



AT ISSUE

The Right to Vote



5.120 Sign at polling station

Government voting rights in Newfoundland and Labrador have undergone several changes in the last two centuries. Today we have universal suffrage, but a significant portion of the eligible population still does not vote. Why is this? Is voting a right or is it a responsibility?

**Britain increased this to two years in 1842.*

During the era of the migratory fisheries, no form of elected government existed in the colony and residents were governed by British authorities. This changed in 1832, after a local reform movement convinced Britain to grant the colony representative government. Voting rights were extended to male British subjects who were at least 21 years old and had lived on the island as tenants or property owners for at least one full year* before the election took place. Women were not allowed to vote, nor were Labrador residents.

Unlike today, early voters did not cast their ballots in secret and instead had to stand and be counted at the various polling stations. Lack of privacy left voters

vulnerable to intimidation or bribery from individuals wishing to manipulate election results, and bullying did occur at some polling stations. This changed in 1887, when the Newfoundland government passed laws requiring all elections to be held by secret ballot. Another difference between voting methods then and now is that in the 1830s the voting process often took days to complete and did not always occur at the same time in the various districts. In 1832, for example, polling at Conception Bay lasted from October 31 to November 3, while voting in St. John's ran from November 5 to 12. This changed in 1842, when Britain passed a bill stipulating that all future Newfoundland elections must occur simultaneously.

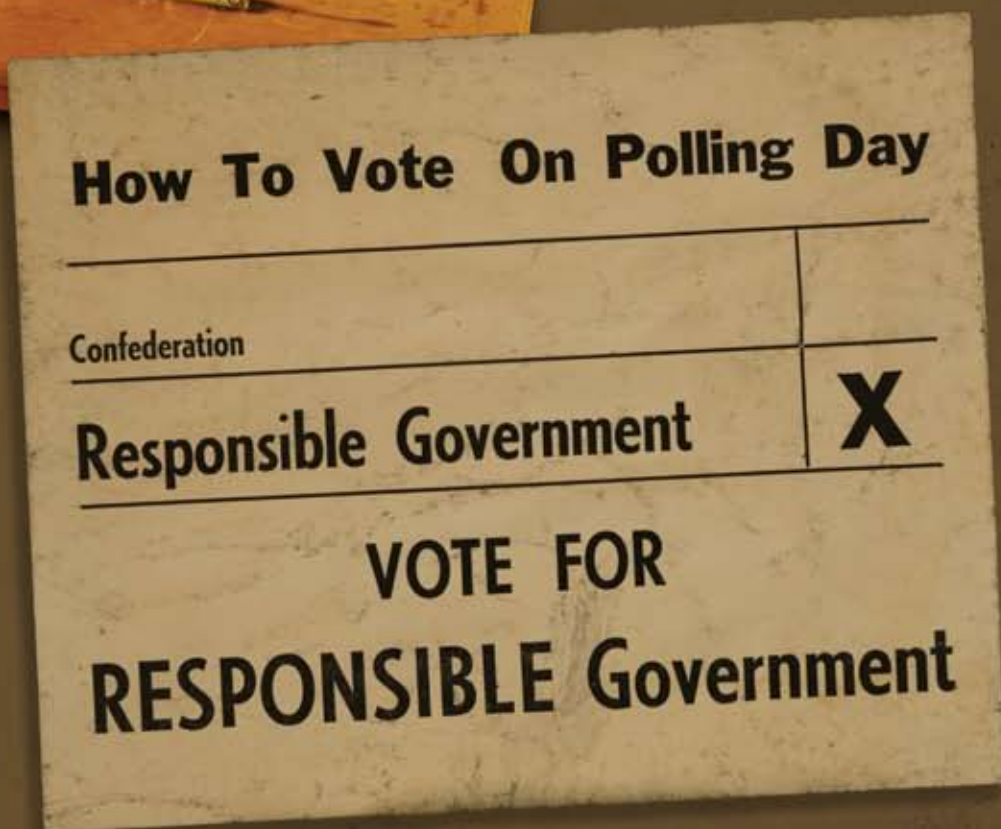
*This was a 90 per cent voter turnout for women on the island!



5.122 The first ballot box in Newfoundland and Labrador

This box was presented to Sir Robert Bond who introduced the Ballot Bill in 1887, which provided for voting by secret ballot.

