

The Alberta GPI Accounts: Democracy

Report # 16

by

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About this Report

This is one of 28 reports that provide the background for the Genuine Progress Indicators (GPI) System of Sustainable Well-being Accounts. It explains how we derived the index that was earlier published in "*Sustainability Trends 2000: The Genuine Progress Statement for Alberta, 1961 to 1999.*" The research for this report was completed near the end of 2000. The appendices provide further background and explanation of our methodology; additional details can be obtained by contacting the authors. Appendix A includes a list of all GPI background reports.

This report examines the trends in the health of Alberta's political democracy as a measure of the condition of a civil society. It looks at trends in voter participation in municipal, provincial and federal elections, days sitting in the Alberta Legislature, and the use of closure in debate in the Alberta Legislature from 1961 to 1999. There are no estimates of the economic benefits or costs of a health democracy. The trends in voter participation are intended to serve as a proxy for the health of a democratic society where citizens feel interested in engaging in political processes and feel that their input and views are respected by elected officials. Days sitting in the Alberta Legislature and the use of closure in legislative debate are used as proxies for the health of civil debate—a key to a healthy, vibrant and open society. The trends in voter participation are used in the Alberta GPI accounting system in conjunction with 22 other societal and human health indicators that make up the full 51 GPIs in the Alberta GPI well-being accounting system.

About the Author

Mark Anielski is Director of the Green Economics team, and has considerable experience in public policy analysis including natural resource, energy, royalty and fiscal policy issues in both the public (Alberta Government) and private (GPC – Government Policy Consultants) sector. He also serves as Senior Fellow to the U.S. economic policy think-tank Redefining Progress in Oakland, California and authored the 1999 U.S. GPI report with journalist Jonathan Rowe. He currently advises the National Round Table on Economy and the Environment’s Sustainable Development Indicator Steering Committee on the development of indicators for measuring sustainability in Canada. Mark teaches business and the environment in the University of Alberta’s School of Business. His expertise is varied and broad including accounting for sustainable development, natural resource accounting, public policy analysis, business planning and performance measurement. Mark pioneered the development of natural capital accounts for Alberta’s timber, oil, gas, coal and other natural capital as well as having experience in the development of performance measurement systems, land use planning and non-market resource valuation, royalty policy analysis (forestry, oil and gas), and analysis of subsidies for both government and private forestry, energy and financial service industries. He holds a Masters degree in forest economics, plus bachelor degrees in economics and forestry.

Acknowledgements and Disclaimer

We acknowledge the invaluable contributions from staff at the Alberta Legislature Library who provided data on days sitting in the Alberta Legislature and guiding the author to data on voter participation rates. The author would also like to thank Kim Speers and her political science students at the University of Alberta for the opportunity to participate in a debate and brainstorming session on how to measure the health of democracies.

The high quality of data compiled by Elections Canada and other election agencies in Edmonton and Calgary enabled us to undertake a much more thorough analysis than would otherwise have been possible.

We also thank Kim Sanderson for her editing assistance. Finally, the Pembina Institute appreciates the vision of Western Economic Diversification in supporting this project—the first of its kind for Alberta, if not internationally.

The contents of this report are the responsibility of the Pembina Institute and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of those who are acknowledged above or the opinions or positions of Western Economic Diversification who helped fund the research.

We have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this document at the time of writing. However, the authors advise that they cannot guarantee that the information provided is complete or accurate and that any person relying on this publication does so at their own risk. Given the broad scope of the project and time constraints, it has not been possible to submit the entire report for peer review. The material should thus be viewed as preliminary and we welcome suggestions for improvements that can be incorporated in any later edition of the work.

