Behind The ‘Change’ Election That Changed Ontario’s Voters For The Better

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Ontario’s seismic “change” election did more than change leaders.

It also changed voters themselves — driving more millennials and Ontarians of all ages to vote, and vote strategically, in ways they may never have before.

The first post-election polling on democratic engagement, conducted by Campaign Research for the Toronto Star, shows millennial voters (up to age 34) cast ballots in unexpectedly high numbers. And with surprising motivations.

We know from Elections Ontario that voter turnout rose to 58 per cent of eligible voters — the highest level in nearly two decades, and a welcome recovery from the historic lows of the last two elections, when barely half of the electorate bothered to cast ballots. Ontario’s embarrassing democratic deficit — burdened by the lowest electoral turnouts in the country — has subsided for the moment.

What reawakened the democratic impulse?

Much of the credit goes to political polarization in a contentious election — manifested not only in people’s ultimate choices, but their underlying calculations.

Ontarians were deeply split: Four in 10 voters said they decided mostly on the basis of the party or leader they “opposed” — essentially a negative vote against Kathleen Wynne’s embattled Liberals, the NDP’s untested Andrea Horwath, or Progressive Conservative leader Doug Ford (who will be sworn in as premier Friday).

“Everyone was talking about a change election,” said Campaign Research CEO Eli Yufest. “That’s probably what drove the voter turnout to increase.”

In the survey, voters cited both “a desire for change,” and “a desire to prevent a particular party or leader from winning” as the two top explanations for the higher turnout.

Asked about their primary motivation, most NDP voters — 51 per cent — said they were “opposed” to other parties, with only 45 per cent saying their main goal was support for the party. By contrast, only one in four PC supporters said their vote was driven by opposition to another party, while fully 69 per cent said they were simply supportive of Ford’s Tories.

The NDP not only “borrowed” supporters from other parties (mostly the Liberals), but also benefitted from millennial voters who voted for New Democrats this time — unlike in past elections when youth turnout was much lower.

Twice as many voters aged 18 to 24 backed the NDP (33 per cent) as Liberal; and three times as many aged 25 to 34 voted for New Democrats (43 per cent) as Liberal. The Tories captured roughly one in four millennial votes.

Far more young people voted this month compared to the last two elections. Yet they were still outnumbered by older adults who voted for other parties, depriving the NDP of the push it needed.

“They are the least motivated group to come out and vote,” observed Yufest of Campaign Research. The NDP’s future challenge is to persuade young people to “get off their butts and go vote for them.”

That is easier said than done, given the millennial mindset.

The biggest single reason given by voters of all ages for not exercising their democratic right was that they were “too busy” — 25 per cent claimed that excuse. But among millennials, fully four in 10 claimed they just didn’t have the time.

The second biggest reason, among those aged 18 to 24, was that they lacked information on the parties or candidates. One in three said they were stumped — far more than other age groups — a daunting democratic challenge given that young people rely less on the mainstream media and turn to more fragmented social media.

One bit of good news is that far fewer people said this time that they “weren’t registered to vote” (15 per cent) compared to the 2014 election, when more than double that number offered that excuse (33 per cent). The message may slowly be getting out that a Canadian citizen doesn’t have to be pre-registered on the voters’ list, and need only present valid identification on election day to cast a ballot in their riding.

The single biggest factor that would make people more likely to vote in future was online ballots (cited by 17 per cent, compared to a mere 4 per cent who mentioned electoral reform). If online voting had been available this month, two out of three people would have used it, according to the survey.

Given the recent challenges to internet security, that kind of fundamental change to voting methods is at least a few change elections away. But if the voter turnout trends downward again, without the motivating factors in this month’s election, online voting — like online dating and banking and tax filing — may be the inevitable choice for voters.

(The online Campaign Research study of 1,378 eligible Ontario voters was conducted June 15 to 18. A probability sample of this size would have a margin of error of plus or minus 2.6 per cent, 19 times out of 20.)

Exploring Information:

1. Now that you have read this article in your group, write down five unanswered questions that you have which, assuming you had the answer, would make you a “total expert” on this issue.

Bibliography:

1. Cohn, Martin Regg. "Behind The 'Change' Election That Changed Ontario's Voters for the Better." TheStar.com. June 27, 2018. Accessed July 11, 2018. https://www.thestar.com/opinion/star-columnists/2018/06/27/behind-the-change-election-that-changed-ontarios-voters-for-the-better.html.