Voter Turnout Analysis of Canadian Undergraduate Student Unions, 2016-2018

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Abstract: Annual election turnouts of campus student unions from Canadian publicly funded universities are analyzed for the 2016, 2017, and 2018 academic years. This first quantitative study of its kind in a Canadian context assesses the current state of student democracy in these higher education institutions and explores potential indicators of higher turnout, including online voting versus paper ballot systems, electorate size, and percentage of part-time students. Descriptive statistics revealed that student union voter turnouts were generally low, averaging about 21% over the study period. A linear multiple regression is conducted to examine the significance of potential factors that could impact turnout. Online voting is found to have a significant impact on increasing voter turnout. Student unions with larger electorates and higher percentages of part-time students were found to experience more difficulty generating voter turnout, which suggests that these student unions need to adapt their election promotion strategies to reach their voters more effectively.

Keywords: Student Unions, Election Turnout, Voter Turnout, Student Government, Online Voting, Political Participation

Introduction

Each year, about eighty Canadian undergraduate student unions from publicly-funded universities elect student representatives. This enables students to not only learn how to practice politics, but to advocate for improving education or contributing student perspectives to wider societal discourses. Since the first Canadian student unions over a century ago (Moses, 1995, 2018), little research has been done to assess their democratic quality or try to identify factors that increase turnout, leaving students with little guidance on how to improve student union political participation and effectiveness.

Existing literature often focuses on historical analyses and qualitative cross-sections covering national and provincial student unions and less so the campus level (Arthur, 1996; Bélanger, 1984; Clift, 2002; Lamarre, 2008; Moses, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2011; Nesbitt, 2009). Other works focus on student life or movements without exploring how student unions contribute to the student experience, let alone student union elections (Axelrod, 1989, 1990; Bennett, 2013; Lemay & Laperriere, 2012; Monahan, 1991). While there have been attempts to theorize optimal structures for Canadian student unions (Crispin, 2017; Gregory, 2010), there has been no systematic assessment of democratic quality. Makela & Audette-Chapdelaine's (2013) analysis of how provincial incorporation legislation impacts student unions provides a foundation, but provinces generally leave considerable flexibility on how to organize student union elections and do not have reporting mechanisms tracking student union turnout. To foster continuous improvement of student union political processes, we need to know the more contemporary situation.

Such guidance on student union democracy is needed now more than ever, as the twenty-first century has thus far witnessed the retrenchment and collapse of student government around the world, government mandated voluntary student unionism that weakens student government revenue, and oppressive policies limiting student government activism (Meads & Smith, 2018; Page, 2005; Patrick, 2022). In Ontario, the Student Choice Initiative attempted to implement voluntary student unionism but was narrowly prevented due to a court decision (McGinn, 2019; Nasser, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities 2019). Canadian student unions remain some of the wealthiest and strongest student unions worldwide (Patrick, 2024), which begets them an important role in helping revive student democracy elsewhere. To meet this task, they must be good examples of student democracy. This first quantitative analysis of Canadian undergraduate student union election turnout seeks to serve as a resource for students, student affairs professionals, educators, and policymakers by assessing turnout and examining potential indicators that can increase it.

This study examines annual voter turnout in 143 undergraduate student union elections from 56 Canadian publicly funded universities from 2016-2018. Factors such as online voting, electorate size, and percentage of part-time students were also explored.

Online Voting

Many Canadian student unions switched to online voting systems in recent decades. Literature surrounding online voting is mixed. While it has been observed that it increases voter turnout of younger demographics, there are concerns that it can be detrimental for older voters not as tech savvy and certain professions or remote areas without internet proficiency and/or access (Lust, 2015). Though online voting could lower costs, it could risk privileging wealthier and more educated voters (Mellon et al., 2017). Spagnuolo & Shanouda (2017) argue online voting can make democracy less accessible for persons with disabilities, and that election implementation must include "a broad and critical approach to access that goes beyond the ballot box" that pays attention also to "access to election material, to political debates, and to important literature (such as newspaper articles) related to elections" (p. 711). Other literature is more optimistic that online voting will increase accessibility and help ensure that votes cast by persons with disabilities are confidential (Gilbert et al., 2008; Goodman et al., 2010; Hill & Alport, 2007).

