What Idle Political Scientists can Learn from TV's Canadian Idol

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ABSTRACT

Since 2003, the audience participation television series *Canadian Idol* has featured young karaoke singers from across Canada being removed one-by-one from competition based on viewer televoting each week. The hugely popular show is one of many local versions based on a franchise that began in the UK as *Pop Idol* and achieved success in the USA as *American Idol*. The franchise has attracted such an enthusiastic following that voting outcomes are often treated as hard news in local media outlets.

Viewers span a range of age cohorts and those who vote for an *Idol* contestant may not cast a ballot for a political candidate. This idiosyncrasy is a prime research opportunity, given that federal election turnout has been declining and alarmingly low among youth in particular. This discussion paper provides the basis for primary research into what political scientists can learn from *Canadian Idol*. Ultimately, it provides a foundation for answering the question: do reality TV voters also vote in general elections?

"What Idle Political Scientists can Learn from TV's Canadian Idol"

How is it that some citizens can react so differently to two national contests? One opportunity involves casting a vote in a federal election towards selecting a legislator, indirectly electing the head of government, and influencing the government's policy direction. The other situation allows repeat voting in weekly elimination rounds as part of a televised talent show where the winning contestant is awarded a music recording contract. Although they both vote it seems that electors in a Canadian general election and as part of audience participation television programming are different creatures. On the one hand we might have a male baby boomer who listens to CBC radio on the way to work, feels a civic responsibility to vote in public elections, and is irritated by fanfare about the tasteless *Canadian Idol* television series. This person is clearly different than a young adult female who seeks entertainment on television each evening, feels that politicians talk over her head, and actively urges her friends to vote for an *Idol* rising star. Both are equal citizens but their choice of voting contests means that one of them is prone to receiving better legislative representation.

This paper provides a foundation to better understand *Canadian Idol* television viewers' attitudes towards politics. Particular attention is paid to young citizens and *Idol* fanatics who repeatedly vote because this may offer insights into ways to stem lower elector turnout rates in Canadian elections. What can the literature tell us about reality television viewers? Just what is it about *Idol* that motivates some federal non-voters to vote over and over again for karaoke singers? What is it about *Idol* that excites some of these citizens and what is it about politics that turns them off?

Turnout in Canadian Federal Elections

A declining proportion of Canadians have been voting in federal elections. It seems that growing numbers of electors believe that selecting a Member of Parliament who represents them in the House of Commons and helping to decide the party government is a less important task than it used to be. Between WWII and the 1988 free trade election Canadian democracy was considered relatively vibrant because roughly three-quarters of registered electors were voting. Since then, however, turnout has been steadily waning and the new norm hovers near the three-fifths mark. Moreover, it is often noted that because there are people whom Elections Canada has been unable to include on its list of electors that in reality barely over half of eligible Canadians are voting (for example, Milner, 2005).

The worsening participation has provoked considerable media and academic discussion. Much is made of Canadians being turned off by politics and surveys repeatedly indicate that Canadians feel that politicians are untrustworthy. In a 2006 poll, respondents were asked to consider whether they trusted politicians, and placed them last on a list of 22 professions (Léger Marketing, 2006). At 14 percent, this occupation scored slightly behind car salespeople and ranked considerably lower than unionists, publicists, real estate agents, insurance brokers and lawyers. Conversely, almost all respondents said they trusted fire fighters, nurses and farmers.

Low turnout is often reasoned by arguments that one vote does not impact the outcome, that there are many safe party seats, and that modern electors are simply too busy to cast a ballot. The single member plurality (SMP) electoral system receives blame, because it requires effort to understand the strategic implications of a vote, and encourages parties to concentrate their

resources in winnable ridings (Milner, 1997). True, overall turnout in the 2006 general election increased to 64.7 percent from the all-time low of 60.9 percent in 2004, and it may well be that simply "throwing the bums out" motivates more people to vote.[1] But it is disturbing that key bodies of research have been demonstrating that youth, or more specifically 18-29 year olds, are consistently least likely to vote and that this downward trend is expected to continue.

An elector's age is the strongest predictor of voting and the contrast between age cohorts is stark. For instance, 83.3 percent of Canadians who were 68 years and older voted in 2000, compared to just 22.4 percent of 18-20 year olds and 27.5 percent of 21-24 year olds (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003b). Generally speaking, non-voters of all ages are less likely to be on the official list of electors, but more likely to have lower income, to be new to Canada, to have lived a shorter period of time in a community, and to not be contacted by a political party. Attitudinal measures such as sense of civic duty and political interest are also strongly correlated with turnout. Young non-voters are strikingly more likely to say that they are too busy to vote than are older non-voters.

This is cause for concern. It does not bode well for a healthy democracy because larger proportions of youth may continue to be non-voters as they grow older. In Pammett and LeDuc's view, Canada is faced with "a younger generation withdrawing or partially withdrawing from politics" (2003a: 11) that votes for the first time at a later age than earlier generations did; this has led them to caution that "a syndrome of non-participation is in danger of developing among many Canadian youth" (2006: 14). There is thus apprehension about the current vibrancy of the country's democracy which, Martinez and Gill add, "could be an indicator of the degrading health of civic society in Canada" (2006: 344). Turnout levels matter because political inequalities are the seeds of non-egalitarian and elitist governance. Mass parties communicate election pledges on the basis of what will get the most votes and, particularly in an SMP system, if fewer young people vote then public policies are more likely to reflect older citizens' concerns. A healthy pluralistic society needs members of all types of demographic cohorts participating, be this as voters on Election Day, within political parties, or as part of pressure groups.

