

# Voters Who Abstain: Explaining Abstention and Ballot Roll-Off in the 2014 Toronto Municipal Election

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the correlates of ballot roll-off in the 2014 Toronto municipal election. While turnout in the mayoral contest was comparatively high, roughly 4.3% of voters abstained from council races. Using data from the Toronto Election Study, a large-*N* survey of electors conducted around the time of the 2014 Toronto Election, this study identifies a series of factors related to roll-off from mayoral to council elections. These variables include a number of sociodemographic characteristics and attitudinal factors commonly associated with turnout, measures of attachment to the city, and a series of election-specific factors. Results reveal that many factors commonly associated with abstention similarly drive roll-off, but that the experiences of individual voters also have an impact upon roll-off rates.

## **Keywords**

turnout, ballot roll-off, Toronto

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In the context of simultaneous elections, voter turnout is not a binary variable. Some people choose to abstain from the electoral process completely, while others might participate only selectively. The 2014 Toronto municipal election produced the highest turnout rate that the city has ever seen. In the mayoral contest, 981,034 ballots representing 54.7% of eligible voters were cast (City of Toronto 2014). The mayoral race was not the only one decided on election day, however, as Torontonians also voted to fill 44 positions on city council.<sup>1</sup> In Toronto's "weak mayor" system, these elections are significant, as councillors are comparatively powerful in such a setting (DeSantis and Renner 2002). Nevertheless, only 939,268 votes were cast in council elections. Put another way, approximately 42,000 or 4.3% of mayoral voters were council *abstainers*.

The phenomenon whereby electors cast a ballot in one simultaneous election, but not another, is commonly referred to as "ballot roll-off." Typically, roll-off involves voting for the position at the top of the ticket, but leaving the council portion of the ballot blank (though much less common, it may also be the case that the opposite is true, Knack and Kropf 2003). The literature on roll-off originates overwhelmingly from the United States, where simultaneous elections are the norm, including in national (Walker 1966; Wattenberg, McAllister, and Salvanto 2000), state (Froonjian 2013; Laurin et al. 2008), and judicial elections (Hall 2007; Streb, Frederick, and LaFrance 2009). Municipal elections have received a relatively modest amount of attention in the roll-off literature, but those studies that have investigated the matter are limited in that they employ aggregate-level data (and, thus, are susceptible to ecological concerns and questions of causal inference) (Bullock and Dunn 1996; Harris and Zipp 1999; Neely and Cook 2008; Vanderleeuw and Liu 2002).

The purpose of this article is to identify the correlates of voter turnout and ballot roll-off in the 2014 Toronto municipal election. Particular attention is to be paid to the correlates of roll-off, the study of which is decidedly less common than that of turnout. The record high rate of voter participation in this 2014 Toronto election makes this an excellent case in which to study the correlates of roll-off, and was likely due to the exceptionally high-profile nature of the mayoral race. The contest pitted Doug Ford, brother of highly controversial incumbent Rob Ford,<sup>2</sup> against John Tory, a former leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, and Olivia Chow, a former federal member of Parliament for the New Democratic Party.<sup>3</sup> It was not only turnout that increased in 2014, however, as the rate of roll-off in 2014 was also higher than in previous elections. Roll-off rates in 2006 and 2010 are estimated at 3.1% and 3.0%, respectively<sup>4</sup> (City of Toronto 2006, 2010).<sup>5</sup> A higher rate of roll-off makes it easier to study the correlates of ballot roll-off abstention using survey data, as more cases fall into the "roll-off" category,

making statistical analysis more feasible. Toronto 2014 thus provides an excellent opportunity to study roll-off in a municipal setting.

This article makes a number of noteworthy scholarly contributions. First, this is the only study to employ individual-level survey data to study roll-off in a municipal context. It draws upon data from the Toronto Election Study (TES), a two-wave, large-*N* survey of electors conducted around the time of the 2014 Toronto elections. Such individual-level data allow for the consideration of several heretofore unconsidered explanatory variables, including a series of sociodemographic and attitudinal factors, measures of attachment to community, and indicators of respondent experiences with, and outlooks toward, the election.

Another contribution of this study stems from the nonpartisan nature of the Toronto election. This characteristic differentiates Toronto from the vast majority of settings where roll-off has been studied in the past. Although there has been some research on roll-off in nonpartisan settings (see Bullock and Dunn 1996; Hall 2007; Streb, Frederick, and LaFrance 2009), this work is considerably less established than research on partisan races. Such a distinction is noteworthy as, not only does turnout tend to be lower in nonpartisan elections (Karnig and Walter 1983; Schaffner, Wright, and Streb 2001), but also an absence of a party cue eliminates an important shortcut for electors looking down the ballot, and may, therefore, affect rates and patterns of roll-off (Hall and Aspin 1987). The absence of such a cue may mean that other factors become more important in determining patterns of roll-off.

Finally, this is the first study of roll-off in any Canadian election. While the topic has received a significant degree of attention in the United States, where multiballot elections are typical at all levels of government (Bullock and Hood 2003; Darcy and Schneider 1989; Nichols 1998; Vanderleeuw and Engstrom 1987; Wattenberg, McAllister, and Salvanto 2000), there has been no scholarly examination of roll-off in Canada.<sup>6</sup> The municipal level is the only one in the country where simultaneous elections occur, and Canadian scholars of voting behavior (like their American counterparts) have traditionally paid relatively little attention to municipal elections (Eidelman and Taylor 2010; Sancton 2015; Sapotichne, Jones, and Wolfe 2007). This study thus represents the only scholarly examination of roll-off in Canada (for that matter, it is also the first individual-level examination of turnout in council elections in the country).

