

Voter Turnout: Thinking Outside the (Ballot) Box

Online voting alone won't resolve the deficiencies in Canada's electoral system, but new media holds great promise.

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A great many Canadians don't vote. Elections Canada has chronicled the decline in voter turnout for decades. Last month, it released the results of its [National Youth Survey Report](#) that presented data on youth participation during the 2011 federal election. The results were disappointing, albeit not surprising. Voter turnout among Generation Y remains low; its participation stymied by perceived barriers in access to the political process and a general lack of motivation.

On Dec. 7, Samara released its own [report on citizen engagement](#). Canadians, its authors argue, are neither uninformed nor uninterested. Instead, they feel disenfranchised – alienated from a system that they believe is unresponsive, exclusive, and contains too few avenues for participation.

Both studies offer insight into a persistent thorn in the side of democratic legitimacy. If policy is more responsive to those who vote, then political decision-making may not reflect the interests of non-voters. With nearly four out of 10 Canadians abstaining from voting, politicians will presumably be more responsive to those whom they rely on for votes.

Manifold reforms have been proposed to address poor turnout rates. One controversial proposal currently being considered by Elections Canada is to conduct online voting. Despite critics' resistance to the idea, more research into its practical viability is prudent and could potentially result in a more inclusive democratic process. But this proposal resorts to a narrow view of tackling the participatory deficit: Reducing political

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engagement to easier access to the ballot box. Innovative thinking around new mechanisms for accessible voting should be encouraged, but will not independently resolve the issue of low voter turnout in Canadian elections.

We'd wager that most Canadians who decline to cast their ballot at a polling station are just as likely to abstain from online voting. We agree with Samara and others who argue that low turnout is not because of a lack of means to vote; it is instead a rejection of the contemporary manifestation of the practice of politics. However, our skepticism about online voting should not be read as a wholesale rejection of the promise of new media as a means to re-engage voters and re-invigorate democratic participation. In fact, we advocate leveraging new media to its fullest potential, which means thinking outside the (ballot) box.

With this in mind, a volunteer network of Canadian political scientists – from graduate students to the country's pre-eminent scholars in electoral politics – launched [Vote Compass](#), an interactive online electoral literacy application. The premise of the application is simple: Users indicate their opinions on 30 propositions of relevance to a given election and then have the opportunity to examine how their responses compare to the policy positions of each of the parties. Party positions on each proposition are carefully derived from party platforms, reconciled with party leadership, and made publicly available for review within the application itself.

The purpose of Vote Compass is to stimulate discussion on a broad suite of salient policy issues and enhance Canadians' familiarity with the substantive content of party platforms. Launched during the 2011 federal election campaign, Vote Compass proved to be wildly popular and drew close to two million respondents. Its early adoption and rapid uptake demonstrates the potential for online technologies to provide new avenues for political participation.

Of course, Vote Compass is not without its detractors. It has roused criticisms – among partisans in particular – for allegedly distorting the political landscape in both the selection and framing of its propositions, as well as its calibrations of the parties. To be fair, Vote Compass simplifies the political landscape, reducing its complexities in an effort to provide an engaging and accessible entry point into party platforms. Its propositions are not constructed using the same methodological criteria as a

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conventional public opinion survey because Vote Compass is not a poll, nor does it aim to be one. The propositions are instead crafted to discriminate between party positions on a range of salient political issues, and they are thus necessarily coterminous with the election discourse. Vote Compass does not include every issue relevant to a given election nor every conceivable permutation of those issues that are included, and at times its fixed response criteria take a broad brush to the nuances of particular policies. But to describe these aspects of the application as limitations presupposes an unrealistic expectation of the function and motive of Vote Compass, and ultimately misses the point of the exercise.

Vote Compass is not akin to a [Deep Blue](#) for the electorate. It was never intended to account for every variable that influences voter choice and its results should not be interpreted as voting advice. Nor is Vote Compass a magic eight ball. The development of its propositions is overseen by an advisory panel composed of Canada's foremost experts in survey methods. Its results are based on meticulous calibrations of party positions carried out by a non-partisan research team of political scientists employing careful analysis of party documents and statements that each party reviews before Vote Compass launches. In fact, we consider the real value of Vote Compass not to lie in its summary results, but in the rich dataset of party positions on particular issues that we collect and make available to the public.

Canadians have become so accustomed to politicians' doublespeak that they no longer expect direct answers to basic questions. For their part, politicians have become so adept in the practice of ambiguous communication that even journalists appear to have resigned themselves to the futility of deriving substantive responses from government representatives. Vote Compass challenges this complacency by parsing political rhetoric in order to clearly define party positions on each of the issues it features. Vote Compass publicizes the text from every party document or statement it uses to impute party positions. So each calibration is ultimately justified using a party's own sources.

Vote Compass also endeavours to give voice to its users. Recently, the project's research team released [results from the 2011 Canadian federal election](#). The results demonstrate the relative support for each of the issues featured in Vote Compass

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across every riding in Canada. They also show differences in support across key demographic indicators, such as age, gender, and education. We clearly recognize that Vote Compass respondents are not a random sample of the general population of Canadian voters but, given that Vote Compass registered nearly two million respondents during the federal election campaign, its results are intriguing notwithstanding the inherent selection effects of an online sample – again, not a poll. Most importantly, the data enriches our understanding of how opinions differ across a broad spectrum of issues in a given election campaign. It reminds voters that no single issue should be the sole determinant of an election outcome, and reminds elected officials that winning the vote ought not be interpreted as unequivocal support for every aspect of their respective policy platforms. Public consultation should be an ongoing process, not one that ends after election day.

Vote Compass is but one among a multitude of innovative ideas that leverage new media to make a meaningful contribution to voter engagement in Canada. But its motivating principle is sometimes at odds with recent proposals, such as online voting. While online voting is a sensible way forward when it comes to the logistics of running elections, it does not address the fundamental problem of a disenfranchised electorate. Instead of bringing the ballot box to voters, our goal should be to bring voters to the ballot box. More accessible voting options are welcome, but the real promise of new media lies in its potential to re-engage the electorate in the political process by reforming mechanisms for political participation.