THE PREFERENCES OF VOTERS AND NON-VOTERS IN CANADA (1988-2008)

Jean-François Godbout[*]
Université de Montréal

Mathieu Turgeon[†]
Universidade de Brasília

January 15, 2012

ABSTRACT

Several decades of empirical studies on political preferences have consistently indicated that there is very little difference of attitudes and opinions between those who participate in elections and those who abstain; even if these two groups differ significantly in their socio-economic characteristics. This study offers an extension to the preceding conclusion by comparing the partisan and policy preferences of voters and non-voters in Canada. Using over 20 years of survey data from the Canadian Election Studies (1988-2008), we show that there is indeed a significant difference in the political attitudes expressed by these two groups. Specifically, we find that non-voters are more conservative on certain issues and more likely to hold anti-system views. The paper also argues that there are major limitations to this conclusion, mainly because of sample selection biases associated with panel attrition.

[*]Corresponding Author: jean-francois.godbout@umontreal.ca. Département de science politique, Université de Montréal. CP 6128 Succ Centre-Ville. Montréal QC, H3C 3J7 Canada.
[†]Instituto de Ciência Política, Universidade de Brasília. Asa Norte, Brasília DF, 70910-900, Brasil.

Introduction

Voter turnout has been declining in recent years in Canada and in other democracies (Blais et al., 2004). In Canadian federal elections, this trend has greatly accelerated since the 2000 election. Averaging across decades, turnout has gone from 77.2% in the 60s, to 74.5% in the 70s, to 73.3% in the 80s, to 68.3% in the 90s, and finally to 61.4% in recent years. The lowest turnout ever recorded in Canadian federal elections occurred in 2008 when it reached a meagre 58.8%. To be sure, fewer voters in Canada participate in elections today compared to a generation ago.

There has been extensive scholarly work examining the *sources* of this decline (e.g., Gray and Caul 2000; Pammett and LeDuc 2003), but not much has been done—at least in the Canadian context—on the *consequences* of low turnout on political representation. One notable exception is a contribution by André Blais in the post-election samples and colleagues (Rubenson et al., 2007). In this article, the authors evaluate the claim made by Lijphart (1997) that higher turnout would benefit parties and policies of the left. Analyzing survey data from the 2000 election, they conclude that voters' opinions and preferences are representative of the entire electorate; consequently, universal turnout would not affect election results significantly. Their finding that turnout does not have a partisan bias is congruent with what has been found in the United States context (e.g., Highton and Wolfinger 2001).

In this paper, we re-examine the claim that turnout can produce a partisan bias in Canada. We argue that although Rubenson and colleagues' approach is a first step in the right direction there is still room for improvement in order to evaluate this important and consequential claim. We begin by demonstrating that comparing voters and non-voters in a public opinion study will be particularly affected by survey non-response and self-selection bias. We show that this is the case in Canadian Election Studies where panel attrition is higher among potential non-voters. Finally, we propose a weighting scheme that allows for a greater discrimination among the electorate to compare between the preferences of voters and non-voters.

Examining seven elections (1988-2008), we find that Canadian voters and non-voters differ more significantly than what is reported by Rubenson and colleagues. Moreover, the differences between voters and non-voters are consistent and contrary to common wisdom, cut in a conservative direction. We further investigate this trend by focusing on three recent elections (2004-2008) and find that non-voters are generally more conservative than voters on issues of relevance to Canadian politics. Not surprisingly, we also show that non-voters have more negative views of political parties and politicians in general. They do not see voting as a civic duty and are generally less satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada. To be sure, our findings indicate rather clearly that voters and non-voters *are* different and that this difference is important.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first part, we discuss sampling issues and selection bias in Canadian Election Studies (CES). In this section, we identify several assumptions that we think are necessary to compare the opinion of voters and non-voters in panel surveys. In the second part, we proceed with this comparison by looking at partisanship and voting intentions in the 1988-2008 CES. We also offer a more detailed analysis of several survey questions related to policy issues in the 2004-2006-2008 CES. In the final two sections, we discuss these results in light of the sampling issues and conclude with some general suggestions to further investigate this problem.

Turnout and Partisan Bias

Research on voter turnout shows rather clearly that some people are more likely to participate in elections (Blais, 2000; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). For example, older, wealthier, and more educated people all have a higher probability of voting (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Non-voters are predominantly found in lower socioeconomic strata of the population. Presumably, the gap in political participation

2

would favor the more privileged segment of the electorate who hold distinct interests and values than lower socioeconomic status (SES) voters. If so, election outcomes, and subsequent policy outcomes, would be different if non-voters where to participate in the electoral process (Lutz and Marsh, 2007).

The question is: do voters and non-voters actually hold distinct interests and values? In other words, do they have different political opinions and preferences? Common wisdom has it that citizens from low socioeconomic strata, who are more likely *not* to vote, have a stronger preference for left-of-centre political parties and policies. On the other hand, higher status citizens, who are more likely to vote, tend to prefer conservative right-of-center political parties and policies (DeNardo, 1980; Pacek and Radcliff, 1995). Thus, if there is any partisan bias associated with low turnout it should cut in a more conservative direction, benefiting parties and policies from the right. In the Canadian case, this would imply that the Conservative Party is the party who benefits the most from the decline in voter turnout. The recent 2011 election results appear to confirm this trend.

Surprisingly, most work in the area has failed to demonstrate any significant difference in political opinions and preferences between voters and non-voters. Generally, these studies find that higher turnout rates would not systematically alter the results of elections (e.g. Brunell and DiNardo 2004; Highton and Wolfinger 2001; Sides, Schickler and Citrin 2008). The same finding applies to Canada. As stated earlier, a thorough analysis of the 2000 Canadian Election Study by Rubenson et al. (2007) indicates that voters and non-voters do not hold different political opinions and preferences. Moreover, the authors also present evidence that universal turnout would not have significantly affected the results of the 2000 federal election.

[Figure 1 about here.]

But how much faith can we put in these findings? To begin, Rubenson et al. (2007) only focus on one election. We believe that studying more elections is necessary since

turnout has decreased even more since 2000. As Figure 1 exhibits, turnout in Canadian elections reached its historical low in 2008, with 58.8% of the eligible voting population casting a ballot. We also think that the approach used by the authors to compare the average opinions of voters with the average opinions of the whole sample (voters + non-voters) seriously affects the results of their analysis by diluting any potential differences that may exist between these groups. In this study, we propose a different approach: We directly compare the preferences of voters and non-voters— two independent samples— by reporting any significant differences with a statistical test.[1] Finally, we also think that the over-reporting of voter turnout in Canadian Election Studies constitutes a serious problem in their analysis. We consider the possibility that the research design—and more importantly sampling issues—seriously affects the conclusions of their study, or any other survey analyses that aim to compare the opinions of voters and non-voters.