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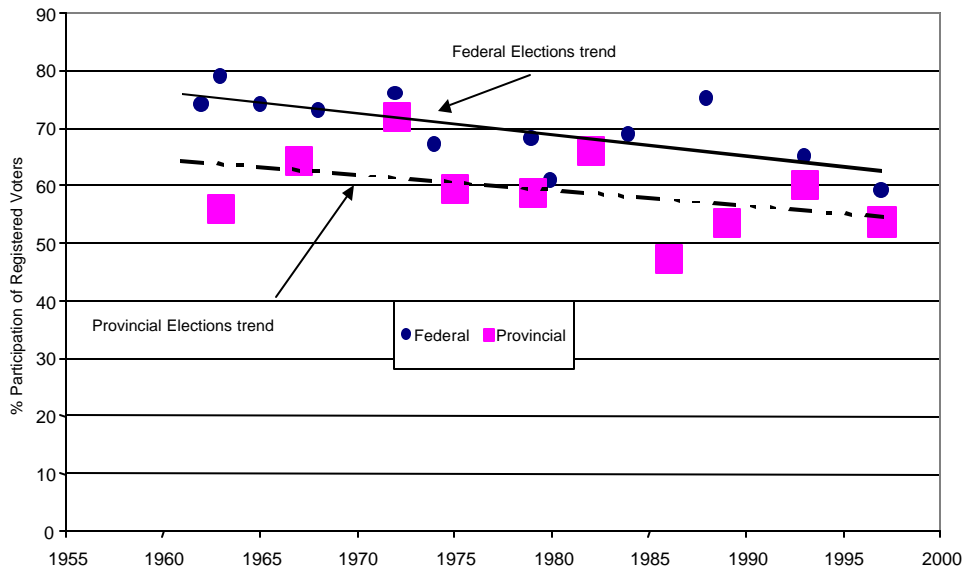
1. Executive Summary

One measure of the health of democracy is voter participation in elections. The figure below shows that average participation in federal elections from 1961 to 1999 averaged about 70 percent of eligible voters. This number has declined steadily from the early 1960s to a low of 59 percent in 1997.* Voter participation in provincial elections has also trended downward, reaching a low of 54 percent of eligible voters in the 1997 election. Participation in municipal elections is even lower, with the turnout in Edmonton and Calgary averaging 42 percent and 41 percent respectively for the period 1961 to 1999.

Noteworthy

- Average voter turnout in federal elections from 1961 to 1999 was 70%; for provincial elections, it was 59%.
- Voter participation in municipal elections is lower than either federal or provincial elections and is also declining.
- Voter participation in municipal elections has reached lows of 23% in Calgary in 1995 and 21% in Edmonton in 1980.
- Future measures of democracy might consider how citizens feel about their government, the democratic process, and how included they feel in decision-making processes.

Federal and Provincial Election Alberta Voter Participation, 1960 to 1999

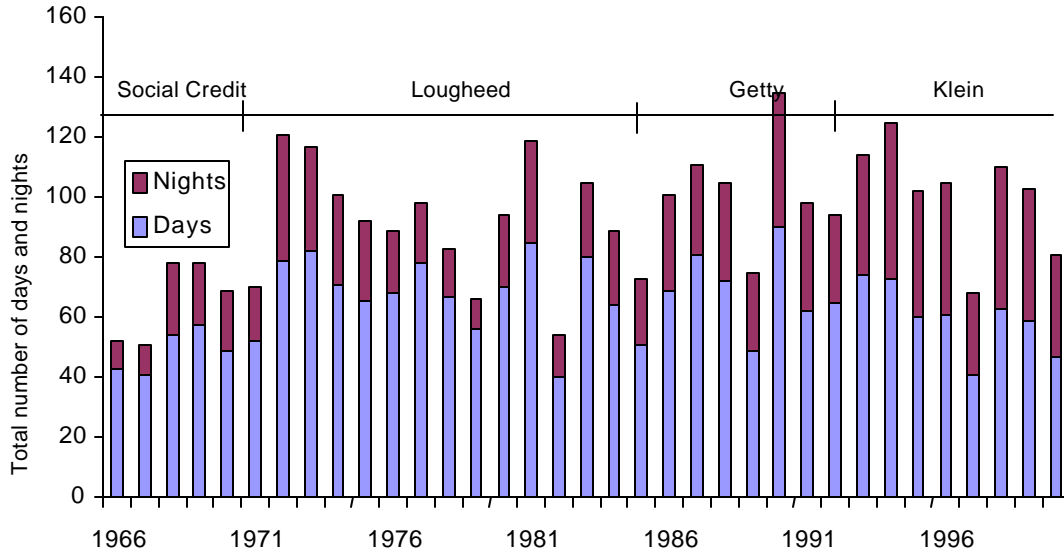


Source: Elections Canada; A Report on Elections 1905-1982, Chief Electoral Officer, Report of the Chief Electoral Officer March 11, 1997 General Election,

Another measure of democracy is the number of days the Legislature sits. Alberta ranked lowest in Canada in 1996-1997, sitting only 38 days compared with Ontario's 134 days (the highest). Finally, the number of times a Government uses closure in the Legislature can be a measure of a healthy democracy. The Klein government used closure 21 times from 1993 to 1997. The Lougheed government used closure only once over a 14-year tenure.