This is why I suspect that it would be worthwhile to study voting that occurs as part of audience participation shows like *Canadian Idol*. Presumably a large number of viewers who vote each week in this karaoke competition, who promote a candidate within their social networks, and who derive a sense of community pride from the show do not similarly participate in a federal election. Granted, many viewers are too young to hold the franchise, and there is some evidence that turnout decline among young people has less to do with a supposed cultural shift than it does a lack of political competitiveness in Canadian federal politics (Johnston *et al.*, 2006). But if news coverage is any indication there are just as many adults who get caught up in *Idol* mania. The audience presents political scientists with two core study groups: the show's youngest viewers who are learning about voting and the show's adult voters who do not vote federally.

[1] In the five federal elections since the Great Depression that a Liberal government has been replaced by the Conservative party, turnout has increased over the previous campaign by between 3.8 and 6.6 percent (a mean of +5.38). However there has been no consistent turnout trend over the same period in the four instances that Canadians have thrown out Conservative administrations.

This fresh subject angle is generally absent from academic literature and has not yet been considered in a Canadian context. To establish the viability of a larger research project I proceed to provide some background information on citizen engagement in the modern television era and about reality television. I outline the programming format and establish its mass appeal. I then analyze the show from a psephological and political communications perspective to identify what political science can learn from this social phenomenon.

Citizen Engagement and Television

For some time now the Canadian government has been concerned about eroding citizen engagement. In particular, the public's rejection of the Charlottetown constitutional accord in a 1992 national referendum despite nearly uniform support from political and business elites was interpreted as a reflection of an erosion of trust in public officials and institutions. This, political scandals, a difficult economic situation, and the 1995 Quebec sovereignty referendum nudged the federal government towards rebuilding relations with disenchanted Canadians. Studies were conducted throughout that decade to explore how citizens should be consulted in the development of public policy, how they could be involved in public or private programs, about their views of government, and how they might be encouraged to participate in their community (for example, Department of Justice, 2001). There also continues to be a parallel focus on stimulating youth contributions to public decision-making (for example, Canada25, 2007). Yet trust in government officials was again damaged in the early 2000s by the sponsorship scandal whose details emerged as federal politicians were beginning to address a "democratic deficit" in Parliament.

Turnout in public elections may reflect confidence in public institutions and can be a good indicator of how engaged the electorate is in how they are governed. The aforementioned concerns about youth participation are exacerbated by political communications that are largely directed at middle-aged and older voters. One consideration is that technology is fundamentally reshaping the way that youth (in particular) interact with others. They increasingly access more video content differently in an era of time-shifted satellite programming, viral emails, YouTube file sharing and portable iPods. They may not know their neighbours, but they might play video games online with strangers in foreign lands, or freely share personal details on a social network such as Facebook. Why mingle at a shopping mall when you can shop on eBay, download a movie to a laptop, and chat with friends through MSN? It is this generation that obtains political information through new media (Tedesco, 2006) and which is more likely to become politically engaged through the Internet than by participating in a public demonstration (D-Code, 2006). Today's youth have fewer reasons to physically venture away from home to be an active participant within their sense of community.

As older generations struggle to keep up with the outburst of online media their political attention will continue to be directed towards television. It remains the most powerful of mediums for it informs viewers in an interesting, emotional and memorable way. TV has enabled political leaders to simultaneously join citizens in their living rooms across the country for a half century now. The technology long ago displaced constituency men standing on tree stumps while delivering long speeches and offering patronage. Diefenbaker used it to end two decades of Liberal rule in 1957. It fed Trudeaumania in the late 1960s, provided the forum for Mulroney to scold a speechless Turner in 1984, and scared the softest New Democrats in the final days of the 2004 campaign to vote Liberal. There is an ever-expanding video emphasis on personalities,

image, and soundbites. Political strategists routinely leverage television's strengths by choosing symbols, using props, promoting key messages, planning backgrounds, and investing in provocative advertising campaigns. Gradually they are directing this expertise to new media.

Some believe that as a consequence politics has crossed over into the entertainment industry. Politicians rehearse zingers for Question Period, hobnob with celebrities, and have long appeared on game, comedy and talk shows (Mullins 2006). Elections have come to resemble a televised talent show and there is increasing tabloid-like interest in politicians' personal lives (Corner and Pels, 2003), although much less so in Canada than in the US or Britain. CBC programs such as *Royal Canadian Air Farce* and *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* regularly lampoon politicians. Reporters file stories about mudslinging, salivate at campaign gaffes, and produce filler such as features on party leaders' fashion sense. Such sensationalism does seem to make credible journalists more determined to investigate serious matters, to prepare reality check segments critiquing parties' claims, to hire buses to visit with ordinary electors, and to reduce their focus on horserace polling data. Yet many of them are trapped by their employers' prioritizing of the ratings game, which is why political ads are treated as hard news, why gossip is vexed for material that is in the public interest, or why a juicy tip offered up by a party's war room is pursued. This reflects the reality that a discussion about the Throne Speech is far less delicious to the general public than are the murky details of a sexy MP dating a popular but married hockey player.