We argue that correcting for the over-representation of reported voters in the post-campaign survey sample to reflect the official turnout rate—a method used by Rubenson et al. (2007)—has some serious limitations. In other words, we demonstrate that respondents who participated in both pre and post-election survey panel waves are significantly different than respondents who participated in pre-election waves only. In the next section, we argue that since measuring the opinions of voters and non-voters in surveys implies having information about the behaviour of respondents after the election, any comparaison of these two groups will necessary be biased.

---

[1]Although to be fair, Rubenson and colleagues compare the opinion of voters and non-voters in a logistic regression where the dependent variable is turnout, and the independent variables are age, gender, education, income and country of origin. Each policy issue is then added separately to the model to estimate whether it has a direct impact on the probability of voting. Thus, their approach measures whether having different opinions on issues actually influences the probability to vote, whereas our approach directly compares the opinion of voters and non-voters.

Sampling Issues in the Canadian Election Studies

We begin by demonstrating that the post-election survey waves of Canadian Election Studies overestimate turnout by a large margin. This finding is by no means limited to the Canadian case, as other surveys like the American National Election Studies also over-estimate turnout by large margins (e.g. Silver and Anderson 1986). Figure 2 reports this difference in seven CES surveys spanning more than twenty years (1988-2008). As we can see, the gap between the average turnout rate as reported by the CES and the official voter turnout rate of Election Canada has greatly increased over the years.

[Figure 2 about here.]

What can explain this trend? One explanation is that there is an increase in vote misreporting (e.g. non-voters who declare having voted in the survey). This bias is very difficult to measure because we do not have validated voter turnout in Canadian surveys, contrary to several other countries (**?**). Nonetheless, we do not think that this is a problem in our study because we do not have reason to believe that Canadians are more likely to misreport having voted today, compared to twenty years ago. Thus, we assume that misreporting voter turnout in CES is constant across this trend.

The second and more serious problem relates to the over-representation of voters (as opposed to abstainers) in the CES panels. It is normal to expect that an important number of respondents will drop in panel surveys. The CES normally conduct two or three panels in a typical survey: a telephone Campaign-Period Survey (CPS), a Post-Election Survey (PES), and a Mail-back Survey (MBS).[2] Not surprisingly, as one moves in time from one wave to the next, the retention rate drops significantly and panel attrition increases. Since information about a respondent's vote choice or political participation must necessarily be obtained in the second wave of the survey, *after*

---

[2]We exclude here *election* panels, like in the 2004-2006-2008 studies

the election, it is impossible to ask these questions to individuals who dropped out of the panel.

Looking at Figure 2, and assuming for a moment that the typical CES has a random sample of the Canadian population in the first wave and that there is no mis-reporting in the second wave of the survey, we must conclude that non-voters are more likely to drop out from the panel. If this was not the case, we would not see a gap between the official turnout rate and the CES estimates. Moreover, the increasing gap in Figure 2 implies that it is becoming more difficult to construct a representative sample of non-voters in CES. Let us consider for example the 2006 election. The population of voters and non-voters was split 59/41 in this election. If we assume once again that the sampling done in the pre-election wave is representative, we begin the 2008 panel with a random sample of voters and non-voters. Now, in order to compare the attitudes of voters and non-voters, we must *necessarily* assume that these two samples are once again perfectly representative of the larger population (59-41) in the second wave of the panel. This is an extremely difficult assumption to sustain. As Burden (2000) demonstrate, any post-campaign panel wave of a political survey will not be constructed from a random sample of the eligible voting population; this is only true for the first wave respondents. Hence, a selection bias will be introduced that can seriously affect any comparison of the preferences of voters and non-voters. This is especially worrisome if voters and non-voters who self-select in the post-campaign panel have different attitudes than voters and non-voters who drop out of the panel.

Providing that we do have a selection bias, any post-stratification weighting scheme—just like the one used by Rubenson et al. (2007)—to correct for the over-representation of voters in post-campaign waves will be inefficient. Such a weight will correctly increase the proportion of non-voters to reflect the official turnout statistics. However, the sample of non-voters in the survey will not correspond to the actual population of non-voters. This fact is well noted by Brehm (1993) who states that "[...]

6

the respondents from underrepresented groups who actually make it into samples are commonly highly unrepresentative of their demographic peers, and upweighting them may only make estimations worse. It is not even clear that weights really eliminate bias (p.120)." Moreover, this problem might even be more important when it comes to comparing voters and non-voters. In the context of American Election Studies, Burden (2000) claims that "[...] worsening presidential turnout estimates are the result mostly of declining response rates rather than instrumentation, question wording changes, or other factors. As more peripheral voters have eluded interviewers in recent years, the sample became more saturated with self-reported voters, thus inflating reported turnout (p 389)."

To demonstrate the importance of this issue in the Canadian context, we report in table the results of probit regressions to predict the likelihood of participating in the post-election waves of three CES surveys (2004-2006-2008). In each election sample, we control for the age of the respondent (also age squared to control for non-linearity), education (whether the respondent has some university education or not), and gender. All of these variables have been shown to be correlated with turnout in Canada (Blais and Loewen, 2011; Blais et al., 2004). However, the variables of interests in these models relate to the respondent's evaluation of his/her likelihood of voting in the upcoming election. One could either be certain or likely to vote, or certain or likely not to vote. From these categories, we constructed a series of dummy variables (likely to vote, unlikely to vote, and certain not to vote).[3] This question is an excellent predictor of the decision to participate in an election, at least among the respondents included in the post-election survey. In 2006 for example, we find that more than 97% of the respondents who declared being likely or certain to vote actually self-reported turning out on election day.

[Table 1 about here.]

---

[3]The baseline category are respondents who declared being certain to vote in the upcoming election.

As we suspected, the results from our regression analysis clearly demonstrate that respondents who are uncertain to vote have a much higher probability of not participating in the post-election panel. And this likelihood seems to be increasing if we compare the baseline category (certain to vote) with likely voters, unlikely voters, and finally certain non-voters (at least for 2006 and 2008). We also note that panel respondents are on average older, but that the retention rate declines with old age. College education has also a significant effect in the decision to participate in the panel, but not gender. So what can we conclude from these analyses? It appears that it is much more difficult to re-interview respondents who report being unlikely or certain not to vote.

