Voter Turnout in Manitoba: An Ecological Analysis♦

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Abstract

Voter turnout in Manitoba provincial elections has been in general decline since the mid-1970s. As in most advanced democracies, the trend remains a puzzle to even the most trained observers. Two important elements are missing from conventional studies, which are based primarily on country-wide public opinion surveys. First is the sense that context matters – that environmental and historical factors have as much of an effect on a community's level of electoral participation as its residents' personal attributes. Second, there is a noticeable dearth of sub-national research on citizen engagement in Canada. Addressing both gaps, this paper treats Manitoba as a case study in the community-level factors influencing the rate of voter turnout. Combining data from Elections Manitoba and the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics, it consists of an ecological analysis of electoral participation among the province's fifty-seven constituencies from 1999 to 2007. The study suggests that, while conventional variables like age and affluence play a role, the competitiveness of the constituency is by far the most important factor in determining a district's rate of voter turnout. This finding required analysts to shift their focus to "competitiveness" as the dependent variable, which, in turn, revealed that the best predictor of a district's competitiveness was how close the race was in the previous election. The centrality of competitiveness to voter turnout in Manitoba raises important challenges for election officials and reform advocates, as it adds a dynamic, contextual variable that is difficult to manipulate.

♦ The following analysis builds on a research report published by the Manitoba Institute for Policy Research (MIPR) (Wesley 2011b). Sections of the report are reprinted with permission of the Institute. Funding for research assistance was provided by the MIPR and Elections Manitoba (through its public information and education mandate). Data was graciously purchased by the University of Manitoba Library Systems. The authors thank Jason Roy for his valuable advice on data analysis, and Emmet Collins and Brett Loewen for their capable research assistance. All analyses and interpretations remain those of the authors, and do not reflect the positions of any of these individuals or organizations. Errors remain the responsibility of the authors.

Introduction

For decades, the political science community has remained fixated on the question of why certain citizens choose to vote, while others do not. This focus has contributed to a rich literature on the demographic and attitudinal underpinnings of voter turnout. Thanks to several generations of survey researchers, we know that non-voters tend to be younger, less educated, less wealthy, less politically knowledgeable, less interested in elections, and generally less integrated into the political system than their voting counterparts. Despite this knowledge, analysts and advocates have been unable to stem the decline in voter turnout, which persists throughout much of Canada and the Western world. This inability is not for lack of effort or talent, but may be attributable to the narrowness of our approach. In particular, our knowledge remains limited by an under-appreciation for the fact that voting is not simply an individual act. Like many other political behavior, voting is a group activity that is influenced by the various environmental factors present in different communities. To understand collective behavior, we must identify how context matters – how group-level variables affect the rate of voter turnout in various types of communities.

As an ecological analysis, this study examines voter turnout variations among provincial electoral constituencies during the 1999, 2003, and 2007 Manitoba General Elections. Based on existing literature, it was hypothesized that various constituencies have distinct electoral engagement patterns based on their own unique geographic, demographic, and political characteristics. As the findings reveal, older, more affluent, stable, and homogenous constituencies tend to feature higher levels of turnout compared to those that feature younger electorates, lower levels of income and education, higher levels of population mobility, and higher levels of culturally diversity. Of particular note, constituencies with high proportions of Aboriginal peoples feature the lowest levels of voter turnout in the province. More than geography and demographics, however, the closeness of the local race is by far the most important factor in determining a community's turnout rate. Indeed, competitiveness is such a strong predictor of turnout that it serves to trump many other traditionally-powerful variables, including age, education, and income.

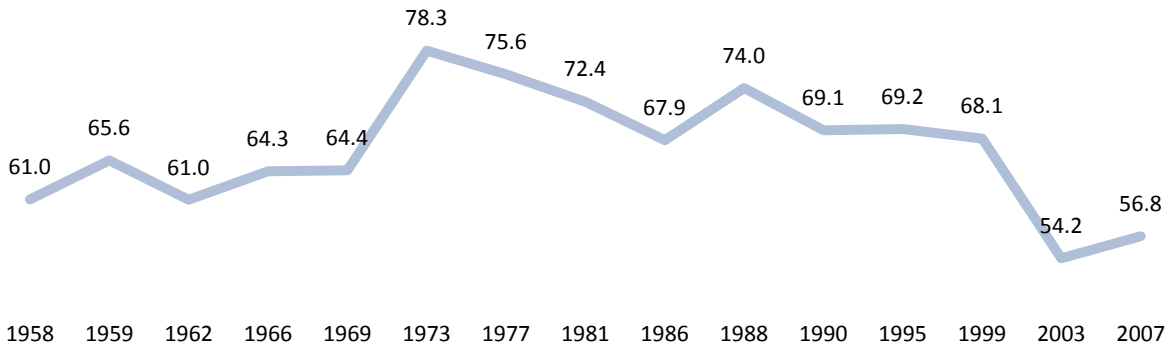
By identifying competitiveness as the most crucial factor in determining a district's level of turnout, the study shifts our focus to a new dependent variable. This, in turn, raises the question of what compositional or contextual factors, if any, dictate the closeness of the race. The primary response – the closeness of the previous election – is neither surprising nor satisfying to those seeking a solution to the turnout decline in Manitoba, prompting a call for further research into the relationship between competitiveness at the aggregate level, and the decision to vote at the individual level.

The paper begins by outlining the state of voter turnout in Manitoba, before explaining the methodology employed in the study. Findings are then presented in two parts: (1) a series of bivariate analyses explaining the sources of voter engagement in the province's various constituencies, and (2) a series of OLS regression analyses examining the determinants of competitiveness. The study concludes that further research is required to discern precisely how and why competitiveness matters to voters on an individual level.

