicated significant resources to courting voters.

So what gives?

It's not just apathy, argues [Amrit Mangat](#), incumbent Liberal candidate for Mississauga-Brampton South: She heard from people who wanted to vote, but couldn't.

"I discussed the matter of inconvenient polling stations with my party and the need to have easy and accessible polling stations," she said. "It is hard to get out people, as you know, to go to vote in the first place. If polling stations are inconvenient, it will not help."

In 2007, the riding had 243 polling stations. In 2011, it had 210.

Tej Bir Dhillon has lived in area for 15 years. He says he had great difficulty voting in 2011.

<http://globalnews.ca/news/1347780/ontarios-electoral-dysfunction-the-award-for-voter-apaty-goes-to/>

“It’s the distance. People don’t have cars. ... I find it inconvenient when I go there. I have talked to my neighbourhood and they complain,” Dhillon said. “There are quite a few people here that are older, senior citizens and they don’t drive. So for them, it’s really inconvenient.”

[Elections Ontario Deputy Chief Electoral Officer](#) Loren Wells says there was an unusually high number of polling stations in 2007 because of a referendum on changing Ontario’s electoral system. So those extra stations were reduced the following election.

“Electors were also asked to vote on the electoral system referendum. So as a result, every elector was provided with two ballots when they went to the voting location. At the close of the polls, the polling officials would have had counted double the number of ballots,” Wells said.

Since 2007, Wells said, Elections Ontario has added [more services to help Ontarian’s make it out to the polls](#). You can now vote – in person or by mail – starting 28 days before voting day.

“So we are placing accessible voting locations in the electoral district, but we do know that there are more accessible options as well for people to vote – by mail, for example, or at the returning office, or at the advance poll.”

Dhillon had no idea Elections Ontario had other voting options. And when it comes to mail-in votes, he’s not convinced.

“I find it more interesting to go there. ... I don’t feel good about mailing in my vote.”

Mississauga-Brampton South isn’t the only riding that lacked eager voters. In [Brampton West](#), only 38.3 per cent of residents cast their ballots. [York West](#) had the third-lowest voter turnout, with 39.2 per cent of people making it to the polls.

Ontario Ridings with the Lowest Voter Turnout	
Riding	Voter Turnout 2011
Mississauga - Brampton South	36.4%
Brampton West	38.3%
York West	39.2%
Etobicoke North	40.1%
Mississauga East - Cooksville	40.5%
Brampton	40.5%
Markham	40.7%
Bramalea - Gore - Malton	40.7%
Vaughan	41.1%
Mississauga	41.5%
Windsor West	41.6%

Source: Elections Ontario

Mangat cites voter fatigue as another factor keeping people from the polls in 2011.

“There was a federal election in May, a municipal byelection in this riding and also a provincial election within a period of six months,” Mangat said.

Progressive Conservative candidate [Amarjeet Gill](#) agrees voter fatigue was a main contributor to low turnout.

“It was election after election.”

[Jane Hilderman](#), research manager at the [Samara Foundation](#), says part of the reason Ontario has seen a decline in voter turnout is a result of younger voters not exercising their franchise. That’s part of a trend across North America.

“In the past ... voting was generally perceived as a duty. Even if you didn’t have a favourite candidate or party or party leader that you wanted to cast a ballot for, you held your nose and went to the ballot box anyway,” Hilderman said.

“Now, voting is increasingly seen as a choice. You have the right to vote but you also have the freedom to choose not to vote. Many [people] are opting for that freedom not to vote.”

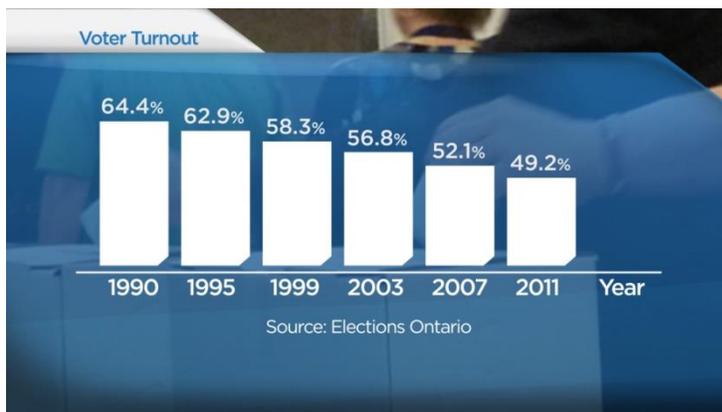
Hilderman says the declining voter turnout is a concern. Canadians aren’t seeing the direct impact politics have on their daily lives, she added.

“We asked Canadians how often or have you ever had a political conversation in the last year, any conversation about politics ... and 40 per cent said they had. That seems extremely low, in my mind,” Hilderman said. “Government, we have to remind ourselves, still makes decisions on how billions of dollars are spent. They make decisions about the rules of the game, in terms of regulation.”

Low turnout is also a problem if you're a politician: Elections are won (and lost) based not so much on whether people like you and your policies, but whether you can convince them to get out and vote.

"Voters need to be engaged and I'm out every day knocking on doors," Gill said.

"They[voters] realize that this important election to come out to."



With more available voting options and the provincial election in the limelight, Mangat hopes this year will show better numbers.

"Voter participation is extremely important for a healthy democratic process and we don't have the same conditions that we were facing

in 2011."

But that doesn't have NDP candidate [Kevin Troake](#) convinced.

He says his concern for the future of politics amid a disengaged public was one of the defining reasons he entered the provincial race.

"The information is not being given out to the general public about how people can vote. People need to be educated on how the voting process works."