5.121 A card from the July 1948 referendum urging voters to vote for Responsible Government.



Women in Newfoundland won the right to vote and run for public office in April 1925, after decades of lobbying government officials. Unlike male residents, however, women had to be 25 years or older to vote. On October 29, 1928, 52 343* Newfoundland women cast ballots in their first general election. Two years later, Lady Helena Squires became the first woman elected into the country's House of Assembly.

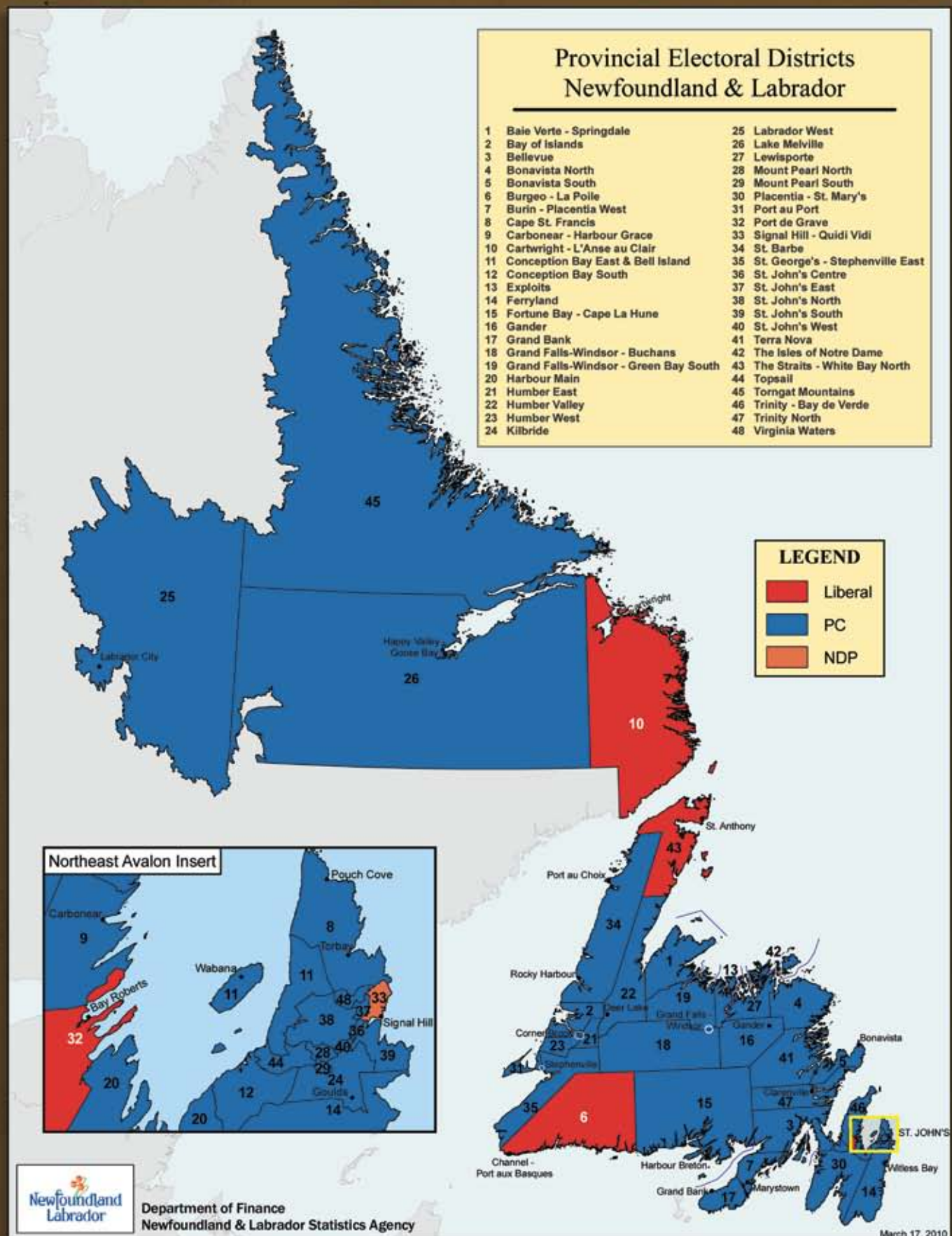
In 1934, however, Newfoundland voluntarily suspended its right to self-government and swore in the Commission

of Government. It was not until 1946 that people returned to the polls to elect members of the National Convention. This time, all residents age 21 and older were eligible to vote, including those living in Labrador. When the polls opened on June 21, 1946, almost half of all eligible voters had never cast a ballot before, having been too young to participate in the previous election 14 years earlier. Approximately two years later, a slim majority of Newfoundland and Labrador voters (52.3 per cent) chose to join Canada in a 1948 referendum.