After a survey of the literatures on ballot roll-off and municipal turnout more generally, TES data are employed to identify the correlates of voter turnout for mayoral and council races, and to identify patterns of ballot roll-off. Data reveal that several sociodemographic and attitudinal variables, as well as one's attachment to community, are associated with turnout and

roll-off, but that election-specific, contextual considerations must also be taken into account.

## Turnout and Roll-Off in a Municipal Context

The decades-long decline in voter turnout across the advanced industrialized world is well documented, and scholars have devoted a great deal of time and attention to identifying the correlates of voter participation. The overwhelming majority of this research has focused on elections at the national and provincial/state levels. Indeed, municipal elections receive significantly less attention from scholars of voting behavior than do contests at other levels of government. This is true both in the United States and Canada, where the extent of this discrepancy has prompted Cutler and Matthews (2005, p. 359) to describe municipal elections as the “poor cousins in the study of elections and voting behaviour.” The relative dearth of research on participation in local elections is particularly noteworthy in that turnout rates tend to be significantly lower in municipal than national elections. This pattern applies to Europe, the United States, and Canada (Kushner and Siegel 2006; Morlan 1984; Nakhaie 2006; Sellers 2013). That said, the existing literatures on turnout and ballot roll-off point to four types of variables that are expected to be correlated with roll-off in the 2014 Toronto election: sociodemographic characteristics, attitudinal factors, measures of community attachment, and the experiences of individual electors.

The literature on turnout at other levels of government is firmly established, and a variety of theories has been developed to explain the decision of whether or not to vote. Stemming from the Columbia school’s focus on sociodemographic factors (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948), explanations for turnout have come to almost universally include measures of sociodemographic characteristics such as age, race, and education (Howe 2006; Tossutti 2006). Insisting that personal agency also plays into the decision of whether or not to vote, rational choice theorists have suggested that turnout is influenced by calculations aimed at maximizing personal utility (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). In attempting to explain that theory’s weaknesses,<sup>7</sup> scholars discovered that electors who believe that the act of voting is a duty are significantly more likely to vote than are those who view voting as a choice. Indeed, this sense of duty has been described as the single most important predictor of the decision to vote (Blais 2000). The “cognitive mobilization” model (e.g., Kornberg and Clarke 1992) further adds to our ability to explain turnout by focusing upon electors’ awareness of, and engagement with, the political process, as indicated by variables such as interest in, and knowledge of, politics or an election. Finally, as scholars have

come to increasingly realize the importance of campaign effects upon voters (see Fiorina 1981; Iyengar and Kinder 1987), contextual factors, including the competitiveness of a race, contact with politicians, and the presence of an incumbent, have been shown to influence turnout patterns (see Blais 2007; Clarke, Kornberg, and Scotto 2009; or Geys 2006 for more extensive surveys of the literature on the topic of voter turnout).

Existing studies of local-level turnout focus upon many of these same factors. Indeed, it has been suggested that psychological and socioeconomic variables related to turnout at the national level have similar relationships at the local level (Hamilton 1971). A significant share of the literature on municipal turnout is related to race and immigrant status (which is not surprising, given the fact that minorities and immigrants tend to be disproportionately located in urban, rather than rural settings) (Goldsmith and Holzner 2014; Hajnal and Trounstin 2005; Michelson 2003; Sheffield and Hadley 1984). The effects of institutional features, such as the use of direct democracy and the power of elected officials, have also been studied in relation to turnout (Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Karnig and Walter 1983; Wood 2002). Finally, the importance of various other factors, such as voter information levels (Lassen 2005), the presence of an incumbent (De Benedetto and De Paola 2013; Trounstin 2013), and being contacted by politicians or their representatives (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014; Niven 2004), has been recognized.

While the relationships between turnout and many of these variables have also been studied in nonmunicipal contexts, there is at least one characteristic known to have an effect unique to the local level: home ownership. The argument is that owners have a particular stake in municipal elections as they recognize the unique impact that local government can make upon property value (Fischel 2001). As such, home owners tend to participate at higher rates than do renters (Holian 2011; McGregor and Spicer 2016; Rossi and Weber 1996). Relatedly, it has been argued that an increased length of tenure in a community should also encourage participation in community affairs, including elections (DiPasquale and Glaeser 1999).

In Canada, the bulk of the literature on municipal turnout employs aggregate-level data (Kushner, Siegel, and Stanwick 1997; Walks 2013; see Stanwick 2000 and Siemiatycki and Marshall 2014 on Toronto), though there are a limited number of studies that draw upon individual-level data (McGregor and Spicer 2016; Nakhaie 2006). There is also some work focused upon turnout among specific groups within society, with ethnic minorities and young voters relatively unlikely to vote (see Lapp 1999 on ethnic minorities and Dostie-Goulet et al. 2012 on youths). To this point, there has been no examination of turnout in Canadian council elections, though this is not

surprising given the limited attention that the topic receives elsewhere (see Houston and Ong 2012 for an American exception).

As previously noted, the literature on the correlates of ballot roll-off is well established in the United States. Research on sociodemographic characteristics tends to focus on minority groups, and it is well documented that minorities have a relatively high propensity to roll-off (Darcy and Schneider 1989; Harris and Zipp 1999). District competitiveness has been found to reduce roll-off rates (Froonjian 2013), and in nonpartisan settings in particular, the presence of an incumbent is negatively associated with roll-off, as incumbency serves as an information cue for voters (Hall 2007). Roll-off also tends to increase in low-salience, low-visibility elections (such as city council races) (Bullock and Dunn 1996). Relatedly, a lack of voter information, or knowledge, on down-ballot contests is also associated with roll-off (Wattenberg, McAllister, and Salvanto 2000).