Turnout in Manitoba

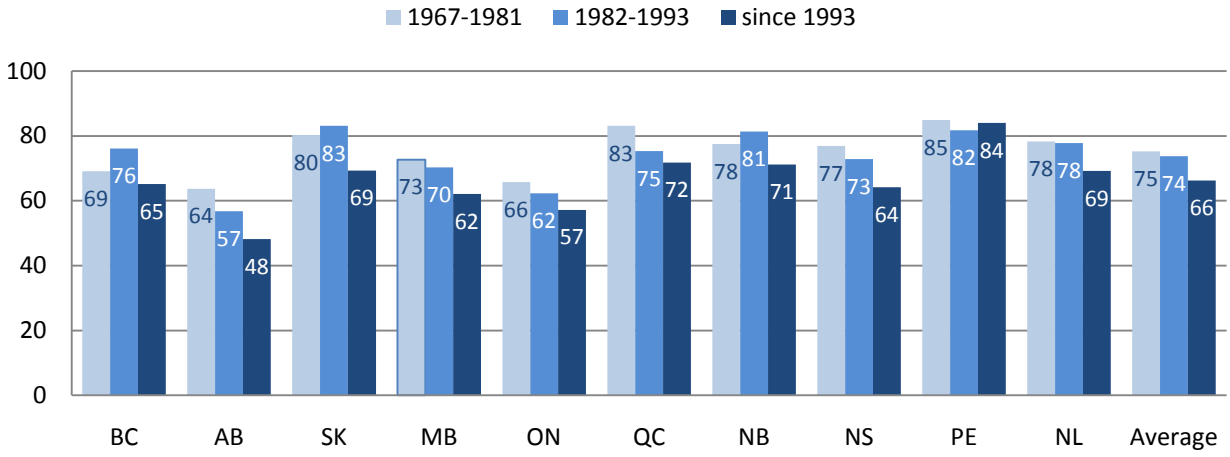
As in much of the rest of Canada, voter participation in Manitoba provincial elections has been in general decline since the mid-1970s (see Figure 1). Throughout the past half-century, Manitoba's provincial turnout rate has ranked eighth in the country, ahead of only Alberta and Ontario (see Figure 2). Turnout in some areas of the province and regions of the country have fallen as much as thirty percentage-points over the past two decades, prompting many to declare a growing "democratic deficit" (Wesley 2010b). As in most advanced democracies, the trend remains a puzzle to even the most trained observers. Why are so few Manitobans turning out to vote?

Figure 1. Voter Turnout in Manitoba General Elections, 1958-2007



Source: Reports of the Chief Electoral Officer, calculations by the authors.

Figure 2. Mean Turnout in Provincial General Elections, 1967-2010



Source: Reports of Chief Electoral Officers, calculations by the authors.

In previous election years, Elections Manitoba has commissioned Prairie Research Associates (PRA) to conduct several surveys of voters and non-voters (PRA 2004, 2008). This research produced several important findings, notably that, "compared to voters, non-voters tend to be younger, less educated, and come from households with children under 18 years of age. They are also more likely

than voters to come from households where other members also do not vote" (PRA 2008: i). These factors appear to be related to the fact that many non-voters feel politically distracted (e.g., having other commitments and priorities during the election campaign), disassociated from the political process (e.g., feeling alienated from the candidates, disinterested in the outcome, ill-informed about their choices, or dissatisfied with their options), or displaced from the voting system (e.g., facing technical or administrative barriers to voting).

These findings echo those reached throughout the Western world. From North America to Europe, politicians, government officials, and social scientists have spent decades diagnosing the turnout decline with nearly everyone employing the same methodological technique. Using public opinion surveys, Canadian analysts have linked participation to a variety of factors, ranging from one's age, gender, income, race, or religion, to one's level of interest, trust, knowledge, civic duty, or efficacy in politics (see: Gidengil et al. 2004: 108-116; Blais et al. 2002: ch. 3; Nevitte et al. 2000: ch. 5; Pammett 1991; Pammett and LeDuc 2003; Rubenson et al. 2007; LeDuc and Pammett 2006; Archer and Wesley 2006). These results have been replicated at the provincial level in Canada, as well (BC Stats 2005; Leger Marketing 2008; BC Stats 2009).

Conducting surveys to determine individuals' propensity to vote is one way of solving the turnout puzzle. Yet this approach can only take us so far. Three important elements are often missing from these conventional accounts. First is a firm appreciation of the methodological and logistical challenges involved with surveying non-voters (Duff et al. 2007). Citizens who are unwilling or unable to participate in elections are just as unlikely to participate in (often lengthy) phone surveys about politics. As PRA reported in 2003, "Non-voters were more difficult to find because people hesitate to admit that they do not vote and because non-voters were generally less interested in participating in any survey on voting" (PRA 2004: 1).

Also missing from most conventional accounts of nonvoting is the sense that *context matters* – that environmental and historical factors have as much of an effect on a community's level of electoral participation as its residents' personal attributes (Kim, Petrocik, and Enokson 1975; Geys 2006; Eagles 1991). Just as there are certain types of *people* who are less likely to vote, so, too are there less participatory *communities*. These insights are not lost on scholars of international politics, whose country-by-country comparisons have shed much light on the turnout decline as both a global and local phenomenon (Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Lijphart 1997; Crepaz 1990; Blais 2006; Blais, Massicotte, and Dobrzynska 2003; Franklin 2004). For the most part, Canadian researchers have often sidelined geographic variations in voter turnout in favor of countrywide analyses (but see: Studlar 2001; Siaroff and Wesley 2011; Wesley 2010b).