* The rate was actually the lowest in history during the 2000 federal election.

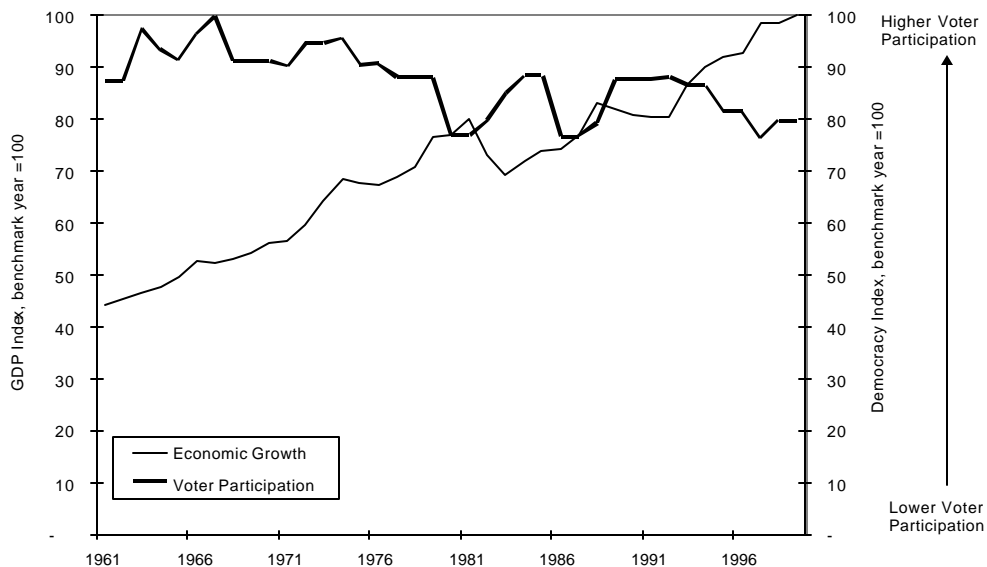
Day and Night Sitzings in the Alberta Legislature, 1966 to 1999



Source: Legislature Library, The Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Voter participation is one measure of the health of the democracy of a region. By considering voter participation, one can begin to answer the question: Has the health of Alberta's democracy declined? Converting federal and provincial voter participation rates into an index where 100 represents maximum participation over the past 40 years, voter participation has declined steadily as the GDP has risen (see figure below). Measuring the health of a democracy is complex and no single measure will suffice. If we use the measure of voter participation, then voter apathy may suggest democracy is less healthy than it was in the 1960s. Using legislature-days suggests another declining trend. At the same time, government use of closure has been on the increase, suggesting that legislative debate is in decline.

Voter Participation Index: Where are we today?



In their consultation with Canadians about quality of life issues, the Canadian Policy Research Network found that issues of government ranked sixth in order of quality of life priorities. Canadians identified six key indicators related to issues of government that would be meaningful to measure:

- voter participation rates;
- taxation rates;
- access to government legislators;
- higher levels of accountability;
- reduced government waste; and
- measures of responsiveness.

New ways of developing the data set for these indicators will have to be found through direct consultation with Canadians and Albertans. Fundamentally, do citizens feel disenfranchised and disenchanted with political leaders and the democratic process? How should we measure these feelings and personal experience of democracy by citizens?

There is no price tag or cost attached to voter participation and democracy. As an index, voter participation in Alberta in 1999 ranked nearly 80 on a scale of 0 to 100, where 100 is the highest level of voter participation recorded in 1967 over the period 1961 to 1999 (see figure for Voter Participation Index).

2. Political Democracy

How should we measure the health, well-being and sustainability of a democracy? How would we compare the strengths and weaknesses of Alberta's political democracy with those of other jurisdictions? This is clearly one of the most difficult GPI accounting challenges and will require considerable debate as to the correct metrics. Nevertheless, some indicators can be used to measure political democracy and freedom; these include voter participation, citizen apathy or frustration with politicians and political process, sessions in the legislature, use of closure to stop legislation and the gap between public opinion and government positions on bills and legislation.

