

# Political Participation Among Seniors

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July, 2013



This research note is the second in a two-part series on seniors. Whereas the first note provided a socio-demographic profile of Canadians over 65 years of age, this note focuses on seniors' electoral participation and the barriers to voting they face. Also included is a discussion on measures adopted in Canadian provinces and territories, as well as those implemented abroad, to facilitate seniors' participation in the electoral process. This note, based on a literature review of secondary sources, provides foundational knowledge for Elections Canada's future initiatives aimed at reducing barriers that seniors may face when voting.

Ensuring that the electoral system is accessible to seniors is an important goal for legal, political and social reasons. Legally, the rights of seniors in Canada are enshrined in section 15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which makes it illegal to discriminate against persons based on age in government laws and policies. The *Canadian Human Rights Act* similarly prohibits federal service providers from discriminating based on age. Politically, as the population ages, the needs of older Canadians will become increasingly important on the policy agenda and for older or retired citizens; voting remains one of relatively few means of expressing their political will.<sup>1</sup>

As noted by Karlawish and Bonnie, because seniors comprise a growing proportion of the total population in most developed countries, "the extent to which an electoral system facilitates or suppresses participation by the elderly can have a direct impact on the

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<sup>1</sup> N. Kohn, "Cognitive Impairment and the Right to Vote," *Canadian Elder Law* (2008), 30.

outcome of elections."<sup>2</sup> In addition, the act of voting is socially validating, and fosters a sense of social inclusion and dignity; when people are excluded from voting, they may feel powerless or marginalized.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly important for older seniors, many of whom are more likely than younger adults to feel socially isolated.<sup>4</sup>

## Voter Turnout

Historically, voter turnout among older Canadians has been high. As Figure 1 below illustrates, among the general population, propensity to vote increases with age, and seniors in general vote consistently more than younger adults. There is, however, a marked decline in turnout after age 75. While seniors over 75 still vote more than the general population, their rate of turnout is significantly lower than that of adults in the 56–74 age category. Among the population of people with disabilities, the trend is somewhat different; voter turnout increases only slightly with age, and starts declining earlier, with a substantial drop-off after age 65.<sup>5</sup> The result is that while young people with disabilities vote only slightly less than young people in general, turnout among older voters is strongly depressed among those with disabilities.<sup>6</sup>

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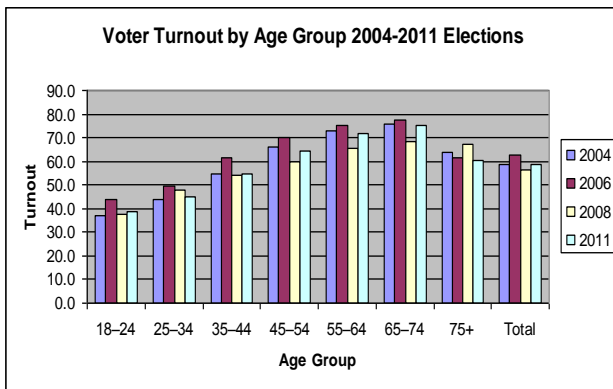
<sup>2</sup> J. Karlawish and R. Bonnie, "Voting by Elderly Persons with Cognitive Impairment: Lessons from Other Democratic Nations," *McGeorge Law Review* (2007), 883.

<sup>3</sup> Kohn, 44.

<sup>4</sup> S. Carstairs and W.J. Keon, Special Senate Committee on Aging, *Canada's Aging Population: Seizing the Opportunity* (2009), 89.

<sup>5</sup> M. Prince, *Electoral Participation of Electors with Disabilities: Canadian Practices in a Comparative Context* (2012).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



Source: Elections Canada. "Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age," retrieved September 1, 2012 from: [www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/part/e-stim&document=index&lang=e](http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/part/e-stim&document=index&lang=e).

