

Voter Participation



Noteworthy:

- Average voter turnout in federal elections from 1961 to 2004 was 70% compared to an average 59% turnout at provincial elections.
- Voter participation in municipal elections is lower than either federal or provincial elections and is also declining.
- Voter participation in municipal elections reached lows of 18% in Calgary in 2004 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.

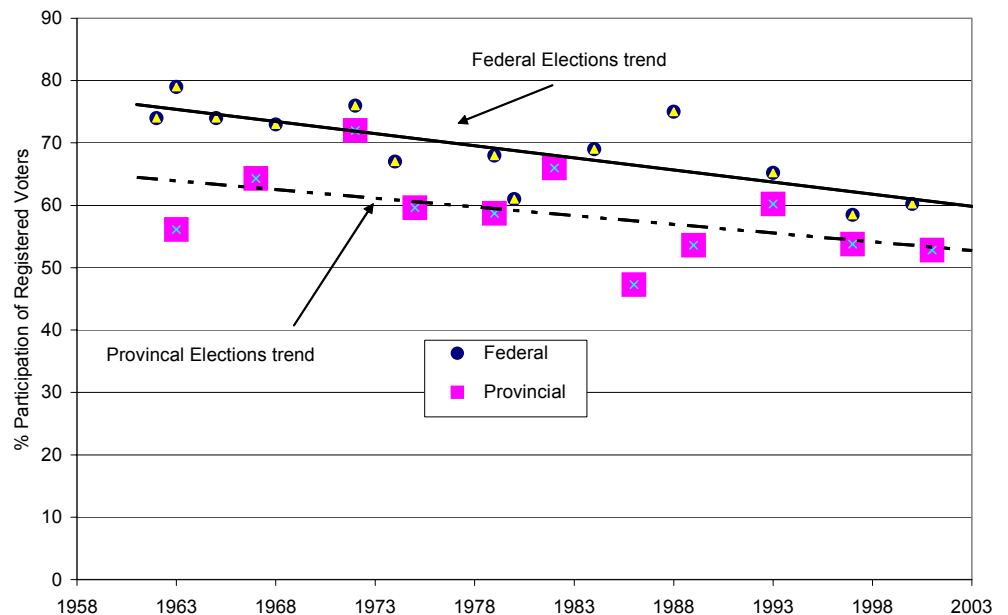
Voter Participation in Alberta: How Much?

One measure of the health of democracy is voter participation in elections. The figure below shows that participation in federal elections from 1961 to 2004 averaged about 70% of eligible voters. This number has declined steadily over time with a low of 59% in 2004. Voter participation in provincial elections has also trended downward, reaching a low of 47% of eligible voters in the 1986 elec-

tion. Average voter turnout between 1961 and 2004 at the provincial level was 59%. In 2001, provincial voter participation in Alberta was 53%. Participation in municipal elections is even lower, with the turnout in Edmonton and Calgary averaging 42% and 39% respectively for the period 1961 to 2004. Another measure of democracy is the number of days the Legisla-

ture sits. Alberta ranked lowest in Canada in 1996-1997 with only 38 days sitting compared with Ontario's 134 days. 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.

