



**Estimation of Voter Turnout  
by Age Group at the  
38th Federal General Election  
(June 28, 2004)**

**Final Report**

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## **Executive Summary**

Voter turnout at the 2004 federal general election continued the downward trend observed since 1993. Research conducted after the 2000 general election shows that this overall phenomenon was largely due to a significant disengagement of Canadian youth. In order to further refine its analyses in this area, Elections Canada opted for a new methodology to measure turnout at the 2004 general election by age group: it cross-referenced actual votes with data from the National Register of Electors to establish voter turnout by age group.

The results show that, among the 18– 21½ year-olds who were eligible to vote federally for the first time in 2004, turnout was estimated at 39%. Interestingly, this was 4% higher than the estimated turnout rate for the next group ( 21½– 24 year-olds), although the difference falls below the margin of error for this study. The turnout rate increased steadily with each age group, reaching its highest at 75% among 58–67 year-olds.

Our estimates are based on a representative sample of 553 polling divisions in 31 electoral districts across the country and all advance poll votes as well as the national subset of votes cast by special ballot. The results, based on the Canadian voting age population, have a statistical reliability of  $\pm 4.3\%$ , 19 times out of 20. While the new approach does not allow for a direct comparison of our findings with previous figures, it does enable us to set new benchmarks against which to compare future trends.

## Background

The past decade has seen a steady decline in voter turnout at Canadian federal general elections. Participation has dropped from a post-war average of 75% to 70% in 1993, 67% in 1997, 64.1% in 2000, and 60.9% in the June 28, 2004, election.<sup>1</sup> Official turnout in Canada is calculated by taking the number of voters registered on the National Register of Electors at the close of an electoral event.

In Canada, as in many other developed democracies, research on electoral participation has confirmed that young people vote less than older people. The Canadian Election Study (CES) — an academic endeavour that has been conducted for every federal general election but one since 1968<sup>2</sup> — brought this trend to light following the 2000 general election. The CES suggested that the decline in electoral participation in Canada over the past 15 years is chiefly due to an unprecedented drop in turnout among the youngest age groups, combined with generational replacement.<sup>3</sup>

To further investigate this trend, Elections Canada commissioned a major study in 2002 by professors Jon Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc.<sup>4</sup> Their research, which drew from an original survey involving equal numbers of self-reported voters and non-voters, found that just over 25% of eligible 18–24 year-olds had voted in the 2000 federal election. It should be noted that this estimate was based on self-reported voting behaviours.

## Elections Canada Initiatives

In light of the evidence produced by these and other studies, Elections Canada adopted a multilayered strategy that includes educating and informing young people about the electoral process and their right to vote, ensuring that the electoral process is as accessible as possible, and raising awareness about the decline of youth voting among opinion leaders and stakeholders.

The Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, described Elections Canada's initiatives on a number of occasions, including: the Symposium on Electoral Participation in Canada held in March 2003 at Carleton University; the Roundtable on Youth Voting in May 2003 at the University of British Columbia; the National Forum on Youth Voting in

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<sup>1</sup> In absolute numbers, more people voted in the 2004 general election than in that of 2000. However, the number of electors in the National Register of Electors increased more than the electoral population did, hence the lower turnout rate. Official voting results can be consulted at [www.elections.ca/scripts/OVR2004/default.html](http://www.elections.ca/scripts/OVR2004/default.html). The official report to Parliament on the 2004 general election is also available at [www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca) > General Information > Official Reports > Elections Canada's Official Reports.

<sup>2</sup> With the exception of the 1972 federal general election.

<sup>3</sup> This trend appears to be confirmed by the 2004 CES; see Elisabeth Gidengil et al., "Missing the Message: Young Adults and the Election Issues," *Electoral Insight*, January 2005. For additional analysis of youth voting in the 2004 election, see André Turcotte, "Different Strokes: Why Young Canadians Don't Vote," in the same issue.

<sup>4</sup> Report and database available at [www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca) > Electoral Law and Policy > "[Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections](#)".

October 2003 in Calgary; and the Roundtable on Aboriginal Youth and the Federal Electoral Process in January 2004 in Ottawa.

Elections Canada's initiatives included a new Young Voters Web site designed to reflect its consultations with young people. In February 2004, the Chief Electoral Officer wrote to 1.1 million young Canadians who had turned 18 since the 2000 general election, reminding them of their democratic right to vote. A registration kit was included for those who were not registered. Once the 2004 election was called, Elections Canada wrote again to the remaining 250,000 unregistered youth, informing them about how they could register during the revision period or at the polls.

