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VARIATION IN TURNOUT BY ALBERTA ELECTORAL DIVISION

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Prepared for:

Elections Alberta

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1.0 Introduction

Voter turnout in provincial elections can be affected by a number of factors, including the issues in the election, timing of the election, the weather on voting day, and the perceived closeness of the race.

With every election, there are variations in voter turnout from one electoral division to the next, and Alberta's provincial elections are no exception.

This document examines one aspect of the voter turnout, that is, the closeness of the race in each electoral division. Below, we examine the variations in voter turnout among Alberta's 83 divisions over the past four provincial elections: 1993, 1997, 2001 and 2004.

2.0 Voter turnout in recent elections

Turnout for Alberta Elections has been relatively low compared to other provinces. In part, this reflects the dominance of a single party over the last three decades. It may be that many eligible voters assume that the outcome of the election is a forgone conclusion, and that whether or not they vote will not change this outcome. However, voters may think that they are able to affect the outcome in particular Electoral Divisions.

As stated above, voter turnout for Alberta provincial elections is relatively low compared to that in other provinces. In the last provincial election, the turnout in Alberta was 44.7% almost ten percentage points lower than that in Manitoba (54.1%) which had the next lowest turnout among recent provincial elections. Indeed, in many provinces the turnout ranges from high-60% to low-70%. Although during the last election the voter turnout in Alberta was lower than normal, since the late 1970s the voter turnout in Alberta has averaged in the mid-50% range.

Figure 1 shows the voter turnout for the last five provincial elections. While up slightly in 1993 and then down in 2004, the average voter turnout hovers somewhere in the mid-50% range.

Voter Turnout in Alberta Provincial Elections 1989-2004

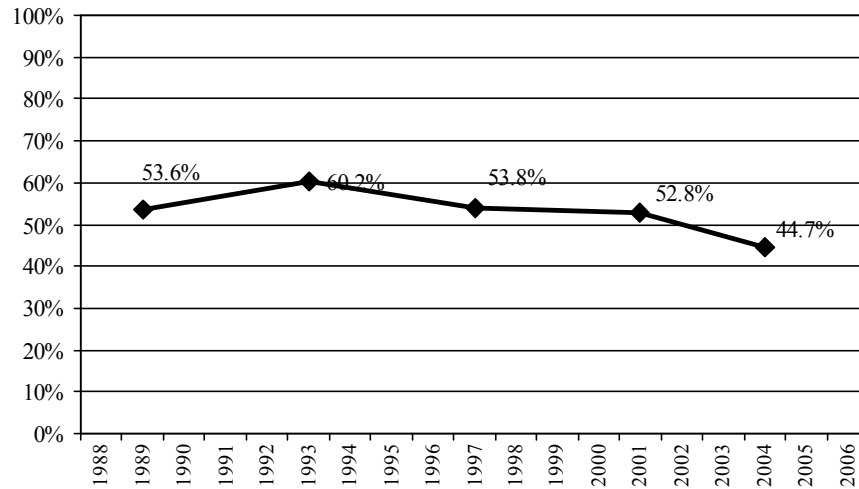


Figure 1

2.1 Voter turnout and competitiveness

There are many theories as to why voter turnout fluctuates. A popular theory suggests that *“nothing attracts a crowd so quickly as a fight.”*¹ In other words, voter turnout is higher in competitive, closely-fought elections.²

Below, we explore how the closeness of the race in electoral divisions affected voter turnout in Alberta over the last four provincial elections. We calculated the margin of victory that indicates the closeness of the race as *“the difference between the number of votes won by the winning candidate and his or her nearest rival, expressed as a percent of the total votes cast for all*

¹ Schattschnieder, E.E. (1960). *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America*. p.1.