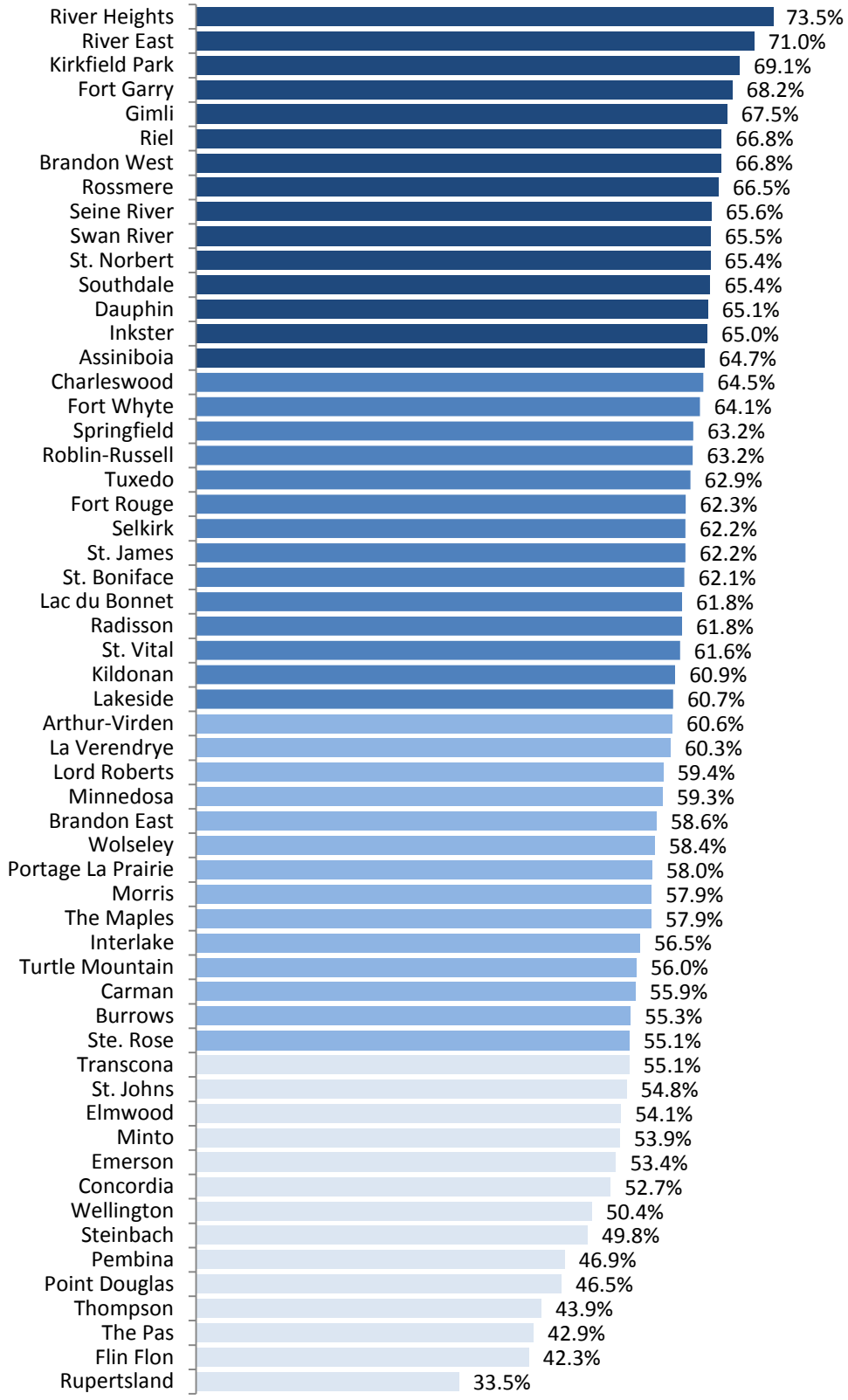
The novelty of these projects highlights the third shortcoming of the existing research on turnout in Canada, namely that it focuses almost entirely on federal, versus provincial, politics (but see: PRA 2008, 2004; BC Stats 2009, 2005; Leger Marketing 2008; Sayers and Stewart 2008). Despite their own groundbreaking work at the national level, the lead researchers for the Canadian Election Study recently conceded, "the puzzle remains why the decline in turnout has taken longer to show up – and has shown up less consistently – in provincial elections than in federal elections" (Gidengil et al. 2004). The few studies that have been conducted at the provincial level, including those in Manitoba, have focused on the province-wide electorate. The present study breaks the province down into separate electoral communities, offering the same contoured perspective on non-voting in Manitoba as provincial-level studies offer to the analysis of national politics.

In this vein, ecological analysis reveals precisely which factors differentiate communities with higher turnout rates from those with lower levels of voter participation. Figure 3 illustrates the variation in turnout among Manitoba's fifty-seven constituencies over the past three elections. These districts may be grouped under four categories (or quartiles): *upper turnout* constituencies (with at least 64.7 percent voter participation); *moderate turnout* constituencies (between 60.7 and 64.6 percent); *low turnout* constituencies (between 55.1 and 60.6 percent); and *minimal turnout* constituencies (below 55.1 percent). Of note, seven (7) of those districts in the final category feature an average turnout rate of below 50 percent.

Several hypotheses emerge from a cursory examination of Figure 3. Constituencies in the bottom quartile are among the "safest seats" in Manitoba, such that the political party representing the district maintains a considerable popular vote lead over its opponents. In addition, many of these constituencies are among Manitoba's most ethnically-diverse and least affluent. Underpinning all of this, there also appears to be a regional connection among minimal turnout constituencies. The bottom four districts – Thompson, The Pas, Flin Flon, and Rupertsland – are all located in Northern Manitoba, for instance, and a series of other constituencies –Elmwood, Minto, Concordia, Wellington, and Point Douglas – are found in Winnipeg's North End.

These surface observations are by no means exhaustive, absolute or comprehensive, of course. Not *all* North End districts feature minimal turnout, for instance; voter participation is quite high in constituencies like Inkster, River East, and Rossmere. The challenge for researchers is to determine, of all the various factors that seem to be at play, which community-level characteristics have the *greatest* effect on the rate of voter turnout in Manitoba's various constituencies. Our attention now turns to that task.

Figure 3. Mean Voter Turnout by Constituency, 1999-2007



Methodology

Ecological Analysis

As an ecological analysis, the following study provides a deeper understanding of the community-level factors impacting voter turnout in Manitoba. Ecological analysis involves the examination of two types of data. The first involve *compositional measures*, which are calculated by aggregating the characteristics of individuals living within a given constituency. This includes, for example, socio-demographic data compiled by Census Canada and the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics. More than this, however, ecological analysis also involves the use of *contextual measures*, which refer to the characteristics of the community beyond those possessed by its individual members. These may include the location and size of the constituency; the presence or absence of an incumbent MLA; the competitiveness of the riding; the level of campaign spending; and many others.

As Eagles (2002) suggests, ecological analyses hold several advantages over conventional, survey-based approaches to voter turnout. The data required for ecological analyses is typically more cheaply and readily available than survey data. Along similar lines, this data is available for a much longer time span, allowing for a more in depth historical analyses than one-off surveys permit. Ecological analyses are also geographically exhaustive, offering coverage of an entire province. This is something precluded by most surveys, which struggle to draw samples representative of the entire population. Because they are within-case studies, ecological analyses also allow researchers to hold a host of variables constant. This, in turn, permits analysts to isolate key factors that help to account for even minor differences in voter turnout. Rather than having to account for different electoral systems or numbers of advance polling days, for instance, researchers can zero-in on factors like the backgrounds of individual candidates. Moreover, ecological analyses allow researchers to answer different types of research questions. In this study, we ask – not why individuals fail to turn out to vote, but – why certain communities have lower levels of turnout. These community-level differences are crucial when it comes to contextualizing the behaviour or individual Manitoba voters. Rather than remove them from their environments, as is the explicit objective of survey research, an ecological analysis treats voters as embedded in their surroundings. Lastly, ecological analysis holds a particular advantage when it comes to the study of elections. Despite the disproportionate media and scholarly attention given to country- or province-wide campaigns, elections are fought fundamentally at the district level (Aistrup 1993: 435; Carty and Eagles 2005) – precisely the focus of an ecological analysis of our sort.

