

Canadians Have a Choice:

The Decisions Behind the Votes in the Next Federal Election

Pressing social issues have the attention of many Canadians, writes **Nick Istvanffy**. How will the next election make an impact on our society's well-being? SPARC BC plans to keep you informed.

CANADA'S GOVERNING POLITICAL PARTY currently holds a minority of the seats in the House of Commons, which means that it a non-confidence vote could result in an election on very short notice. Of course, it could also be months or even years before an election occurs. But historically, minority governments in Canada have been short-lived and it is likely that Canadians will return to the polls sometime in 2007—potentially very soon.

In previous elections, SPARC BC has produced a series of papers on social issues, *Canada Votes*, as a way to build awareness and support for policies. Previous editions of *Canada Votes* have explored topics such as accessibility, housing, social transfers, child poverty, cities and infrastructure, population health, and taxation. The *Canada Votes* papers were used as a reference tool to help citizens learn more about particular issues and engage in the deliberative processes of democracy. Each paper also included suggestions for more information and questions that individuals could ask their candidates in order to make more informed voting choices.

Every election is important, as each determines the overall direction of the country for as

many as five years into the future. A majority government is under no obligation to return to the polls, and can effect major changes in social policies and programming over that time. Though minority governments are usually short-lived, and tend to compromise with other parties, the relative balance of power in a minority situation can have a significant impact on policies and social outcomes for citizens.

Currently, Canadians in most ridings have a choice between four major parties, as well as a number of smaller parties who are striving to have an impact. Each of the parties takes a significantly different view on the best options for the future of Canada, and it is essential for citizens to make the most informed choices possible when selecting a representative. The coming election will be a crucial decision point for many of the problems facing Canadians, and it will be important to work hard to ensure that voting decisions are informed and careful.

To prepare for the coming election, SPARC BC is building connections to a number of other provincial and national organizations. The partnerships will help to expand the impact and relevance of the *Canada Votes* papers, and will help

ensure that important issues are explored in the course of the campaign. SPARC BC is also planning to develop a model for an ‘all-candidates forum’, in which candidates would engage with community members to explore some of the key issues. The forum will be presented in partnership with partner organizations, and the format will be made available to any interested community agencies or groups.

Although new issues continually arise, and others become less important over time, in recent years some of the most pressing social problems have not been addressed in any meaningful way, and in fact have become worse. SPARC BC has selected a range of topics for the coming *Canada Votes* papers, and these will reflect some of the issues that have arisen, but will also include many of the urgent social issues that have not yet been addressed.

Issues that will be explored in the next version of the *Canada Votes* papers include:

- Housing and affordable housing
- The widening gap between high and low incomes
- Immigration and social challenges facing immigrants
- Issues facing Aboriginal communities, and recent cuts to funding
- The growing need for child care, and rising child poverty
- The social determinants of health and population health

- Women and labour force participation, and recent cuts to support women’s advocacy
- Cuts to research and advocacy at the federal level
- Youth issues
- Challenges facing the voluntary sector
- Disability issues and cuts to the national advocacy budget

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Each of the papers will include descriptions and background information about the issues, suggested questions that concerned citizens can ask their candidates, and a list of places people can look for more information. The papers will be available electronically, as well as printed copies.

Provincial and national partners will write many of these papers, and all of the papers will be circulated as widely as possible once an election begins. It will be important for citizens across the country to have the opportunity to determine the positions of the various parties on these issues, and therefore to make the most informed choices possible when voting. ■

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