Most of us use video as a source of entertainment[2] such as for unwinding after supper and media outlets need eyeballs to sell the advertising that helps finance video content production. Few of us are interested in watching policy discussions even though most of us would probably agree that CPAC should continue to air them. Not surprisingly political coverage highlights compelling conflict and amusing blunders because controversy attracts attention better than harmony does. In fact politics and the media have a symbiotic relationship with respect to the propagation of military-like political antagonism (Marland, 2003). This helps explain why even serious programming, such as CBC's *Politics* or CTV's *Mike Duffy Live*, may negatively impact viewers' perceptions of politicians.[3] The implication is that the more citizens are exposed to politicians on television (and presumably on video generally) the less likely viewers are to trust them. The opposite appears to occur for the reality television contestants who often become local heroes, media darlings and tabloid heartthrobs.

Overview of Reality TV

Reality TV programming burst onto the scene in the late 1990s and is characterized by untrained participants delivering unrehearsed televised performances rather than professional actors following scripts. Millions of viewers have embraced the spontaneous dialogue that emerges in snippets of 'real life' situations or competitions. There are several formats: accident & emergency (e.g., *Cops*' job shadowing of police officers), docusoaps (e.g., *The Osbournes* going about their daily activities), game documentaries (e.g., *Survivor* participants voting each other off an island), and hybrids of these (Kilborn, 2003: 2), including interactive voting dramas which encourage the audience to help influence the show's outcome (e.g., *Dancing With The*

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[2] Note that newspaper readers have strong political awareness whereas Canadians watching commercial television have weak political knowledge; youth are more likely to fit in the latter category (Milner, 2005).

[3] This has been found with US news-talk political programming (Mutz and Reeves, 2005).

Stars) (Williams, 2005).[4] The programs typically air on weekday evenings when consumers relax with light fare and find refuge from the complexities of their daily lives (Graber, 2001; Kilborn, 2003).

Canada's three major English television networks—CTV, Global and CBC—have all dabbled in reality programming. CTV and Global have tended to air American productions such as *Survivor* and *The Bachelor* whereas the CBC has taken a made-in-Canada approach. CBC's homegrown output has included *The Greatest Canadian* (2004), which invited submissions from the public, short-listed many politicians (including "greatest Canadian" medicare promoter Tommy Douglas), attracted news interest, and has found a second life in re-runs. *Hockeyville* (2006) profiled grassroots stories about Canadian towns' embodiment of ice hockey, named finalists in five geo-political regions, and the winning town hosted a televised NHL hockey game. But consumers are fickle animals; CBC's *Making the Cut* (2004) featured NHL coaches evaluating thousands of unsigned hockey players in seven cities who were seeking win an invitation to an NHL training camp, yet the show enticed few fans (although re-emerged on Global in 2006). There have been outright failures too, most notably CBC's cross-border collaboration with *The One: Making a Music Star* (2006) which was cancelled by ABC due to low ratings before the Canadian version could be produced.

The challenge for Canadian politicians in a video age is well illustrated by the tepid interest in CTV's *If I Were Prime Minister* (2006) and its CBC sequel *The Next Great Prime Minister* (2007). The highbrow format encouraged 18-25 year olds to submit a video of a speech outlining their national vision and policy ideas for the Canadian government. Contestants' proposals were assessed by past Prime Ministers Clark, Turner, Mulroney, Campbell and Martin. Political aficionados must have been delighted to see former Liberal and Progressive Conservative heads of government sitting side-by-side as they offered political advice to bright young minds. However the show lacked mass appeal[5] and it was the antithesis of the bubbly CTV *Canadian Idol* series hosted by Mulroney's son.

Canadian Idol

Television consumers can choose from an increasing number of programming options and platforms, yet sometimes a series becomes a social phenomenon. Such is the case with the *Idol* franchise. *Pop Idol* (2001) launched as a voting drama in the UK and put a grassroots twist on the Eurovision Song Contest that has been running since 1956. The series became a ratings phenomenon in the USA for FOX-TV as *American Idol* and branched off into dozens of other countries with local versions such as *Australian Idol*, *Česko hledá SuperStar* (Czech Republic), *Deutschland sucht den Superstar* (Germany), *Hay Superstar* (Armenia), *Ídolos Brazil*, *Idols West Africa*, *Narodniy Artist* (Russia), *Nouvelle Star* (France) and *SuperStar KZ* (Kazakhstan). The Canadian rendition has been a hit each summer since it aired in 2003. In its first year it was the most-watched series in the country's history and it has regularly been the most watched show by viewers 2-54 years old.[6] Indeed, 1.61 million people tuned in to the CBC's federal election night coverage in 2004—second only that week to *Canadian Idol*'s 1.67 million viewers (Attallah, 2004).

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[4] Note that Britain's *The Salon* offered audiences more interactivity opportunities than just voting (Holmes, 2004a).

[5] In the USA, Showtime's *American Candidate* (2004) similarly failed to capture the public imagination.

[6] Neilson Media Research data reported by CTV (2006).

Canadian Idol is unabashedly mindless fun. It is simple, upbeat, glitzy and fosters a relationship with its audience. The grassroots series is a hybrid of talent show, talk show, and docu-soap in that it is a flashy contest between previously unknown youth (16-28 years old) from across Canada who sing mainstream songs. The show's popularity is fuelled by CTV publicity and benefits from the fanfare associated with *American Idol* (which is carried by CTV and concludes immediately before the Canadian version). American contestants have subsequently released platinum recordings (over 1 million sold), have won Grammys, and have starred in movies (including the 2006 Academy Award winner for Best Supporting Actress). By comparison Canadian finalists have all gradually faded from public view but this does not seem to have had any impact on viewer interest.