Much of the research on roll-off is inapplicable to Toronto, but should nevertheless be recognized. For instance, Bullock and Dunn (1996) find that roll-off is lower when voters are given a “straight-ticket option,” which is not the case in Toronto, where mayoral and council candidates are not tied together by party affiliation (a finding which suggests that roll-off may be particularly detectable in this context). The influence of various voting technologies upon roll-off has also been considered (Nichols 1998; Nichols and Strizek 1995; Thomas 1968), though elections in Toronto employ simple paper ballots. Finally, there has been research into roll-off on ballot propositions, as opposed to elected office (Bowler, Donovan, and Happ 1992; Magleby 1984; Reilly and Richey 2009), and the Toronto contest included no direct democracy measures. The absence of these factors (a straight-ticket option, voting technology, and ballot propositions) means that the 2014 Toronto election represents a relatively straightforward case, where the effects of sociodemographic characteristics, attitudinal factors, attachment to community, and context can be studied without being influenced by these complicating factors.

Existing research on abstention and roll-off, therefore, points to a series of four hypotheses regarding the correlates of roll-off in the 2014 Toronto municipal election.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** There is no reason to expect that sociodemographic factors found elsewhere to be related to roll-off will not also be relevant in Toronto. Thus, it is anticipated that ethnic minorities, in particular, will be relatively likely to roll-off (though it is worth considering whether other sociodemographic factors commonly associated with turnout may exhibit a relationship with roll-off, including gender and age).

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** It is expected that attitudinal measures known to be associated with voter turnout, including political interest and knowledge, and the belief that voting is a duty, will be negatively associated with roll-off. These factors are all known to increase turnout, and should have the same effect at both the mayoral and ward levels, thus driving down rates of roll-off.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** It is anticipated that measures of attachment to community, which are known to have effects unique to the municipal level, will be negatively associated with roll-off. Those individuals who own homes or who have lived in the community for a long period of time arguably have a particularly high “stake” in municipal politics, and are expected to participate as fully as possible in the voting process.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** Context-specific factors are expected to affect patterns of roll-off, and such factors can vary greatly by ward. The competitiveness of a race, the presence of an incumbent councillor, and being contacted by ward candidates are expected to be negatively associated with roll-off.

To test these expectations, four types of explanatory variables are included in the analyses below. These variables were selected on the basis of the aforementioned literatures on turnout and roll-off, as well as the format of TES data. Note that Appendix A contains the wording of the survey questions employed in the below analysis, and Appendix B contains relevant descriptive statistics. The categories of variables considered are as follows:

1. *Sociodemographic characteristics:* Several factors commonly associated with turnout and/or roll-off are included, namely age, income, education, visible minority status (this variable refers to those individuals of non-European origin), and gender. As geography is an important factor in vote choice in Toronto (Walks 2004), a dummy variable comparing downtown to the city’s periphery is also included for exploratory purposes.<sup>8</sup>
2. *Attitudinal factors:* Three attitudinal factors known to be related to turnout and/or roll-off in other contexts are considered, including an indicator of interest in municipal politics, a measure of political knowledge (an index based upon a series of knowledge questions), and an indicator of respondents’ belief that voting is a duty or a choice.
3. *Attachment to community:* Two measures of attachment to community are included, specifically whether survey respondents own (vs. rent) their home and whether they have lived in Toronto for greater than 10 years.<sup>9</sup>

4. *Election specific variables*: Finally, a series of factors reflecting the contextual experiences of individual electors is considered, namely, the extent to which respondents are attentive to the mayoral and council races,<sup>10</sup> whether respondents were contacted by either mayoral or council candidates during the campaign, the competitiveness of the ward campaign,<sup>11</sup> and the presence of an incumbent (note that this final factor is only considered at the ward level, since there is no variation on this variable in the mayoral race).

## Data and Methodology

This study consists of two separate analyses, using two types of dependent variables: abstention and roll-off (both of which are measured through post-election questions on turnout at the mayoral and council levels).<sup>12</sup> First, two models are specified to evaluate the correlates of mayoral and council abstention, respectively, including each of the explanatory variables described above. The dependent variables in these models are mayoral and council *abstention* (rather than turnout) so that the direction of coefficients is comparable with the subsequent roll-off analysis. Next, the determinants of roll-off are identified. Whereas the abstention analysis includes all potential electors (both voters and abstainers), the roll-off analysis necessarily focuses only upon those individuals who voted at the mayoral level. The dependent variable in this model indicates roll-off, where cases are assigned a value of 0 if respondents voted at both the mayoral and council levels, and 1 if they abstained in the council election.

Although related, some of the explanatory variables in the roll-off analysis differ slightly from those in the abstention models. Specifically, two of the contextual variables have been modified to compare *differences* between mayoral and council variables—an important consideration in an analysis of roll-off, where we are trying to determine why electors might vote in one election, but not another. First, a measure of “relative attentiveness” was created by subtracting values for ward attentiveness from mayoral attentiveness. A high value for this variable indicates that respondents are much more attentive to the mayoral than council race, and a low value means the opposite. Second, a “net” candidate contact variable was created whereby respondents are differentiated on the basis of whether they were contacted by mayoral candidates only, ward candidates only, or neither or both. These variables allow for a consideration of different outlooks toward, and experiences with, the two types of elections.