## Barriers to Voting

Various barriers may explain declining turnout among seniors as they grow older. Barriers may be internal, that is, related to the voter's own health status and capacity to vote; or external, that is, arising from the physical environment, laws and policies, or attitudinal/social factors.<sup>7</sup>

### Internal Barriers

Internal barriers are typically the result of deteriorating physical or cognitive health. Compared to the general population, there is a far higher incidence of physical disability among seniors. Approximately 33% of people between 65 and 74 and 56% of those 75 and older report some form of physical disability, compared to 14.3% of the general population. As shown in Table 2, limitations related to mobility and restrictions due to pain are the most common forms of physical disability among seniors. Physical limitations may, to varying degrees, interfere with a potential voter's ability to travel to a polling place, access the ballot box and/or cast a ballot.<sup>8</sup>

Proportion of Seniors with a disability, 2006					
Age	Vision	Hearing	Pain	Mobility	Agility
65-74	5.6%	11.9%	22.8%	23.8%	23.3%
75+	13.4%	25.9%	34.5%	44.7%	42%

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Kohn, 34.

<sup>8</sup> S.H. Akili, "Enabling Disabled Voters Via Mobile Democracy" (2009), 8-11.

Cognitive difficulties may also interfere with voting. Dementia – due to Alzheimer's disease or other causes – affects a significant number of seniors and is expected to present a major social and public health problem as the population ages. In 2008, 480,600 people, or 1.5% of Canada's population, suffered from some form of dementia, and this number is expected to rise to 1.13 million (or 2.8% of Canadians) by 2038.<sup>9</sup> As the risk of developing dementia doubles every five years after 65, most patients are 75 years of age or older.<sup>10</sup> Dementia is progressive in nature, and the extent to which it interferes with voting depends on its severity.

Mild cognitive deficits do not necessarily prevent people from voting, and many remain interested in doing so.<sup>11</sup> For example, a study of the 2000 American presidential election found that "a substantial portion of patients with mild to moderate dementia voted on their own at a voting booth."<sup>12</sup> However, even those with the cognitive capacity to vote may find aspects of the process challenging. Confusing ballots, distractions at the polling station and low lighting can all create difficulties for those with cognitive deficits.<sup>13</sup> In moderate or severe cases of dementia, voting may become increasingly difficult or impossible. People may have difficulties understanding the nature of the election, obtaining information about the candidates, and remembering where and when to vote.<sup>14</sup>

Results from the Canadian Labour Force Survey suggest that issues related to health and disability present the most significant barrier to voting for seniors. Among those who did not vote at the 2011 general election, 22% of those aged 65–74 cited health and disability reasons for not having voted, compared to 44% for those over 75.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Alzheimer's Society of Canada, cited in M. Sheppard, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, "Reducing the Fear of Alzheimer's Disease" (2011), retrieved August 7, 2012 from: [www.cbc.ca/news/health/story/2011/03/24/alzheimer-conference-hope.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/health/story/2011/03/24/alzheimer-conference-hope.html).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Kohn, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Karlawish et al. "Electoral Participation of Electors with Disabilities: Canadian Practices in a Comparative Context" (2012).

<sup>13</sup> Kohn, 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Statistics Canada, *Reasons for Not Voting in the May 2, 2011 Federal Election* (2011), retrieved August 7, 2012

## External Barriers

According to a study by Michael Prince, external barriers “arise from the physical environment, policies, information or third parties’ attitudes and behaviour”.<sup>16</sup> In many cases, these barriers exacerbate age- and disability-related challenges.

### Transportation

For people with mobility restrictions, transportation to and from polling stations can present a major barrier. While most people over 65 have a driver’s license and access to a vehicle, 29% require assistance with transportation, and may depend on family, caregivers or volunteer drivers.<sup>17</sup> A lack of transportation may be particularly restrictive in rural communities, where public transportation is limited and travel distances are greater.