Today, residents of this province can participate in municipal, provincial, and federal elections once they reach the age of 18. Governments at all three levels typically remain in office for four years or until a general election is called. A general election takes place in all electoral districts on the same day. In contrast, a by-

election typically takes place in a single district. This usually occurs after an individual politician leaves his or her seat between regularly scheduled general elections, making it necessary for voters in that district to elect a new representative.

5.123 Provincial electoral districts as of March 2010



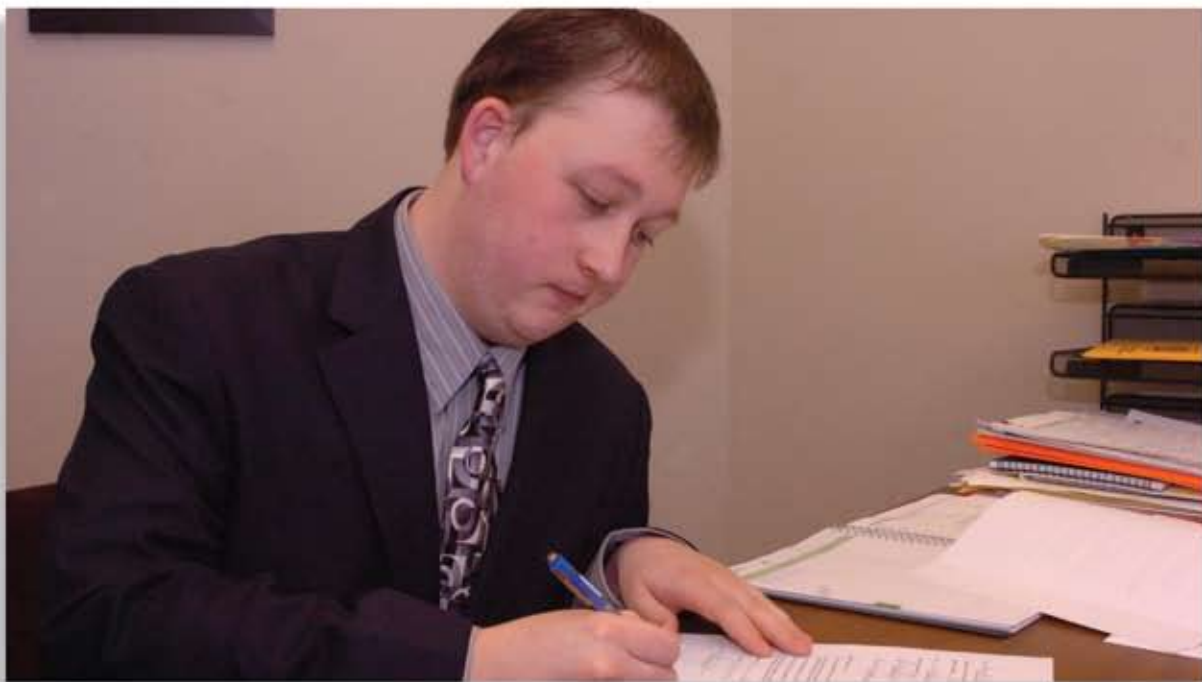
*Postal voting is also growing in popularity. The city of St. John's, for example, asked voters to use mail-in ballots during its 2009 municipal election instead of visiting polling stations.

Once an election has been called, there are several ways to vote. The most common way is for a voter to visit the polling station* in his or her district to cast a ballot on election day. Residents who will be unable to do this may apply to participate in advance polls that take place during a specified time period before the actual election day. Additionally, citizens who will be out of their districts on election day may still vote by special ballot – which is essentially a mail-in ballot.

Despite these options and universal suffrage, not all people exercise their right to vote. In the 2007 provincial election, for example, only 60.2 per cent of eligible voters cast ballots. Although voter turnout is low among all age groups, it is particularly a problem among young voters. Elections Canada estimates that only 44 per cent of electors aged 18 to 24 participated in the 2006 federal election, while overall voter turnout was 64.7 per cent.

“Age ... affects (voter) turnout ... Recent studies indicate that ... not only are young people participating less than their elders, their willingness to participate appears to be declining over time.”