Awareness of a new season builds each April with open auditions to recruit potential contestants in roughly a dozen cities ranging from Vancouver to St. John's. Tryouts are held at public locations such as shopping malls and all eligible attendees are guaranteed an audition (CTV, 2007). Four celebrity judges—including a Canadian equivalent of Simon Cowell, the original *Idol*'s curt but honest talent evaluator—whittle down participants to a handful of semifinalists. A video compilation of the auditions process airs months later to launch the season. This mixes humour with credibility by profiling embarrassing performances by oblivious amateurs who are mercifully cut off by the judges. By comparison those who reach the top ten are generally treated with respect and admiration.

The competition airs twice a week from late May to mid-September. Semifinalists perform an abridged version of a famous song while a variation of a toll-free phone number and a mobile phone text number is displayed on screen (e.g., "Phone 1-866-9-IDOL-01 or text to 436501"). Each contestant then listens to the panel's impressions and the host urges viewers to have their say by voting for their preferred candidate. Viewers are encouraged to vote via touchtone telephone or they can pay $0.50 per "vote" text message sent from a mobile phone. This must occur during a two-hour window (9-11pm) in viewers' time zone (east or west) after each weekly performance episode. Repeat voting is allowed though sometimes local phone carriers are unable to handle the high volume of calls.[7] The contestant who receives the fewest votes is eliminated at the end of a tension-filled show that airs the same week.

Certainly many viewers take action. Over 30 million votes have been cast per season since 2004 and the number has been increasing each year. A rough estimate indicates that on average each viewer votes twice per week for ten weeks. This type of engagement exists in other countries as well.[8]

The fame has attracted an assortment of broadcast, print and online news coverage, with even the normally staid CBC reporting on their competitor's program. CTV's treatment has been self-promotional with a celebrity-entertainment focus. Conversely other outlets seem to balance updates about a local contestant's progress with reports of associated social phenomena. This has included news of the repeated theft of signs along a highway route renamed "Casey's Way" after

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[7] It has been estimated that up to three-quarters of calls in some US markets do not get through; see "Idol voting: What's right, what's wrong," *People* (May 31, 2004).

[8] For instance in Britain more people voted in the *Big Brother* series than in the 1999 European Parliament elections (Kilborn, 2003: 15). By comparison, *Greatest Canadian* restricted the number of repeat votes per phone and collected approximately 1.2 million entries.

a New Brunswick contestant; supporters furiously voting at dozens of pay phones in the St. John's area; emergency officials in Medicine Hat vexing over delayed dial tones; criticism of the contest from music professionals; and coverage of the 1,500 people who lined up in Toronto to audition for the 2007 contest. Politicians across Canada have chimed in too. They have encouraged constituents to support their local contestant; inquired at CTV about how they can become involved; participated in *Idol* parties; joined in photo-ops; invited contestants to formal political events; and have attended the show in Toronto (for example, Pacienza, 2004). The intensity of public interest is aptly captured in the following passage about the fourth-place Quebec contestant in the inaugural 2003 season:

> She returned home Thursday from Toronto to thank the 6,000 residents of this small town [Ste. Julienne], about 60 kilometres northwest of Montreal, who set up special phone lines and voted for her hundreds of times to try to keep her in the running. "I am still Audrey de Montigny…I'm still the same," said the attractive 18-year-old…As soon as she stepped off a plane in Montreal, she was met by a mob of reporters who peppered her with questions about what's next for her. She left the airport in a white stretch limousine. The event was carried live by two Quebec all-news TV channels. Her news conference a few hours later also was broadcast live for almost 45 minutes by Radio-Canada's all-news channel, RDI. Her home town was full of posters and congratulatory signs. (Canadian Press, 2003).

Discussion

What are we to make of the fascination with a nationally televised voting drama compared to declining participation in federal elections? Some media observers (particularly in Britain) have been studying reality TV programming, leading to observations on humans' communications behaviour (Thornborrow and Morris, 2004), and recognition that the *Idol* franchise promotes American culture internationally (Meizel, 2006). But surprisingly there has been little political analysis of people voting. Understanding why some people from a variety of demographic cohorts place more importance on selecting the latest "Idol" than on deciding who should represent them in the House of Commons can help us figure out how what can be done about turnout issues in general elections. We can also gain insights into the views of 16 and 17 year olds who are about to be given the right to vote.

The party leaders' debates at the midpoint of a federal election campaign are perhaps the political equivalent of *Canadian Idol*. The main TV networks collaborate with the parties to simultaneously air these sound offs. They attract widespread media build-up, convey excitement over the possibility of a major development, and offer electors an opportunity to get to know the contestants. The leaders compete against each other in a semi-scripted performance that is every bit about optics as an *Idol* act is. Unlike *Idol*, however, risk is minimized to such an extent that the debates can become stale discussions about policy details, shouting matches between frustrated participants, or both. The knock-out punch of Mulroney on Turner in 1984, or even the emotional pledge by Jean Charest in 1997 to keep Canada together for our children, are exceptional but surprisingly rare political theatre. Whereas *Idol* audiences can decompress mentally the leaders' debates tend to be tedious, confrontational, uninspiring and even irritating. Moreover, *Idol* viewers may become impressed at youthful talent but if they are exposed to middle aged party leaders waxing on then some of them are doubtlessly reminded just how disconnected they are from power-hungry elites.