As Johnston (2004) explain: "Good practice in clearance of a sample requires a willingness to make several attempts to reach a target household, to take daily and weekly rhythms into account in ordering callbacks, and to attempt to convert refusals. Only by such means can the theoretical objective of equal probability of selection be approached (p. 389)." However, it seems much harder today to reach non-voters in public opinion surveys. The right end plot in Figure 3 actually demonstrates that the number of refusals before completion of the post-election CES panel wave has increased over time. In 2008, about 12% of non-voters objected at least once to participate in the PES, while this number was around 3% in 1988. We find a similar pattern with the number attempts to reach a survey participant (right end side of Figure 3. Call frequency has increased while the actual sample size of non-voters in the post-election survey has declined. For instance, even though the average number of call attempts in the 1997 and 2008 post-election survey was similar for non-voters (around 8 calls), the difference between the proportion of non-voters in both surveys could not be more different. Looking at Figure 1, we see that the gap between the official turnout and the reported CES turnout in 1997 is the smallest in the series. On the other hand, this difference in 2008 is the highest. In over a little more than ten years, the same number of call attempts has actually produced a much smaller

sample of non-voters. Moreover, this is by no means a Canadian problem, Johnston (2004) explains that a similar pattern has been established with the American National Election Studies.

[Figure 3 about here.]

What does this all mean for the comparative study of voters and non-voters in public opinion surveys? It could mean nothing if the voters and non-voters who dropped from the panel are very much like the ones who remained in the survey. On the other hand, if one believes that they represent two distinct group of respondents who have very different views, any attempt to generalized the opinions of voters and non-voters will necessarily be biased.

Brehm (1993) suggests that there is mainly small differences between respondents who participate in both waves of a panel, and those who drop out for some reason, the *phantom respondents*. However, the author also warns that these differences could pose a problem in models of voter turnout. As Burden (2000) explains, "[...] the marginal respondents who are difficult to interview successfully are also some of the least frequent voters (p.395)." In fact, it appears that more affluent and more educated individuals have a greater likelihood of participating in surveys and are less likely to drop out of panel study (for a review of survey non-response see **?**). Moreover, respondents who are interested in the survey topic are also more likely to cooperate and participate in the study and this can have serious implications for key statistics in later analyses (Grove, Presser and Dipko, 2004).

The Canadian Election Studies also appear to suffer from this problem. We compared the attitudes of respondents who declared being unlikely to vote in the pre-election survey with the attitudes of respondents who reported not voting in the post-election survey. We found important differences between these two groups (see Appendix A). Self-reported non-voters in the PES surveys were on average more conservative than unlikely voters who participated in the CPS surveys only. We also

9

conducted a more direct test by comparing the opinion of first wave and second wave panel respondents, *regardless* of turnout (see Appendix B). Here again, we found that individuals who remained in the panel were more conservative on average than respondents who dropped out of the study.

Consequently, based on this evidence, we believe that weighting by post-stratifying respondents on the basis of the official turnout rate might not be sufficient to correct for the selection bias in the different survey panels. Researchers should be extremely careful in claiming that any sample of non-voters correctly weighted is representative of the overall population of non-voters. This should be even more true today since turnout is declining at an accelerating rate, while the proportion of reported voters in recent CES is consistently increasing. With this caveat in mind, we can now proceed to analyze the difference between the opinion of voters and non-voters in several CES surveys. If anything, the presence of a selection bias could actually make both groups more alike, especially if respondents who self-select in the post-election panel share similar views. We return to the selection bias implications in the discussion section below following our analyses.

Comparing Partisan and Voting Intentions, 1988-2008

In the following two sections of this paper, we are interested in determining whether there are systematic patterns of differences between voters and non-voters in several public opinion surveys. We begin by looking at the partisan preferences of voters and non-voters between 1988 and 2008 in seven Canadian Election Studies. We then proceed to extend the work done by Rubenson and colleagues to three additional canadian elections (2004, 2006 and 2008). In both of these analysis, we correct for the over-reporting bias by using different weighing schemes. In the 1988-2008 analysis, we re-weight the sample to reflect the official turnout rate. This is the same technique employed by Rubenson et al. (2007). In the more detailed 2004-2008 analysis, we

construct a more precise turnout weight by using some demographic information about voters and non-voters provided by Election Canada.

We start our analysis by estimating whether there is a difference of attitude between voters and non-voters in seven Canadian elections (1988-2008). Because the content of the questions varies considerably across surveys during this period, we focus only on the partisan and voting intention questions which are available in all studies. In each case, we compare the proportion of voters who identified with a specific party to the proportion of non-voters who identified with the same party. To simplify the presentation, we report only the value of the difference in four categories; the proportion of voters and non-voters who identified with one of the major parties (Liberal, Conservative, NPD,) and the proportion of voters and non-voters who declared their intention to vote for one of the major parties in the upcoming elections. In each of these cases, we also compare the proportion of independent and undecided voters and non-voters. The party identification and vote intention variables are collected from the pre-election wave of the surveys while the turnout variable is from the post-election wave of the panel.[4].

Figure 4 reports these differences in each of the seven election studies. A negative value on the y axis indicates a representational bias in favour of voters (e.g., % voters - % non-voters). This bias ranges from -.30 to .30. The individual plots contain two types of points. Filled circles indicate that the mean difference is significant (p<.05, two-tailed t-statistic), whereas empty circles indicate that the difference of opinion between voters and non-voters is not statistically significant (p>.05).

[Figure 4 about here.]

The eight plots of Figure 4 report three interesting trends. First, as we can see

---

[4]Note that for partisan identification, we did not collapse the follow up question for independent voters (e.g. Is there a party that you are leaning toward?). However, because very few potential voters in the pre-election surveys declared having decided who they were going to support in the upcoming election, we have merged this variable with the follow up question for undecided voters. Those who indicated that they did not know, or were undecided in both questions were coded as undecided in our analysis

with the Conservative party, there are significantly more voters who identify with the Tories when compared to non-voters. This is a very important finding because it indicates that there is more conservative supporters among voters than non-voters. However, this distinction does not hold if we look at the vote intention question. We actually find more voters who indicate that they would support the Conservative party in the pre-election survey, but only after the 2003 election (and the Progressive-Conservative and Canadian Alliance merger). Incidentally, we do not find this bias in the 1988 survey when the Bloc and the Reform parties did not compete in the election.

Not surprisingly, the second most important trend found in these plots demonstrates that non-voters are more likely to be undecided about their voting choice, and more likely to refuse to identify with a political party. Both of these trends appear to be consistent across the whole period. They demonstrate that a greater proportion of undecided and non-partisan respondents choose not to vote.

