



# Variation in Turnout By Alberta Electoral Division

**2008 report**

September 2008



# 1. Background and Introduction

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This report updates the 2007 report, *Variation in Turnout by Alberta Electoral Division*.<sup>1</sup>

The 2007 report examined one aspect of the voter turnout - the closeness of the race in each electoral division over the previous four provincial elections. This report adds the data from 2008 provincial elections to the 2007 report, and compares the 2008 findings to the previous four elections (1993-2004). Elections Alberta supplied the 2008 provincial elections data to Leger Marketing for analysis.

The 2008 report is organized as follows:

- ✓ Voter Turnout in Recent elections
  - Voter Turnout and Competitiveness
    - Lowest Voter Turnout
    - Highest Voter Turnout
    - Highest and Lowest Proportional Plurality
    - Persistence of Low Voter Turnout
    - Persistence of High Voter Turnout
- ✓ Conclusion

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<sup>1</sup> The 2007 report was submitted to Elections Alberta by PRA Inc.

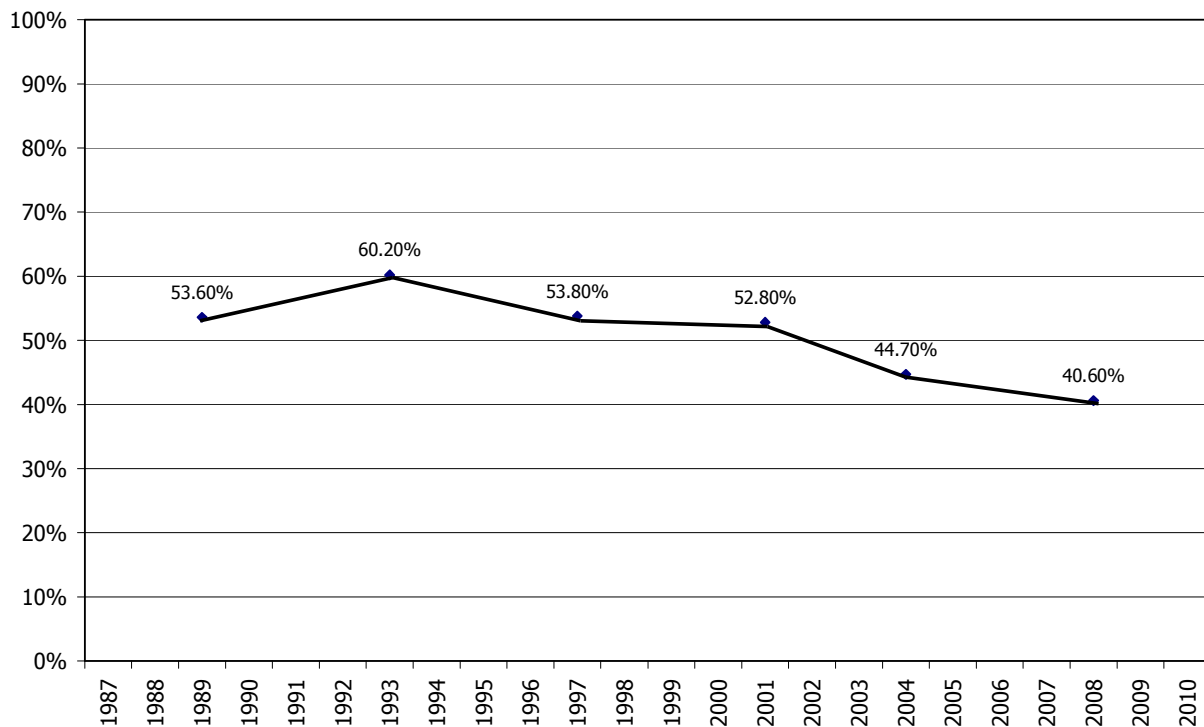
## Voter Turnout in Recent Elections

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Figure 1 shows the voter turnout for the last six provincial elections. In 2008, voter turnout dropped to 40.6% from 44.7% in the 2004 elections.

While up slightly in 1993 from 1989, voter turnout has decreased incrementally in subsequent election years.