Part of the appeal of a reality series is that it creates instant celebrities out of everyday folk. It is essential to producers that contestants have no training and that they are easily replaceable as on a soap opera (Turner, 2006). Despite their overnight fame they project civility through backstage footage which reveals their hopes and fears. They are wide-eyed when they meet with established music stars and listen eagerly to vocalists. Biographical features remind us how close these kids-next-door remain to their ordinary social class despite their newfound fame. For audiences, humility is important because they are most likely to identify with celebrities who are most like themselves (Mullins, 2006). *Idol* hopefuls may therefore succeed despite character flaws such as being moody or greedy however they will likely fail if they exhibit pretentiousness (Biressi and Nunn, 2005). For contestants, merely appearing on television is gratifying, and they become part of an “ordinary/extraordinary paradox” which nevertheless tends to reward those who are charismatic and physically attractive (Holmes, 2004b: 157; also Corner 2004).

If politicians have something in common with an *Idol* contestant it may be feeling this “relentless pressure to seem ordinary” (Attalla, 2004: 284). For example many Canadians were ruffled by Brian Mulroney’s Gucci-shoe elitist style and they turned in 1993 to the unrefined Jean Chrétien, the squeaky voice of Preston Manning, and the angry man act of Lucien Bouchard. Chrétien loved to promote a “little guy from Shawinigan” image while his successor Paul Martin regularly shunned a necktie and rolled up his shirt sleeves. They and countless other campaigners try to convey symbolic ties with electors. Hard hats are donned to empathize with blue-collar workers’ concerns, denim suggests approachability, and sports jerseys demonstrate support for the home team. Sometimes politicians dress in regional specific attire, such as a cowboy hat in Calgary, traditional clothing when meeting with Aboriginals, or perhaps wearing a sealskin coat in Newfoundland and Labrador. Politicians also use props such as a finance minister’s choice of shoes on budget day or (in the USA) an adulterer clutching a bible. Actions also promote a just-like-us perception such as Chrétien racing up steps and Harper attending NHL matches with his son. Pollsters sometimes survey electors about which leader they would most like to have a beer with and packaging a politician as one of us has become a time-honoured strategy. Some politicians—such as a 67 year old Martin sporting a leather jacket throughout the 2006 campaign—even try to achieve mass popularity by seeking to be stylish in the thorny pursuit of “cool” (Street, 2003).

Televised ‘cool’ is a big part of the *Idol* brand. Contestants are relaxed (or charmingly nervous), trendy, attractive, self-controlled, polite and friendly. They may have unusual hair styles, clothing or body piercings. By comparison a politician appearing this way would not be taken seriously and an established politician who has a makeover seems less genuine (Manning’s mid-1990s new hairstyle, contact lenses and voice lessons come to mind). Coleman’s take on this contrast is that reality TV participants are often inherently cool with outsiders wanting to be a part of their world whereas quarrelling MPs are simply “too buttoned-up, suited and regulated for any hint of spontaneous fun” (Coleman, 2003: 734). It is almost and oxymoron for politicians to be cool because this could necessitate being detached from politics, rebelling against authority, and publicly exhibiting a hint of narcissism. By their very nature, establishment politicians are usually the reverse: they embody authority, they are politically involved, and they must convey populism. Moreover, there is also the considerable risk of becoming ‘uncool’ through an election photo-op gone amuck. Robert Stanfield fumbling a football in 1974, Gilles Duceppe wearing a hair net in a cheese factory in 1997, and a buff Stockwell Day arriving at a news conference on a jet ski in 2000 are good examples of the image perils facing politicians.

Possibly the only *Idol*-like Canadian federal party leader in the television age was Pierre Trudeau. The Philosopher King confidently promoted his views in English and French while wearing a rose in his lapel, driving a sports car and dating entertainment celebrities. His coolness spawned Trudeaumania in the late 1960s and was sustained by his aloofness towards authority (e.g., pirouetting behind the Queen's back), a youthful playfulness (e.g., sliding down railings), indifference to politics (e.g., his claims that he did not very badly want to be PM), and his playboy activities (e.g., skipping a Liberal meeting to party in New York City). Trudeau's rise occurred just a decade after Canadians had responded en masse to John Diefenbaker's televised fiery oratory. Diefenbaker may have been a populist outsider however he was a career politician who lacked Trudeau's looks and suavity. Being cool may not translate into a landslide electoral victories but it helps explain why the Trudeau name holds a Kennedy-like pedigree in the Canadian media whereas Diefenbaker is a curmudgeon relic of yesteryear.

But really, why should it matter whether politicians are as cool as *Idols*? Presumably the nation would be in far more capable hands with either of the bookish leaders of the Conservative or Liberal parties than any of the *Idol* finalists. Politicians do exhibit tinges of cool—such as Stephen Harper's brash treatment of press gallery journalists or Stéphane Dion toting his book bag—but with a politician any trendy characteristics can simply make them seem unpalatable or geeky. Parties do not tend to anoint someone as a leader who is simultaneously trendy and charismatic yet subtly projects individualism and indifference; the compromising nature of mass politics often endorses nerdish characters while suppressing the rest. The fact is that (unlike *Idol* contestants) politicians' behaviour and character are so routinely scrutinized for flaws that perhaps they can only be cool when they initially seek positions of influence or only after they have left the political arena and myths develop. But perhaps comparing reality TV and politics is a moot point with respect to turnout since even at the height of Trudeaumania (1968) turnout was like that of the previous (1965) and subsequent (1972) election campaigns. If *Idol* is any indication then politicians need to be more than just cool for turnout to increase—they need the freedom to generate an upbeat enthusiasm that the adversarial nature of politics stifles.