Finally, we find that there is a greater proportion of Liberal identifiers who participated in the 1993, 1997, 2000, and 2004 elections. In each of these elections, there are always more Liberal identifiers in the group of voters. It is interesting to note that for these four elections, the Liberal party formed the government. Perhaps this party is more successful when it is able to mobilize a greater proportion of its supporters. That being said, we note that contrary to expectation, the NDP does not suffer from a turnout partisan bias. We basically find as many supporters of this party in the voting and non-voting categories of the sample.

It is important to note that these time trend analyses should be taken in context. Indeed, the proportion of Liberal identifiers (or supporters) can fluctuate from one election to the next. The same is true for any other party or for independent or undecided voters. For example, in one election, the proportion of independents could be greater than the proportion of Liberals in the sample (like in 1988, .33% versus .25%). The reverse can also be true. We could find more Liberals than Independents in the sample, just like in the 1997 election (.31% Liberal versus .28% Independent). Thus,

some of the differences in party identification or voting intentions reported above might simply be due to the changing nature of the distribution of these two variables in several elections.

That being said, we can conclude that there are systematic differences between the proportion of voters and non-voters who identify with the Conservative party across this period. Indeed, there is a significant over-representation of this group in all of the post-election samples. In the next section, we turn to the task of evaluating whether self-reported voters and non-voters have different issue perceptions.

The Preferences of Voters and Non-voters, 2004-2008

In this section of the paper, we continue our analysis of the preferences of voters and non-voters by extending the work done by Rubenson and colleagues to three additional canadian elections (2004, 2006 and 2008). As was noted above, Rubenson et al. (2007) proposed to correct for the oversampling of voters in their analysis of the 2000 Canadian Elections Study by weighting the respondents according to the official turnout rate. About 83% of the 2000 CES reported voting while the official turnout rate in that election was a little over 61%. The 2004, 2006 and 2008 CES also show the same over-reporting problem and will require a correction.

The weighting scheme adopted by Rubenson and colleagues is a sensible fix because it simply aims at reflecting the official turnout rate where the proportion of voters is much lower than in the sample. This procedure implies weighting self-reported non-voters/voters to correct for the under/over-representation of both groups in the sample. Specifically, self-reported non-voters are to be over-represented by a factor equal to the official proportion of non-voters in the election over the proportion of non-voters in the sample. Thus, for the 2000 federal election, one would have to weight self-reported non-voters by a factor of 2.29 (39/17). As for voters, one has to correct for their over-representation by a factor equal to the official proportion of

13

voters divided, this time, by the proportion of voters in the sample ($61/83 = .73$).

In the following analysis, we use a similar weighting scheme but, instead of relying uniquely on the distribution of voters/non-voters at the national level, we use information about electoral participation disaggregated by age group and region of residence. We consider five regions (Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario, Western provinces and British Columbia) and seven age groups (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-74, 75+). Given the importance of age in explaining turnout Blais and Loewen (2011) and of the varying participation rates observed in the Canadian provinces, we believe that our weighting procedure is more accurate than the one used by Rubenson and colleagues. Moreover, this weight affords for greater discrimination between groups of eligible voters. The information at the population level is available for the 2004, 2006 and 2008 elections from Elections Canada (2004, 2006 and 2008). These three studies use administrative data from the electoral process to verify in a sample of eligible voters who voted or abstained on the day of the election. Election Canada also collects information about age, gender, and residence from the National Register of Electors. Therefore, we are provided with a sample of validated turnout rate by region and age group in each of these elections.

We constructed the weight by using the same variables available in the Canadian Election Studies and the Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group study of Election Canada. With this information, we calculated the frequency distribution of voters and non-voters in each age category and in the five geographic regions. Obtaining the individual respondent weight was purely a matter of computing the ratio of the frequency cell of the voting population in one specific age/region over the sample proportion of the same frequency cell in the CES. Therefore, the distribution of preferences for voters and non-voters in the population is equal to the distribution of voter preferences in the CES sample appropriately weighted. Given the capability of obtaining a fairly accurate estimation of the individual voting and non-voting groups in each region and age group, estimating the counterfactuals becomes a sim-

ple question of correctly weighting each case in the Canadian Election Studies. In this context, weighting adjustment technique compensates for non-response by applying differential weight adjustments across the specific classes of respondents (i.e., the individual weight being applied in proportion to the inverse of the rate of selection in the sample).

Tables 2, 3, and 4 below present the differences we obtain when comparing voters and non-voters using this weighting scheme over several items from the 2004, 2006 and 2008 elections. The survey questions concern a series of political issues, issue salience, evaluations of the economy and personal finances, and evaluations of leaders and parties. As before, we also report party identification and voting intentions because these estimates are now calculated with a different weight. The tables present values for voters, non-voters and the differences between the two groups. Statistically significant differences at .05 or .10 (two-tailed t-test) are indicated in the tables. Note that we include only items that were measured in pre-election surveys.

Tables 2-3-4 present some notable differences between voters and non-voters. Let's treat each series of items in turn. The entries in the *Issues* series of the tables are percentages of the subpopulations (voters and non-voters) that agree with the statement. Examining only the statistically significant differences for 2004, we find that: 1) fewer non-voters agree that the federal government treats their own province worse; 2) more non-voters believe that political parties never keep their promises; 3) more non-voters believe Canada should admit fewer immigrants; 4) more non-voters favour the death penalty; 5) fewer non-voters believe people should relocate because of work; 6) fewer non-voters believe it is a citizen's duty to vote; and 7) fewer non-voters are satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada. Of these 16 issues, 15 were also measured in the 2006 Election Study and of these, only eight showed statistically significant differences. We note five similar differences between voters and non-voters in the 2004 and 2006 surveys (federal government; promise; immigrants; duty; and democracy). Unfortunately, the 2008 pre-election survey does not allow for many

comparison on issues. Still, we were able to identify four issue questions and two of these also appear in the 2004 and 2006 surveys. The differences between voters and non-voters were significant in three out four items, most notably duty and democracy which are also significant in the other surveys.

Overall, while only examining political issues, we find a great deal of differences between voters and non-voters (and many more than what Rubenson and colleagues find for the 2000 election). Moreover, it seems like there is a "logic" in the differences uncovered. First, and not surprisingly, non-voters are more skeptical of political parties and of the electoral process. Indeed, fewer believe parties keep their electoral promises and that it is their duty to vote. A majority of them do not feel any guilt from not voting. Overall, they are not satisfied about how democracy works. But, it also seems that, contrary to common wisdom, non-voters are generally more *conservative* than voters, at least on some specific issues. For instance, they are less favorable of immigration and more favorable of the death penalty and tougher sentences for young offenders. They also believe more strongly that the private sector should be left entirely responsible for creating jobs. The differences found on the issues concerning how the federal government treats provinces, what should be done about Quebec, and whether people should move where the jobs are harder to classify on a liberal-conservative scale. All we can say is that non-voters feel differently about these three issues when compared to voters.

