

# Municipal elections hard sell

## Turnout of 40% considered high

BY ROY GREEN  
Staff Writer

There's an urban legend about a man showing up at the polls at a municipal election in a small Ontario town demanding to know why he couldn't cast his vote for Royal LePage.

Even if it isn't true, it is at least a near-truth in the suggestion people will vote for any old name on a sign during an election.

But at least this apocryphal voter went to the polls, something fewer and fewer people seem to be doing.

In the just-completed provincial election, Dalton McGuinty's Liberals tallied 1.9 million votes, the Tories about 1.3 million and the NDP about 650,000. But apathy was the real winner, with about 3.9 million Ontarians choosing to stay away from the polls.

About 55 per cent of eligible voters participated in the election, which is not a record low, but is less than the 58.3 per cent recorded in the 1999 provincial election and the 61.3 per cent average from Ontario elections from 1980 to 1999. The only province in which fewer people vote is Alberta, which had an average turnout of 56.2 per cent over that period. And this was in spite of an Elections Ontario TV advertising campaign, backed up by print ads in 26 languages.

It's clear ... there's a tremendous amount of cynicism that votes don't count, in which case you need to raise

awareness about that," said John Wright, a senior vice-president at the polling firm Ipsos-Reid.

The decline in Ontario is part of an overall decrease across Canada.

While 5.25 million people voted for the Liberal Party of Canada in the 2000 federal election, 8.25 million did not vote at all, according to Fair Vote Canada. National voter turnout has gone from 77 per cent in the 1972 federal election to 61 per cent in 2000.

### LACK OF INTEREST

A report conducted by the federal government last March asked non-voters about their reasons for not marking a ballot. The top reasons given were lack of interest in the election, negative attitudes toward politics and personal or administrative factors.

And the situation is even worse in municipal elections, where the average voter turnout is 30 to 35 per cent.

Even with some hot mayoralty races, the voter turnout in York Region's nine municipalities in 2000 averaged a little more than 40 per cent.

"One of the best election results in my ward achieved over 35 per cent and that was considered a good turnout," said Richmond Hill Councillor Vito Spatafora. "Usually, it's closer to 25 per cent, only a quarter of the people and that's pretty pathetic."

Newmarket Regional Councillor Diane Humeniuk agrees.

"You get a much lower turnout municipally, even though the municipal government is the closest to the voter," she said. "People feel their vote isn't going to make a difference, but it does," she added.

A specialist in urban politics believes it is an unusual situation. "Voter turnout in municipal elections is a real paradox," said Ryerson University professor Myer Siemiatycki. "Of all our levels of government, we make it hardest to cast an intelligent ballot at the municipal level."

Party politics at the federal and provincial levels make it easier to decide, he said. Municipal voters, by contrast, vote for a mayor, ward councillors and school board trustees, none of whom run on official party labels.

Richmond Hill Councillor Nick Papa said low voter turnout is not always a sign of voter apathy.

"A lot of newcomers don't understand the system. I can sense it when I go around knocking on doors. It's not that they don't want to vote, they just don't understand it."

A brief and unscientific telephone sampling of voters in York Region this week revealed only two of 15 respondents knew the candidates in their ridings and only one knew who would get her vote.

"I will go out and vote for a candidate in my riding because she responded to a concern I had at one time," said Doris Dobson of Woodbridge.

The more common response was more like that of Stouffville's Gerry Meharg.

"I don't follow municipal elections," Mr. Meharg said. "I vote provincially, but I don't even know who's running municipally."

**"I'll vote provincially, but I don't even know who's running municipally"**

Gerry Meharg  
Stouffville resident



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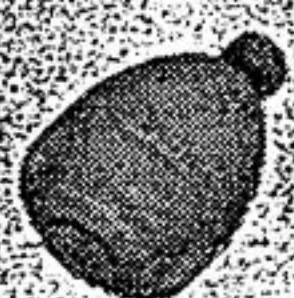
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