

Voter Turnout Among First-Year University Students

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I. ABSTRACT

II. INTRODUCTION

A. Background of Voter Turnout Among University Students

According to Elections Canada, there is a significant voter turnout gap between younger and older demographics, as the agency found that results among the 18-to-24 age group was 28% lower than the 65-to-74 age group ("Canada's Elections: Youth Voting Trends"). Among this demographic, a significant portion consists of first-year university students who are newly eligible to vote. Lower turnout rates can be attributed to factors such as, a lack of education on the voting process, limited exposure to the political system, or a perception of disengagement from politics overall. To effectively participate in elections, civic participants are expected to not only have a general understanding of each party's political stance and values but also stay informed about the changing political climate and current events leading up to the election. However, the transition to university life can be overwhelming for many first-year students, leading them to opt-out of exercising their civic duty to vote. As a result, low voter turnout among this demographic remains a concern, and initiatives to educate and engage young voters are essential for creating a more inclusive and representative democracy.

B. Purpose and Intended Audience

The purpose of this report is to identify the gaps in first year university students' voter turnout in a General Election or by-election, and how to effectively educate students regarding the elections to, in turn, produce a growing trend towards higher participation rates among this demographic. The results are analysed, compared to, and supported by current research, and recommendations are made on how to better support first year university students to make informed decisions when voting in a Provincial General Election or by-election, and ultimately

increase voter turnout in this demographic. This report is intended for the Event Coordinator for the University of British Columbia's Alma Mater Society (AMS), Mishra Abhiudai.

C. Method of Inquiry and Data Sources

The primary sources of data for this report are derived from an anonymous survey shared with students attending the University of British Columbia. The data obtained from this survey is supplemented with statistics produced by Elections Canada regarding the Youth Voting Trends in Canada. Review of secondary sources was executed through academic articles, reports, and news articles related to voter turnout among post secondary students.

D. Scope of Inquiry

To form the driving motivation behind this report, the scope of inquiry was narrowed down to the following questions:

1. How informed are newly eligible voters regarding the voting process and political system prior to election?
2. What resources are provided by UBC to first-year students who are newly eligible to vote?
3. Are first-year students receptive to the resources provided by UBC?
4. What hindrances and obstacles do newly eligible voters face come election time?
5. What would be the most effective resource for this demographic in gaining knowledge for an election?

III. DATA COLLECTED

A. Existent Knowledge Before Election Day

"Before election day, how informed were you about..."