The data used in these analyses are from the TES, a two-wave,<sup>13</sup> large-*N* Internet survey of voters and nonvoters conducted around the time of the 2014

Toronto municipal election. In the weeks before election day (after the candidate nomination deadline), 3,000 respondents were interviewed. Nearly 75% of those respondents also completed the postelection wave of the survey, which was administered in the week after the election. The sampling frame included eligible voters only (those individuals 18 or older who are Canadian citizens and who live in Toronto). Respondents were recruited through existing panels from an established Canadian survey firm and were compensated for their responses. The TES includes a variety of questions about attitudes and behavior, similar to those contained in many national or provincial election studies. It is the largest ever individual-level study of a Canadian municipal election and allows for a thorough consideration of mayoral and council voting behaviour.<sup>14</sup> To maximize the generalizability of our findings, all results discussed below are weighted for age, gender, and education.

As noted above, the estimated rate of roll-off using data from the City of Toronto's aggregate data is 4.3%. However, individual-level survey data are required to estimate the proportion of voters who cast ballots in mayoral or ward races only. TES participants were asked turnout questions for each type of election, and these responses could be compared with one another to determine roll-off patterns. Data suggest that, of those respondents who voted at the mayoral level, only 92.6% also voted in council races. This would represent an estimated roll-off rate of 7.4%,<sup>15</sup> which is higher than the 4.3% suggested by the aggregate-level data. Such differences between survey and actual election results are to be expected, given that all sampling techniques introduce some unavoidable uncertainty when attempting to make estimates rated to the population. Moreover, it is standard for turnout rates reported in surveys to differ substantially from actual election results (Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986).

There is an additional factor, however, that might help to explain the difference between aggregate and individual-level estimates of roll-off. While the focus here has been upon those individuals who vote at the mayoral level but abstain from council races, it must be pointed out that there are inevitably some individuals who exhibit the opposite behavior and who vote in the council election only. Such behavior serves to depress the estimated roll-off rate in an analysis based upon overall vote counts. As aggregate-level data do not account for these individuals, however, it cannot be used to accurately estimate roll-off rates. As such, the figure of 4.3% is a conservative estimate for the share of mayoral voters who did not participate in the council election.

Despite the fact that roll-off can occur in both "directions," the focus here is upon those individuals who participate in the mayoral election only. Of those TES respondents who voted for only one contest, the data reveal that the overwhelming majority (98%) abstained from the council race. Such a

finding might be expected with such a high-profile mayoral contest and is consistent with existing literature that suggests that roll-off tends to occur on lower parts of the ballot (Knack and Kropf 2003).<sup>16</sup> However, the low number of TES respondents who fit into this category ( $N=2$ ) means that a statistical analysis of this “reverse” roll-off is not feasible.

## Findings

Prior to identifying the sources of roll-off in the 2014 Toronto municipal election, the correlates of abstention in the 2014 mayoral and ward races are identified. Table 1 includes the results of two logistic regression models, where the dependent variables are abstention at the mayoral and ward level, respectively. Explanatory variables include the aforementioned measures of sociodemographic characteristics, attitudes, attachment toward community, and election-specific factors. The table includes raw coefficients and average predicted marginal probabilities.<sup>17</sup> As all variables are coded from 0 to 1, the marginal effects can be interpreted as the effect of a “full dose” of each explanatory variable upon abstention.

Table 1 indicates that many factors are associated with abstention for both types of municipal office, but also points to some noteworthy differences. Age and ethnicity, respectively, are negatively and positively associated with abstention at both levels. While gender is related to turnout in council races, the effect of this variable is statistically insignificant in the mayoral model. With respect to the attitudinal indicators, all three variables (interest, believing that voting is a duty, and knowledge) are positively associated with voting in mayoral and council races. The attachment to community variables are not significantly related to mayoral abstention, but there is modest evidence ( $p < .10$ ) that both home ownership and having lived in Toronto for more than 10 years increase turnout in council races. Finally, attention to the mayoral contest is negatively associated with abstention at both levels (in fact, this variable has the greatest marginal effect of any variable considered in the table), though attention to council races is associated with ward level voting only.

The fact that the correlates of mayoral and council turnout differ in several instances provides some indication that these factors may be associated with roll-off. However, a more rigorous analysis is required to identify the sources of roll-off with greater certainty. To that end, Table 2 presents the results of an additional logistic regression model, where this time the dependent variable is a measure of roll-off. The model includes only those individuals who voted in the mayoral election, and the outcome variable is coded as 0 if respondents voted for both offices, and 1 if they voted at the mayoral level only. Positive entries thus indicate a positive relationship with roll-off.