– From *A History of the Vote in Canada*, Elections Canada website



5.124 Kurtis Coombs, 19, briefly mayor-elect of Paradise

When one vote could have made the difference ...

On September 29, 2009, 19-year-old Kurtis Coombs became Canada's youngest mayor after winning a municipal election in Paradise by three votes. Two days later, however, a re-count showed that he had actually tied with fellow candidate Ralph Wiseman. According to provincial law, a draw then had to take place to determine the winner. As a result, both names were written on

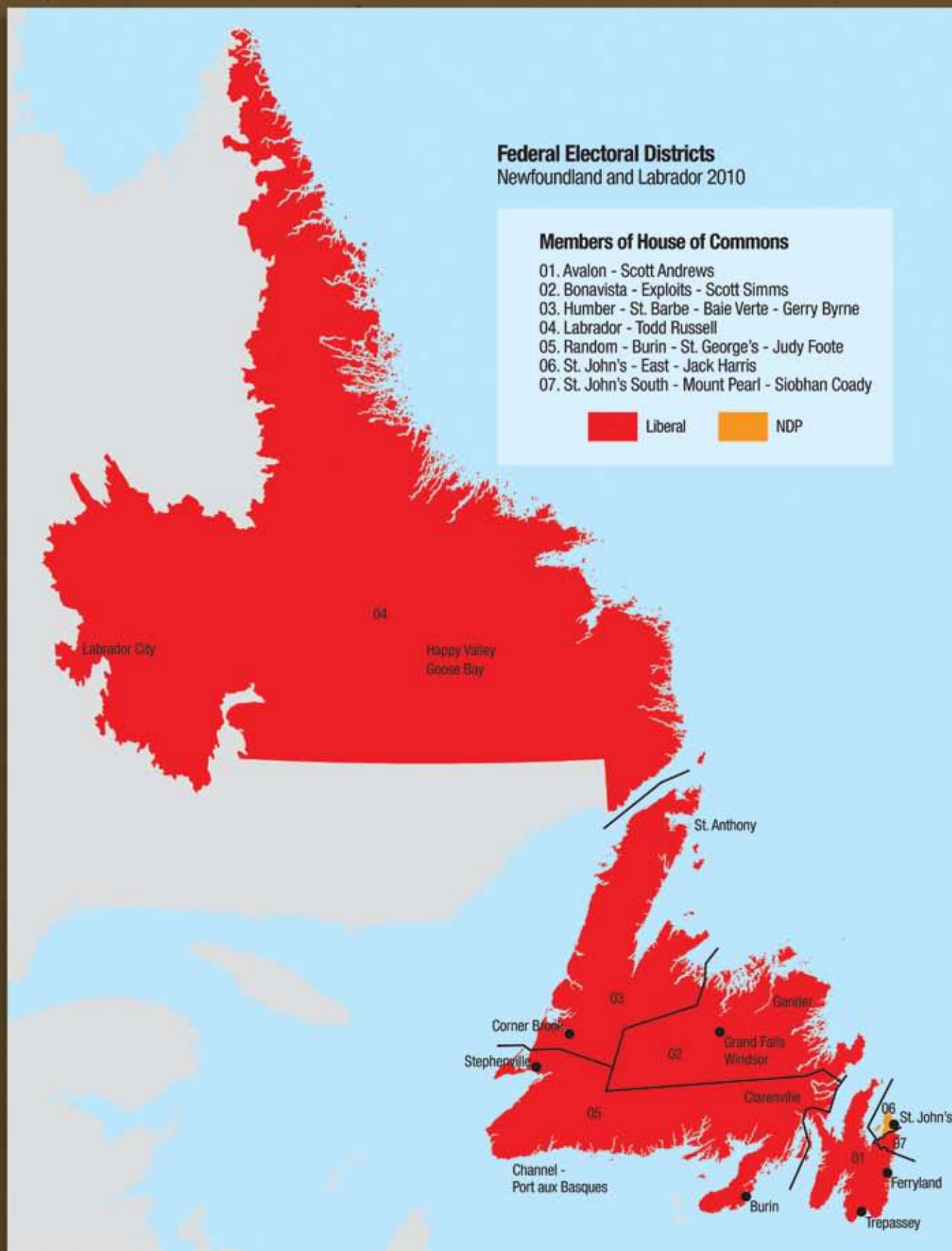
slips of paper and placed inside a container (a recycling bin was used). In the end, Wiseman's name was pulled out of the box, making him mayor of Paradise. Some Paradise residents called for a re-election, but the provincial Supreme Court ultimately ruled against Coombs' application to overturn the results and have a new election ordered.