Three general aspects of the community setting are particularly crucial, in this regard. First, each constituency has its own *geographic* characteristics. As suggested by the following analysis, the outlook and behaviour of an individual voter appears profoundly affected by the relationship between his or her home community and those around it. It is crucial to examine the impact of living in rural regions versus urban areas, for example, or in the North versus the South. Second, constituencies feature different patterns of social interaction. Whether measured in terms of socio-economic, cultural, or other forms of *demographic* diversity, some constituencies are more homogenous than others – a factor which may or may not lead to higher rates of voter turnout. Third, but most importantly according to the results of our study, each electoral district constitutes its own, unique *political* "world". Rather than considering the 2007 Manitoba Election as a single event, an ecological analysis treats the campaign as a collection of fifty-seven local races held simultaneously. From this perspective, the factors affecting an individual voter depend upon the political choices and forces he or she confronts,

the amount of resources devoted by politicians in the district, and the unique local political culture of which he or she is a part.

In short, an ecological analysis allows researchers to examine voting as a *group experience*. Because politics is part of the broader social structure, these differences may manifest themselves in different levels of voter turnout (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968: 137). Fundamentally, an ecological analysis treats voting, not simply as a matter of individual choice, but as a group behaviour. (Two otherwise identical individuals may well behave differently depending on where they live.) This does not suggest ecological analysis is superior to survey research; rather, we argue that a full understanding of voter turnout requires both approaches.

Data

Most of the data employed in this analysis was compiled by Elections Manitoba and the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics (MBS).[1] The former provides researchers with free, online access to election returns and campaign finance figures, while the latter has assembled a series of datasets purchased by the University of Manitoba Library system. These sets break down census data along provincial electoral district (PED) boundaries. In Manitoba, these boundaries are adjusted every ten years by an independent commission, with the two most recent redistributions having occurred in 1998 and 2008.[2] Accordingly, the three most recent elections – 1999, 2003, and 2007 – have been conducted using the same electoral boundaries (established in 1998). As preceding elections in 1988, 1990, and 1995 took place using a different electoral map (drawn in 1988), for reasons of comparability, our analysis must be confined to the following three elections:

General Election	Census Data	PED Boundaries
1999	1996	1998
2003	2001	1998
2007	2006	1998

Findings

Determinants of Voter Turnout

As mentioned, the competitiveness of a given district trumped almost all other geographic, demographic, and political factors in terms of explaining its level of voter turnout. The sole exception was a constituency's proportion of Aboriginal peoples, such that districts with larger Aboriginal communities featured lower levels of voter participation regardless of their competitiveness. For this reason, we will abbreviate our discussion of the determinants of voter turnout, choosing instead to focus on explaining the varying rates of competitiveness found in Manitoba's fifty-seven constituencies.[3] Treating turnout as the dependent variable, and momentarily looking past the pre-eminence of

[1] Supplementary data (e.g., from candidate biographies) were drawn from publicly-available sources.
[2] For more information on the Manitoba Electoral Boundaries Commission, see: http://www.boundariescommission.mb.ca/.
[3] For more on the determinants of voter turnout in the 2007 Manitoba election, see Wesley (2011b).

competitiveness, bivariate analyses do confirm the importance of several common determinants of voter participation in Manitoba. Table 1 contains the statistical evidence underlying the following discussion.

Table 1. Mean Determinants of Voter Turnout in Manitoba by Quartile, 1999-2007

Table 1.1 – 1999 Election	Q1 Lowest Turnout	Q2	Q3	Q4 Highest Turnout
% one house	24.05	27.02	26.57	22.19
% one family	14.42	15.55	15.02	12.11
% low income	18.7	19.92	15.97	11.77
% unemployment rate	10.45	8.98	7.43	6.06
% immigrant population	8.99	11.76	14.65	13.38
% visible minority population	4.55	6.35	9.5	7.3
% aboriginal population	24.03	12.73	7.8	3.4
% rented	30.3	28.02	33.07	25.78
% owned	61.12	69.42	66.1	74.22
% movers 1 year	15.51	15.04	15.34	12.95
% movers 5 years	39.52	38.11	42.25	39.45
% non movers 1 year	84.49	84.96	84.66	87.05
% non movers 5 years	60.48	61.89	57.75	60.55
% allophone	65.15	75.03	77.47	77.31
% francophone	3.5	4.69	2.6	6.46
% no high school	20.68	14.43	9.9	7
% high school only	10	11.35	12.01	11.13
% university	14.28	17.23	27.15	32.32
% low income	61.87	62.05	51.21	40.31
% mid income	29.63	31.26	37.08	40.32
% high income	8.5	7	11.71	19.38
% competitiveness	69.38	73.32	83.17	85.86
% low age (0-29)	47.92	42.18	40.85	39.84
% high age (65 and over)	12.42	14.59	14.49	12.72
Average household income	$58,298.70	$68,942.42	$71,740.26	$68,305.19
Average spending Liberals	$8,310.01	$6,755.86	$14,044.64	$15,779.81
Average spending NDP	$12,977.47	$24,211.11	$25,527.50	$21,021.42
Average spending PC	$27,867.66	$23,660.04	$32,324.49	$33,461.90

Table 1.2 – 2003 Election	Q1 Lowest Turnout	Q2	Q3	Q4
% one house	26.9	29.13	25.45	25.29
% 18 + population	70.39	75.26	76.43	76.34
% one family	22.04	17.84	13.16	13.44
% immigrant population	13.66	12.14	11.56	10.4
% visible minority population	9.3	7.8	7.32	6.7
% aboriginal population	26.94	13.85	5.84	10
% rented	32.73	30.32	25.5	22.89
% owned	58.93	67.21	74.5	74.93
% movers 1 year	15.82	13.75	13.53	11.14
% movers 5 years	42.08	38.16	40.2	34.47
% non movers 1 year	84.18	86.25	86.46	88.86
% non movers 5 years	57.92	61.84	59.8	65.53
% allophone	66.82	73.4	81.06	81.6
% francophone	2.17	7.72	3.61	2.43
% no high school	16.29	12.15	7	10.06
% high school only	39.12	36.5	31.14	33.82
% college	17.62	19.53	21.93	19.95
% university	14.9	19.75	28.3	24.69
% low income	54.34	51.25	38.53	44.14
% mid income	33.34	35.1	37.78	3575
% high income	12.32	13.65	23.7	20.11
% competitiveness	42.68	62.84	78.79	86.6
% low age (0-29)	46.24	40.7	39.18	37.73
% high age (65 and over)	11.27	14.65	13.71	16.17
Average household income	$64,619.48	$70,281.82	$71,068.18	$69,967.53
Average spending Liberals	$5,319.78	$7,291.33	$9,228.57	$12,351.02
Average spending NDP	$15,883.85	$23,473.93	$18,876.27	$26,281.28
Average spending PC	$7,791.53	$10,600.17	$19,581.84	$19,955.17