Voter age would likely be less of a factor given most students are between 18-30, a demographic which tends to favour internet voting and would be more inclined to vote if e-voting options were available (Nemeslaki et al., 2016). Regarding security, there are now third-party online voting companies that provide online voting systems for student unions and other organizations to help limit the risk of tampering (Simply Voting, 2019). Beyond student unions, online voting is already used for some state-wide elections. Estonia began offering an online voting option in its 2006 election. In subsequent elections, the number of online votes and overall turnout increased. Online voting attracted new voters who would not have voted otherwise (Alvarez et al, 2009; Trechsel & Vassil, 2011;). E-voting's longer availability period (seven days) was cited as one of the main factors for increased turnout. The case study of Estonian elections is useful because of the scale of their elections. Out of 900,000 eligible voters, the average number of votes cast in each election stays between 500,000-600,000. Estonia also has one of the highest internet penetration rates in the world, with 91% of the population having regular access in 2021 (Kemp, 2021). Voting conditions in Estonia have some similarities with a student union: a relatively small electorate and a high degree of digital literacy.

Universities have also been used to evaluate the online voting's potential on a larger scale. Decman's (2018) focus group of University of Ljubljana students in Slovenia who voted to select Student Council (SC) members revealed that in the environment where voters have high digital literacy and elections have relatively low stakes, voters tend to use online voting options if available. In this case, online voting attracted new voters who would not have otherwise voted. Participants highlighted the importance of availability of voting via smartphones to increase access. Lewis and Rice's (2005) quantitative analysis of 94 US four-year postsecondary student government elections found that student governments with online voting had higher turnout.

Electorate Size and Percentage of Part-Time Students

Lewis and Rice (2005) observe that smaller schools had higher turnout than larger ones, which is supported by similar findings in extant literature (Barker & Gump, 1964; Holland & Andre, 1987; Lindsay, 1982). Garcia's (2012) study involving secondary students found that students in smaller schools participate more in extracurricular activities than their counterparts in larger schools. Feldman and Matjasko (2006) reported that attending a larger school suggested an increased likelihood that students exhibit less or no extracurricular participation. Lewis and Rice (2005) factored in the number of part-time students, iterating that "On-campus students should be more integrated into campus activities than off-campus students, and they are more directly affected by many of the issues that student governments address…." and that "it seems reasonable to assume that full-time students will be more integrated into campus life than part-time students" (p. 726). Cazabon (2009) outlines that part-time postsecondary students are less engaged in curricular and extracurricular activities. Thomas (2015) suggests that this may be due to part-time students having more difficulty developing a sense of belonging in their school community and identifying primarily as workers. Part-time students' other commitments like work or parenting may restrict their ability to participate in student politics (Lang, 2012; Crispin & Nikolaou, 2019). Part-time students' increased tendency to enroll in online and remote learning may also contribute to their apathy (Foley & Marr, 2019).

Data Collection

Manual data collection started in 2019 and was completed in 2021 through publicly accessible online sources. Turnout and voting method data, as well as confirmation of online voting, was collected from websites and social media accounts of student unions and student newspapers. Turnout was gathered from annual executive committee election results and did not include irregular by-elections or referenda. Electorate size data was collected from the Universities Canada website. Electorate size was calculated as total full-time and part-time undergraduate students, except for the University of Toronto that has a separate part-time undergraduate student union. 56 (69%) of the 81 universities had functioning undergraduate student unions that reported turnout data online for at least one of the study period's three years.

The dependent variable in this study comprises voter turnout percentages from Canadian undergraduate student union executive elections in publicly funded universities from 2016, 2017, and 2018 academic years. Inaccessible turnout data was listed as missing values. We did not include graduate student unions, college student unions, or student unions of the small number of private postsecondary institutions in Canada because of data availability issues. We classified student unions by province to provide disaggregated descriptive statistics. There were no cases in the territories that fit the scope of the study.