The second series of items deals with *Issue salience*. In the 2004 and 2006 pre-election surveys, respondents were asked to indicate, from a list of five issues, which they viewed was the most and second most important problem facing the nation. The entries are percentages of the subgroups who indicated the issue as most or second most important. The results show that voters and non-voters do not differ by much. We do see however, in 2004, that non-voters care somewhat less about social welfare programs and that, in 2006, non-voters are more concerned about taxation. These two differences are consistent with the findings presented above in that, if anything,

16

non-voters are more conservative and *not* more liberal, as they are more concerned about the taxes they pay and less about social welfare programs for example.

[Table 2 about here.]

Next we look at a series of questions about the state of the economy and personal finances. The results indicate that non-voters have better prospective evaluations of their personal finances in the 2004 election, and worse retrospective and prospective evaluation of the national economy in the 2004 and 2006 surveys. Again, not much can be said about these differences beyond the fact that voters and non-voters differ on their evaluations of the national economy and their personal finances.

[Table 3 about here.]

Respondents were also asked to rate parties and leaders on a 0-100 thermometer scale in all three pre-election surveys. The entries for these two series of items are the average scores for voters and non-voters. Here, the differences are strong and consistent across the board. Non-voters systematically show lower party and leader evaluations than voters. All differences reach statistical significance. These findings are also consonant with the ones reported above about the feeling of non-voters toward parties and the electoral process in general. The views non-voters have about parties and leaders—both fundamental democratic actors—are much more negative when compared to voter evaluations.

[Table 4 about here.]

Finally, the results for party identification and vote intentions are very similar to the ones presented above. Non-voters in the sample, when compared to voters, tend to identify less with political parties and are more likely to be independent. They are also more likely to be undecided about which party to support in the upcoming election (recall that these are voting intentions). Again, most differences reach statistical significance.

Discussion

In sum, the results presented in Figure 4 and Tables 2-4 show some interesting findings. Our analysis contradict both the work of Rubenson and colleagues *and* the common wisdom about the characteristics of the typical non-voter. While this study does not find much differences in the opinions and preferences between voters and non-voters, our results strongly challenge this claim. Voters and non-voters are different, quite different, that is. Precisely, non-voters in the sample systematically evaluate parties and their leaders more negatively, fewer identify with political parties and show electoral support for them, and a majority of non-voters believe that parties hardly ever keep their promises. They do not believe citizens have the duty to vote in elections and their satisfaction with the way democracy works is decidedly lower. To be sure, non-voters have a more pessimistic and cynical view of democracy, its actors and institutions. It is not surprising they do not participate in elections.

But, there is more. Non-voters, contrary to common wisdom, are also generally more conservative than voters. They approve more strongly of the death penalty, believe Canada should allow less immigrants and apply tougher sentences to young offenders. They also believe more strongly that the creation of jobs should be left entirely to the private sector. Finally, they are more concerned, as compared to voters, about the taxes they pay, but less concerned about social welfare programs. These differences are significant and concern important issues of Canadian politics.

In our view, this constitutes a very interesting paradox. Non-voters are systematically *less* likely to identify with the Conservative party. Yet, their views on many issues—such as crime, taxes and welfare programs—match with the positions of this party. Should we conclude then that the turnout bias is actually hurting the Conservatives in Canada?

As we argued in the first part of this paper, we should be really careful about generalizing the results of these analyses because we do not have a *representative* sample

of non-voters in the CES. The problem of panel attrition does not go away, even after using a more precise weight based on the respondent's age or region of residence to correct for the under-representation of non-voters in the panel. As we show in the Appendix, self reported non-voters who make it into the post-election survey are unrepresentative of their pre-election survey counterpart. As Burden (2000) and Brehm (1993) explain, upweighting non-voters in the panel may only make estimations worse.

One thing is clear, self-reported non-voters have much more negative views of politics and politicians in general. They are more likely not to consider voting as a duty or to feel guilty about abstaining from voting. Their views of politicians and parties are much more negative on average, especially when we consider the two main political parties, the Conservative and Liberal parties.

Conclusion

Many believe that since voters and non-voters have different SES characteristics, they must necessarily have different attitudes about politics in general (Lijphart, 1997). Since educated, wealthy, and older citizens are more likely to vote, many believe that the gap in political participation would favor the more privilege segment of the electorate.

The preceding analysis has only partially validated this claim. We did find that voters and non-voters have different partisan preferences. The most consistent finding is that self-reported non-voters in the CES are systematically less likely to identify with the Conservative party. However, we did not find that non-voters are more likely to hold progressive views on average, or favour greater economic redistribution. What we did find was that self-reported non-voters hold more cynical views about politics and politicians; they do not appear to care much about the democratic process in general. And this is even more true for respondents who dropped out of

19

the CES panels and failed to participate in the post-election survey wave.

In light of these findings, what can we conclude about the usefulness of using surveys to compare the policy attitudes of voters and non-voters? Can we make some generalization about the Canadian electorate? We think not. In its present form—even after controlling for the over-representation of voters with post-stratification weights—public opinion surveys are incapable of accomplishing this task. We have yet to find a way to correct for panel attrition and self-selection bias (although see Brehm (1993)). Perhaps increasing the number of contact attempts to reach respondents in subsequent survey panel waves is a solution. But we don't think that this will work. As we saw in this study, even though the CES team increased the average number of call-back attempts after the 1993 survey, the proportion of non-voters in the sample has continued to decline, while the actual number of non-voters in the population has continued to increase.

Some, like Johnston (2004), argue that the increasing usage of internet based survey offers a solution. We disagree. Internet based panel will generate the same problem of self-selection. As Grove, Presser and Dipko (2004) explain, motivated respondents interested in a survey topic are much more likely to participate in panel studies. Our findings seem to confirm this claim. The average self-reported non-voter of the CES is definitely less interested in politics. Furthermore, respondents who dropped out of the CES panels were also more likely to have negative views about politicians and politics. So it appears counterintuitive to think that internet based surveys will recruit more of this type of respondent.

Finally, we urge researcher to recognize the limitations of using CES surveys to make inferences about the general electoral population, at least when using post-election panel data. We also recognize that we are unable to explain why self-reported non-voters appear to be slightly more conservative on certain policy issues, but less likely to identify with the Conservative Party. Perhaps it is once again a question of self-selection bias. One could think that the small proportion of non-voters who

remain in the panel are motivated by more extreme policy views, while the respondents who simply drop out of the survey do not care as much about the same issues. We leave this question open for future work.