In preparation for the June 2004 election, 80 returning officers appointed community relations officers to identify neighbourhoods with large concentrations of students, carry out special registration drives, assist youth in finding accessible polling locations, and provide information to community youth leaders and youth media about registration and voting.

During the 2004 election, Elections Canada's mainstream advertising campaign targeted young people with the message that people should "speak up when everyone is listening." Elections Canada also sponsored a Canada Road Trip contest developed by an outside company and promoted on the Web and on the MuchMusic and MusiquePlus television channels.

Other initiatives relied on partnerships with various non-governmental organizations interested in civic education. Examples of such initiatives include:

- Partnership with Cable in the Classroom on "Your Vote... Your Voice," a program that challenged students in grades 10–12 across Canada (secondary IV, secondary V and CÉGEP in Quebec) to create public service announcements telling their peers why democracy is important and why it is important to vote
- Partnership with *Rush the Vote*, an organization that aims to increase youth voter turnout and political awareness through musical events at which performers encourage voting and democratic involvement
- *Student Vote 2004*, an innovative educational program that provided students who had not reached voting age with the opportunity to experience the 2004 federal electoral process through a parallel election in their schools
- Partnership with the Dominion Institute on *Youth Vote 2004*, for a youth voter education kit
- Four post-secondary student associations, to develop a poster for the 2004 general election

As a result of these and other initiatives, youth participation became one of the most important issues during the 2004 election campaign. While it did not become politicized,

youth participation was addressed by a number of political parties and was a major focus of the national media. To our knowledge, this is a first.

### **Assessing Youth Voter Turnout**

A well-known problem encountered by researchers who use survey data to study voter participation is that self-reported turnout is consistently and significantly higher than the official turnout, generally by about 15 to 20%. While corrective measures may be applied, there is no complete solution to the problem. More importantly, it is impossible to know whether or how this tendency may vary with the age of the respondents.

Several factors can explain this over-reporting phenomenon. First, people who are less interested in politics, and who are more likely to be non-voters, are also more likely to refuse to participate in electoral surveys, leading to the under-representation of non-voters and the over-representation of voters in the survey samples.

Another factor identified by survey specialists is the natural human tendency to over-report behaviours that are considered to be positive socially accepted norms — voting appears to be such a behaviour. Although this problem is less likely to occur in telephone than in face-to-face interviews, it exists nonetheless. Researchers have tried different ways of asking survey respondents if they had voted or not, and the results have remained consistently higher than the official turnout rates. Since it is virtually impossible to measure and control the phenomenon, the most effective solutions have consisted of methodological data corrections, such as weighting procedures, in order for the survey results to correspond to official turnout figures.

### **A New Approach**

Given these methodological difficulties, Elections Canada has adopted a new approach to measure turnout across age groups. Exercising an authority granted to the Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada used various data gathered for the purpose of administering the electoral process to create a large sample of electors who voted at the 2004 general election. This information was then cross-referenced with National Register of Electors data to obtain a breakdown of voters by age group. This study was designed to strengthen Elections Canada's ability to serve electors and provide public education and information in keeping with section 18 of the *Canada Elections Act*.

As part of the methodological approach, we selected a national sample of 553 polling divisions in 31 electoral districts across all provinces and territories. It provided estimates with a statistical reliability of  $\pm 4.3\%$ , 19 times out of 20, when generalized to the entire Canadian voting age population.<sup>5</sup> Because there was also an interest in estimates of turnout at the provincial level, the original sample was increased by another 139 polling divisions in order to obtain provincial/territorial estimates with a reasonable statistical reliability. In this report, estimates at the national level are based solely on the original sample, while

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<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this study, turnout is calculated on the basis of the estimated population of eligible voters (or the voting age population), as opposed to the number of registered electors.