**Table 1.** Abstention in Mayoral and Ward Elections.

	Mayoral Abstention		Council Abstention	
	Coefficient (SE)	Marginal Effect	Coefficient (SE)	Marginal Effect
<b>Sociodemographic characteristics</b>				
Over 50	-0.42 (0.20)**	-0.05**	-0.48 (0.19)**	-0.07**
High income	-0.26 (0.19)	-0.03	0.03 (0.18)	0.00
University educated	0.11 (0.19)	0.01	0.06 (0.16)	0.01
Ethnic minority	0.55 (0.20)***	0.07***	0.60 (0.18)***	0.08***
Female	0.16 (0.18)	0.02	0.46 (0.16)***	0.06***
Downtown	0.11 (0.20)	0.01	0.01 (0.18)	0.01
<b>Attitudinal variables</b>				
Interest in municipal politics	-0.70 (0.40)*	-0.08*	-0.76 (0.36)**	-0.11**
Voting in municipal elections is a duty	-0.53 (0.19)***	-0.06***	-0.60 (0.17)***	-0.08***
General political knowledge	-1.75 (0.30)***	-0.20***	-1.14 (0.28)***	-0.16***
<b>Attachment to community</b>				
Home owner	-0.15 (0.20)	-0.02	-0.34 (0.19)*	-0.05*
Lived in Toronto >10 years	-0.04 (0.24)	-0.00	-0.36 (0.21)*	-0.05*
<b>Election specific variables</b>				
Attention to mayoral contest	-2.41 (0.48)***	-0.29***	-1.72 (0.44)***	-0.24***
Attention to ward contest	-0.32 (0.39)	-0.04	-1.21 (0.35)***	-0.17***
Contacted by mayoral candidate	-0.05 (0.21)	-0.01	0.10 (0.19)	0.01
Contacted by ward candidate	-0.13 (0.21)	-0.02	-0.33 (0.19)*	-0.05*
Ward competitiveness	0.38 (0.44)	0.05	0.34 (0.39)	0.05
Ward incumbent present	0.09 (0.24)	0.01	-0.17 (0.20)	-0.02
Constant	2.35 (0.45)***		2.87 (0.43)***	
N	1,585		1,585	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.2488		0.2420	

\**p* < .10. \*\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .01.

**Table 2.** The Determinants of Ballot Roll-Off.

	Coefficient (SE)	Marginal Effect
Sociodemographic characteristics		
Over 50	-0.52 (0.31)*	-0.03*
High income	0.42 (0.28)	0.03
University educated	0.09 (0.27)	0.01
Ethnic minority	0.57 (0.28)**	0.04**
Female	0.80 (0.26)***	0.05***
Downtown	-0.20 (0.32)	-0.01
Attitudinal variables		
Interest in municipal politics	-1.65 (0.43)***	-0.11***
Voting in municipal elections is a duty	-0.72 (0.25)***	-0.05***
General political knowledge	0.39 (0.45)	0.02
Attachment to community		
Home owner	-0.56 (0.28)**	-0.04**
Lived in Toronto >10 years	-0.84 (0.30)***	-0.05***
Election specific variables		
Attention to mayoral contest- attention to ward contest	3.36 (0.92)***	0.22***
Contacted by mayoral candidate- contacted by ward candidate	1.08 (0.45)**	0.07**
Ward competitiveness	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00
Ward incumbent present	-0.63 (0.28)**	-0.04**
Constant	-3.01 (0.84)***	
N	1,313	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.1674	

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

Recall that two of the explanatory variables in Table 2 differ from those included in Table 1. The attention variables (mayoral and ward) have been combined to create a single measure representing the difference in attention paid to the two races. The candidate contact variable is also based upon a combination of the mayoral and council contact variables, and has a value of 1 if respondents were contacted by mayoral candidates only and 0 if contacted by ward candidates only (or 0.5 if contacted by both or neither). These augmented measures enable us to test whether *differences* in attitudes toward, or experiences with, the two levels of races are associated with roll-off. As with Table 1, all variables in Table 2 are coded from 0 to 1; thus, marginal effects can be interpreted as the effect of moving from the minimum to maximum value for each variable.

For the most part, the results in Table 2 are compatible with expectations. Consistent with both existing American literature and H1, ethnic minorities are relatively likely to roll-off. TES data also suggest that women and young voters are more likely than their male and older counterparts to vote in the mayoral election only. Interestingly, the age and ethnicity variables display the same association with roll-off as they do with abstention (negative and positive, respectively). However, though TES data reveal no relationship between gender and mayoral turnout, female voters are more likely than their male counterparts to roll-off. The effect is equal to 5 percentage points and is the largest effect observed for any sociodemographic characteristic.

The attitudinal variables also function largely as anticipated. Interest in municipal politics and the belief that voting is a duty are both negatively associated with roll-off, as H2 suggested. Political knowledge, however, is associated with turnout only. Interested, dutiful voters are, thus, very likely to come to the polling booth, and to vote in both elections. In contrast, while knowledge decreases rates of abstention, it has no statistically significant relationship with roll-off.

The measures of attachment to community also display the anticipated relationship with roll-off. Home ownership and having lived in the city for greater than 10 years both make voters less likely to abstain in the ward election, in particular. These findings are particularly interesting given that Table 1 suggests that these variables have no effect upon mayoral turnout (and the relationship with council turnout is weak). Nevertheless, as was predicted in H3, both variables are negatively associated with roll-off. Home ownership and having lived in Toronto for greater than 10 years both decrease rates of roll-off—the combined effect of these variables is 9 points. Such a finding suggests that, among those individuals who do vote at the mayoral level, an attachment to the community makes participation in council elections more likely.

Finally, as H4 suggested, there is evidence that context matters; the election-specific variables highlight the importance of distinct contextual factors in shaping roll-off patterns. Differences in the level of attention paid to the two types of races had a significant effect upon roll-off. Indeed, this effect is the largest observed in Table 2. Those individuals who were very attentive to the mayoral race, and not at all attentive to council races, were 22 points more likely to abstain than those voters who were attentive to council races, but not the mayoral race. A similar pattern exists for the candidate contact variables, as being contacted by a mayoral candidate makes one 7 points more likely to roll-off than being contacted by a council candidate only. Results also reveal that the presence of an incumbent decreases the likelihood of roll-off (a potential cause of this pattern is name recognition, as voters may use this information in lieu of a partisan heuristic).