References

Blais, André. 2000. *To vote or not to vote? : the merits and limits of rational choice theory*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Blais, A., E. Gidengil, N. Nevitte and R. Nadeau. 2004. "Where Does Turnout Decline Come From?" *European Journal of Political Research* 43(2):221–236.

Blais, A., and P. Loewen. 2011. "Youth Electoral Engagement in Canada." *Elections Canada*, Ottawa.

Brehm, John. 1993. *The Phantom Respondents: Opinion Surveys and Political Representation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

Brunell, T. L. and J. DiNardo. 2004. "A propensity score reweighting approach to estimating the partisan effects of full turnout in American presidential elections." *Political Analysis* 12(1):28–45.

Burden, Barry C. 2000. "Voter Turnout and the National Election Studies." *Political Analysis* 8(4):389-398.

DeNardo, James. 1980. "Turnout and the vote: The joke's on the Democrats." *The American Political Science Review* 74(2):406–420.

Elections Canada. 2004, 2006 and 2008. "Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group." *Elections Canada*, Ottawa.

Gray, M. and M. Caul. 2000. "Declining Voter Turnout in Advanced Industrial Democracies, 1950 to 1997: the Effects of Declining Group Mobilisation." *Comparative Political Studies* 33(9):1091-1122.

Groves, Robert M., Stanley Presser and Sarah Dipko. 2004. "The Role of Topic Interest in Survey Participation Decisions." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 68(1): 2-31.

Highton, Benjamin and Raymond E. Wolfinger. 2001. "The political implications of higher turnout." *British Journal of Political Science* 31(1):179–192.

Johnston, Richard. 2008. "Survey Methodology." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology Survey Methodology*, eds. Collier, David, Henry E. Brady and Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier. Oxford : Oxford Handbook. pp. 385–403.

Lijphart, Arend. 1997. "Unequal participation: Democracy's unresolved dilemma." *The American Political Science Review* 91(1):1–14.

Lutz, Georg and Michael Marsh. 2007. "Introduction: Consequences of low turnout." *Electoral Studies* 26(3):539–547.

Pacek, A., and B. Radcliff. 1995. "Turnout and the Vote for Left-of-Center Parties: a Cross-National Analysis." *British Journal of Political Science* 25(1):137-143.

Pammett, J. H., and L. LeDuc. 2003. "Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-Voters." *Elections Canada*, Ottawa.

Porter, Stephen R. and Michael E. Whitcomb. 2005. "Non-Response in Student Surveys: The Role of Demographics, Engagement and Personality." *Research in Higher Education* 46(2): 127-152.

Sides, John, Eric Schickler and Jack Citrin. 2008. "If Everyone Had Voted, Would Bubba and Dubya Have Won." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 38(3):521–539.

Silver, B. D. and B. A. Anderson. 1986. "Who over reports voting?" *American Political Science Review* 80(2):613-624.

Rosenstone, Steven J. and John Mark Hansen. 1993. *Mobilization, participation, and democracy in America*. New topics in politics New York: Maxwell Macmillan International.

23

Rubenson, D., A. Blais, P. Fournier, E. Gidengil and N. Nevitte. 2007. "Does Low Turnout Matter? Evidence from the 2000 Canadian FEderal Election." *Electoral Studies* 26:589-597.

Wolfinger, Raymond E. and Steven J. Rosenstone. 1980. *Who votes?* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Table 1: Probability of Inclusion in the Post-Campaign CES

	2004		2006		2008	
Likely to vote	-0.275	(0.051)	-0.277	(0.077)	-0.153	(0.065)
Unlikely to vote	-0.464	(0.092)	-0.445	(0.142)	-0.342	(0.122)
Certain not to vote	-0.411	(0.081)	-0.493	(0.135)	-0.254	(0.118)
Age	0.005	(0.007)	0.034	(0.010)	0.027	(0.008)
Age squared	-0.000	(0.000)	-0.000	(0.000)	-0.000	(0.000)
College	0.189	(0.046)	0.343	(0.070)	0.264	(0.055)
Female	-0.024	(0.042)	0.002	(0.064)	-0.075	(0.051)
Intercept	0.507	(0.167)	-0.090	(0.258)	0.068	(0.201)
Pseudo R^2	0.0208		0.0377		0.0198	
N	4225		1953		2980	

Note: The regression coefficients are estimated with probit models for each election year. Standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable indicates whether a respondent who was drawn from a random sample in the pre-election wave of the CES participated in the post-election wave.

Table 2: Political Opinions and Preferences of Voters and Non-Voters†, 2004

	Voters	Non-Voters	Difference (Voters - Non-Voters)
Issues			
More should be done for Quebec	23.5	25.4	-1.9
Oppose same sex marriage	35.9	34.0	+1.9
Favour having private hospitals	42.8	46.5	-3.7
Federal government treats worse own province	35.8	31.1	+4.7**
Political parties hardly ever keep promises	49.5	59.6	-10.1*
Tough sentences for young offenders	50.4	52.4	-2.0
Canada should admit fewer immigrants	26.2	38.9	-12.6*
Favour death penalty	37.9	46.5	-8.6*
Leave it to private sector to create jobs	42.0	44.4	-2.4
Not only police and military should use guns	40.2	36.7	+3.5
People should move where jobs are	67.1	62.1	+5.0**
Women's place is at home	39.7	42.9	-3.2
The gun registry should be scrapped	57.5	54.9	+2.4
Citizen's duty to vote	96.3	73.7	+22.6*
Satisfied with how democracy works	57.2	45.0	+12.2*
More should be done to reduce gap between poor and rich	74.0	77.5	-3.5
Issue salience: among top 2 most important			
Healthcare	73.0	71.4	+1.6
Taxes	35.5	39.3	-3.8
Social welfare programs	26.5	20.7	+5.8*
The Environment	16.4	15.1	+1.3
Corruption	41.8	43.6	-1.8
Evaluations of the economy			
Retrospective personal finance: better	19.2	21.7	-2.5
Prospective personal finance: better	22.8	29.5	-6.7*
Retrospective national economy: better	23.8	17.3	+6.4*
Prospective national economy: better	25.3	17.7	+7.6*
Leader evaluations[a]			
Martin (Liberals)	49.0	41.4	+7.6*
Harper (Conservatives)	48.7	43.1	+5.6*
Layton (NDP)	45.4	39.4	+6.0*
Party Evaluations[a]			
Liberals	47.2	38.7	+8.5*
Conservatives	47.6	41.3	+6.3*
NDP	43.0	38.4	+4.6*
Party Identification			
Liberals	32.0	22.4	+9.6*
Conservatives	21.0	10.0	+11.0*
NDP	7.9	4.2	+3.7*
Independents	23.8	52.4	-28.6*
Vote Intentions			
Liberals	28.4	25.7	+2.7
Conservatives	30.0	20.8	+9.2*
NDP	14.6	9.2	+5.4*
Undecided	9.2	21.1	-11.9*

†Entries are percentages.
[a] Average scores on a thermometer scale from 0-100.
*Indicates statistically significant differences at .05 (two-tailed).