² This hypothesis was tested in a 2001 study that involved an analysis of the “margin of victory” in the 10 highest and 10 lowest voter turnout divisions, and it revealed that voter turnout was generally higher in divisions where the margin of victory was narrow, and lower where the margin of victory, or plurality, was large. Massicotte, Louis, and Brochu, Edith, (2001). “Elections federales des novembre: coup de loupe sur un scrutiny,” *Le Devoir*, February 26, 2001. p. A7. Cited by Centre for Research and Information on Canada (2001). “Voter Participation in Canada: Is Canadian Democracy in Crisis?” *The CRIC Papers* No. 3, p.8, note 12.

candidates in the constituency.”³ For the purposes of this study, we refer to it as the “proportional plurality” of the winner.

Table 1 shows the voting turnout and the average proportional plurality, that is, the number of votes separating the winner from the second place runner-up as a percentage of all votes cast. If the theory is correct, one might expect that when a provincial race is tighter (that is, has a lower average proportional plurality), the voter turnout will be higher.

Examining the last four provincial elections seems to indicate that this theory holds true for some elections, but not for others. In 1993, voter turnout was at its highest and the proportional plurality was at its lowest.⁴ However, in subsequent elections there does not appear, at least for the province as a whole, a link between proportional plurality and voter turnout overall.

Election	Average proportional plurality	Voter turnout
2004	23.6%	44.7%
2001	35.6%	52.8%
1997	23.1%	53.8%
1993	18.8%	60.2%

Data: Elections Alberta. Calculations: PRA.

Voter turnout and proportional plurality vary significantly by electoral division. Indeed, a study of the federal election found a strong link between voter turnout and proportional plurality.⁵ Electoral divisions with close races tend to have higher turnouts,

³ Endersby, James W., Galatas, Steven E., and Rackaway, Chapman B. (2002) have suggested that more complex measures of closeness than simple plurality (the difference in votes between the first and second-place candidate) are appropriate in elections with strong multiple candidates. Centre for Research and Information on Canada, (2001). “Voter Participation in Canada: Is Canadian Democracy in Crisis?” The CRIC Papers No. 3, p.8. note 12. As Alberta electoral divisions tend to be two-way contests, our analysis will use the simple plurality to measure closeness.

⁴ This anomalous voter turnout in 1993 may be explained by the closely fought Progressive Conservative Party’s leadership race that saw Ralph Klein elected as leader in December 1992. A provincial election followed shortly after that (June 1993). Although speculative, the general interest in the leadership race and new leader may have increased voter turnout. The election was more closely fought than most others have been in the province, with the Liberals taking 32 seats (quadruple the 8 they had in 1989).

⁵ Ibid. In the top 10 divisions with the highest voter turnout, the average margin of victory was 21.0% while the average turnout was 60.3% (p. 43). In the lowest 10 turnout divisions, the average margin of victory was 30.7% and the average voter turnout was only 31.4% (p. 44).

while those with wide margins of victory tend to have lower turnouts.⁶

To see if similar patterns exist in Alberta, we examined the top 10 Alberta electoral divisions in terms of their highest and lowest voter turnout over the last four provincial elections.

2.1.1 Lowest voter turnout

Table 2 shows that there is a correspondence between voter turnout and the average proportional plurality in the top 10 electoral divisions in terms of low voter turnout. For example, in 2004, in the 10 divisions with the lowest voter turnout (average 31.4%), the average proportional plurality was 30.7%. In other words, the gap between the winning candidate and the second place candidate was large, representing almost one-third of the votes cast. This same pattern has existed across the last four elections, although prior to the 2004 election, the average turnout was higher (reflecting the higher overall turnout in the earlier elections.)

Election	Average proportional plurality	Average voter turnout
2004	30.7%	31.4%
2001	39.5%	40.7%
1997	24.9%	40.6%
1993	21.0%	49.9%

Data: Elections Alberta. Calculations: PRA.

While Table 2 suggests that the closeness of the race plays a role in voter turnout, the proportional plurality varies tremendously among these ten divisions. For example, in 2004, the proportional plurality in the 10 electoral divisions with the lowest voter turnout ranges from 4% to 49%.