Interestingly, and in contrast with research on American state elections (Froonjian 2013), the competitiveness of a ward race displays no relationship with roll-off. This null finding could suggest that respondents have a poor understanding of the competitive circumstances in their ward, or simply that this factor has no bearing upon their roll-off decision. Future research is required to determine the reason for this result, which runs counter to our established understanding of the relationship between competitiveness, abstention, and roll-off.

## **Discussion**

This study has been the first examination of roll-off in a municipality to employ individual-level survey data, and has shed light on several factors that have not yet been considered in the roll-off literature. In doing so, it has identified a series of variables related to abstention that also affect roll-off, including age, ethnicity, political interest and the belief that voting is a duty, rather than a choice. These well-known sociodemographic and attitudinal correlates of voter turnout thus contribute to our understanding of municipal roll-off. At the same time, several factors have been identified that affect roll-off, but not turnout. Home ownership, the length of time lived in the city, contact with politicians, and the presence of a ward incumbent all display either a weak or no relationship with turnout, but have a significant impact upon roll-off. Studying these variables in relation to traditional turnout variables alone, therefore, misses the very real effect that these factors have upon the decision-making processes of electors. Another particularly important product of the above analysis is that it highlights the importance of context and the experiences of individual electors when explaining roll-off patterns. The individual-level nature of the TES has allowed for the identification of several contextual factors related to roll-off, which have not previously been considered by municipal scholars.

This article makes several noteworthy contributions to the literature on ballot roll-off. First, the TES confirms findings from the United States that show that ethnicity is an important predictor of ballot roll-off. Such a finding suggests that the “gap” in race-based participation rates is greater than previously understood in the Canadian literature; not only do ethnic minorities have a relatively low rate of participation, but when they do turn out, they are less likely than their White counterparts to vote in down-ballot races. The second finding worthy of further discussion is the important role that community attachment plays. Home ownership and length of tenure have important effects upon how fully voters choose to participate in the electoral

process. Such a result suggests that scholars should seek to identify other factors that have effects unique to the local level of government, as well as to study, in more detail, the effects of these variables upon other aspects of municipal politics, including policy, or fundraising. Finally, this study's results point to the importance of considering the context in which electors operate. The experiences of voters can be shaped by ward or individual-level characteristics, and these experiences can have a profound effect on participation in different portions of the ballot.

As is the case with all elections, the 2014 Toronto election was unique. The turnout rate was relatively high for a municipal election, the contest was nonpartisan in nature and featured a particularly polarizing candidate, the city has a "weak mayor" system, and Toronto is the fourth most populous city in North America. That said, there is no obvious reason to expect that the patterns observed above are inapplicable to other municipalities in Canada and elsewhere, particularly in nonpartisan settings, where council races tend to be relatively low-information affairs and where a "straight-ticket" option is not available as a shortcut for voters. Nevertheless, future research is required to confirm the applicability of this study's findings to other settings, as well as to continue to develop our understanding of voting behavior at the municipal level more generally.

Relatedly, the results of this study point to some important avenues for further exploration. TES data suggest that council voters are older and less likely to be minorities or women than are mayoral voters, meaning that the mayor has a different constituency than do councillors. Patterns of roll-off are nonrandom, and the effects of this pattern for representation and policy outcomes should be considered. There is evidence that the policy preferences of voters are no different from those of abstainers in Canadian federal elections (Rubenson et al. 2007), but the question of whether the ideology of those individuals who "roll-off" in the context of (simultaneous) municipal elections differs from those who do not needs to be considered in greater detail.<sup>18</sup> The results above also suggest that greater attention should be paid to the experiences and perceptions of individual voters when explaining roll-off. Individual-level data have shown that contact with politicians and attentiveness affect rates of roll-off. Other similar factors, such as discussing mayoral and/or council politics with friends or family, or seeing advertisements for different levels of races may also have significant effects, while contextual factors, such as the ethnicity or gender of candidates or incumbents may also have differential effects upon various groups of electors.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, there is a great deal of research that must be conducted before our understanding of the correlates of roll-off will begin to rival that of turnout.

## Appendix A

### Survey Questions

Turnout and vote choice. Did you vote in this election? (Yes/No).<sup>\*</sup> Which mayoral candidate did you vote for? (Provided with list of options including a “did not vote” option).<sup>\*</sup> Which city council candidate did you vote for? (Provided with list of options, including a “did not vote” option).<sup>\*</sup>

Sociodemographic characteristics. In what year were you born? (Coded as over 50 = 1, 50 and under = 0). What was your annual household income last year, before taxes? (Coded as high income, if above median, = 1, low income = 0). What is the highest level of education that you have completed? (Coded as 1 if University or professional degree, 0 if less). What is your ethnicity? (Coded as 1 if of non-European ancestry, 0 if European). Were you born in Canada? (Coded as 0 if born in Canada, 1 if born outside of Canada). What is your gender? (Coded as 1 if female, 0 if male). In what part of the city do you live? (North York, Scarborough, Etobicoke, Toronto)

Attitudinal variables. How interested are you in municipal politics? (0 = not at all interested . . . 1 = very interested). For you personally, is voting first and foremost a duty or a choice at the municipal level? (duty = 1, choice = 0). Knowledge is based upon an index (alpha = .65) of the following questions: Do you know the name of the Mayor of Toronto prior to Rob Ford?<sup>\*</sup> Do you know the name of the Governor General of Canada? Do you know the name of the Finance Minister of Canada?<sup>\*</sup> Do you know the name of the leader of the New Democratic Party of Ontario?<sup>\*</sup>

Attachment to community. Do you or someone else in your household own your home? (1 = yes, 0 = no). How long have you lived in Toronto? (1 if more than 10 years, 0 if 10 years or less)

Election specific variables. On a scale of 0 to 10, how much attention did you pay to (1) the mayoral election campaign? (2) the campaign for city council in your ward? (0 = none . . . 1 = a lot).<sup>\*</sup> During the campaign, were you contacted by, or on behalf of, any mayoral candidates? (yes = 1, no = 0). During the campaign, were you contacted by, or on behalf of, any city council candidates? (yes = 1, no = 0).<sup>\*</sup>

Quality control question: To ensure that your browser is downloading the content of this survey correctly, please select option “four” below.