Table 3: Political Opinions and Preferences of Voters and Non-Voters†, 2006

	Voters	Non-Voters	Difference (Voters - Non-Voters)
Issues			
More should be done for Quebec	26.6	33.1	-6.5**
Oppose same sex marriage	33.3	38.9	-5.6
Favour having private hospitals	47.6	46.4	+1.2
Federal government treats worse own province	34.4	22.1	+12.3*
Political parties hardly ever keep promises	31.1	45.5	-14.4*
Tough sentences for young offenders	47.9	54.9	-7.0**
Canada should admit fewer immigrants	21.9	29.6	-7.7*
Favour death penalty	38.5	38.1	+.4
Leave it to private sector to create jobs	33.1	40.1	-7.0**
Not only police and military should use guns	39.4	34.4	+5.0
People should move where jobs are	62.4	60.5	+1.9
Women's place is at home	36.7	41.3	-4.6
The gun registry should be scrapped	60.6	60.2	+.4
Citizen's duty to vote	96.9	77.0	+19.9*
Satisfied with how democracy works	61.8	52.3	+9.5*
Issue salience: among top 2 most important			
Healthcare	67.2	65.3	+1.9
Taxes	31.4	38.3	-6.9**
Social Welfare programs	30.0	26.6	+3.4
The Environment	22.4	20.7	+1.7
Corruption	43.2	38.6	+4.6
Evaluations of the economy			
Retrospective personal finance: better	23.9	21.3	+2.6
Prospective personal finance: better	21.7	21.6	+.1
Retrospective national economy: better	44.6	27.0	+17.6*
Prospective national economy: better	26.0	20.5	+5.5**
Leader evaluations[a]			
Martin (Liberals)	46.0	40.5	+5.5*
Harper (Conservatives)	44.5	36.1	+8.4*
Layton (NDP)	51.1	42.2	+8.9*
Party Evaluations[a]			
Liberals	44.7	41.8	+2.9
Conservatives	46.5	39.4	+7.1*
NDP	45.7	40.7	+5.0*
Party Identification			
Liberals	32.7	28.3	+4.4
Conservatives	22.3	10.6	+11.7*
NDP	9.6	6.9	+2.7
Independents	19.9	41.6	-21.7*
Vote Intentions			
Liberals	29.9	29.4	+.5
Conservatives	29.7	19.1	+10.6*
NDP	14.4	12.9	+1.5
Undecided	10.6	20.0	-9.4*

†Entries are percentages.
[a]Average scores on a thermometer scale from 0-100.
*.05 (two-tailed); **.10 (two-tailed).

Table 4: Political Opinions and Preferences of Voters and Non-Voters†, 2008

	Voters	Non-Voters	Difference
			(Voters - Non-Voters)
Issues			
Citizen's duty to vote	97.3	82.0	+15.3*
Satisfied with how democracy works	71.8	56.3	+15.5*
No point in voting for small parties	21.1	19.4	+1.7
Not feeling guilty for not voting	19.8	52.9	-33.1*
Evaluations of the economy			
Retrospective personal finance: better	21.1	25.3	-4.2
Retrospective national economy: better	12.5	14.2	-1.7
Leader evaluations[a]			
Dion (Liberals)	43.0	38.6	+4.4**
Harper (Conservatives)	51.0	46.3	+4.7**
Layton (NDP)	53.9	50.3	+3.6**
Party Identification			
Liberals	24.7	22.5	+2.2
Conservatives	26.3	19.6	+6.7*
NDP	10.3	9.1	+1.2
Independents	24.3	40.0	-15.7*
Vote Intentions			
Liberals	20.3	16.6	+3.7
Conservatives	33.6	30.7	+2.9
NDP	15.7	14.4	+1.3
Undecided	12.1	19.0	-6.9*

†Entries are percentages.
[a] Average scores on a thermometer scale from 0-100.
*.05 (two-tailed); **.10 (two-tailed).
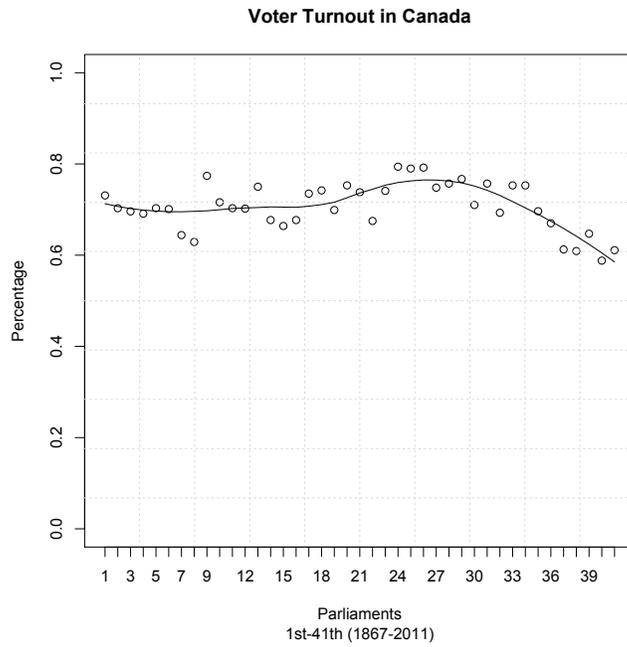
Voter Turnout in Canada