⁶ Endersby et. al. (2002). “Closeness Counts in Canada: Voter Participation in the 1993 and 1997 Federal Elections”. *The Journal of Politics*. Vol 64. No. 2. p. 610-631.

2.1.2 Highest voter turnout

Table 3 shows the average voter turnout and proportional plurality in the 10 electoral divisions that received the highest voter turnout in the last four provincial elections. For example, in 2004, the average proportional plurality in the 10 electoral divisions with the highest voter turnout (average 55.8%) was 18.6%. However, the difference is not as dramatic as might be expected given findings in other studies. Indeed, in elections prior to 2004, the average proportional plurality in the 10 highest voter turnout divisions is no more than six percentage points lower than those with the lowest voter turnout.

Election	Average proportional plurality	Average voter turnout
2004	18.6%	55.8%
2001	32.5%	62.6%
1997	18.7%	62.5%
1993	20.4%	68.6%

Data: Elections Alberta. Calculations: PRA.

Again, the averages conceal the fact that the proportional plurality in the electoral divisions with high voter turnout ranges greatly. For example, in 2004, the proportional plurality in these divisions ranged from 3% to 44%.

2.1.3 Highest and Lowest proportional plurality

Another method of examining turnout is to consider those electoral divisions with the lowest proportional plurality. The tables below show the 10 divisions with the highest and lowest proportional plurality, as well as the average voter turnout in each. If the closeness of the race theory holds, we would expect that those divisions with the lowest proportional plurality should have higher than average turnouts. Conversely, those electoral divisions with the highest proportional plurality should have lower than average turnouts.

In the last four elections, in the 10 electoral divisions with the lowest proportional plurality, the difference between the first and second place candidates averaged less than 5% of all the votes cast. Given the closeness of these races, we would expect that the turnout in these electoral divisions would be higher than the provincial average. In fact, the average voter turnout in the 10

divisions with the closest races is similar to that of the provincial turnout in each of the past four elections. For example, as shown in Table 4, the turnout in the 10 divisions with the lowest proportional plurality (46.2%) is just two percentage points higher than the provincial turnout (44.7%) overall.

Table 4: Average voter turnout versus average proportional plurality – top 10 <u>low</u> plurality Alberta divisions 1993 – 2004			
Election	Average proportional plurality	Average voter turnout	
		10 low plurality divisions	Province
2004	2.6%	46.2%	44.7%
2001	3.7%	52.8%	52.8%
1997	4.6%	54.6%	53.8%
1993	2.9%	56.6%	60.2%

Data: Elections Alberta. Calculations: PRA.

Table 5 shows the average proportional plurality and turnout in the 10 electoral divisions that received the highest proportional plurality in the last four provincial elections. Given a high proportional plurality, meaning that the second place candidate was well behind the winner in terms of votes, one would expect the turnout to be significantly less than the provincial average. However, the turnout in these divisions varies little from that of the province overall. In fact, in some cases the turnout for these 10 divisions is higher than the provincial average.

Table 5: Average voter turnout versus average proportional plurality - top 10 <u>high</u> proportional plurality Alberta divisions 1993 – 2004			
Election	Average proportional plurality	Average voter turnout	
		10 low plurality divisions	Province
2004	47.4%	43.3%	44.7%
2001	62.6%	55.0%	52.8%
1997	52.9%	52.8%	53.8%
1993	45.7%	62.0%	60.2%

Data: Elections Alberta. Calculations: PRA.

Both Tables 4 and 5 suggest that the closeness of the race is not a factor in voter turnout in Alberta provincial elections.

Figures 2 through 5 show the voter turnout by proportional plurality in each of Alberta's 83 electoral divisions for the past four provincial elections. There seems to be little correlation between the turnout in an electoral division and the proportional plurality. In other words, there does not appear to be a strong connection between the closeness of the race and voter turnout in Alberta electoral divisions.