This paper suggests that political scientists, opinion pollsters and others may need to look for better ways to help us understand the health of a democracy from the perspective of citizens. Perhaps we will need to discuss with citizens how included and empowered they feel in shaping public policy. Do they feel alienated from and disenfranchised by elected officials? Have people lost faith in their representatives and, if so, why? Are elected officials performing their duties as "stewards" of society's living capital (human, social, environmental) with which they have been entrusted and are they providing guidance for the effective stewardship of the economy?

Putting a monetary value on the strengths or weaknesses of a democracy is perhaps the greatest challenge of all. How should we determine a full benefit or cost account for political democracy? Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this study but leaves room for considerable methodological inquiry.

3. Indicators of Political Democracy

Dr. Kim Speers, professor of political science, challenged her University of Alberta class to help the GPI Accounting team define measures of political democracy. During their November 9, 2000 class, the students discussed how we might measure the performance of our democracy and their suggestions are listed below. According to Professor Speers, political scientists have been debating the concept of democracy for hundreds of years. She notes that in the past five years, those in the performance measurement community have begun to seriously study the ability to “measure” democracy. While there are numerous definitions of democracy, for the purposes of this study, democracy can be defined as a system by which, by and large, the members of a community participate, or may participate, directly or indirectly, in the making of decisions that affect them all.

Speers’ class identified the following potential indicators or measures of political democracy:

- Frequency of elections
- Number of political parties
- Number of days sat in legislature
- Number of free votes in legislature
- Number of referenda
- Number of bills passed in a sitting
- Percentage of eligible persons who vote in elections
- Number of citizens involved in government committees
- Number of individual liberties
- Quality of individual liberties
- Broad or free access to public office
- Social and economic equality
- Structural limitations of electoral system (percentage of persons not allowed to vote for reasons other than age)
- Percentage of voting population who belong to a political party
- Percentage of voting population who belong to an interest group (club, association, think tank, etc.)
- Percentage of government committees, boards and authorities that are elected
- Percentage of government targets met or exceeded in business plans
- Percentage of elected body that represents the characteristics of population (gender, age, income, race and ethnicity, physical ability, etc.)
- Percentage of bureaucracy that represents the characteristics of population (gender, age, income, race and ethnicity, physical ability, etc.)

Linda Sloan, MLA Edmonton Riverview identified and measured the following political democracy measures in “*Growth in Alberta – Sustained or Stunted?*”¹

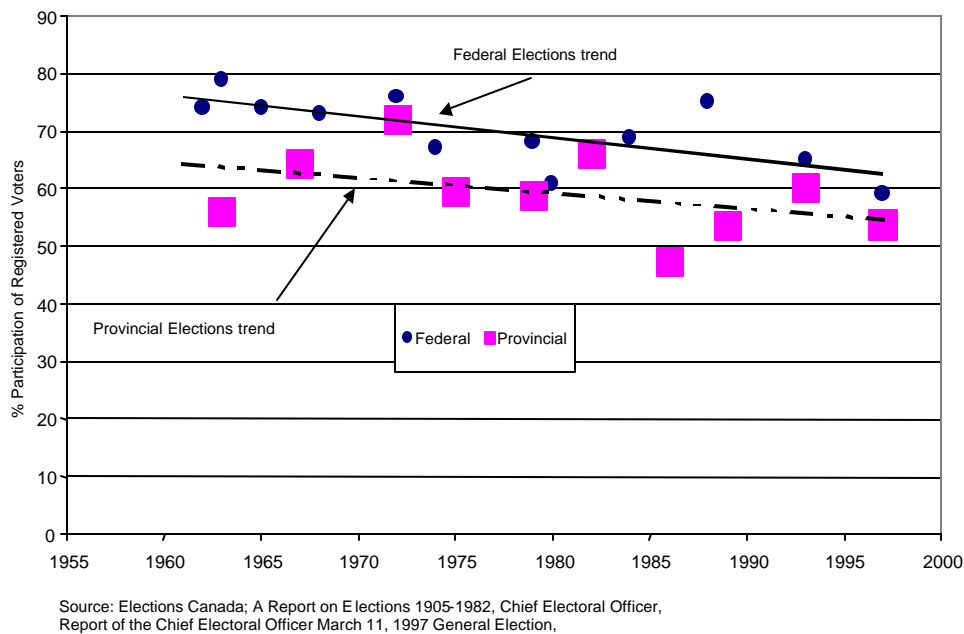
1. Days Legislature in session versus actual days sitting
2. Legislature sitting days
3. Speed at which government-sponsored bills made into law
4. Government use of closure to stop legislature debate on bills
5. Percentage of legislature seats versus percentage of popular vote
6. Members of Legislature (MLAs) per Albertan