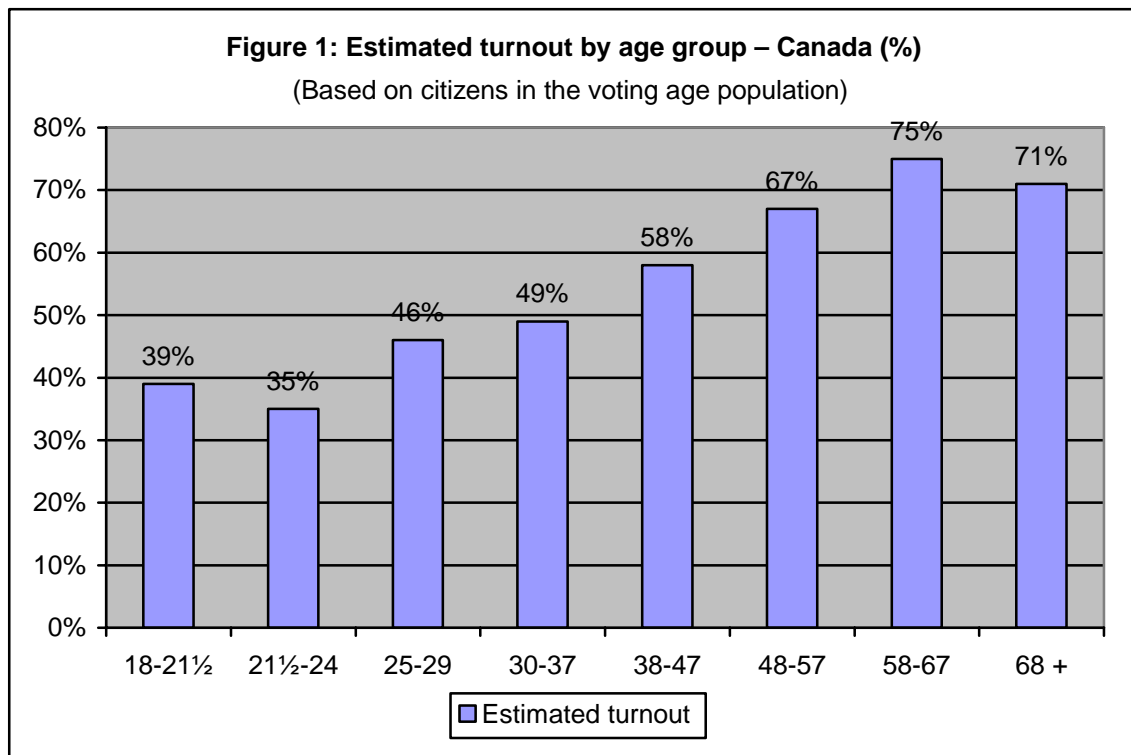
those at the provincial level are based on the augmented sample. Further details about the methodology for this study are provided in the Appendix.

## Observations

### National Highlights

Figure 1 shows the estimates for turnout rates by age group at the national level. These estimates are calculated by comparing the number of voters to the estimated voting age population for each age group (citizens only).

The general trend consists of a linear relationship between age and participation, consistent with the patterns traditionally observed using other research methods. However, the results showed one interesting exception to this relationship: for the youngest group of electors (18–21½ year-olds) for whom June 28, 2004, was the first federal general election in which they were eligible to vote, the turnout rate was 4 points higher than for the next oldest group (21½–24 year-olds), that is, those who had been eligible to vote for the first time in 2000. Yet it is worth noting that this difference falls below the margin of error for the national sample, which means that the gap between the two estimates could be explained by the sampling error and does not necessarily indicate a true difference between the estimates.



Among the older age brackets, voter turnout increased steadily with each group, reaching a high of 75% among 58-67 year-olds and declining slightly to 71% in the oldest group. Again, this pattern is consistent with what is traditionally reflected in public opinion surveys.

In addition, at the national level, only the three oldest age groups (people 48 years of age and older) boasted a participation rate higher than the average.

### Provincial Highlights

The following table presents the turnout rates by age group for each province and territory. Overall turnout based on the population of Canadian citizens 18 years of age and older for each province is featured in the last column on the far right.

Table 2: Estimated turnout by province (based on the number of citizens in the voting age population [%])