Turnout and proportional plurality by electoral division: Alberta 2004

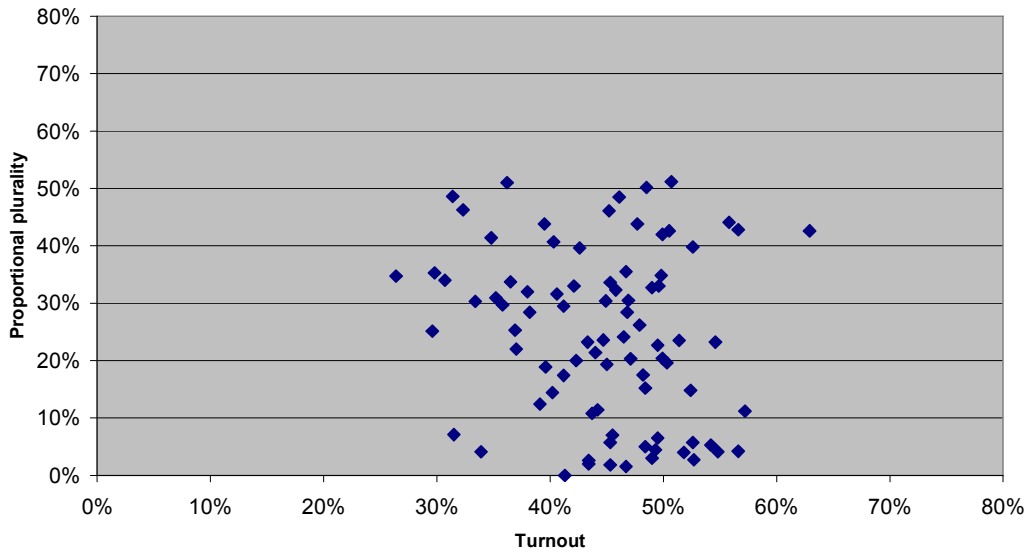


Figure 2

Proportional plurality and turnout by electoral division: Alberta 2001

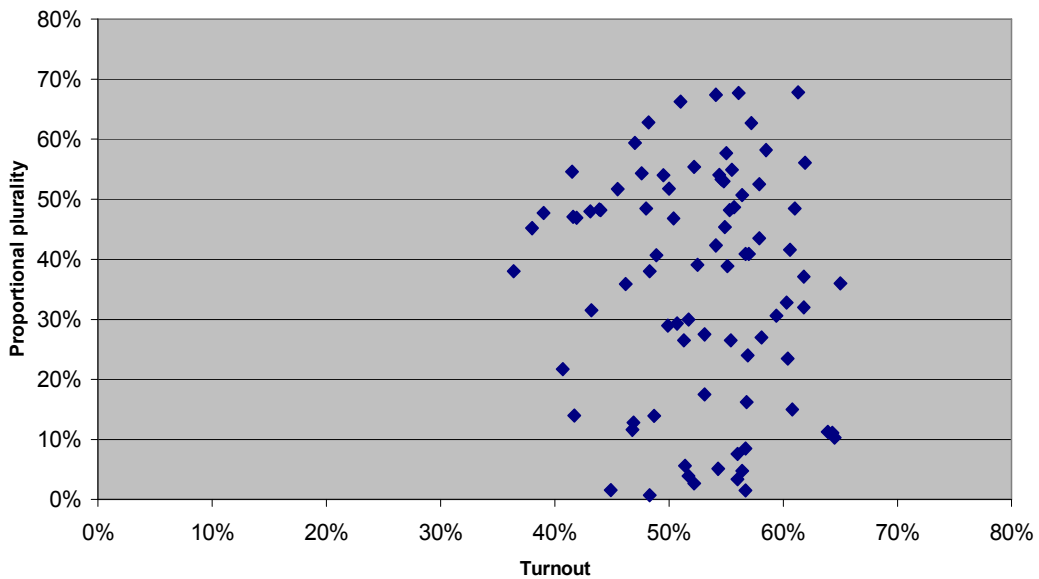


Figure 3

Turnout and proportional plurality by electoral division: Alberta 1997

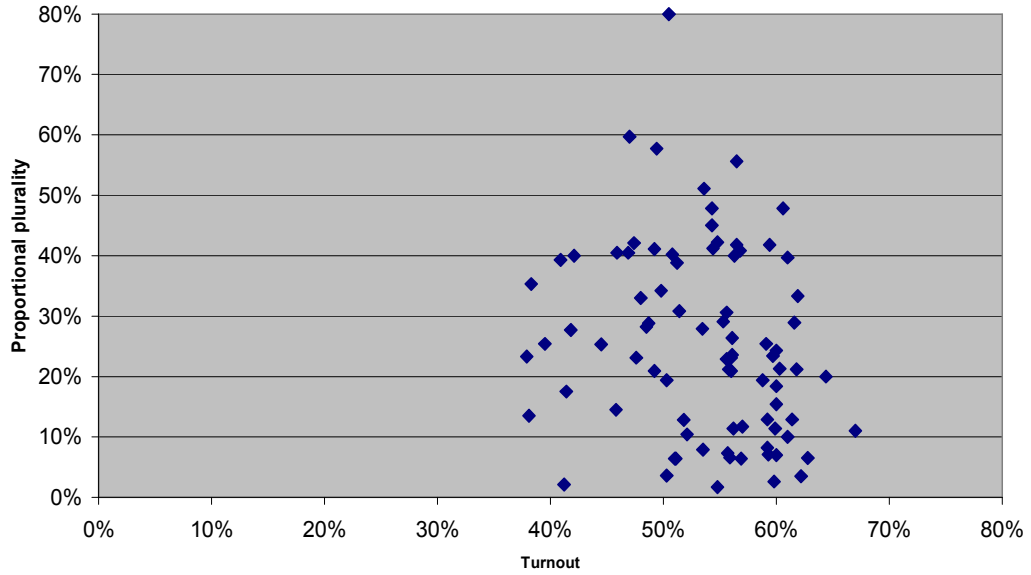