In many respects *Idol* contestants' manufactured celebrity is a modern twist on riveting 1950s quiz shows or the creation of the hip Monkees band in the 1960s (Franck and Nüesch, 2007). In today's era new media platforms exponentially increase the speed and intensity of an unknown's rise to stardom. Like-minded people may congregate with each other online by email, in chat rooms, Web logs (blogs) and fan Web sites, which further contributes to the word-of-mouth and gossip that are thought to be critical for television events (Biressi and Nunn, 2005). *Canadian Idol* thus becomes a shared public experience, with a significant number of people reminded of the musical show multiple times a day through different mediums, many of whom discuss it even when they are not exposed to media.

Music plays a central role in *Idol*, which is an evolution of the 1980s music video, a genre which unveiled the audio-visual attributes of television and where viewers become as transfixed by the singer as the singing (Kinder, 1984). The music itself matters to audiences because songs can inspire, are memorable, and can connect people. Likewise in politics, an official anthem can inspire nationalism, songs challenging authority can motivate a struggle, and music can be blended with images to bring new political meaning. There is entertainment and political convergence when musical events motivate public action, as with the *Live Aid* (1985) and *Live 8* (2005) concerts. Although *Idol* ballads tend to involve shortened versions of pop

music, it is not uncommon for political messages to appear in these, typically within songs that involve the government or economic system (Balliger, 1999).

An important point where *Idol* and politics are off-key is the type of communication used by participants. Aslama and Pantti have argued that a central attraction for reality TV viewers is that participants confess their emotions in free-flowing language (Aslama and Pantti, 2006). The on-air banter with judges and use of interviews or video diaries projects authenticity, credibility, integrity and trustworthiness. This is a sharp contrast with politics. *Idol* contestants exhibit a youthful naïveté, may have sex appeal, and wear ripped jeans; politicians tend to have baggage, suspicious motives, and seem to be stuffed shirts. Moreover, *Idols* use colloquial speech, whereas politicians lean on government buzzwords: an *Idol* will gush that she cannot thank everyone enough for their support, whereas a politician might release a discussion document to be reviewed in committee consultations with industry stakeholders to help formulate a comprehensive government policy and legislative framework (*etcetera*). Coleman (2004) has suggested that this language disconnect is linked to political parties drawing upon opinion survey data rather than having conversations with people. It is probably more of a reflection of bureaucrats' weak communications skills, ministers' preference to err on the side of caution by being precise and the osmosis of government speak in political circles. Just as importantly, *Idol* regularly provokes idle chatter and spontaneous cheers among viewers, whereas politics tends to bring out frustration and complaining.

Perhaps the most significant demarcation is how the sum of communications impact citizens' attitudes toward *Canadian Idol* contestants compared to election candidates. The show seems to be targeted at a segment of the electorate that politicians often overlook and it treats young people with respect. Audiences are believed to derive further trust from the show's openness, from its interactivity and from its respect for differing points of view (van Zoonen, 2004). Whereas the unwavering negativity in the political arena is a turnoff, when the "bad cop" *Idol* judge offers an opinion, this plays out as a witty blend of comic relief and critical authenticity. All told this populist program comes across as being inclusive on a number of key demographic fronts, including age, gender, ethnicity, geography and socio-economic status. Gender equality, for instance, is used in selecting two groups of semi-finalists and in the first four years the same number of females won as males. This may be seen as a reflection of the democratization of television (Turner, 2006).

Indeed repeat voting and community support for *Idol* contestants only emerges because these viewers feel that the show's outcome matters and that the remaining contestants are there because of these fans' votes. Entertainment becomes arousing with each voting round as viewers become more aware, more interested, more passionate, and more determined to do what they can to get their candidate 'elected.' Perhaps this involves asking family and friends to vote. Perhaps schoolmates, hometown residents or the local mayor join the bandwagon. Maybe geographic factors lead to an entire region or province rallying behind their representative. Perhaps ethnicity, gender, or a candidate's charm inspires viewers. Presumably the quality of vocal talent plays a role. Whatever the variables, ultimately it seems to be the *Idol* package in its entirety that commands viewers' attention, rather than the contestants themselves. Public support for a candidate is linked to the perceived importance of the contest. This would have us believe that lower elector turnout in public elections has less to do with politicians than it does with everlasting unpalatable political theatre.

Politics is inherently a nasty business. Ideologies and party labels unite some at a cost of estranging others. Promises are broken, oppositions oppose, secret deals are brokered, unethical acts are unearthed, accusations are made, insults are lobbed, controversial positions are taken, messages are spun and dirty tricks are applied. A politician must have considerable resources, good timing, and a thick skin. Unlike *Idol*, politics is not about 15 minutes of fame intermingled with banal chitchat although this comparison illustrates that context is everything. Media outlets deliberately promote political conflict by making editorial decisions about news coverage in a bid to provide reality-style infotainment.[9] Imagine if members of the news media treated *Idol* the way that they do politics! The host would instantly be vilified because of his father's unpopularity. *Idol* fanatics would not openly express the same support for their preferred contestant. Reporters would rarely fawn over finalists or ask such friendly questions in interviews. Details would leak out from "unnamed sources" about the Machiavellian deceit and fakery exhibited by contestants as they jostled for position. Commentators would discuss a singer's questionable past behaviour, be critical of a contestant who had three image makeovers during the course of the season, and have lingering suspicions about the hidden meaning behind a choice of songs. Scandalous details of a love tryst between two candidates would leave supporters feeling betrayed and planning a coup. But this would never happen because it is presumably not in the public interest for journalists to engage in a "if it bleeds it leads" scrutiny of the show.