Table 1.3 – 2007 Election	Q1 Lowest Turnout	Q2	Q3	Q4 Highest Turnout
% one house	26.52	27.82	27.03	27.26
% one family	24.05	15.78	14.45	15.81
% low income	19.04	12.33	9.19	10.37
% unemployment rate	8.05	5.423	4.64	5.08
% immigrant population	14.46	10.16	11.07	15.19
% visible minority population	9.82	6.8	6.71	12.49
% aboriginal population	30.68	15.55	10.64	9.09
% rented	31.1	23.39	22.75	28.99
% owned	59.17	72.93	76.78	70.32
% movers 1 year	15.7	11.34	12.77	13.36
% movers 5 years	39.43	31.52	36.09	37.35
% non movers 1 year	84.29	88.65	87.23	86.65
% non movers 5 years	60.56	68.46	63.91	62.37
% allophone	66.07	77.17	79.64	77.28
% francophone	2.03	4.9	5.9	3.74
% no certification	32.63	24.6	16.85	12.9
% high school only	25.41	25.43	25.17	25.05
% university	14.34	20.59	25.67	32.17
% low income	47.56	45.23	36.1	34.13
% mid income	34.64	34.06	35.21	34.43
% high income	17.8	20.71	28.69	31.43
% competitiveness	51.53	68.22	77.81	77.73
% low age (0-29)	46.07	39.54	36.95	37.75
% high age (65 and over)	10.96	14.61	15.4	15.07
Average household income	$65,793.71	$67,905.59	$74,860.14	$75,945.45
Average spending Liberals	$5,264.61	$5,622.14	$3,020.38	$11,597.21
Average spending NDP	$12,109.67	$14,029.50	$18,348.79	$27,875.53
Average spending PC	$10,884.85	$19,304.16	$23,505.07	$25,598

Geography

There was a distinct regional component to the turnout variation among Manitoba constituencies during the period under investigation. Simply put, whether speaking about the province as a whole or its capital city (Winnipeg) northern districts feature lower rates of voter turnout than southern ones. This north-south divide is more pronounced than the one between urban and rural constituencies; indeed, when excluding the vast territory occupied by Manitoba's four northern-most ridings, our findings suggests there is no discernible relationship between turnout and population density.

Explanations of these regional variations are varied. While challenging to measure, it is difficult to discount the power of "political culture" when explaining these regional turnout disparities, however. A community's political (or civic) culture consists of its most deeply-held principles – a series of widely-held norms or principles that help guide the beliefs, customs, and practices of its residents (Wesley 2010a, 2011a). This includes common attitudes toward the political system and its actors, and

perceptions of the role of individual citizens in the political process. Grounded in higher levels of engagement, empowerment, knowledge, and sense of civic obligation, some political cultures are more participatory than others. By contrast, voter turnout is likely to be lower in communities featuring higher levels of alienation (or even animosity) toward the political system, its institutions, and its leaders.

Without the benefit of survey data, we cannot compare the northern and southern civic cultures in Manitoba. This said, the historic geo-cultural realities faced by certain Manitoba communities may be seen to influence their rates of voter turnout. Existing literature on so-called "peripheral" communities suggests that, due to their geographic isolation from the provincial capital, Northern Manitobans may experience a greater sense of political alienation. By the same token, theories suggest that members of traditionally disadvantaged groups – like many residents of Winnipeg's North End – tend to disengage from politics. Again, these are hypotheses that await confirmation through further research.

More concretely, it is important to note the close, historical relationship between regionalism, socio-economics, and ethnicity in Manitoba politics. Since the first major wave of British-Canadian settlers arrived on the Canadian Prairies in the early nineteenth century, the more prosperous segments of the Manitoba population have been concentrated in the fertile farming areas of the rural south(west) and the middle-to-upper-income communities of South Winnipeg. Meanwhile, as labourers, small farmers, members of ethnic minority communities, and Aboriginals, residents of the rural North and North Winnipeg have tended to occupy lower levels of economic status. In this sense, the relationship between "region" and "turnout" may be largely the product of socio-economic differences. These additional factors are explored in greater detail below.

Demography

Existing research ties a community's turnout rate to its socio-economic and demographic characteristics. In general, the more stable, homogeneous and affluent a community is, the more likely its residents are to participate in elections (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). Previous research reveals that, the more stable a constituency is in terms of its population, the higher its rate of turnout is likely to be. Because they feature a more deeply-rooted sense of community, stronger interpersonal bonds, higher levels of social capital, and a move vibrant civic spirit, electoral districts consisting of longer-term residents are likely to feature higher levels of electoral participation than those with more transient populations.[4]

To capture the two main dimensions of the concept, the present study assessed each constituency's "stability" in terms of its proportion of younger and older citizens, and its proportion of migrant residents. The latter was measured in terms of the proportion of residents in each district that

[4] Interestingly, previous research conducted in Manitoba does not fully support these conclusions. According to the results of the 2007 PRA survey, there was a negligible difference between voters and non-voters in terms of their length of residency in Manitoba. That is, Manitobans who had lived in the province their entire lives were just as likely to vote (62%) as not to vote (61%); those who had lived in Manitoba most of their lives were as likely to be voters (11%) as non-voters (12%); and those who had lived in the province only part of their lives were as likely to vote (27%) as not (27%) (PRA 2008). While interesting in terms of measuring the effect of provincial-level in- and out-migration, this variable does not enable us to assess changes of residence *within* Manitoba. As stated, this may have an effect on individuals' level of attachment to their local community, and, by extension, may result in a different type of political community at the constituency level.

had changed dwellings (in the past one year, and past five years). The results suggest that a community's level of demographic stability *does* matter when it comes to determining its level of voter turnout.

Turning first to age, previous research suggests that younger Manitobans are less likely to vote than their older counterparts. According to a PRA survey, three-quarters of Manitobans under 30 did not vote in the 2007 election (PRA 2008). Combined with the fact that 2 in 3 members of the baby boom generation cast ballots, this means more than half of the voting population consists of Manitobans over the age of 55.

As individuals, young Manitobans are less likely to vote for a wide variety of reasons. According to national-level research, this disengagement is due to a combination of apathy, disinterest, lack of political knowledge, neglect at the hands of politicians, and a weaker sense of civic obligation (Howe 2007; MacKinnon, Pitre, and Watling 2007; O'Neill 2001; Archer and Wesley 2006; Blais and Loewen 2009; O'Neill 2007; Turcotte 2007; Gidengil et al. 2005; Turcotte 2005; Gidengil et al. 2003; Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2008). At the same time, according to PRA's 2007 non-voter survey, "Non-voters are more likely [than voters] to report having children under 18 years of age in their household. Some 40% of non-voters reported having children under 18 in their household, compared with 29% of voters." Although some theories posit that, once young people enter this stage of the life cycle they become more interested in participating in the policy-making process, the PRA research suggests that – by fostering a different set of competing priorities – family life may actually discourage young Manitobans from investing time and resources in political activity.