We analyzed turnouts from 2016-2018 mainly because earlier turnouts were less accessible. Much of the data collection was conducted in 2019, and we did not include more recent turnouts due to funding and labour constraints of the manual data collection process that required extensive digital media searching. The impact of the Ontario Student Choice Initiative and COVID-19 have likely resulted in irregular voter turnouts that merit their own study.

Furthermore, there are outlier cases occurring in 2019 that would have required extra care to be given to the data, including the collapse of the Student Union of the University of Ottawa (SFUO) in 2019 when students chose in a referendum organized by the University of Ottawa to abandon the SFUO in favour of a new student union, as well as the fragmentation of the University of Toronto sub-campus student unions from the University of Toronto Students' Union (UTSU) (Davison, 2019; UTSU, 2018). To account for these outliers, additional case studies would be beneficial. 2016-2018 is thus the ideal study period to demonstrate typical Canadian student union election cycles where the data was readily accessible at the time of data collection. Since student union turnout data availability typically spans only a few years, many data points from 2016-2018 and multiple years afterward may no longer be available, so subsequent research would likely have a multi-year gap between its data and ours.

We focused on executive committee elections because they take place each winter and involve votes from the entire student body, unlike board of directors' elections, where only specific departments or sub-campus groups may be able to vote for their representatives and may have separate election cycles. We did not include referenda because they are sporadic and can deviate from the typical election cycle.

Even though we avoided the complications of including data before and after the study period, there are still some outliers. These were primarily universities without undergraduate students, including University College of the North, as well as École nationale d'administration publique and Institut national de la recherche scientifique (Universities Canada, 2018). The Royal Military College of Canada does not have a campus-wide student union. First Nations University of Canada (FNUC), which shares a student union with the University of Regina. We removed these cases from the dataset. Furthermore, Laurentian University was amid fragmentation during the study period, with two student unions overseeing different sub-campuses. This leaves 78 student unions.

When gathering data, we first looked at the student union's website if it existed. If this did not prove fruitful, we went to the student union's social media feeds and scoured posts from 2016-2018. If the student union did not provide turnout data, we checked campus student newspaper websites and social media if applicable and available. If the student newspaper also did not report turnout data, we used an internet archive called the Wayback Machine to look for previously deleted student union and student newspaper webpage archives. If all these steps did not work, we would assign missing values for the student union's turnout. We were unable to secure ethics approval to contact student unions and student newspapers due to our institutions preventing students from being primary investigators for projects other than theses and we were unable to secure interest from a professor to submit ethics approval for us.

Results

The mean turnout for all elections for which turnout data was reported from 2016-2018 was about 21%. The highest turnout Queen's University in 2017 with 45.7%. The lowest was 4% at Athabasca University in 2016. Average turnout remained fairly constant over the years, starting at 20.5% in 2016, increasing to 20.8% in 2017, and decreasing back to 20.5% in 2018. 22 (28%) of student unions examined did not have accessible records of voter turnout data for any of the election years. Turnout reporting was often not consistent for each of the three years, since of the 234 elections that took place in the 78 student unions during the study period, data was available for only 143 (59%). By 2018, 50 (64%) of student unions had online voting. Of the 143 elections with reported turnout data, 114 (80%) had online voting, but of the 234 elections that took place during the study period, 154 (66%) had online voting.

Disaggregated descriptive statistics by province are provided in Table 1. There was a substantial lack of election turnout reporting in Quebec student unions for the years studied, likely due to many Quebec student unions having their elections at a general meeting of members where attendance may not be reported instead a of multi-day election. This process likely stems from the influence of student syndicalism in Quebec, a concept originating in France in the 1960s that views students as workers and unions as labor unions (Fields, 1970; Nesbitt, 2009). Average voter turnout in British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec, and Saskatchewan was below the national average over the three years studied, while New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Prince Edward Island were consistently above. Alberta had mixed results, falling below the average in 2016 and 2018 but exceeding it in 2017.