*Ideology: Economic conservatism index:* Do you agree or disagree with the following statements: (1) Government should leave it entirely up to the private sector to create jobs,\* (2) Government should see to it that everyone has a decent standard of living,\* (3) More should be done to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor.\*

*Social conservatism index:* Do you agree or disagree with the following statements: (1) same-sex marriage rights are a good thing,\* (2) Society would be better off if fewer women worked outside the home,\* (3) Canada should admit more immigrants.\*

\*Those questions asked in the postelection questionnaire are denoted with an asterisk. All others were measures in the preelection questionnaire.

## Appendix B

### Descriptive Statistics.

	Average	SD	Minimum	Maximum	<i>n</i>
<b>Abstention</b>					
Abstention from mayoral election	0.17	0.38	0	1	1,585
Abstention from ward election	0.23	0.42	0	1	1,585
Ballot roll-off	0.07	0.26	0	1	1,313
<b>Sociodemographic characteristics</b>					
Over 50	0.55	0.50	0	1	1,585
High income	0.51	0.50	0	1	1,585
University educated	0.60	0.49	0	1	1,585
Ethnic minority	0.29	0.45	0	1	1,585
Female	0.39	0.49	0	1	1,585
Downtown	0.28	0.45	0	1	1,585
<b>Attitudinal variables</b>					
Interest in municipal politics	0.64	0.27	0	1	1,585
Voting in municipal elections is a duty	0.66	0.47	0	1	1,585
General political knowledge	0.68	0.31	0	1	1,585
<b>Attachment to community</b>					
Home owner	0.74	0.44	0	1	1,585
Lived in Toronto > 10 years	0.84	0.37	0	1	1,585

(continued)

## Appendix B (continued)

	Average	SD	Minimum	Maximum	<i>n</i>
Election specific variables					
Attention to mayoral contest	0.76	0.23	0	1	1,585
Attention to ward contest	0.55	0.28	0	1	1,585
Attention to mayoral contest-attention to ward contest	0.61	0.12	0.25	1	1,585
Contacted by mayoral candidate	0.58	0.49	0	1	1,585
Contacted by ward candidate	0.58	0.49	0	1	1,585
Contacted by mayoral candidate-contacted by ward candidate	0.50	0.24	0	1	1,585
Competitiveness (distance in vote share between 1st and 2nd place candidates)	0.63	0.22	0.19	0.99	1,585
Incumbent present	0.81	0.40	0	1	1,585

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### Notes

1. School board elections were contested at the same time, though due to data availability, the focus here is upon mayoral and ward races only.
2. The Ford brothers both have controversial and high-profile histories. Rob (the incumbent mayor) was a highly polarizing and divisive figure throughout his entire career, thanks to a gaffe-prone public persona, highly ideological politics, personal difficulties (including chronic substance abuse), a hostile relationship with the media, allegations and investigations of conflict of interest, and frequent embarrassing, racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic/transphobic public remarks (*CBC News* 2013, 2014; Dale 2013; Mahoney 2012). Doug took Rob's

place on the ballot on the nomination deadline date after Rob was diagnosed with cancer, and withdrew from the mayoral race to seek (and eventually win) a council seat instead. Doug was previously a municipal councillor, and was himself controversial and polarizing. He faced stiff criticism during the campaign for public comments laced with bigotry, including charges of misogyny and anti-Semitism, as well as allegations of conflict of interest and narcotics dealing in his youth (Dale 2014; Dale and Pagliaro 2014; Doolittle and McArthur 2014).

3. Come election day, Tory was the victor, winning 40.3% of the vote, just over six and a half points ahead of Ford, and over 17 points better than Chow.
4. Voter turnout rates in these elections were 39.3% in 2006 and 50.6% in 2010.
5. While the matter is outside of the purview of this article, it is conceivable that the increase in turnout is associated with an increase in roll-off. When turnout increases, by definition, it means that new voters have been brought to the ballot box, and those individuals drawn to participate in the mayoral election may conceivably be relatively unlikely to vote in down-ballot races. Similarly, the roll-off patterns of specific groups within the population may be election specific. For example, the Ford brothers have a history of making racist remarks, and their behavior could have drawn many infrequent ethnic-minority voters to the polls. Such voters might reasonably be expected to have relatively high rates of roll-off, if indeed they were attracted to the mayoral race, in particular. While these possibilities cannot be tested without panel data (which are unavailable here), they are nevertheless worthy of future examination.
6. The research that comes the closest to studying this phenomenon is a study by Dostie-Goulet et al. (2012), who identify a series of factors associated with voting in federal elections, but abstaining at the municipal level. These elections did not occur simultaneously, however, so “selective abstention,” as the authors refer to it, is qualitatively different from ballot roll-off.
7. In short, the rational choice theory suggests that an elector will vote if the benefits expected from voting are greater than the expected costs. However, given that the chances of one’s vote having a decisive effect upon an election is miniscule, it might be argued that the very act of voting is irrational. The “duty” variable has been proposed as a way of explaining this failure of the rational choice model.
8. Suburban voters have different priorities and preferences than their urban counterparts, and the urban/suburban divide is a major driver of support in Toronto municipal elections (see McGregor, Moore, and Stephenson 2016). Doug Ford, in particular, performed very poorly downtown, as compared with in the periphery of the city.
9. A cut-off point of 10 years was chosen based upon the format of the survey question used to operationalize this variable.
10. Attentiveness might also be grouped with the attitudinal variables. However, given that this factor may be influenced by ward-specific factors, it is grouped here with the other contextual factors.
11. This variable is based upon the difference in vote share of the top two candidates in each council race. These differences range from 1.2 percentage points