Based on this, it may be that constituencies with a higher proportion of persons under 30, and children under 18, would feature lower rates of turnout. Not surprisingly, according to our study, these relationships hold at the community level, as well: constituencies with a larger proportion of younger Manitobans had much lower rates of voter participation than those with older populations.

By the same token, but to a much smaller degree, districts featuring a higher proportion of "movers" had lower levels of turnout than those with more stable populations. This effect was most prominent when considering the proportion of *recent* movers in each constituency; low turnout districts were more likely to feature a large number of residents who had changed dwellings within two years of an election. The relationship between population stability and turnout is complicated somewhat by the presence of several "high growth" constituencies in the "upper" turnout category (e.g., Fort Whyte and Southdale); further research in this area is required before any firm conclusions can be reached.

Existing literature outside Manitoba suggests that, the more culturally homogeneous a constituency, the higher its level of voter turnout. In other words, electoral districts that feature high levels of diversity are assumed to feature lower levels of social and civic solidarity; without a deep sense of common attachment to the mainstream political, institutional, and democratic norms found therein, such a constituency is likely to feature lower levels of political participation (Nakhaie 2008; Tossutti 2007; Raney and Berdahl 2009).

As the PRA surveys did not report turnout variations among Manitoba's various cultural communities, beyond immigrant status (which they concluded had little effect on one's propensity to vote), the present study breaks new ground. In this analysis, the cultural diversity of each provincial constituency was measured in several ways, including the proportion of immigrants, members of visible minority and linguistic minority groups, and Aboriginal peoples residing therein. Our findings support

those of many earlier studies, suggesting that constituencies with larger proportions of immigrants and visible minority residents did *not* feature substantially different rates of voter turnout than those with predominantly Caucasian populations.

There are several possible reasons for this. Primary among them, Manitoba's so-called "ethnic communities" have long been among the most politically-active and politically-integrated in Canada (O'Neill and Wesley 2008). From Eastern Europeans in the first immigrant wave of the early-twentieth century, to immigrants from Asia and Africa in the twenty-first, political parties and candidates have directed their mobilization efforts squarely at these groups. Most recently, this is particularly true of Manitoba's Filipino and Sikh communities, whose influence in civic, provincial, and federal politics remains among the strongest of all visible minority groups. In addition, further research may provide some evidence of a "role model" effect, in that constituencies that featured visible minority candidates were also likely to feature higher levels of voter turnout than those that did not.

Overall, the lower the proportion of English- or French-speaking, non-Aboriginal residents in a constituency, the lower its level of voter turnout. In this context, it is worth noting that communities whose residents speak *either* official language tend to feature higher rates of voter turnout. Rather than simply non-Anglophones, the presence of large proportions of *allophone* residents appears to contribute to lower rates of participation among Manitoba constituencies.

The demographic effect was most pronounced in terms of those constituencies with high proportions of Aboriginal residents. Indeed, "Aboriginal population" was the only community-level characteristic that persisted when controlling for the competitiveness of a constituency election. In other words, whereas the influence of other prominent factors – including age and affluence – "disappeared" when competitiveness was taken into account, the proportion of Aboriginals in a constituency retained its force. It matters not whether the local race is close; if the constituency has a high proportion of Aboriginal peoples, it is very likely to feature low voter turnout. This finding expands upon those generated through survey analyses, which suggest Aboriginal Canadians are among the least engaged in electoral politics -(Ladner and McCrossan 2007; Silver, Keeper, and MacKenzie 2005; Jacobs 2009; Alfred, Pitawanakwat, and Price 2007; Cairns 2003; Hunter 2003; Kinnear 2003). This disengagement is due to a combination of deep structural, socio-demographic, historical, attitudinal, and cultural factors, all of which are worthy of further analysis and discussion.

According to previous research outside Manitoba, more affluent citizens are more likely to vote than those with lower levels of education and income (Gallego 2009). Again, the PRA surveys provided some support for these findings. While non-voters in Manitoba are less likely to have attained a high school diploma or pursued post-secondary education than voters, income did not have a statistically significant impact on a Manitoban's likelihood of voting (PRA 2004, 2008).

Based on these findings, we might expect affluent communities to be more likely to feature higher levels of voter turnout compared to their less-prosperous counterparts. This assumption is grounded in the premise that a community with a higher standard of living would foster a more politically-minded atmosphere. As the resources required to follow and participate in politics place a relatively high price on civic engagement vis-a-vis other day-to-day challenges, communities with lower living standards may feature less political activity. Politics (and, by extension, voting) may be a luxury some communities simply cannot afford.

In this study, each constituency's affluence was measured in terms of its average household income and proportion of residents who attained higher levels of education. As expected, communities with a higher proportion of high-income households, and those with higher rates of high school and post-secondary educational attainment rates, also featured higher levels of voter turnout. By the same token, constituencies with a higher proportion of low-income households, and lower rates of high school completion, also featured lower rates of voter participation.

Politics

Previous Manitoba non-voter surveys have not tested the effect of the local community's political environment on individual citizens' propensity to vote. Focusing more upon residents' attitudes toward the electoral institutions, no overtly "political" questions were asked of respondents. As such, we have no data linking residents' likelihood of voting with their personal assessment of the electoral climate in their district. As a means of partially addressing this gap, the present study examined the impact of a constituency's political environment on its rate of voter turnout.

The study tested the widely-held assumption that turnout increases when the outcome of a particular election is less certain, or when the conflict between political parties and candidates is more intense (Downs 1957; Crepaz 1990; Gray 1976; Holbrook and Van Dunk 1993; Blais and Lago 2009; Blais 2000; Pacheco 2008; Orford 2008; Ashworth, Geys, and Heyndels 2006; Abramson, Diskin, and Felsenthal 2007; Johnston, Matthews, and BIttner 2007). Competitive contests are more likely to generate voter awareness and interest, while attracting both media attention and increased voter-mobilization efforts on the part of politicians and strategists.

To measure the effect of electoral competitiveness on voter turnout in Manitoba, we compared turnout rates among constituencies with varying rates of "closeness". For the purposes of this study, "competitiveness" was assessed in terms of the average gap between the first- and second-place candidates.

The closeness of the local election was by far the most important factor in determining the different levels of turnout among Manitoba's fifty-seven constituencies. While the substance of this finding is hardly surprising, its magnitude is worthy of note. It appears that the closeness of the district-level campaign trumps most other socio-demographic and political characteristics when it comes to determining a community's level of turnout. (The single exception, worthy of repeated notice, is the proportion of Aboriginal peoples found in the district.) We will return to "competitiveness" in the next section.