Figure 4

Proportional plurality and turnout by electoral division: Alberta 1993

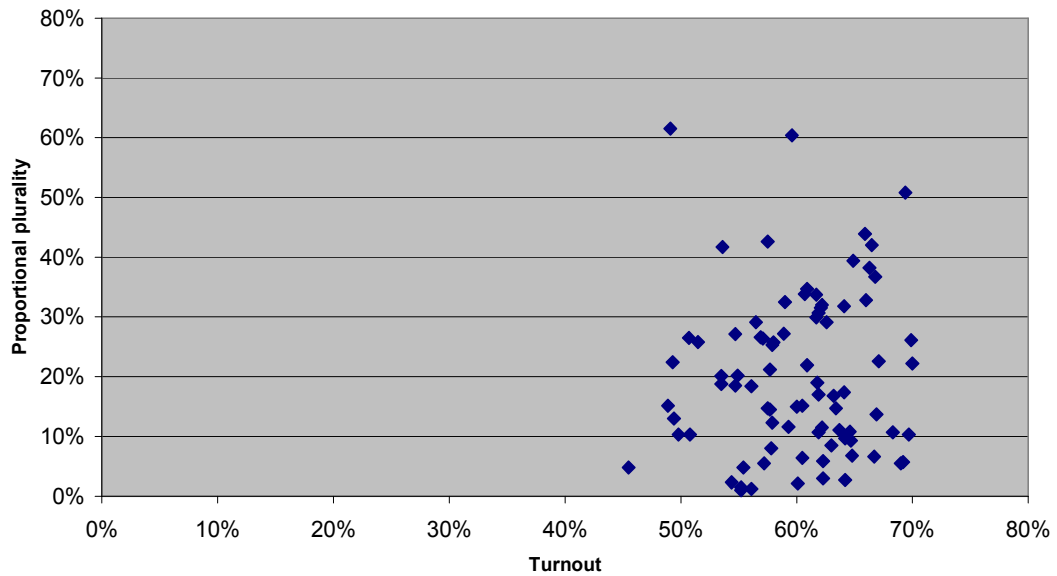


Figure 5

2.2 Persistence of low voter turnout

While proportional plurality does not necessarily play a role in voter turnout in Alberta provincial elections, there does appear to be a pattern of voter turnout by division.