Table 1.1: Voter Turnout by Province

Province	Number of Student Unions	Number of Elections with Turnout Reported	Average Voter Turnout Percentage					
			2016	+/- National Average (20.5)	2017	+/- National Average (20.8)	2018	+/- National Average (20.5)
Alberta	6	13 (72%)	17.3	-3.2	21.6	+0.8	16.7	-3.8
British Columbia	11	22 (67%)	13.8	-6.7	11.2	-9.6	14.9	-5.6
Manitoba	4	9 (75%)	11.0	-9.5	15.5	-5.3	17.3	-3.2
New Brunswick	4	9 (75%)	30.6	+10.1	37.1	+16.3	27.7	+7.2
Newfoundland and Labrador	1	3 (100%)	7	-13.5	8.9	-11.9	9.4	-11.1
Nova Scotia	9	16 (59%)	24.4	+3.9	21.7	+0.9	27.5	+7.0
Ontario	25	53 (71%)*	23.2	+2.7	24.3	+3.5	22.1	+1.6
Prince Edward Island	1	3 (100%)	40	+19.5	29.8	+9.0	27.8	+7.3
Quebec	17	12 (24%)	20.1	-0.4	18.1	-2.7	18.9	-1.6
Saskatchewan	2	6 (67%)	16.9	-3.6	15.4	-5.4	11.4	-9.1

* = Includes three cases where all candidates were acclaimed without an election

To examine potential determinants of student union voter turnout, we regressed turnout percentages from each student union election on the independent variables. The R-square value was 0.269, which is still meaningful given the finite number of undergraduate student unions in Canada. All variables were statistically significant with P-values approximately at or below .05. Online voting had the largest impact on voter turnout of the three independent variables. At a 95 percent confidence level, student unions with online voting had on average an increase in voter turnout between 4.1-12.2 percentage points. Since the average student union election voter turnout was about 21%, such an increase is substantial. There was a negative correlation with electorate size and turnout. At a 95% confidence level, for every additional 10000 students in an electorate, on average, turnout decreases between 0.14-2.51 percentage points. The percentage of part-time students also negatively correlated to turnout. At a 95%

confidence level, for every additional 10 percent of the electorate that is made up of part-time students, on average, voter turnout decreases between 1.62-4.32 percentage points. These results suggest that of the observed cases, student unions that do not have online voting, have larger electorates, and have larger proportions of part-time students have the most difficulty with election turnout.

Table 1.2: Multiple Regression Results

Variables	Coefficient
Online Voting	0.082 (0.020)
Electorate Size	-1.321E-06 (5.990E-07)
Percentage of Part-Time Students	-0.003 (0.001)

R-squared: 0.269

Discussion

The observation that online voting provides a substantial increase to student union election turnout suggests that it is more effective than traditional paper ballots. One explanation may be that by the late 2010s, much of students' education experience and other aspects of life took place in a digital environment, going beyond desktop computers to smartphones that students carry wherever they go. When voting opens, students may receive immediate notifications of the election and can cast their ballots. This finding supports Alvarez et al. (2009), Trechsel and Vassil (2011), and Decman's (2018) assertions that online voting draws participation from portions of voting populations that would not have otherwise voted. It also aligns with results of Lewis and Rice's (2005) study.

Lust (2015) and Mellon et al.'s (2017) concerns about online voting disadvantaging older voters while privileging wealthy and more educated voters may still have an impact given how low Canadian student union voter turnout was overall, but the wealth and knowledge of digital technology necessary to attend and participate in Canadian higher education during the study period likely mitigated these issues. Spagnuolo and Shanouda's (2017) calls for holistic election promotion strategies can be adapted to help older voters as well. The results suggest that larger schools and those with more part-time students struggle to boost turnout, aligning with research showing lower extracurricular participation at larger institutions (Barker & Gump, 1964; Feldman & Matjasko, 2006; Garcia, 2012; Holland & Andre, 1987; Lindsay, 1982) and less involvement from part-time students (Cazabon, 2009; Crispin & Nikolaou, 2019; Foley & Marr, 2019; Lang, 2012; Thomas, 2015). We propose that, given the advocacy role of Canadian student unions (Arthur, 1996; Moses, 2001; Tewksbury, 2018), students at larger universities and part-time students face greater challenges making their voices heard. This raises equity concerns, as these students may be less connected to their elected representatives and may have more limited access to or awareness of union support. Therefore, voter turnout could serve as a measure of student union effectiveness in promoting equity and activism. Canadian undergraduate student unions, particularly those using paper ballots, with larger populations, and more part-time students, need to innovate election processes to boost participation. Growing student enrollment, co-op programs, international exchanges, and part-time status make traditional promotion tactics like posters insufficient without coordinated online campaigns through email, websites, and social media. Student newspapers, both print and digital, can also help, as political reporting has been shown to improve youth understanding and turnout (Campion-Smith, 2020; Kiousis & McDevitt, 2008; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2018; Moeller et al., 2014). Unions with outdated election rules may struggle to effectively engage a dispersed, increasingly international student electorate. While online voting can help mitigate these challenges, it should be coupled with other improvements to make election promotion larger scale, proactive, and diversified enough to reach the online and in-person spaces where students congregate.