The competitiveness of a constituency is often closely tied to the amount of resources devoted by major parties to conducting local campaigns (Herrera, Levine, and Martinelli 2008). On one hand, competitive races draw more spending; with tensions heightened, constituency associations are able to raise more funds and have the incentive to spend more money to contest a close seat. On the other hand, more spending can often make a local election more competitive, as opponents expend extra resources to win important votes.

To measure the effect of campaign spending on voter turnout, this study compared the resources spent by the three major party campaigns (the Liberals, New Democrats, and Progressive Conservatives) in each constituency throughout the period under investigation. Figures were drawn

from official election campaign financial statements filed by each constituency association. The results reveal that, compared to minimal and low turnout districts, moderate and upper turnout constituencies drew much more in terms of total campaign spending by major parties. These findings suggest that districts with higher turnout draw an increased amount of resources from political parties in Manitoba, and/or that campaign spending has a significant, positive effect on voter participation.

Some speculate that a broader array of candidates involved in a particular constituency campaign may help to bolster voter turnout. This is based on the notion that candidates who represent traditionally disadvantaged groups – including women, visible minorities, and Aboriginal peoples – may serve as political role models for other members of these communities, thus encouraging fellow members to vote.

The results of this study suggest that having visible minority or Aboriginal candidates has no discernible effect on the level of voter turnout in a district. There is a strong, statistically significant relationship between turnout and the presence of female candidates, however. This finding suggests one of two possibilities: female candidates are more likely to run in high turnout constituencies or, perhaps more plausibly, that having at least one woman as a major party candidate can help encourage voter participation.

The results of these analyses confirm that, for nearly all Manitoba constituencies, the closeness of a local campaign was the primary factor driving a district's rate of voter participation. While affluence, stability, and homogeneity all played a role in determining turnout, regardless of its relative socio-economic status or ethnic diversity, if a constituency featured a close contest between two or more candidates, its rate of voter turnout was likely to be higher than those in which the outcome of the race was more predictable. The one notable exception to this trend was found among constituencies with high proportions of Aboriginal residents. Regardless of the competitiveness of the local race, if a district featured a large Aboriginal population, its level of voter turnout was likely to be among the lowest in Manitoba. Aside from this factor, however, the closeness of a district's race is the best predictor of its level of turnout. To explain turnout, then, requires an explanation of competitiveness. It is to that task that we now turn.

Determinants of Competitiveness

OLS regression was used to discern factors which help to explain the competitiveness of these three elections. In particular, we asked if the closeness of the race was explained by how competitive the riding was in the previous election, or whether there were additional factors. A block recursive model was used to establish to what extent socio-demographic and political variables account for the closeness of the race in the fifty-seven constituencies in Manitoba. These factors included a combination of relatively static, compositional variables, and dynamic, contextual variables. In terms of sequence, compositional variables such as mean age, income and education levels were introduced first, so as to establish a relationship between socio-demographic factors and the competitiveness of a riding. Next, contextual variables were included to test whether political variables influenced the competitiveness of the race. The results discussed below only include statistically significant findings. In instances where the competitiveness of a riding could be used as the main independent variable, the score was included in the model. This was the case for the 1999 election, which marked the beginning of new electoral boundaries.

The initial models included competitiveness in 2007 as the dependent variable and competitiveness in 2003 and 199 as the independent variables (see Figure 4). Model One indicates that the closeness of the race in 2003 positively explains how competitive the riding was in 2007. Model One accounts for 33% of the variance in the competitiveness score for the 2007 election. Model Two introduces a second independent variable, the competiveness score for the 1999 election. Both the competitiveness scores account for approximately 37% of the variance.

Figure 4. OLS Regression for Competitiveness 2007

	Model One	Model Two
Independent Variables		
Competitiveness 2003	.439 (.083)***	.296 (.108)**
Competitiveness 1999		.263 (.013)a
Constant	.392 (.059)	.285 (.079)
Adjusted R2	0.33	0.365
Standard Error of Estimate	0.12073	0.11751
N	57	57

a p<0.1
* p<0.05
** p<0.01
*** p<0.001

The 1999 Election

In relation to turnout for the 1999 election, competitiveness in the election explains 19.8% of the variance (Figure 5). Of the compositional variables included in the regression models, ridings with a greater English speaking population had a positive and statistically significant relationship with the competitiveness of a riding. Having a high percentage of immigrant population had a negative impact on the closeness of the race (p<0.05), meaning that ridings with proportions of immigrants featured lower levels of turnout.

Figure 5. OLS Regression for Turnout 1999

	Model One
Independent Variables	
Competitiveness 1999	.230 (.060)***
Constant	.497 (.047)
Adjusted R2	0.198
Standard Error of Estimate	0.07354
N	57

a p<0.1
* p<0.05
** p<0.01
*** p<0.001

Next, the contextual variables were explored as a predictor of competitiveness. The presence of a female candidate or incumbent did not produce statistically significant results. Displayed in Figure 6, high levels of campaign spending by the Progressive Conservatives was the only contextual variable which had a positive and statistically significant relationship with competitiveness in 1999 ($p<0.05$).

Figure 6. OLS Regression for Competitiveness 1999

	Model One
Independent Variables	
High NDP Spending	.036 (.045)
High Liberal Spending	.054 (.044)
High PC Spending	.096 (.043)*
Constant	.692 (.046)
Adjusted R2	0.058
Standard Error of Estimate	0.15994
N	57

a p<0.1
* p<0.05
** p<0.01
*** p<0.001

The 2003 Election

The competitiveness in 1999 accounts for 48.5% of the variance in competitiveness in the 2003 election (Figure 7). There is a positive statistically significant relationship between the competitiveness of the race in 1999 and in 2003.

Figure 7. OLS Regression for Competitiveness 2003

	Model One
Independent Variables	
Competitiveness 1999	.855 (.117)***
Constant	.11 (.093)
Adjusted R2	0.485
Standard Error of Estimate	0.14386
N	57

a p<0.1
* p<0.05
** p<0.01
*** p<0.001

Treating competitiveness in the previous election as the main independent variable, and controlling for the proportion of Aboriginals in a riding, there a negative and statistically significant relationship with the competitiveness of a riding, as indicated in Figure 8. The initial model, which only included the high percentage of Aboriginal population as the independent variable and competitiveness

in 2003 as the dependent variable produced a negative, statistically significant relationship with competitiveness ($p<0.01$), accounting for approximately 10% of the variance. When the competitiveness score from 1999 was introduced, the high percentage of Aboriginal population remained statistically significant ($p<0.05$).