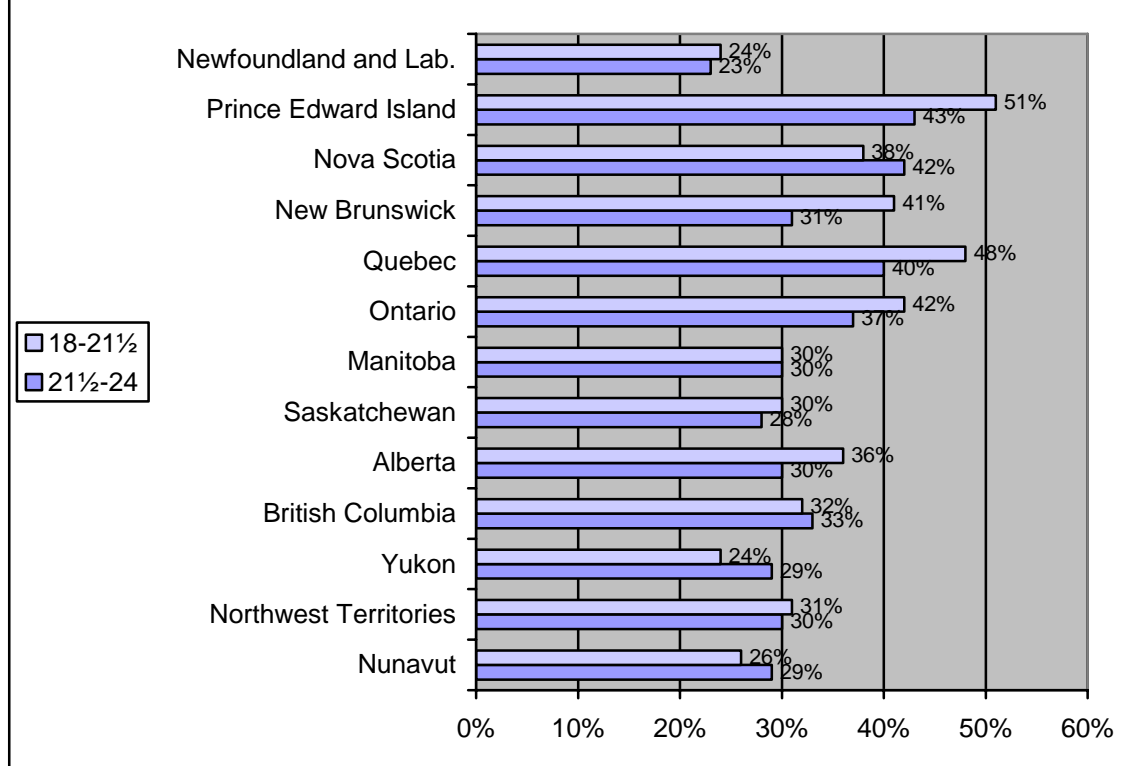
	18–21½	21½–24	25–29	30–37	38–47	48–57	58–67	68 +	Turnout
Newfoundland and Lab.	24	23	33	39	49	58	69	57	49
Prince Edward Island	51	43	57	65	73	80	89	75	74
Nova Scotia	38	42	53	47	62	74	73	60	61
New Brunswick	41	31	46	55	66	74	86	73	65
Quebec	47	40	47	50	56	69	77	75	61
Ontario	42	37	46	49	63	70	77	65	60
Manitoba	30	30	37	42	53	66	70	73	57
Saskatchewan	30	28	35	41	53	68	78	86	59
Alberta	36	30	43	51	56	66	73	67	56
British Columbia	32	33	45	46	52	70	80	78	59
Yukon	24	29	45	47	56	67	75	81	56
Northwest Territories	31	30	40	44	58	64	51	32	50
Nunavut	26	29	38	43	48	55	76	69	45

In absolute numbers, among first-time eligible electors, those from Prince Edward Island had the highest participation rate (51%), followed by Quebec (47%), Ontario (42%) and New Brunswick (41%). Youth participation rates were generally consistent with the overall turnout for each province and territory.

Figure 2 below provides a graphic comparison of the two youngest age groups. The greatest deviation is found in New Brunswick, where a difference of 10% separates the youngest cohort from the second youngest. That province is followed by Prince Edward Island (8%), Quebec (7%), Alberta (6%) and Ontario (5%).

In the remaining provinces and territories, particularly British Columbia, Nunavut and Yukon, the trend between the two groups is reversed and falls back in line with the traditional linear relationship between age and turnout. It should be noted, however, that any comparison must take into account the margins of error reported for the geographical units of interest (see Table 5 of the Appendix).

**Figure 2: Estimated turnout among the two youngest age groups -- provinces and territories (%)**



(Based on citizens in the voting age population)

## Conclusion

The results suggest caution in concluding that more young people participated in the 2004 general election than in the 2000 general election. Given the very different methodologies employed, it is not appropriate to compare the results presented in this study to the Pammett-LeDuc findings, or indeed to any survey-based study. Public opinion surveys are invaluable research tools that enable researchers to better understand various aspects of the vote and related attitudes and behaviours. But when it comes to measuring voter turnout across age groups, surveys consistently tend to produce inflated figures. In this regard, the estimates presented in this study provide a new benchmark against which future participation rates should be measured. Regrettably, it is not possible to look back for comparisons, as the election-day lists used for previous elections were destroyed one year after the event, as prescribed by the law.