4. Voter Participation

Voter participation in elections reflects the interest and commitment of citizens to the democratic and political process. Participation in elections can be viewed as a measure of participation in decision making and an expression of democracy. Low voter turnout can be seen as an indicator of disenchantment, apathy or lack of power over decision making.

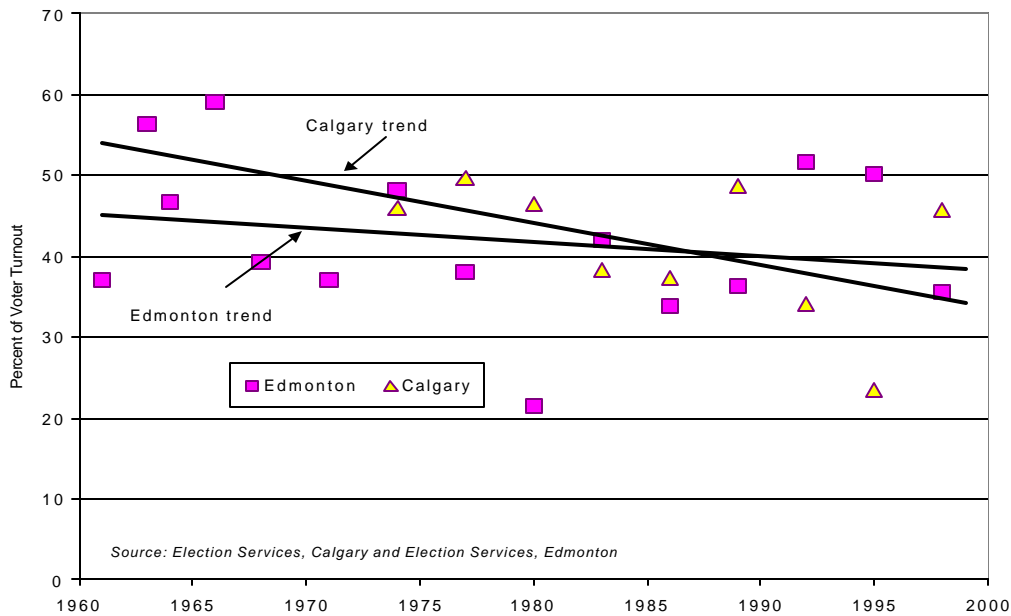
Federal elections stimulate the most interest of all elections, as reflected in a 70-percent mean voter turnout for 1961-1997 (Figure 1). As Figure 1 shows, the trend in voter participation in federal elections has declined over the past 40 years, reaching a low of 59 percent of potential voters in 1997 compared with a high of 79 percent in 1963. Participation in provincial elections is generally less than for federal elections, averaging 59 percent over the same time period, and it has also declined. The all-time high was in 1972 when 72 percent of potential voters participated in the election won by Peter Lougheed and his Progressive Conservatives. It has been as low as 47 percent in 1986 after the leadership transition from Lougheed to Don Getty. Voter participation at the provincial level has since remained relatively low with 54 percent voter turnout in the 1997 provincial election.