### Living Arrangements and Institutionalization

Seniors’ living arrangements may also affect their ability to vote. According to Karlawish et al., among seniors who live at home, those who receive care from spouses are more likely to vote than those cared for by adult children.<sup>18</sup> This may be because a caregiving spouse may have a better understanding of his/her partner’s wishes and fewer conflicting responsibilities.<sup>19</sup> Approximately 8% of those aged 75–84 and 32% of those over 85 live in a long-term care facility.<sup>20</sup> Care facilities vary, with some providing assisted living while others offer comprehensive 24-hour nursing services. However, seniors in long-term care generally have higher levels of disability than those living at home, and are often highly dependent on facility staff. Anecdotal evidence suggests that long-term care staff are often busy with other tasks such as the provision of care, staffing and

administration, and because of this, they may not always prioritize voting or ensure that residents have the necessary access and assistance.<sup>21</sup>

### Voter Identification Requirements

Anecdotal evidence obtained by Elections Canada suggests that ID requirements may present significant barriers to seniors. In particular, those residing in long-term care facilities may not hold original copies of their identification, or addresses on the documents may be inconsistent. In some cases, there may also be administrative challenges in informing voters and their families of the ID requirements.<sup>22</sup>

### Screening

Canada is one of only four democratic countries worldwide that has no laws to exclude voters on the basis of mental or cognitive incompetence.<sup>23</sup> As such, no formal screening processes are used to determine whether a person is capable of voting. Nonetheless, research by Kohn suggests that friends, caregivers and facility staff may conduct informal screening of seniors, that is, “create affirmative barriers to voting even where not authorized to do so and where their manner of doing so is inconsistent with the law.”<sup>24</sup> Currently, empirical research on this topic is limited, and so the extent to which this occurs in Canada is not documented.

Research in the United States and the United Kingdom has also revealed more general barriers faced by seniors and electors with disabilities, which may affect their ability or inclination to vote. At the systemic level, these may include budget constraints for electoral services, or inadequate informational materials provided to seniors on where and how to vote.<sup>25</sup>

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from: [www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/110705/dq110705a-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/110705/dq110705a-eng.htm).

<sup>16</sup> Prince, 24.

<sup>17</sup> M. Turcotte and G. Schellenberg, Statistics Canada, *A Portrait of Seniors in Canada* (Minister of Industry, 2007), 153.

<sup>18</sup> Karlawish et al., cited in Prince, 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> K. Cranswick and D. Dosman, Statistics Canada, “Eldercare: What we know Today” (2007), retrieved May 7, 2012 from: [www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2008002/article/10689-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2008002/article/10689-eng.htm).

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<sup>21</sup> J. O’Sullivan (2001) cited in Prince, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Elections Canada, *Summary of Existing Research and Knowledge on Seniors in Long-Term Care Facilities* (n.d.), 15.

<sup>23</sup> Kohn, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Kohn, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Prince, 26.

## Overview of Key Initiatives to Increase Accessibility

At the federal level, several measures to facilitate access to the electoral process for seniors are already in place (see annex). This section highlights measures adopted within other jurisdictions, including provinces and other countries. These measures are not currently in place at the federal level in Canada.

### Initiatives to Address Internal Barriers

#### Assistive Devices

Some provincial and international jurisdictions provide additional assistive systems and devices to facilitate voting for senior voters and persons with disabilities. For instance, Elections Ontario provides magnifiers and easy-grip pencils upon request,<sup>26</sup> and has piloted a Voter Assistance Access Line to provide immediate help to voters with disabilities who are experiencing difficulties. Internationally, the Western Australian Electoral Commission has implemented “drive-through polling places, redesigned desktop voting screens, telephone typewriter service (TTY), hard-of-hearing counter cards, video magnifiers and closed-circuit TV (CCTV) screens, as well as magnifying sheets and triangular pencils at polling places,” to assist voters with disabilities.<sup>27</sup>

#### Electronic Voting Machines

Electronic balloting devices, such as direct recording electronic devices (DREs), used in many American jurisdictions, offer the benefit that information can be presented to the voter page-by-page instead of in full-face format. In addition, electronic interfaces can use high resolution, adjustable font, and prompts and