**Fig. 1: Voter Turnout in Alberta Provincial Elections 1989-2008**



## **Voter Turnout and Competitiveness**

### **2007 report findings:**

Examining the last four provincial elections (1993-2004), the theory of proportional plurality<sup>2</sup> holds true for some elections, but not for others. In 1993, voter turnout was at its highest and the proportional plurality was at its lowest.<sup>3</sup> However, in subsequent elections there does not appear to be a link between proportional plurality and voter turnout for the province as a whole.

### **2008 report findings:**

In 2008 elections, there is a slight rise in the proportional plurality from 2004 and a decrease in voter turnout. It is too early to say with any certainty if there is a link emerging between proportional plurality and voter turnout.

**Table 1: Average Voter Turnout Versus Average Proportional Plurality 1993 – 2008**

| <b>Election</b> | <b>Average proportional plurality</b> | <b>Voter turnout</b> |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 2008            | 28.2%                                 | 40.6%                |
| 2004            | 23.6%                                 | 44.7%                |
| 2001            | 35.6%                                 | 52.8%                |
| 1997            | 23.1%                                 | 53.8%                |
| 1993            | 18.8%                                 | 60.2%                |

<sup>2</sup> Proportional Plurality: difference between the number of votes won by the winning candidate and their nearest rival, expressed as a percentage of the total votes cast for all candidates of the constituency. If the proportional plurality is correct, one would expect that when provincial race is tighter (i.e. has a lower average proportional plurality), the turnout will be higher and when the race is not close, the turnout will be lower.

<sup>3</sup> This anomalous voter turnout in 1993 may be explained by the closely fought Progressive Conservative Party's leadership race that saw Ralph Klein elected as leader in December 1992. A provincial election followed shortly after that (June 1993). Although speculative, the general interest in the leadership race and new leader may have increased voter turnout. The election was more closely fought than most others have been in the province, with the Liberals taking 32 seats (quadruple the 8 they had in 1989).

## **Lowest Voter Turnout**

### **2007 report findings:**

In 2004, in the 10 divisions with the lowest voter turnout (average 31.4%), the average proportional plurality was 30.7%. This means that the gap between the winning candidate and the second place candidate was large, representing *almost* one-third of the votes cast.

### **2008 report findings:**

In 2008, in the 10 divisions with the lowest voter turnout (average 28.1%), the average proportional plurality was 37.1%. The gap between the winning candidate and the second place candidate represented *more* than one-third of the votes cast.

**Table 2: Average Voter Turnout Versus Average Proportional Plurality  
- 10 Lowest Voter Turnout Alberta Divisions 1993 – 2008 -**

| <b>Election</b> | <b>Average proportional plurality</b> | <b>Average voter turnout</b> |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 2008            | 37.1%                                 | 28.1%                        |
| 2004            | 30.7%                                 | 31.4%                        |
| 2001            | 39.5%                                 | 40.7%                        |
| 1997            | 24.9%                                 | 40.6%                        |
| 1993            | 21.0%                                 | 49.9%                        |

Compared to the 2004 elections, the average turnout for the 10 lowest turnout divisions has slightly fallen while at the same time the average proportional plurality has increased. Hence, there appears to be a continuation of a link between voter turnout and the average proportional plurality in the top 10 electoral divisions in terms of low voter turnout.

A similar pattern has existed over the previous five elections (1993-2008) - lower plurality translating into higher voter turnout and vice versa. The only exception is the 2001 election in which the turnout was similar to 1997 but the proportional plurality was considerably higher.

## Proportional Plurality among the 10 Lowest Voter Turnout Divisions

Although *average* proportional plurality (closeness of the race) does seem to be related to voter turnout, there is a high variation in proportional plurality within these ten divisions. In 2008, the proportional plurality in the 10 electoral divisions with the lowest voter turnout ranged from 8% to 64% (in 2004, the range was from 4% to 49%).