The persistence of low voter turnout in divisions from one election to the next is shown in Table 6. The top 10 electoral divisions for low voter turnout are fairly consistent, although not uniform, from one election to the next, with five of these top 10 divisions in the 2004 elections also appearing in the top 10 rankings for the previous three elections. These are Calgary-Montrose, Calgary-Cross, Peace River, Calgary-Buffalo, and Calgary-McCall.⁷ Several other divisions have also consistently been in the top 10 electoral divisions for low voter turnout for three of the last four elections: Red Deer North; Calgary-Fort and Calgary-East.

Electoral division	2004	2001	1997	1993
Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo/Fort McMurray	X	X		X
Calgary-Montrose	X	X	X	X
Calgary-Cross	X	X	X	X
Peace River	X	X	X	X
Lesser Slave Lake	X		X	
Calgary-Buffalo	X	X	X	X
Bonnyville-Cold Lake	X			
Calgary-Fort	X	X	X	
Calgary-McCall	X	X	X	X
Calgary-Hays	X			
Red Deer North		X	X	X
Calgary-East		X	X	X
Livingstone-Macleod		X	X	
Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan			X	
Calgary Mountain View				X
Edmonton-Norwood				X

Data: Elections Alberta. Calculations: PRA.

⁷ Note that these are not exact comparisons as election boundaries have changed over time.

Table 7 shows the degree of persistence among the top 10 high voter turnout electoral divisions for the past four elections. In contrast to Table 6, there is considerably less consistency in the top 10 rankings of high voter turnout from one election to the next, with only one division appearing in the rankings for all four elections: Olds-Didsbury. The divisions of Edmonton-Riverview, Edmonton-Gold Bar, St. Albert, Edmonton-Whitemud, Barrhead-Westlock, and Vegreville-Viking have appeared among the top 10 high voter turnout divisions in three of the last four elections.⁸

Table 7: Top 10 high voter turnout Alberta electoral divisions by election year				
Electoral division	2004	2001	1997	1993
Edmonton-Riverview	X	X	X	
Sherwood Park	X	X		
Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills*	X	X	X	X
Edmonton-Glenora	X			
Edmonton-Gold Bar	X	X	X	
Dunvegan-Central Peace	X			
Edmonton-Rutherford	X			
Calgary-Varsity	X			
St. Albert	X	X	X	
Edmonton-Whitemud	X		X	X
Barrhead-Westlock		X	X	X
Vegreville-Viking		X	X	X
Calgary Elbow		X		
Drayton Valley-Calmar		X	X	
Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert		X		
Lac La Biche-St. Paul			X	
Chinook				X
Pincher Creek-Macleod				X
Calgary-Glenmore				X
Calgary-Lougheed				X
Calgary-Foothills				X
Calgary-Elbow				X
Data: Elections Alberta. Calculations: PRA.				
* Formerly the Electoral Division of Olds-Didsbury (1993)				

⁸ Again, while the names of the Divisions are the same, the geography may have changed from election to election.

3.0 Conclusion

This research suggests that, in Alberta, there is not a strong link between the closeness of the race at the provincial electoral division level and voter turnout. This disconnect may exist because eligible voters assume that whether or not they vote the outcome of the provincial election will remain the same. This research also suggests that consistent high or low voter turnout in specific divisions, from election to election, is not necessarily a function of the closeness of the race. Rather, it could be the result of specific demographic characteristics of the electorate in these divisions.