

Session title: Bringing Voters Back to the Polls: Developing Effective Partnerships for Greater Electoral Participation

Moderator/Panelists:

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Date and time: Wednesday, December 11 2013, 9:15 am

Rapporteur: Karine Gaudreault

Session Summary

The meeting offered perspectives on this issue from academics, interested parties and members of civil society.

The decline of voter turnout in industrialized democracies has raised questions concerning how to bring voters back to the polling stations. According to the literature, the determining factors that influence voter turnout are age, education, and cohabitation with others. One of the main findings of the analysis on electoral participation is the decline in youth voting. Two factors can explain this phenomenon: the life cycle effect and the generation effect. The tendency of young people to vote less than adults increased as of the 1970s. This could be explained among other things by the fact that today's youth have less access to resources than the previous generation and face greater instability.

A sense of duty also plays a very important role in determining whether to vote or not. Civic duty is the feeling that voting is not only a right, but also a duty. This sentiment seems to be more ingrained in older electors.

In addition, certain contextual factors affect the decision to vote. More people vote in rich or moderately rich countries, as well as when voting is compulsory, when the voting system is proportional, and when elections are very competitive. It is important to underline that, with the exception of compulsory voting, the effect of other contextual factors on voter turnout is modest.

According to a partisan perspective, it seems that the idea of voting has become less popular. Over the years, political mobilization has become more impersonal, with campaign techniques changing from door-to-door interactions and personalized phone calls to publications on social networks and automated phone calls. Along with this change in approach, there has been an increase in cynicism among members of the general public. In the case of Quebec, dissatisfaction with the political options and the more or less positive political climate during elections has also affected turnout.

All panelists agreed that the entire system must be flexible and adapt to the new reality. To encourage more voters to come out, a number of institutions must join forces and reach out to different social groups. The use of networks and social media is crucial, since voting is a social act. Also, the panelists thought it might be useful to consider the option of online voting, especially since this would help reach young people. It was also agreed that the voting system should be adapted to meet the diverse needs of the population in regard to political options. Moreover, political parties must also adapt their tactics in order to generate public interest and communicate their message.

Overall, more targeted solutions need to be implemented by all political stakeholders in order to increase voter turnout.