Figure 1: Federal and Provincial Election Alberta Voter Participation, 1960 to 1999



Municipal electoral participation is lower than that for both federal and provincial elections. There are no central records for participation rates in municipal elections, but the Election Services Office in Edmonton was able to supply voter turnout figures for that city from 1961 to the present, while the Calgary office provided figures from 1974 (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Edmonton and Calgary Municipal Voter Participation, 1961 to 1999



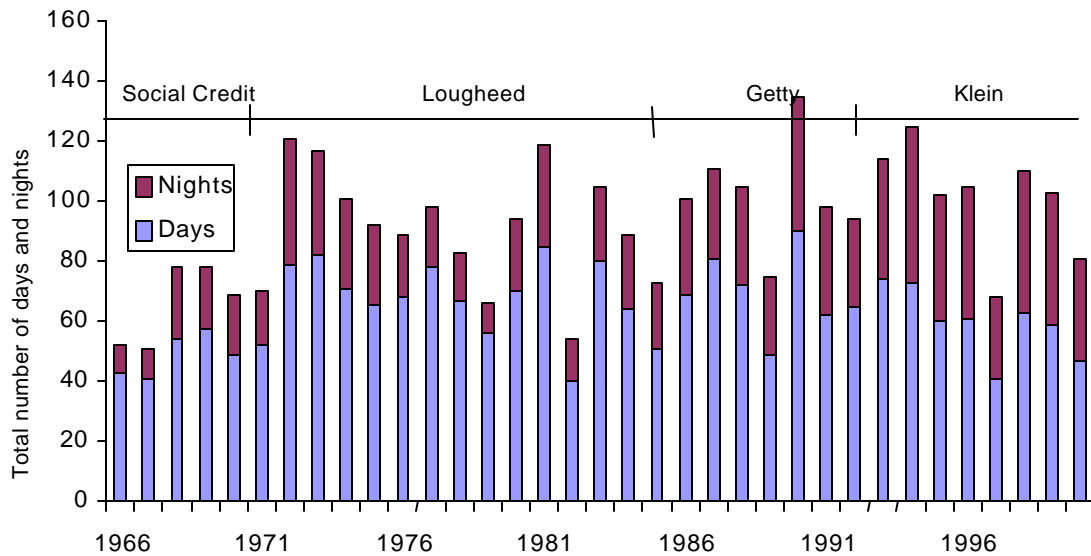
Edmonton voter participation averaged 42 percent compared with Calgary's 41 percent for the period 1961 to 1999. In Edmonton, voter participation has ranged from a high of 59.2 percent in 1966 to a low of 21.4 percent in 1980. Calgary's voter participation has ranged from 49.6 percent in 1977 to a low of 23.4 percent in 1995. It is evident that public interest varies from election to election, no doubt depending on the issues and contestants.

5. Days in the Legislature

Another measure of political democracy is the number of days that elected representatives sit in the Legislature session relative to total days.

Figure 3 shows the number of days and nights that the Alberta Legislature has sat since 1966. The average length of Legislature sittings has increased since the time of the Social Credit government between 1966 and 1971, which averaged 66 days/nights per year. The Lougheed government sat an average 93 days/nights per year, while the Getty government sat an average 103 nights/days per year. Under Ralph Klein, the average has increased marginally to 104 days/nights per year. The main distinction between the Klein and Getty periods is that Klein abolished sittings on a Friday. Indeed the various Klein governments have spent an average 61.6 days per year in Legislature during their terms compared to Getty's average of 69.7 days per year (higher than Lougheed's average 68.4 days per year). At the same time, Klein has spent more evenings in the Legislature averaging 42.3 nights per year (compared to 33.0 nights for Getty), to compensate for the time lost on Fridays.

Figure 3: Day and Night Sitzings in Alberta’s Legislature, 1966 to 2000



Source: Legislature Library, The Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Linda Sloan’s analysis of political democracy provides an alternative measure of legislature-days to actual days in power. Her analysis shows a dramatic decline under the Klein government to 232 legislature-days between December 5, 1992 and February 13, 1998 compared with the Getty government’s 556 legislature-days during a similar length of time. Legislature-days thus have declined 58 percent between the two Conservative government tenures. Sloan compares sitting days in provincial legislatures in Table 1.

Table 1: Legislature Sitting Days by Province (1996-1997)

Province	Sitting Days
Ontario	134
Manitoba	103
B.C.	81
Quebec	80
Newfoundland	52
Nova Scotia	46
PEI	43
New Brunswick	38
Alberta	38

Source: Legislative Assemblies Across Canada found in Sloan’s *Growth in Alberta – Sustained or Stunted? A Discussion Paper on Growth in Alberta*. September 18, 1997.