The study has some limitations that can be explored in future research. For instance, integrating college and graduate student union turnout may yield varied results and allow for more independent variables. The importance

of student newspapers covering student union politics can be explored to find a potential correlation between students being informed about student union developments and voter turnout. The percentage of international students in the electorate would also be good to explore, provided that such data can be made available by campus, since it could help determine whether election promotion activities are adequately informing international students who are new to the campus and their student union. Rules allowing slates of candidates or mandating election debates may also be impactful. Another approach would be to develop variables measuring frequencies and/or impacts of student union victories and scandals to see if they may influence voter turnout.

Low voter turnout may also be connected to broader issues of disillusionment of young people and students with democracy more broadly. In Canada, young people aged 18-25 have the lowest voter turnout in comparison with other age groups (Youth Voting Trends, 2023). The youth voting turnout reached 68% in 2015 but fell to 67% and 63% in 2019 and 2021 respectively. These figures represent a significant downturn from the 77% and 76% turnouts in 1972 and 1979. The 2015 National Youth Survey found that Canadian youth is less interested in Canadian politics and feel less strongly that voting will make a difference in comparison with older voting groups (Nielsen Consumer Insights, 2023).

The low voter turnout is attributable to a need for more effective political education in Canada that focuses on transparency and rebuilding trust with youth who may feel like democracy has failed them, so students know about both the importance of various levels of government and societal institutions they have a voice in and how they can enact change (Caduhada, 2023; Kozak, 2021; Stockemer and Rocher, 2017). The aforementioned National Youth Survey also demonstrated that young people who voted were more likely to say they learned about government and politics in high school (Nielsen Consumer Insights, 2016) Perhaps these political education ideas could be adapted to student government contexts. Future research would benefit from examining the prevalence of student disillusionment with student government democracy and potential causes for such disillusionment such as whether students believe student government is important and/or capable of enacting educational change (Roberts, 2022).

Conclusion

This study has helped show that student unions need to prioritize political participation and accessible decision-making processes to ensure that their decisions and activities are truly representative of their respective student populations. Reporting election results is integral for student unions to assess electoral participation. The most notable finding is that online voting has a significant effect on student union voter turnout. This evidence can thus be useful in helping students and student affairs professionals improve their student unions' democratic processes and increase political participation, while also providing grounds for arguments in favour of providing online voting in other levels of government. While the additional variables for future research mentioned in the discussion section above would be good to explore in subsequent works, the limited data available renders this study an important foray into Canadian postsecondary student democracy that provides empirical insights about the strength of student union mobilization capacities. It also outlines challenges faced in informing students about student union elections and why they are important for helping make student voices heard in education decision-making. It is thus very important for student unions to track their percentage turnout data so they can assess current political participation rates and examine how they can improve participation in future years.

Future research may benefit from examining whether the length of time a campus student union spends allied to a particular national or provincial student union impacts said campus student union's voter turnout (Gregory, 2010). The role student journalism plays in informing student bodies about upcoming student union elections may also be an interesting factor to explore. Other aspects of student union election processes, such as the existence of a party or slate system, the length of voting and campaign periods, and whether debates are held may help identify other factors that influence electoral participation. Given that all student unions studied had turnouts less than 50% from 2016-2018, there is a great need to improve participation rates. Future research should explore the prevalence and causes of student disillusionment with democracy in general and the connection between low voter turnout among youth with the participation in student government, including whether students view it as important or capable of driving educational change

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