Voter turnout for the 2008 federal election was 58.8 per cent – an all-time low. Newfoundland and Labrador had the worst provincial rate of voter turnout with only 48.1 per cent of voters turning out.

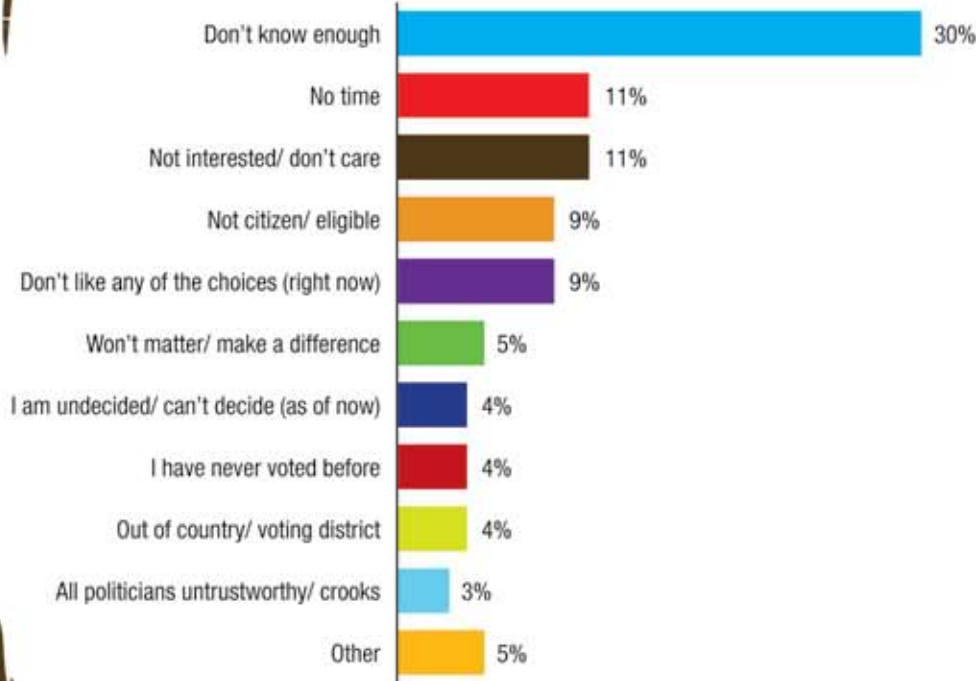
In a survey on youth voting, common reasons given by young people for not voting included not having enough information about the candidates running for office, not having enough time, and not being interested. (See fig. 5.124.) Many see this trend of low turnout by young voters as troubling. In a 2008 report, Chief Electoral Officer Paul Reynolds stated: “The youth are our future and if we fail to engage them now, the political history of this province could be lost.”

Voting is important because it gives us a say in how our country, province, and communities are governed. By taking part in an election, we choose our political leaders and help our democracy work. Reformers recognized this in the early 1800s and so did suffragists in the early 1900s – that’s why they fought so hard to win the right to vote.

5.125 Federal electoral districts as of 2010



5.126 Top reasons given by youth for not voting



Note: All topics under 3% collapsed into "Other"
Don't know / Refused (5%) not shown

For Discussion:

1. Is it important to vote? Explain.
2. Create a list of ways that people under the age of 18 can be politically active. Which of these have you done? What can you do to be more politically active?
3. What can politicians, election organizers, educators, the media, or society in general do to increase voter turnout among young people?
4. Why did reformers in the early 1800s and women suffragists in the early 1900s fight so hard to win the right to vote?
5. Voting is mandatory in Australia, where voter turnout is usually about 90 per cent. (Compare this to a 58.8 per cent voter turnout in Canada's 2008 federal election). Voters who do not appear at the polls in Australia and do not have a legitimate excuse (such as illness, travel, or religious objections) have to pay a small fine of approximately \$15. Do you agree with this policy? Why or why not?

Questions:

1. Do you intend to vote in elections after you turn 18? Why or why not?
2. Ask someone in your family why he or she votes. List the reasons. Do you agree with these reasons? Why or why not?
3. Imagine you are a politician running for office. What would you do to appeal to young voters?
4. Consider the Paradise municipal election in September 2009 (See fig. 5.122). Would a higher voter turnout have prevented the election from resulting in a tie?
5. Will this issue convince more young people to vote? Why?