6. Government of Closure

Another measure of the health of democratic process is the use of closure by Government in Legislature debate on bills and legislation. Sloan’s analysis (1997) shows that during 14 years in power, the Lougheed administration used closure only once compared with 21 times by Klein during only four years in power (to June 15, 1997).² The Getty administration used closure 14 times over six years. Klein has used closure an average of 5.3 times per year.

7. Voter Participation as an Index of Democracy

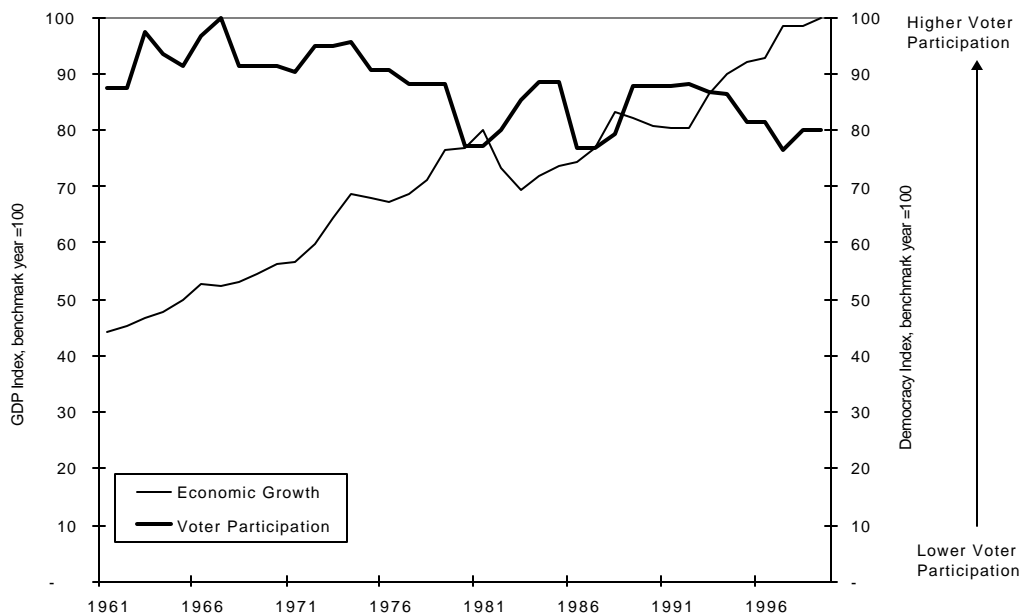
The GPI accounting system takes raw data and converts it to an index for comparison with other indicators and for aggregation with other indicators to create composite indices such as the Societal GPI Index (which contains 22 social and human health indicators) and the aggregate GPI (which contains all 51 indicators in the GPI accounts).

The democracy index uses voter participation rates for municipal, provincial and federal elections as the basis of the index. Raw data used in the 1961 to 1999 voter participation index can be found in Appendix B. Raw data are converted to an index on a 100-point scale. To index the data series we assume that higher levels of voter participation are more desirable than lower levels. Hence we chose for our benchmark year the highest combined rate of voter participation in municipal, provincial and federal elections. In creating the blended composite voter participation rate estimate we assumed, because of the variance in election years by level of government, that the voter participation rate between election periods applies to those years in which, for example, a municipal election did not take place in the same year as a provincial election.

We then set a benchmark year as the highest composite voter participation rate during the period 1961 to 1999. This figure is converted to 100 points by dividing through by itself. Then the entire data time series is divided through by this benchmark year figure multiplied by 100 to yield an index.

Indexing is useful for comparing social indicator trends, for example, with Genuine Progress Indicators or composites of indices that would otherwise not be comparable. The index in Figure 4 shows democracy (voter participation) in slight decline relative to economic growth over the past 40 years.

Figure 4: Voter Participation Index vs. Economic Growth (GDP) Index, Alberta 1961 to 1999



8. So What?

Has the health of Alberta's democracy declined? Measuring the health of a democracy is complex and no single measure is sufficient. If we use the measure of voter participation, then voter apathy may suggest democracy is less healthy than it was in the 1960s. Other measures such as "days in the legislature" suggest another declining trend. At the same time, use of Government closure has been on the increase suggesting that legislative debate is in decline.