There are few analyses of this subject. Unfortunately CTV does not disclose a breakdown of voting statistics possibly because it prefers to suggest that there is pan-Canadian appeal rather than pockets of *Idol* activists. We do know that *American Idol* viewers (particularly blacks) seem more likely to support contestants of their own race and that there is an increase in the number of households tuning in to the show on that basis (Lee, 2006). As well younger Americans have been considerably more capable of naming the show's winner than identifying which political parties held power at the state or congressional levels in their country (Kurtzk *et al*., 2003). Furthermore it has been established that *Indonesian Idol* fans respond with considerably more vigour than most TV viewers and actively become engaged in the programming through various media platforms (Coutas, 2006).

Coleman has conducted perhaps the only significant political analysis of this by comparing political fanatics with *Big Brother* viewers.[10] He found that a majority of "political junkies" were male, over 50 years old, working professionals, and identified with a particular religion. They tended to agree that people have a civic duty to follow the news. Conversely, a majority of *Big Brother* viewers were female, under 40 years old, and were not religious. Many of them felt that coverage of politics on TV tended to be boring and they generally held more respect for the show's contestants than for MPs. (An overwhelming majority of both test groups said that they voted in general elections however Coleman argues that respondents overstate their voting records.) All told, his data suggest that reality TV viewers believe in their judgment skills and hold respect for political junkies, but that the latter frown down somewhat on the former. Kilborn's questions epitomize the dichotomy:

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[9] For instance journalists may frame a contest between two candidates and pit colour commentators against each other (Bennett, 2005).

[10] This wildly popular British series features contestants of varying ages living with each other in a house filled with hidden cameras as they gradually vote each other out (Coleman, 2003).

> What conclusions…are we to draw from the fact that millions of viewers are able to become so enthralled by the televised game-playing activities of a group of celebrity-hungry individuals? Why does so much kudos seem to be attached to being selected to appear in such high-profile events, where one is effectively sacrificing one's privacy in exchange for what is often a very brief, though intense period of media exposure? And what is it that viewers get out of participating vicariously in such events? (2003: 187-188)

As with *Big Brother*, the *Idol* series is believed to be in tune with people who feel disconnected from politics (Paskoff, 2003). News coverage and anecdotal evidence indicate that interest in *Idol* has been just as strong among young people as it has been with their parents, particularly mothers. The fact is the show brings together formats that have historically targeted females: fashion, low-key hosts using state-of-the-art technology, melodramatic soap operas, talk shows, game shows, repetition, a focus on human relationships, and low production values.[11] There is every reason to believe that adults who watch the show gossip with members of a variety of social groups about the latest performances (Franck and Nüesch, 2007) and that all viewers exhibit a clustering of support for a particular candidate.[12] Furthermore viewers of all ages may develop an emotional attachment to contestants, have a sense of responsibility for their success or failure, and develop a feeling of community without leaving home (van Zoonen, 2004).

As the season goes on the show grows into a social event whose legitimacy is magnified by mass media coverage. Rational choice theorists (for example, Parsons, 2006) might have something to say about this. Picking up the phone to vote is a low-cost and low-risk activity. Perhaps a sense of duty and peer pressure to support a candidate develops. Repeat voting becomes a socially acceptable habitual behaviour that increases in perceived importance each week, which provides psychological benefits including a sense of belonging, identity and accomplishment. By comparison, the same people may be rationally ignorant about politics because they do not derive similar stimulation from seeking out political information and going to a polling station on Election Day. Voting on *Canadian Idol* is part of the entertainment experience and satisfies a void (e.g., it makes the viewer feel happy) that voting in politics does not. Furthermore, to political inactive citizens an *Idol* contest may be just as important as a public election, leading Williams (2005: 639) to propose that TV voting dramas are "a realm of displacement enabling the expression of anxieties of democratic governance that are ordinarily silenced in political discourse."

Of course audiences can choose to participate directly in other mass media forums such as by calling a talk radio program (for example, Ross, 2004) or (increasingly) through the Web. There are particular similarities between TV voting dramas and open-line radio shows, such as a pluralistic accessibility to the mass media, participating in an infotainment product, difficulty getting through on the phone, and a sense of democratic participation. There is no need for the audience to be literate, educated or part of an elite social class. Talk radio can be an outlet for all sorts of people who may feel disenfranchised and who derive a sense of community from

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[11] Conversely networks' male-oriented programming involves conflict, mystery, law, danger, and sports (Meehan, 2002).

[12] People generally value others' opinions and they are more likely to express their own views when members of a reference group share that opinion. That is, silence occurs when there is a higher chance of becoming isolated from a group that has a dominant opinion (Glynn and Park, 1997).

listening or participating. It is a research consideration that the self-selected minority of open-line radio listeners and callers are possibly disproportionately *Canadian Idol* viewers and voters.

Conclusion

Televised voting dramas such as *Canadian Idol* appear to offer a rich source of data for political scientists who are interested in better understanding barriers to voter turnout in public elections. Federal election turnout among young people may be declining yet it seems that recently many of them have nevertheless been voting for performers on a musical talent show. Conversely Canadians who are least likely to watch happen to belong to the age cohort that is the most likely to vote in a general election.