Figure 8. OLS Regression for Competitiveness 2003

	Model One
Independent Variables	
Competitiveness 1999	0.807***
High Aboriginal Population	-.096 (0.041)*
Constant	.077 (.093)
Adjusted R2	0.524
Standard Error of Estimate	0.13824
N	57

a $p<0.1$
* $p<0.05$
** $p<0.01$
*** $p<0.001$

Figure 9 displays two statistically significant compositional models. Model One indicates that in ridings where English is more prevalent the contest will be closer. As well, in Model Two, constituencies with more homeowners will be more competitive. It would follow that ridings that are more homogenous are likely to have competitive elections.

Figure 9. OLS Regression for Competiveness 2003

	Model One	Model Two
Independent Variables		
Competitiveness 1999	0.700 (0.108)***	0.763 (0.106)***
English	0.660 (0.154)***	-
Owned	-	0.378 (0.096)***
Constant	-.368	-0.178
Adjusted R2	0.609	0.593
Standard Error of Estimate	0.12553	0.12791
N	57	57

a $p<0.1$
* $p<0.05$
** $p<0.01$
*** $p<0.001$

The contextual variables introduced into the model did not yield statistically significant results. This election was the only case in which political variables did not account for a statistically significant relationship with competitiveness. In all other instances, the closeness of the previous election was the

strongest predictor of the competitiveness. Competitiveness in the 2003 election is dictated by the closeness of the race in the previous election, and by select socio-demographic factors: language, home ownership and the presence of an Aboriginal population.

The 2007 Election

The analysis of the 2007 election reveals that compositional variables, while controlling for competitiveness in the previous election, have no bearing on the closeness of the race in 2007. However, political variables have a positive and statistically significant relationship with the competitiveness during the election. Figure 10 includes two models. Model One consists of the contextual variables as well as competitiveness in 2003. Ridings with high levels of conservative campaign spending are more likely to have a competitive riding ($p<0.01$). Model Two applies both contextual and a compositional variable, accounting for 48.5% of variance. The model indicates that ridings with a high population of movers has a negative and statistically significant relationship with the competitiveness of the election. Campaign spending for NDP also becomes statistically significant when controlling for movers.

Figure 10. OLS Regression for Competitiveness 2007

	Model One	Model Two
Independent Variables		
Competitiveness 2003	.296 (.086)***	.272 (.083)**
High Spending Liberals	.031 (.034)	.061 (.035)a
High Spending NDP	.061 (.031)a	.067 (.030)*
High Spending PC	.109 (.034)**	.081 (.035)*
Movers		-.813 (.337)*
Constant	.386 (.055)	.516 (.075)
Adjusted R2	0.436	0.485
Standard Error of Estimate	0.11079	0.1059
N	57	57

a $p<0.1$
* $p<0.05$
** $p<0.01$
*** $p<0.001$

For each election, it is apparent that the overriding factor in determining the competitiveness of a riding is the closeness of the previous race. While a handful of compositional factors, such as measures of homogeneity, and political variables help to explain the closeness of the race, the models demonstrate that the competitiveness of the race is, for the most part, determined by the closeness of the previous election.

Discussion

These findings raise serious challenges, and important questions, for those who wish to improve the level of electoral engagement in Manitoba. When the closeness of the local race is the primary determinant of voter turnout, and when the closeness of the *previous* election is the best predictor of the competitiveness of a given race, increasing the level of voter participation in low-turnout communities becomes difficult. It may not be enough to encourage youth and Manitobans with lower incomes and less education to vote; this study suggests that, if these individuals do not live in a competitive district, they are less likely to participate in elections. Moreover, boosting competitiveness through electoral reform or changes to electoral laws and regulations would require legislative action. Considering the cyclical, competitive nature of Manitoba's two-party-plus system (Adams 2008), advocates would face a stiff challenge in convincing an incumbent government (or a government-in-waiting) to support electoral reform. This leaves many reformers with few options when it comes to addressing the leading cause of low turnout in many districts.

In essence, proponents of higher turnout must work to find ways of encouraging individuals in less-competitive districts that their vote "counts", regardless of whether it has an impact on the eventual outcome of the local race. Previous research demonstrates that appeals to civic duty and political obligation may be effective for some (particularly, older) members of the population. Other Manitobans (especially youth) may be persuaded by the prospect of other forms of gratification (including the fact that their political party of choice is eligible for an annual per-vote subsidy). To discover new ways of persuading these individuals, it is necessary to delve more deeply into the reasons *voters* in these uncompetitive districts have decided to cast ballots.

For, while confirming many popular notions about voter turnout, these findings suggest further research is required to fully understand the nature of electoral participation in Manitoba. In particular, future studies should seek to understand why certain individuals in less-competitive districts decide to participate, when their individual votes are so unlikely to alter the outcome of the election. Understanding the attitudes of these *voters* is crucial, as it may lead to new insights into what differentiates participants from on-participants in Manitoba democracy. Learning what leads some residents to vote may help proponents of civic engagement convince some *non-voters* to consider participating in the electoral process (Engelen 2006; Fowler and Kam 2006).

This would entail more than the standard, survey-based approach. The results of this study suggest that elections are community events, and are experienced quite differently in constituencies across the province. To study non-voting in its proper perspective, then, researchers should consider convening focus groups in various communities throughout Manitoba. This qualitative, group-based approach would complement the broad-based, quantitative survey conducted by PRA, while supplementing the present ecological analysis with much-needed input from Manitobans, themselves. Considering the results of this analysis, separate focus groups should be convened in constituencies with varying rates of competitiveness, affluence, ethnic diversity, and Aboriginal populations.

Conclusion

Throughout each of the past three Manitoba elections, the competitiveness of a local race has been the best predictor of a district's level of voter turnout. Indeed, provided a constituency features a tight contest between two or more candidates for office, many of its demographic characteristics fail to affect its rate of voter participation. Constituencies with younger, less affluent populations will feature the same level of turnout as their older, more prosperous neighbours – provided the local race is competitive. Conversely, no matter how "old" or affluent a constituency, if it does not play host to a close contest, it will not feature a high level of turnout. While the magnitude of this effect is noteworthy, these findings are neither particularly surprising or satisfying. At the aggregate level, it is logical that competitive races are more likely to engage their constituents than uncompetitive ones. Electors are more likely to feel that their votes will "make a difference" in the outcome, and political actors (parties, candidates, media) are more likely to devote more attention and resources to close races.

Nonetheless, these findings serve as an important reminder to analysts, practitioners and observers: context matters. In particular, the political environment surrounding a local race has a larger impact than the many demographic factors we typically associate with (non)voting. Questions remain as to how these community-level variables impact citizens at the individual level, providing researchers with a new series of challenges when it comes to understanding and improving the level of voter turnout in Manitoba and beyond.

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