Sloan concludes that "political democracy is shrinking in Alberta. Overall, the government has decided to represent only 26 percent of eligible voters who voted Conservative in the last election. The fall sitting of the elected Legislature has been replaced by the Summit, where delegates hand-picked by the government will decide the agenda and priorities for government and the province."³

Other possibilities for future measurement include assessing voters' sense of alienation from the political process and elected officials and the extent to which citizens feel disempowered or disenchanting with political leaders and the democratic process.

Appendix A. List of Alberta GPI Background Reports

A series of Alberta GPI background reports accompanies the *Alberta Sustainability Trends 2000* report and this report. These documents are being released in late 2001 and early 2002 and will be available on the Pembina Institute's website at www.pembina.org.

Alberta GPI Background Reports and Sustainability Indicators

GPI Background Reports	GPI Accounts Covered by Report
1. Economy, GDP, and Trade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic growth (GDP) Economic diversity Trade
2. Personal Consumption Expenditures, Disposable Income and Savings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disposable income Personal expenditures Taxes Savings rate
3. Money, Debt, Assets and Net Worth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Household debt
4. Income Inequality, Poverty and Living Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Income distribution Poverty
5. Household and Public Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public infrastructure Household infrastructure
6. Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly wage rate Unemployment Underemployment
7. Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transportation expenditures
8. Time Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paid work time Household work Parenting and eldercare Free time Volunteerism Commuting time
9. Human Health and Wellness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life expectancy Premature mortality Infant mortality Obesity
10. Suicide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suicide
11. Substance Abuse; Alcohol, Drugs and Tobacco	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drug use (youth)
12. Auto Crashes and Injuries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Auto crashes
13. Family Breakdown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Divorce
14. Crime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Crime
15. Gambling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Problem gambling
16. Democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Voter participation
17. Intellectual Capital and Educational Attainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educational attainment
18. Energy (Oil, Gas, Coal and Renewable)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oil and gas reserve life Oilsands reserve life
19. Agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agricultural sustainability
20. Forests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Timber sustainability Forest fragmentation
21. Parks and Wilderness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parks and wilderness

GPI Background Reports	GPI Accounts Covered by Report
22. Fish and Wildlife	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fish and wildlife
23. Wetlands and Peatlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wetlands• Peatlands
24. Water Resource and Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Water quality
25. Energy Use Intensity, Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Air Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Energy use intensity• Air quality-related emissions• Greenhouse gas emissions
26. Carbon Budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Carbon budget deficit
27. Municipal and Hazardous Waste	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hazardous waste• Landfill waste
28. Ecological Footprint	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ecological footprint

Appendix B. Democracy Data

Voter participation data and index

Year	Composite Voter Participation Rate (Federal, provincial, municipal) (percentage of eligible voters)	Voter Participation Index is where maximum participation in federal, provincial and municipal elections was highest (1967) at an average 60.88 percent
1961	53.25	87.47
1962	53.25	87.47
1963	59.35	97.49
1964	56.93	93.51
1965	55.68	91.46
1966	58.80	96.59
1967	60.88	100.00
1968	55.55	91.25
1969	55.55	91.25
1970	55.55	91.25
1971	55.00	90.35
1972	57.75	94.87
1973	57.75	94.87
1974	58.28	95.73
1975	55.18	90.64
1976	55.28	90.80
1977	53.70	88.21
1978	53.70	88.21
1979	53.63	88.09
1980	46.98	77.17
1981	46.98	77.17
1982	48.73	80.04
1983	51.88	85.22
1984	53.88	88.50
1985	53.88	88.50
1986	46.78	76.84
1987	46.78	76.84
1988	48.28	79.30
1989	53.40	87.72
1990	53.50	87.89
1991	53.50	87.89
1992	53.70	88.21
1993	52.75	86.65
1994	52.70	86.57
1995	49.68	81.60
1996	49.68	81.60
1997	46.63	76.59
1998	48.63	79.88
1999	48.63	79.88

Endnotes

¹ Sloan, Linda. *Growth in Alberta – Sustained or Stunted? A Discussion Paper on Growth in Alberta*. September 18, 1997. Ed. note: Ms. Sloan did not run in the 2001 provincial election and is no longer a Member of Alberta’s Legislative Assembly.

² *The Edmonton Journal*, June 16, 1997

³ Sloan, Linda. *Growth in Alberta – Sustained or Stunted? A Discussion Paper on Growth in Alberta*. September 18, 1997.