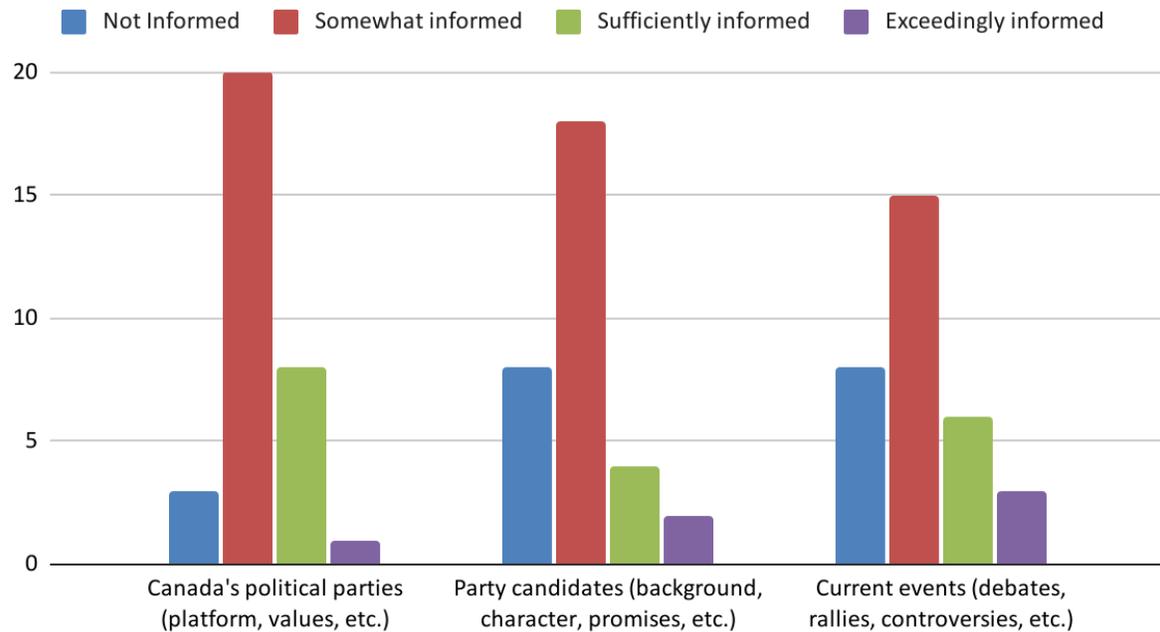


Figure 1. Existent Knowledge Before Election Day

Figure 1 demonstrates that when questioned about their existing knowledge of three separate categories of Canadian politics, an average of 55% of respondents declared that they were “somewhat informed” on each topic. To effectively participate in elections, civic participants are expected to not only have a general understanding of Canada’s political parties and candidates, but also stay informed about the changing political climate and current events leading up to the election.

Existent knowledge may derive from intergenerational political beliefs, education, or overall socialisation, which can lead first-time voters into thinking they are sufficiently informed about Canadian politics to vote. First time voters can also self-educate on social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, which are commonly used by university students and are

often the primary source of news and information for them. During election season, political parties and candidates heavily utilise social media to engage with voters and share their platforms, which can make it easier for students to stay informed.

The results of this survey (Figure 1) indicate that first-year university students who are newly-eligible voters in Canada are likely to be “somewhat informed” about Canada's political parties, the voting process, and current political events leading up to the elections due to their exposure to politics, engagement with campaigns, and social media usage.

B. Factors that Negatively Impact Voter Turnout

Scholars in this field found that life stress affects individuals' political behaviour dramatically and is a major reason why many people, especially first-year university students, may opt out of this civic duty (Hassell & Settle). The process of registering to vote, gaining a comprehensive understanding of Canadian politics, and participating in the voting process can be daunting, especially for those who are new to the system. As such, a portion of this survey analysed the hindrances first-year students may have experienced during the voting process.

"Please select which (if any) of the following describe the voting experience:"

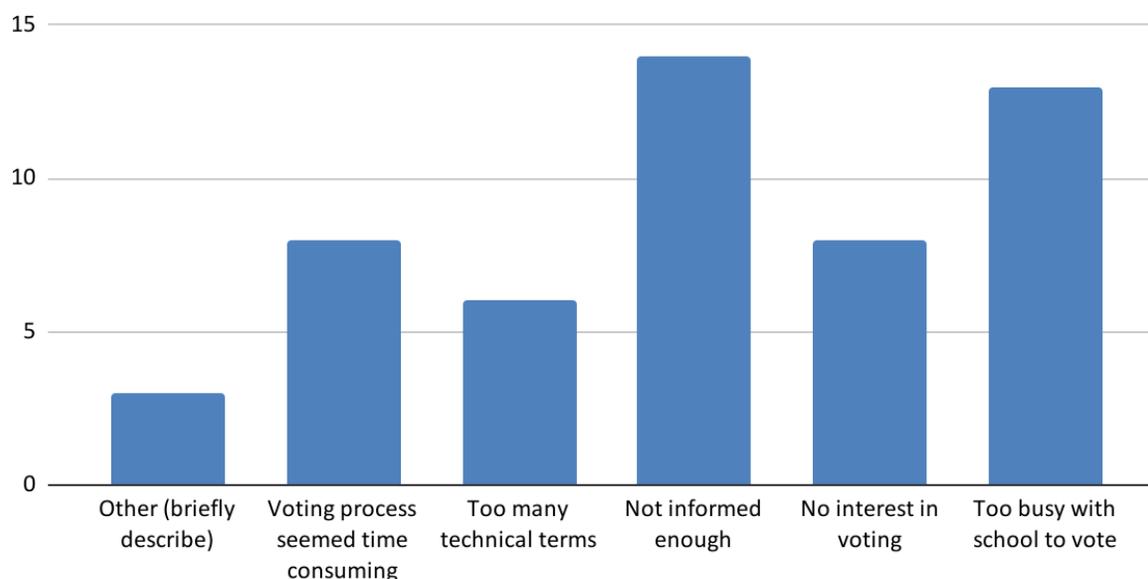


Figure 2. Factors that Negatively Impact Voter Turnout

The survey results indicated in Figure 2 disclose the various obstacles that first-year university students face when voting for the first time. Respondents most commonly selected that they were “not informed enough” or “too busy with school to vote.” The other response options were “no interest in voting,” “too many technical terms,” and “voting process seemed time consuming,” but these options received relatively low percentages of responses.

