

Occupy the ballot box

November 16th, 2011

VANCOUVER - British Columbians are heading to the polls this week to vote for their local governments.

A new poll released today by the Centre for Civic Governance at the Columbia Institute found 45% of British Columbians couldn't identify the date of their next municipal election, less than two weeks out from the election. This is a concerning statistic, coming as it does amidst declining voter participation in recent elections. Voter turnout hovered around 30% in recent municipal elections, with a downward trend in voter turnout nationally from 75% in 1988 to 61% in this past election.

Citizens who miss the opportunity to cast their ballots this Saturday will lose an opportunity to act on the issues that are concerning them.

While the natural environment was not top of mind, when asked specifically about climate change, 40.7% of respondents were still willing to pay higher taxes in order to see their local government take strong climate action. (19% neither agreed or disagreed, 38.7% disagreed.) Local leaders who have been championing climate action initiatives should take heart that, even when faced with the prospect of higher taxes, there is a substantial core of voters who want action on climate change.

Local decision-making that builds community spirit, supports the local economy, strives to include all community members, develops walkable communities, works to improve public transportation and energy efficiency can make an enormous difference and lead to a healthier, more active and stronger community.

In another area where visionary local leaders can take heart, 67.1% of respondents asked about a Living Wage said they would favour their municipality adopting a bylaw to ensure that all directly-employed city staff, as well as staff contracted by the city, are paid a locally calculated living wage. A living wage means that the recipient can afford basic necessities (food, clothing, shelter, transportation, childcare, healthcare), and a small amount for emergencies.

This response reflects a core concern for many: the economy. When asked about issues, 32% of British Columbians expressed strong concern about the economy, with 13.5% identifying *Cost of Living* as the most important problem facing their community. Second and third spots went to housing affordability (9.5%) and the economy (8.8%).

Communities are stronger when community members are engaged in their community. Caring enough to vote sends a strong message to those who are elected about the community they are putting themselves forward to govern. It makes for better leadership. This leadership, on both municipal council and school board, is key to building inclusive and sustainable communities. Your vote can make a difference. Occupy the ballot box!

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Charley Beresford is executive director of the Columbia Institute, a public policy NGO which fosters leadership for inclusive, sustainable communities. The survey was fielded on-line, November 7th and 8th by Stratcom. It is statistically weighted to ensure reflection of BC's population.

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