Figure 1: This plot displays the percentage turnout which is the ratio of the total number of ballot casts in an election over the number of eligible electors on the list. Source: Election Canada.
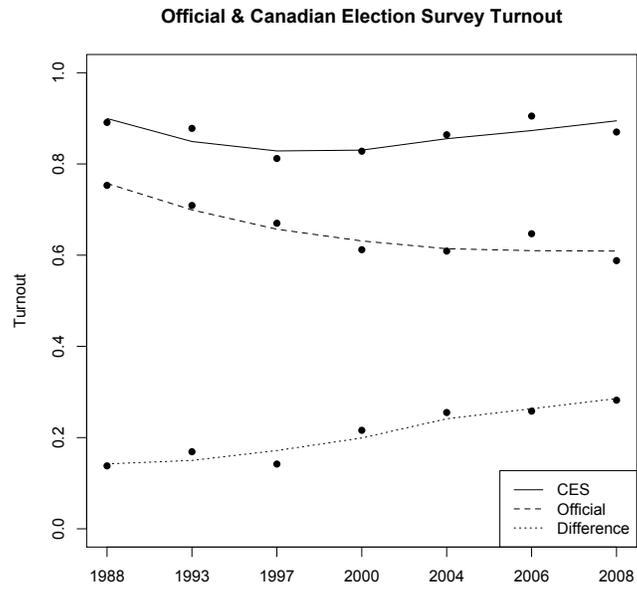
Figure 2: The plot reports the official voter turnout in percentage from Election Canada and the turnout rate in the post-campaign Canadian Election Studies.
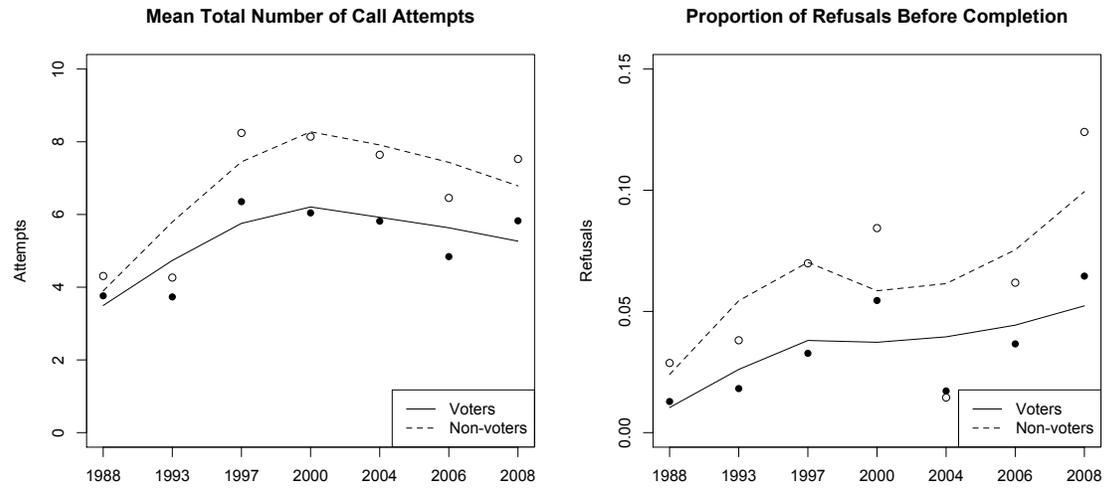
Figure 3: The plots report the mean number of call attempts and the mean number of refusals before completion in the post-election surveys of the Canadian Election Studies for reported voters and non-voters.
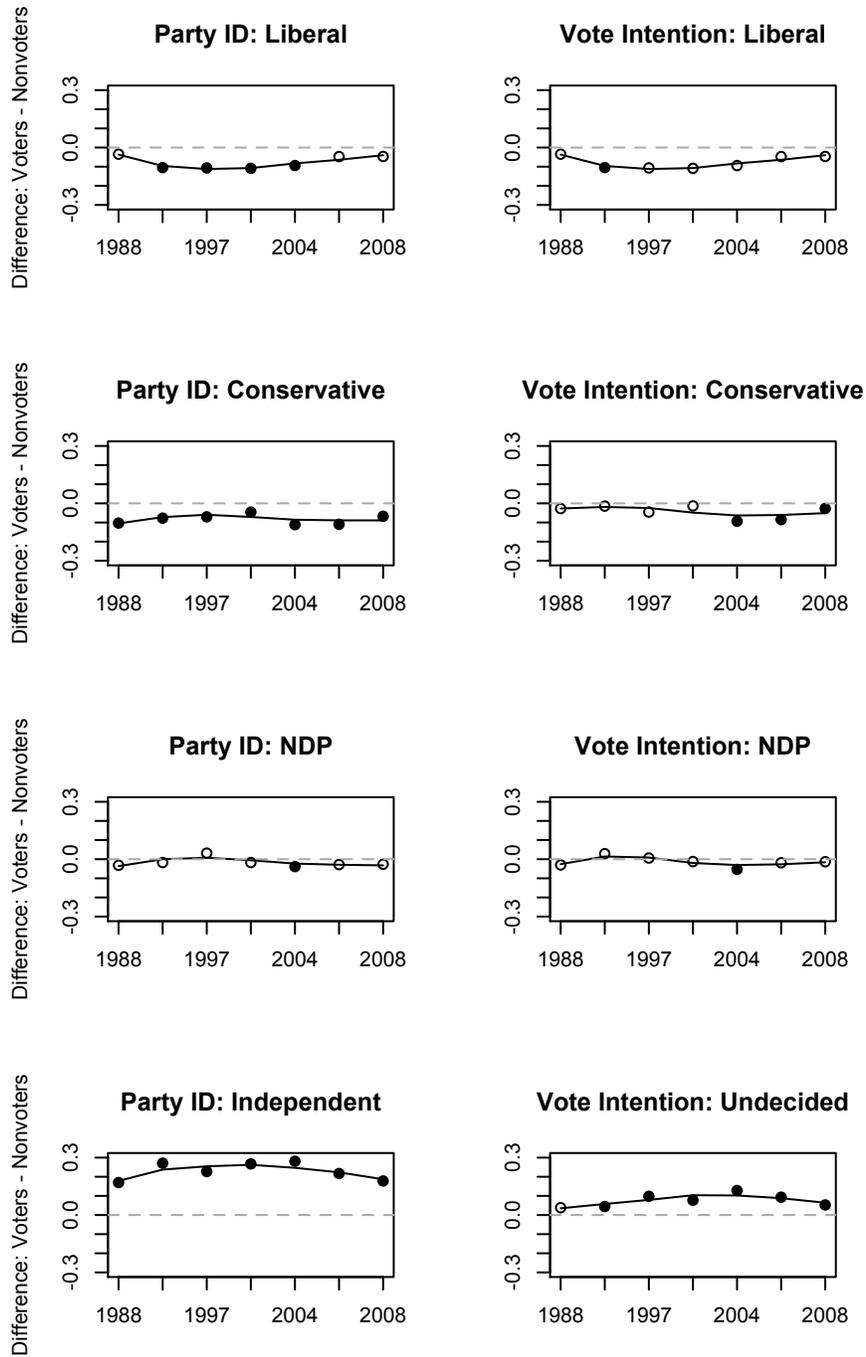
Figure 4: The plots report the difference between the partisan identification and the voting intentions (campaign wave) of voters and non-voters (post-election wave) in seven elections. Black filled points indicate that this difference is significant (p<.05, t-test). The data is weighted according to the official turnout rate. Source: Canadian Election Studies, 1988-2008.