Perhaps one of the most striking findings of this study is that participation by first-time voters (18–21½ year-olds) appears to have been higher than that of second-time voters (21½–24 year-olds). This pattern, which was observed across the country in many provinces and one territory, could signal the beginning of a reversal of the decline among

young voters witnessed in recent years. While the cause of this pattern is not yet evident, it is possible to suppose that the increased efforts by Elections Canada and others to educate, inform, and make the electoral process more accessible to youth, had a positive impact. In this context, the February 2004 mail-out to potential first-time voters is particularly noteworthy.

These new results should not lead to the conclusion that the problem of low youth turnout is resolved. The fact remains that young people continue to be significantly less likely to exercise their right to vote than older generations. We know that in the 2004 general election younger cohorts constituted a larger proportion of voters than in 2000. And while it is possible that first-time voters participated in somewhat greater numbers in 2004, they are still voting at a rate of some 35% less than the oldest age group. Further research, including more qualitative studies of young electors, is required to better understand the reasons for this trend.

The Chief Electoral Officer of Canada has a mandate to make the electoral process better known to Canadians, particularly those who may have difficulties exercising their right to vote. For this purpose, and given the results of this study, Elections Canada is committed to maintaining the momentum of its initiatives in this area both during and between elections, and will continue pursuing activities and partnerships to inform young people about their democratic rights and the importance of participating in the electoral process.



## **Appendix: Methodology**

## Methodology

The goal of this study was to estimate the voter turnout rates at the 38th general election held on June 28, 2004, for specific age groups of interest. To this end, turnout was determined by dividing the number of people who voted by the number of eligible electors (Canadian citizens 18 years of age and older). Typically, studies of youth turnout have compared the number of youth voters to the estimated number of youth in the electoral population. However, in Canada, the official voting results are traditionally calculated by taking the number of registered electors.

For the purpose of this study, the estimated electoral population was based on Statistics Canada's 2001 Census. Adjustments were made to the Census population counts to remove non-citizens and citizens under 18 years of age, since they were not eligible to vote. Additional adjustments were made to take into account population growth during the time elapsed between Census Day and polling day, using demographic information provided by Statistics Canada.

In order to calculate turnout by age, two pieces of information were needed: evidence of the act of casting a ballot and date of birth. Date of birth information is available in the National Register of Electors and is copied onto the final list of electors produced after the election. The voting method (on polling day, by special ballot, or at advance polls), as set out in the *Canada Elections Act*, was also accounted for in the sampling strategy.

The study sample consisted of three different components: electors who voted at advance polls or by special ballot, electors who registered on the spot on polling day, and electors already registered who simply showed up and voted on polling day. The first two components required no sampling procedures, as the relevant information was available for all electors using those voting mechanisms. The third component consisted of a sample.

Administrative controls ensure that Elections Canada can keep records of electors who vote at advance polls or by special ballot; therefore, those who voted by these means could be identified on the final list of electors. This first component comprised 1,454,700 electors.

Electors who registered on polling day could easily be identified from the operational system, and all were assumed to have voted. Date of birth information for this group was taken from the registration certificates. This second component included 896,900 voters.

When electors show up at their polling station to vote, their name is physically struck off the list of electors for that polling division as a control measure. These lists, which are returned to Elections Canada with the ballots, are the only evidence that electors who were not required to register on polling day actually voted that day. Originally, a sample of some 90,000 such voters was selected to produce national turnout estimates. Some 20,000 voters were subsequently added to increase the reliability of turnout estimates at the provincial

level. This third component was therefore the only one that was based on sampling errors. In this case, date of birth information came from the National Register of Electors.

The micro-data used for this study contain private information and therefore cannot be made publicly available.

### **Age Groups**

Age groups were determined on the basis of an elector’s age on polling day (June 28, 2004), and in such a way as to isolate those who had turned 18 since the previous general election (after November 27, 2000). This group, composed of 18–21½ year-olds, represented young people who were eligible to vote for the first time federally in the 2004 general election. The second group, comprising 21½–24 year-olds, represented those who had been eligible to vote federally for the first time in the 2000 general election, and therefore eligible to vote in a federal general election for the second time in 2004. These two youngest groups formed “youth” for the purpose of this study.