The survey result indicates that almost 27% of the respondents believed they were “not informed enough” during the election period. This suggests that first-year university students may be focused on their increased workload and overall shift to university life, which leaves little time for keeping up with the latest news and current events about politics. As a result, they may feel uninformed and unsure about who to vote for, which can discourage them from participating in the electoral process. Especially as a first time voter, first-year university students are particularly uninformed about the voting process.

The survey also indicated that 25% of respondents were “too busy with school to vote”. University students, especially in their first year, are often busy with their academic responsibilities, such as attending lectures, writing assignments, and preparing for exams. This can leave them with little time or energy to engage in political activities, such as attending rallies or tuning into candidates’ debates or campaigns. In addition, some students may have part-time jobs or club meetings, which further reduces the time they have available for political activities. As a result, they may feel that they do not have enough time to take part in the election. On the day of the election, voters must also allocate sufficient time to participate in the voting process. This includes travelling to the polling station, presenting identification, and waiting in line if necessary.

C. Effective Resources

It is important for universities to provide resources regarding elections as it helps to promote political engagement and participation among students, especially first-year students who are voting for the first time. By providing resources, universities can help to educate newly-eligible voters about the political process and the importance of voting, which can encourage them to become more involved in civic affairs. While it is imperative that universities educate students about elections and Canadian politics, it is only effective if they deliver this information in a way that students will be receptive and engaged.

"What types of resources did your university provide? Select all that apply."

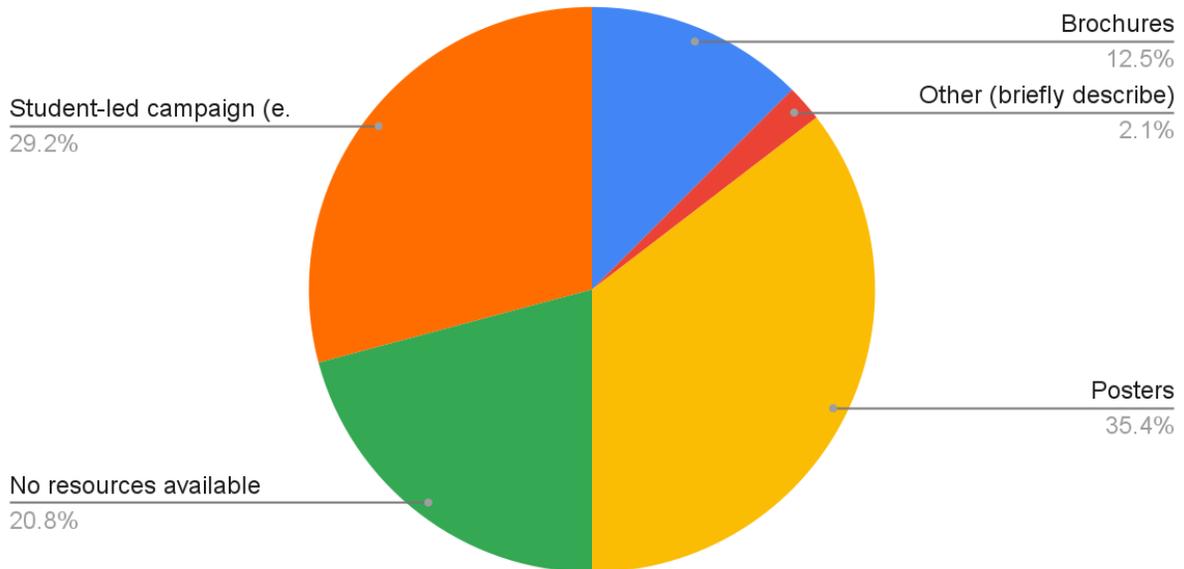


Figure 3. University Provided Resources

"What resources were independently accessed for the election?"