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<sup>26</sup> Elections Ontario, *Multi-Year Accessibility Plan. 2011-2012 to 2015-2016*, retrieved August 7, 2012 from: [wemakevotingeasy.ca/media/AODA/MYAPeng.pdf](http://wemakevotingeasy.ca/media/AODA/MYAPeng.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Western Australian Electoral Commission, *Be Involved: Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2007–2012* (2011), in Prince, “Persons with Disabilities and Canada’s Electoral Systems: Gradually Advancing the Democratic Right to Vote” (2004), retrieved August 18, 2012 from: [www.elections.ca/res/eim/article\\_search/article.asp?id=15&lang=e&frmPageSize=](http://www.elections.ca/res/eim/article_search/article.asp?id=15&lang=e&frmPageSize=)

visual cues. Some research has shown that these features reduce error rates among older voters.<sup>28</sup>

#### Photograph Ballots

In Quebec, ballots featuring photographs of the candidates have been implemented,<sup>29</sup> and research shows that this format may prove particularly useful for older voters with memory deficits or cognitive impairments.<sup>30</sup>

#### Modifications to Polling Places

Kohn (2008) suggests that fixing conditions such as low lighting and distracting noises would decrease the cognitive demands associated with voting, and thus make it significantly easier for citizens to record their votes.<sup>31</sup> It is not clear whether these variables have received attention in Canadian or international jurisdictions.

### Initiatives to address external barriers

#### Transportation to Polling Place

Transportation to and from polling stations is commonly cited as a significant barrier to voting by seniors.<sup>32</sup> Currently, Yukon and Newfoundland and Labrador offer this service.<sup>33</sup>

#### Training and Education

Many jurisdictions provide training, information and guides to educate election workers, caregivers and residential facility staff about the voting rights of seniors and those with cognitive impairments. This is a useful practice to help them understand seniors’

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<sup>28</sup> T. Selker, “The Technology of Access: Allowing People of Age to Vote for Themselves,” *McGeorge Law Review* (2007), 1125–1128.

<sup>29</sup> Prince (2012), 33.

<sup>30</sup> Kohn, “Cognitive Impairment and the Right to Vote,” *Canadian Elder Law* (Fall 2008), 22.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> When asked the question “What, if anything, should be done to help older people to vote in federal elections?”, the most common response among seniors (39%) was that transportation should be provided to and from voting stations (Elections Canada, *Survey of Electors Following the 40th General Election*).

<sup>33</sup> Prince, 34–37.

specific needs and to discourage the inadvertent “screening out” of voters.<sup>34</sup> The province of Ontario, for example, provides targeted training to election officials on the needs of seniors and people with disabilities. In the United States, the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) has developed guidance materials for election officials working in long-term care facilities. The EAC also facilitated a working group of academics, election workers and subject matter experts to share information on voting in long-term care facilities.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

Voting is important for seniors, as it provides an opportunity to participate in the political process and promotes a sense of inclusion. While seniors as a group have the highest rates of turnout among all age demographics, they do face certain barriers to accessing the electoral process, particularly as they get older. Barriers, most commonly related to health and disability, may be amplified by the physical environment of polling places. While Elections Canada has implemented a number of measures to assist seniors with health conditions and disabilities, the benefits of additional measures, such as modifications to polling sites, redesigned ballots, additional assistive devices and transportation services, may warrant further research and consideration.

## Annex: Key Initiatives to Increase Voting Access for Seniors to Vote in Canadian Federal Elections

### Accessible Voting Stations

Polling stations on both election day and advance polling days, as well as returning offices, must be equipped with level access. In the exceptional circumstances in which designated facilities are not accessible, eligible voters may be issued transfer certificates allowing them to vote at alternate voting facilities.

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Information on Promising Practices Could Strengthen the Integrity of the Voting Process in Long-Term Care Facilities* (2009), 16.