The following table illustrates the age groups based on dates of birth.

Table 4: Details on age groups

Age groups	Born on or after	And before	Electors in population (estimated)	Percentage
18–21½	November 28, 1982	June 29, 1986	1,416,638	6.2
21½–24	June 29, 1979	November 28, 1982	1,327,382	5.8
25–29	June 29, 1974	June 29, 1979	1,793,493	7.9
30–37	June 29, 1966	June 29, 1974	3,081,459	13.5
38–47	June 29, 1956	June 29, 1966	4,907,862	21.6
48–57	June 29, 1946	June 29, 1956	4,231,475	18.6
58–67	June 29, 1936	June 29, 1946	2,704,571	11.9
68+		June 29, 1936	3,303,620	14.5
Total			22,766,499	100.0

### **Sample Design**

As previously explained, a sample was selected among previously registered electors who voted at their polling stations on June 28, 2004 (third component). The sampling unit was the polling division, and the sample itself was selected from the 59,514 polling divisions across the country.

For practical considerations, the sample was established in two steps. First, a number of federal electoral districts were randomly selected within each province. This selection yielded 28 electoral districts. Since the three territories each have only one electoral district, they were included by default, for a total of 31 districts overall. The number of

electoral districts selected was determined to ensure adequate coverage at the national level.

The second step was to identify 20 polling divisions within each of the selected electoral districts for the original sample used to produce national estimates. The augmented sample, designed to improve the statistical reliability of provincial estimates, included 139 additional polling divisions. To make sure the sample represented the population as much as possible in terms of turnout, the polling divisions were ordered by turnout and selected using systematic sampling (selection of polling divisions from the list at regular intervals).

### **Margins of Error**

At the national level, the sample produced estimates with a margin of error of  $\pm 4.3\%$ , 19 times out of 20. In other words, if the same sampling strategy were replicated 20 times, we would expect that, 19 times out of 20 (95% of the time), the estimated turnout rate for each age group would not differ from the real value in the population by more than 4.3%. At first glance, the national margin of error may seem inconsistent with the large number of electors captured in the sample (over 90,000). From a methodological perspective, the overall margin of error has to be based on the number of polling divisions selected (sample unit) rather than the number of individual voters it contains.

The following table provides the margins of error for each age group at the national level as well as for each province, territory and aggregated region. Estimated turnout rates provided in this study may vary from the real value in the population by plus or minus their corresponding margins of error (in percentage points).

Due to the sampling procedures, the data does not allow reliable estimates of voter turnout for a geographical territory smaller than the province.

**Table 5: Margins of error**

	18-21½	21½-24	25-29	30-37	38-47	48-57	58-67	68 +
Canada	3.6	3.5	4.0	4.0	5.2	5.4	6.4	9.4
Newfoundland & Labrador	4.2	4.8	5.9	4.2	3.1	3.7	4.9	6.2
Prince Edward Island	7.3	5.0	10.7	2.8	2.9	2.1	11.3	4.0
Nova Scotia	4.6	20.2	14.4	2.4	13.8	15.6	9.1	33.5
New Brunswick	2.1	2.8	11.0	4.5	2.0	5.1	12.2	4.5
Quebec	3.2	6.6	6.5	7.8	6.6	4.7	5.9	12.4
Ontario	7.5	3.1	4.9	7.0	7.5	6.8	6.1	13.9
Manitoba	3.6	4.9	11.2	16.2	6.6	5.5	5.7	34.4
Saskatchewan	5.1	3.0	4.7	5.1	8.2	11.2	7.7	25.4
Alberta	6.6	3.1	3.9	9.6	6.0	4.1	6.9	20.6
British Columbia	8.2	7.4	11.7	9.6	6.8	3.7	10.5	16.6
Yukon	2.8	4.5	8.2	3.6	3.9	4.2	8.0	13.1
Northwest Territories	5.5	4.1	5.8	3.4	4.1	7.5	7.4	7.6
Nunavut	3.7	2.6	3.5	2.2	3.1	5.2	4.3	8.8
Atlantic (NL, PE, NS, NB)	2.2	8.0	6.8	2.0	5.6	6.3	5.4	13.9
Prairies (MB, SK, AB)	4.1	2.2	3.4	6.9	4.2	3.4	4.4	14.9
Territories (YT, NT, NU)	2.5	2.2	3.4	1.9	2.4	3.6	4.6	6.8

Note: Margins of error vary considerably because polls were selected randomly with no control for age groups.