Federal and Provincial Election Alberta Voter Participation, 1960 to 2003

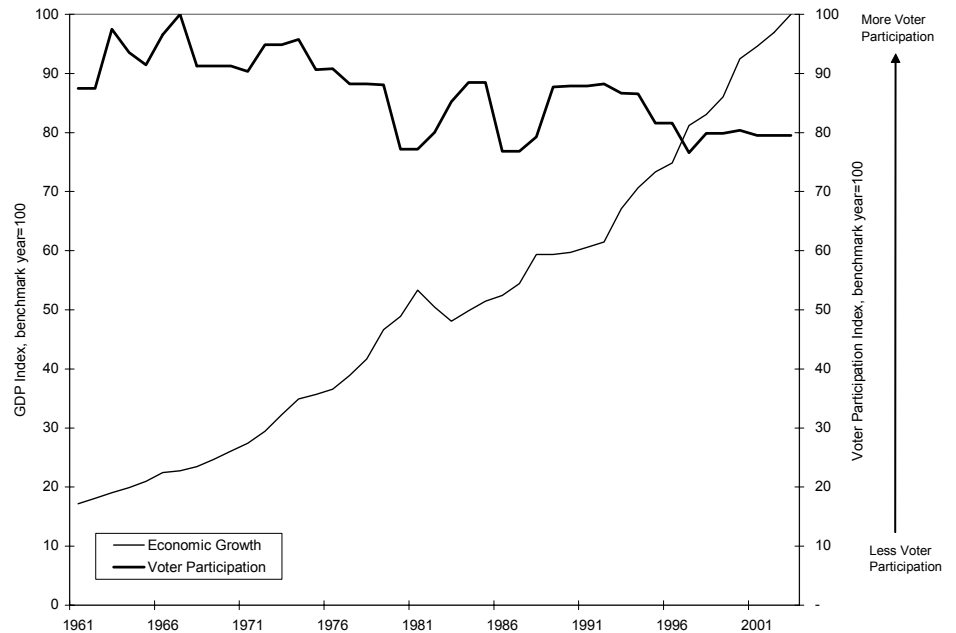


Source: Elections Canada; A Report on Elections 1905-1982, Chief Electoral Officer, Alberta, 1983; Report of the Chief Electoral Officer March 11, 1997 General Election, Alberta.

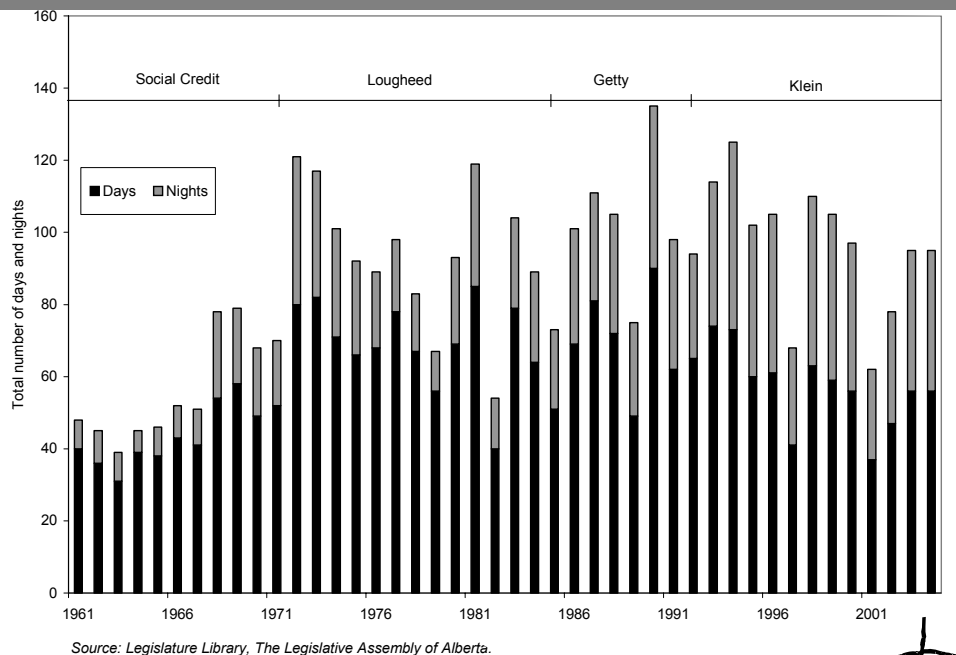
So What?

Voter participation is one measure of the health of the democracy of a region. By considering the voter participation in a region, 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 since 1961, demonstrates that voter participation has declined steadily. This decline has occurred at the same time that the provincial Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has risen (see figure at the upper right). Measuring the health of a democracy is complex and no single measure will suffice. If we use voter participation as a measure of the health of democracy, then the data suggests 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. 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 the following key indicators that would be meaningful to measure: 1) voter participation rates; 2) taxation rates; 3) access to government legislators; 4) higher levels of accountability; 5) reduced government waste; and 6) 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?

Voter Participation Index: Where are we today?



Days and Nights Sitting in the Alberta Legislature, 1966 to 2004



Source: Legislature Library, The Legislative Assembly of Alberta.

There is no price tag or cost attached to voter participation and democracy.

As an index, voter participation in Alberta in 2003 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 2003.