in Ward 16 to 80.6 points in Ward 22. The variable has been recoded so that it has a theoretical range of 0 (where one candidate receives 100% of the vote) to 1 (where the top two candidates are tied). Thus, in Ward 16 (which was won by 1.2 points), the variable has a value of 0.988, and in Ward 22 (where the gap was 80.6 points), it has a value of 0.194.

An alternative measure of competitiveness, based upon vote fractionalization (see Rae 1968), produces the same results as those for the competitiveness measure described above. Thus, the null results observed for the competitiveness variable in all models is not due simply to the operationalization of this variable.

12. The actual turnout rate from the election (54.7%) is lower than the reported turnout rate among survey respondents (roughly 83%). Such a discrepancy is common in election studies and is due to at least two possible causes. First, social desirability pressures may lead some nonvoting respondents to claim that they had voted. Second, given the voluntary nature of the Toronto Election Study (TES), many nonvoters (who presumably had relatively little interest in politics) may simply have opted not to complete the survey. As with all Canadian elections, there is no way to validate turnout responses; thus, there is no way to determine the extent to which respondents are being truthful. That said, social desirability pressures (which may lead nonvoters to claim they voted) are relatively weak in online surveys (Kreuter, Presser, and Tourangeau 2008), which may suggest that much of this discrepancy is due to the self-selection of participants. In addition, it might be argued that the measure of “duty” can be interpreted as a proxy for social desirability—any respondents wishing to portray themselves in a positive light might be expected to express the view that voting is a duty, rather than a choice. The inclusion of this variable may, therefore, serve as a control for social desirability, thus producing unbiased estimates for the other variables. Still, it is important to recognize that some respondents may report voting when they did not and that there may be a nonrandom relationship between some of the variables included in this study’s models and such misreporting (even after controlling for a sense of duty). It may, for example, be the case that some groups of individuals are more susceptible to social desirability pressures than are others, which may introduce some bias into the turnout analysis. That said, the primary focus of this study is to determine patterns of roll-off, and there is no reason to expect social desirability to affect responses to mayoral and council turnout differently. Accordingly, misreporting as a result of social desirability pressures does not pose a significant issue here.
13. The first wave was administered from September 19 until October 26, while the second was administered from October 28 until November 3.
14. As a quality control measure, the TES included a question to ensure that respondents were answering questions seriously (respondents were reimbursed for their participation in the TES). The 3.1% of respondents who “failed” this question are excluded from our analysis.
15. The figure of 7.4% represents 97 respondents. For analytical purposes, it is fortunate that the rate of roll-off predicted by individual-level data is higher than that

stemming from aggregate data. A lower rate of roll-off would mean that fewer survey respondents would fall in this category, meaning that we would have less statistical leverage on the data.

16. It is also consistent with TES indicators of attentiveness to the mayoral and council contests. On a scale of 0 to 10, the average attentiveness score for the mayoral election was 7.5, while this figure is only 5.4 for the council elections (this difference is significant at  $p < .001$ ).
17. Marginal effects are calculated while leaving the values of all other variables unchanged.
18. A cursory analysis of TES data (results not shown, but available from the author) suggests that those individuals who rolled-off were, in fact, more ideologically conservative than those who did not. Indices for social and economic conservatism were created and, for both measures, those voters who rolled-off were relatively right-wing ( $p < .05$  for both measures). Given the unique nature of this election (which included the highly polarizing Doug Ford), however, care must be taken when attempting to generalize about this particular trend. Turnout in the election was very high, and Doug Ford (and his brother Rob) clearly polarized the electorate. Ford supporters were disproportionately more likely to roll-off than were those voters who supported the other candidates ( $p = .07$ ). Given that he was clearly a conservative candidate, such a pattern may account for the observed ideological differences between those who roll-off and those who do not. The question remains, however, whether this trend holds elsewhere, or whether Ford attracted voters who might not have voted at all, were it not for his presence. If a voter is drawn to the voting booth with the aim of supporting a particular mayoral candidate (like the polarizing Ford), it stands to reason that such voters would be relatively likely to roll-off. A full analysis of this matter is out of the purview of this article. Nevertheless, further work is required to determine whether ideological differences exist in other municipal settings with simultaneous elections.
19. An analysis of TES data (not shown here, but available from the author) suggests that the race of an incumbent does have a relationship with roll-off rates among minority voters. In wards with a visible minority incumbent, there is no difference between the roll-off rates of minority and White voters. However, when the incumbent is White, minorities are relatively likely to roll-off ( $p < .01$ ). There is no similar effect observed for females, however, who are more likely than men to roll-off, regardless of the gender of the incumbent. Although a complete analysis of this phenomenon is outside of the purview of this article, this is an area of research ripe for future examination (such research might take into account the ethnicity and gender not only of incumbents, but of all candidates contesting ward races).

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