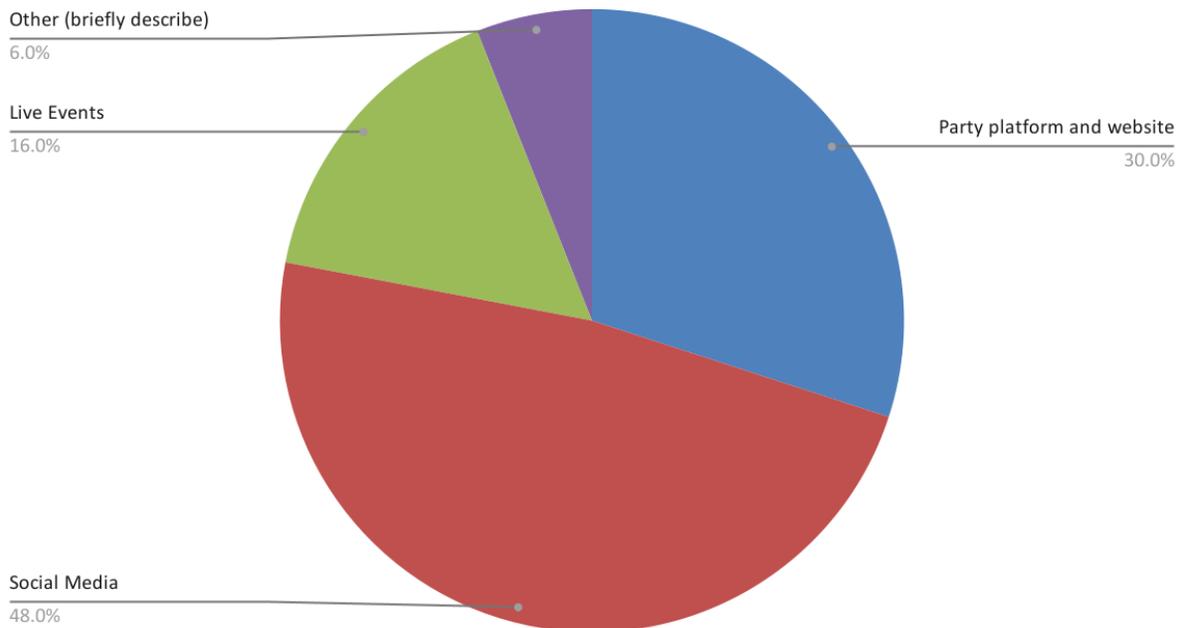


Figure 4. Independently Assessed Resources

Figure 3 indicates how 35% of respondents received information from their university regarding elections through posters. However, Figure 4 indicates that 48% of respondents independently accessed information through social media. While universities are mostly providing information through posters, the results from the survey suggest that first-year university students are more engaged in social media resources. In fact, when asked to describe the most ideal resource in gaining knowledge for an election, 78% of respondents included social media in their response.

IV. CONCLUSION

A. Summary and Overall Interpretation of Findings

The study aimed to identify the gaps in first year university students' voter turnout in a General Election or by-election, and how to effectively educate students regarding the elections to, in turn, increase voter turnout in this demographic. The survey conducted among UBC students revealed that the average university student is only "somewhat informed" about Canadian politics, with 27% of the respondents indicating that they were "not informed enough" during the election period. It is also imperative to note that 25% of respondents found that they were "too busy with school to vote".

The current programs and resources at UBC were found to be unparalleled with the resources UBC students find themselves most receptive to. While 35% of respondents received information from their university regarding elections through posters, 78% of respondents declare social media as the most effective and ideal resource for gaining knowledge about the election and Canadian politics.

B. Proposed Solutions for Improving Voter Turnout Among First-Year University Students who are Newly-Eligible to Vote

Several solutions have been formulated for the major gaps identified in this study, namely that students believe they are not sufficiently informed enough and that they do not have enough time to vote. UBC's Alma Mater Society (AMS) can host an event on campus for all students to attend, where a representative from each political party has their own forum and briefly describes their party platform. For those who seek a more simplified and less time-consuming resource, UBC can send one supplementary email that is informative, easily-digestible and concise. The email will act as a digital version of the event, where the party platform is outlined. Contact information of party representatives will also be provided in the case that students desire more

information. As a result, first-year students will be provided an equal, unbiased amount of information among all the political parties in Canada to equip them with the resources needed to execute their civic duty and ultimately, increase voter turnout. Key points in the email and event can easily be transformed into a social media post for Instagram, Twitter and TikTok for those who prefer Social Media as a platform for learning.

These measures can improve the accessibility and effectiveness of existing programs and resources. It is imperative for the AMS, which represents and serves the student body, to prioritise these issues and take action to improve the voter turnout among first-year students who are newly-eligible to vote. As a result, the AMS can have a significant positive impact on the UBC political climate and promote an informed body of students.

V. APPENDICES

VI. REFERENCES

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