### Alternative Voting Methods

Alternative voting methods include advance polls and special ballots.<sup>36</sup> *Advance polls* are available to electors who are unable or unwilling to vote on election day, enabling them to vote early at a designated location. Voting at an advance poll may help seniors by allowing them to arrange for appropriate transportation, and to determine early whether any voting barriers are present.<sup>37</sup> *Special ballots* allow voting at any time during the electoral period either by mail or in person at the returning office,<sup>38</sup> and may benefit those who are unable to visit a designated polling place.

### Assisted Voting and Information

Elections Canada provides a range of information, education, and accessibility services that can assist seniors. These include lists of candidates in large print, a voting template and voter information on DVD. An elector with a disability may also, upon request, receive help marking the ballot. Electors with hearing difficulties can request sign language interpreters at the polls.<sup>39</sup> A TTY toll-free information line is also available for electors with a hearing impairment.

### Assistive Voting Device

The assistive voting device (AVD) is a piece of electronic equipment that allows electors with a visual impairment or limited dexterity to mark a ballot independently and in secrecy. Elections Canada conducted a pilot test of such a device in the November 29, 2010, by-election in Winnipeg North. The agency concluded that the type of device used in

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<sup>36</sup> Elections Canada, “Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group and Gender at the 2011 General Election” (2011), retrieved August 11, 2012 from: [www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/part/estim/41ge&document=report41&lang=e#p41](http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/part/estim/41ge&document=report41&lang=e#p41).

<sup>37</sup> AODA Alliance, “Use Options for Accessible Voting for Voters with Disabilities in This Election” (2011), retrieved August 12 from: [www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/09202011.asp](http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/09202011.asp).

<sup>38</sup> In the case of an elector voting by special ballot outside the electoral district of his or her ordinary residence, the completed ballot must arrive at Elections Canada in Ottawa no later than 6:00 p.m., Eastern Time, on polling day.

<sup>39</sup> Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, *Report of the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada on the 37th General Election Held on November 27, 2000*.



this pilot is not a solution that lends itself to electoral events held at the federal level.

#### *Mobile Polls*

A returning officer may, with the approval of the Chief Electoral Officer, establish mobile polling stations in polling divisions that consist of two or more institutions where seniors reside, allowing them to vote without travelling to an external polling location. As well the *Canada Elections Act* provides that such voting at such a poll may be suspended temporarily, and, with the approval of the person in charge of the institution, the ballot box, ballots and other necessary election materials may be carried from room to room to take the votes of electors who are confined to bed and ordinarily resident in the polling division in which the institution is situated.

#### *Ordinary Poll in Seniors' Residence*

The returning officer may also create a "single ordinary poll" in a seniors' residence with a high number of electors. This poll only serves the electors living in that residence.

#### *Polling for Hospitalized or Convalescing Electors*

If electors are unable to leave their beds, it is possible for the station to be brought to them, at the discretion of the deputy returning officer.

#### *Voting at Home*

Electors who are unable to leave their homes may vote at home in the presence of an electoral officer and a witness, provided that they are registered for a special ballot, cannot go to the local Elections Canada office, and cannot mark the ballot due to a disability.

#### *Voter Identification Card*

In 2010, in order to address barriers related to identification, Elections Canada authorized the use of the voter information card (VIC) as proof of address for select groups of electors. During by-elections in the fall of 2010 and during the 2011 general election, as well as in the following by-elections, electors living in long-term care facilities, Aboriginal people living on reserves, and students living in residences whose polls were located on campus were allowed to use their VIC as proof of address.

According to the 2011 post-election survey of administrators, and consultations with returning officers, this initiative reduced the proof-of-identity barrier for seniors, particularly those living in rural areas.

#### *Complaint Process*

Elections Canada, in response to a ruling in the case of *Hughes vs. Elections Canada*, implemented a system to collect feedback and complaints related to polling site accessibility issues. A feedback form is available at all polling sites and online. Returning officers are responsible for investigating complaints and following up with electors who have requested it.

#### *Outreach*

Elections Canada has recently initiated outreach activities for voters in seniors' residences and, in the 2011 general election, hired 300 community relations officers to visit long-term care facilities and provide information on registration and voting to administrators, residents and their families.