

# Voter turnout a crying shame



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In the wake of the municipal election, I hate to say it, but I'm embarrassed to be an Edmontonian. We saw some exciting upsets for council positions and a landslide mayoral victory, but the real news that struck me is that only 26.8 per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot.

This poor voter turnout wasn't restricted to Edmonton either. The headline in the *Calgary Herald* on Tuesday declared, "Calgarians turn out in droves to vote." I was then shocked to read in the article that a whopping 30 per cent of the electorate voted. That constitutes "droves"? I guess considering how, in 2004, only 20 per cent of Calgarians voted, 30 per cent is decent by comparison, but it's still nothing to brag about.

Voter apathy has unfortunately become a reality in municipal elections. It really hits home for me this year because of the troubling news coming out of Myanmar over the last month. Protesters there are willing to be beaten, imprisoned, and even die for democracy, and Edmontonians aren't even willing to get off the couch for 20 minutes.

That's disgusting. There are millions of people in the world who would give anything to live in a free and democratic country like Canada, and what's our response? The vast majority of voters stayed home to watch *Dancing with the Stars*.

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So why aren't we voting? There are always those who preach the ever-popular "my vote doesn't count" argument. This is a somewhat viable reason in federal elections with 30 million-plus people in Canada and a first-past-the-post system that often leaves large portions of voters unrepresented. But in civic politics, your vote does count. Look at some of the election results this year: in many cases, a few hundred votes separated new councillors from the also-rans.

Furthermore, the issues that a city government deals with—transportation, affordable housing, snow removal—affect your life immensely. In federal politics, issues like the war in Afghanistan or gay marriage really only affect some Canadians. Civic politics, on the other hand, have tremendous impact on your daily life.

Another excuse I heard from some of my co-workers was that they didn't know where to vote or who was running. Hello, people, this is the *Information Age*. Even Osama Bin Laden has Internet access, presumably. The city of Edmonton website was very useful to this end, with a handy tool that found the closest poll in each ward and a page with links to all the candidates' websites. Information was readily available. It was even a nice fall day on 15 October, so I can't understand the overwhelming level of apathy at the polls.

Political experts will argue that because the mayoral race was uninspiring, people weren't motivated to vote, but aren't the huge issues facing Edmonton in the near future enough to spur voting? The next three years could be the most significant in Edmonton's history. We're in the midst of an unprecedented economic boom, and landmark decisions will have to be made about downtown revitalization, a new arena, LRT expansion, river valley development, relationships with surrounding communities, arts and culture, public safety, policing, and much, much more. There will be a lot of controversial decisions made, and I refuse to believe that only 26 per cent of Edmonton cares about these issues.

It's at times like this when I think of the adage, "if you don't vote, you can't complain." Well, rest assured the three quarters of Edmontonians who didn't vote *will* be complaining over the next three years. When it takes extra time to get to work on overloaded buses, when gang violence creeps into suburbia, and when new downtown condos get approved, you can bet we'll hear the complainers—it just astounds me that they didn't want to be heard at the polls.

The right to vote is one of our greatest privileges in Canada—it's just a shame that only a quarter of us seem to realize that.

# Too many elections spoil the sauce

Every Tom, Dick, and Harry organization is trying to get me to vote, and with that much on my plate, it's just not possible for me to make informed choices



VICTOR  
VARGAS

While elections are a very important part of democracy, having too many is like eating too much ice cream: you'll get hypothermia and die a horrible death. And right now, the amount of elections on the average Canadian's plate is maddening.

Just by being an average U of A student, you'll have survived the Student Council by-elections and the municipal elections in the past month. Then, you'll have to be prepared to vote in the provincial elections and the Student Council elections after that. Of course, there's the possibility of a federal election that can pop up at any time, like an outbreak of democratic herpes.

Every club that you're a member of has an election that needs your vote, and any nationality you have may allow you to vote in that election. For instance, Poland has set up voting booths internationally, and Polish election fever has now gripped Britain of all places. Even your church may require you to put in a vote, even if it's for something lame like the Christmas committee.

All of these voting rituals would be easy if there was some kind democratic standard, but every single miniature democracy has reinvented the wheel and made a unique and different system.

For example, look at the position of president. Aside from being the "leader," seemingly every elected president has a vastly different purpose in every society, with varying powers.

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Some presidents have a veto; others don't have a vote because they chair meetings. There are presidents that choose staff, where other presidents require executive approval. All of this is subjective to the society that you're participating in and vastly changes the kind of person you want in that position, meaning in order to be a responsible voter, you have to understand the political processes of each organization you choose to vote for.

But perhaps the worst part about the number of elections is the saturation of politics. At least when there was a long

break between elections, people could go about their days without hearing a talking head blasting out insane rhetoric like "the left are all pinko commies" or "the right are selling out the nation." But now, where there's an election around every corner and a federal election can spring up at any moment, every day is campaign day. And as our American neighbours have proven, every dose of politics brings out the worst in people.

Even when Al Gore won the Nobel Peace Prize, the right-wing pundits couldn't stop for a moment to say "Good for him, he's brought honour and respectability to our country," because it risks conceding points to the Democrats. Instead, they can only bash him and claim that he didn't deserve the award in the first place. And it's all because partisanship trumps being a good person. After all, it's for the greater good.

With politics being pushed on all of us 24/7, responsible voters are being embittered towards other ideologies. I remember a time when I could have good and intelligent conversations with other people, with different opinions, without it descending into a screaming fest of "right-wing conspiracy" and "liberal media bias." I would like to be able to just vote once or twice every year so that I could make an informed decision instead of asking my magic 8-ball, but when every day is an election day, that's all I've really got time for.

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