As long as *Canadian Idol* continues to thrive a primary research study could be administered to better understand contextual and other variables as they relate to voting. Profiles of non-viewers, of passive viewers, of occasional voters, and of fanatics who rally others to vote methodically could be constructed (McKee, 2002). We do not have a clear understanding of what attracts viewers to vote or the number of unique votes registered in the series. We are unable to say if reality TV voters also vote in federal elections (if so, how are they different from non-voters?) or if they do not (if so, how are they different from federal voters?). There are a plethora of other potential research questions, a number of which are outlined in the Appendix. There are certainly also questions concerning topics not raised here, such as the opportunity to better understand if e-democracy is a viable way to increase turnout, because there are conflicting views on this subject.[13]

Our existing knowledge indicates that legislators, political scientists and media experts can learn much from the *Idol* phenomenon. But as long as politicians continue to assume that citizens have an inherent interest in how they are being governed and as long as confrontation characterizes the political profession then election turnout is unlikely to increase. Politics is not nearly as friendly, inviting or pleasurable as *Idol* is. Nor should it be, since policy debates are already often overshadowed by sensationalistic fluff. However since the mass media recognizes that citizens are disinterested in bureaucratic detail then it will continue to provide adversarial political programming. Similarly as long as *Canadian Idol* attracts audiences then CTV will continue to promote the show. If there is a lesson here for political scientists it is that we cannot expect everyone to share the same sense of civic duty to vote for a candidate, whether that candidate is running for public office, or is trying to win a televised karaoke contest.

[13] For instance Milner (2005) believes that televoting is unlikely to engage non-voters and removes critical personal interaction, while Becker and Slaton (2000) gush with optimism that citizens can be empowered with new technologies such as online public meetings.

Appendix
Some Questions for Further Research

- **Civic engagement:** Why do some people vote during *Idol* but not in a federal election? Do (adult) *Idol* voters exhibit comparable levels of political interest and civic duty as federal voters? Are *Idol* voters finding a sense of community among themselves that politics doesn't offer? How do *Idol* fans compare to political partisans? To what extent do *Idol* voters discuss *Idol* compared to politics? Do *Idol* voters feel that they are participants in Canadian society? What can politicians do to make *Idol* viewers feel included in the political process? Does voting in *Canadian Idol* have more similarities with expressing a viewpoint in a public opinion survey than voting in a general election?

- **Demographics:** How do *Idol* voters differ from viewers who choose not to vote or from citizens who shield themselves from *Idol* and who vote in a federal election? From people who do not tune in to either the show or federal elections? How old are *Idol* voters? Are females more likely to vote on *Idol*? Do the household income levels of *Idol* voters differ from the mean? Are *Idol* voters more likely to be unemployed? Do rural voters place more importance on *Idol*'s national attention? What is the profile of an (adult) *Idol* voter compared to a federal voter? Do *Idol* voters also vote in general elections? To what extent does the place where an *Idol* contestant is from matter compared to a politician's origin? What are children's perceptions of *Idol* contestants vis-à-vis politicians?

- **Media:** How do viewers use the Internet to obtain and share information about *Idol*? Does *Idol*'s finale show differ in any meaningful ways from Election Day coverage? How do children catch on to the show's popularity given that it airs in a relatively late time slot (9-11pm)? Do politicians seem phony when they stay on message compared to the unscripted dialogue of *Idol*? Do people who remain unchanged by celebrity inspire followers? Do journalists accurately reflect the public interest in *Idol*? What electoral benefits do politicians receive from associating with *Idol*?

- **Perceptions of Politics:** What are *Idol* voters' impressions of federal politics compared to *Idol*? To what extent can the general population name *Idol* contestants compared to party leaders and local candidates? How does *Idol* differ from the party leaders' debates or local all-candidates' debates? What positive roles do *Idol*'s judges play and is there a political equivalent? Do viewers feel that they "know" *Idol* contestants better than politicians? To what extent does physical appearance matter when supporting an *Idol* contestant versus a politician? Do politicians appear pretentious and out-of-touch compared to *Idol* contestants? What kinds of politicians seem ordinary, or cool, and does this matter? Why do young people audition for *Idol* but not necessarily get involved in politics? How important is celebrity status to young people? Are politicians famous in the same sense of the word as for *Idol* finalists? Can *Idol* voters see politicians as pop stars? Is there any difference between an *Idol* contestant pleading for votes and a politician doing the same thing? In the eyes of *Idol* viewers, what are the core strengths and weaknesses of "The Next Great Prime Minister"?

(Marland 2007)

- **Psychological attachment:** What kind of emotional needs does *Idol* fulfill that politics does not? How much do *Idol* voters like contestants compared to politicians? How much do they trust contestants compared to politicians? How strong is *Idol* voters' attachment to *Idol* candidates compared to political candidates? To what extent does music contribute to *Idol*'s popularity? Does the success of an *Idol* contestant inspire pride in *Idol* voters and does this happen in politics? Does *Idol* feel like a friendly competition whereas politics is unfriendly and unwelcoming? How are political partisans similar to and different from *Idol* fans?

- **Simplicity:** How significant is the simplicity of *Idol* in encouraging voting? Do *Idol* voters feel that politics is complex? Do *Idol* voters feel that common language is being spoken? Are politicians talking over their heads?

- **Voting:** What motivates *Idol* viewers to vote? Do viewers encourage other members of their household to vote? Do viewers encourage members of their reference group who live in another household to vote? What do CTV voting statistics reveal? On a per-capita basis, do some regions of Canada vote more often on *Idol* than others; if so, why? What proportion of a region's televoters only vote for their region's contestant? Are young *Idol* voters likely to become adult federal voters? To what extent does televoting facilitate participation for *Idol* fans? Would *Idol* voters participate in federal elections if televoting were an option? How relevant to citizen efficacy is it that *Idol* allows repeat voting? Does having an impartial host and spokesperson for *Idol* increase viewers' trust in the show? How does this compare to the role of Elections Canada and the Chief Electoral Officer?

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