The two electoral divisions with the lowest proportional plurality were substantially different from the electoral divisions in that respect (under 10% plurality vs. 35% or more for other areas) and these two areas also experienced highest voter turnout.

| <b>Election-2008<br/>Electoral Division</b> | <b>Turnout</b> | <b>Plurality %</b> |
|---|----------------|--------------------|
| Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo                  | 21.51%         | 38.74%             |
| Lesser Slave Lake                           | 26.18%         | 43.82%             |
| Calgary-Cross                               | 27.59%         | 34.58%             |
| Grande Prairie-Wapiti                       | 28.02%         | 49.79%             |
| Peace River                                 | 28.19%         | 39.92%             |
| Bonnyville-Cold Lake                        | 29.15%         | 63.65%             |
| Red Deer-North                              | 29.54%         | 36.19%             |
| Grande Prairie-Smoky                        | 29.77%         | 45.86%             |
| Calgary-Buffalo                             | 30.39%         | 9.98%              |
| Calgary-Montrose                            | 30.51%         | 8.09%              |

## **Highest Voter Turnout**

### **2007 report findings:**

In 2004, the average proportional plurality in the 10 electoral divisions with the highest voter turnout (average 55.8%) was 18.6%.

### **2008 report findings:**

In 2008, the average proportional plurality in the 10 electoral divisions with the highest voter turnout (average 50.2%) was 38.2%.

**Table 3: Average Voter Turnout Versus Average Proportional Plurality  
- 10 Highest Voter Turnout Alberta Divisions 1993 – 2008 -**

| <b>Election</b> | <b>Average proportional plurality</b> | <b>Average voter turnout</b> |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 2008            | 38.2%                                 | 50.2%                        |
| 2004            | 18.6%                                 | 55.8%                        |
| 2001            | 32.5%                                 | 62.6%                        |
| 1997            | 18.7%                                 | 62.5%                        |
| 1993            | 20.4%                                 | 68.6%                        |

The 2008 election results are in contrast to the results of 2004. In 2004, the plurality was 18.6% (average turnout of 55.8%) whereas in 2008, the plurality increased to 38.2% without a proportionate change in the turnout (average 50.2).

While in the divisions with the lowest plurality the closeness of the race appears to affect the voter turnout, the link between voter turnout and proportional plurality in the 10 voter divisions with the highest turnout is not as consistent.

### **Proportional Plurality among the Top Highest Voter Turnout Divisions**

As in the case of the lowest turnout divisions, the proportional plurality in the electoral divisions with high voter turnout varies substantially. In 2008, the proportional plurality in these divisions ranged from 16% to 69% (in 2004, it ranged from 3% to 44%).

| <b>Election-2008<br/>Electoral Division</b> | <b>Turnout</b> | <b>Plurality %</b> |
|---|----------------|--------------------|
| Edmonton-Riverview                          | 52.53%         | 15.58%             |
| Dunvegan-Central Peace                      | 52.43%         | 22.67%             |
| Sherwood Park                               | 52.14%         | 37.08%             |
| Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville                | 51.87%         | 68.73%             |
| Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills                   | 49.75%         | 43.04%             |
| Calgary-Varsity                             | 49.74%         | 10.65%             |
| Battle River-Wainwright                     | 48.76%         | 66.14%             |
| Lac La Biche-St. Paul                       | 48.48%         | 53.51%             |
| Drayton Valley-Calmar                       | 48.41%         | 40.15%             |
| Edmonton-Whitemud                           | 48.39%         | 24.53%             |

## **Highest and Lowest Proportional Plurality**

In this section, the electoral divisions with the highest and lowest plurality are examined to see if the divisions with lowest plurality have highest voter turnouts and conversely whether the divisions with highest proportional plurality have the lowest turnouts.

Table 4 illustrates the average plurality and turnout for the 10 divisions with the *lowest* plurality in the previous five provincial elections.

### **2007 report findings:**

In the last four elections (1993-2004), in the 10 electoral divisions with the lowest proportional plurality the difference between the first and second place candidates averaged less than 5% of all the votes cast. In 2004, the turnout in the 10 divisions with the lowest proportional plurality (46.2%) is just two percentage points higher than the provincial turnout (44.7%) overall.

### **2008 report findings:**

Similar to the findings from 2004 elections, the difference between the first and second place candidates in 2008 averaged less than 5% of the entire votes cast. The average turnout of the lowest plurality divisions (40.9%) in 2008 is the same as the provincial average (40.6%).

**Table 4: Average Voter Turnout Versus Average Proportional Plurality  
-10 Lowest Plurality Alberta Divisions 1993 – 2008 -**

| Election | Average proportional plurality | Average voter turnout      |          |
|----------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------|
|          |                                | 10 low plurality divisions | Province |
| 2008     | 3.1%                           | 40.9%                      | 40.6%    |
| 2004     | 2.6%                           | 46.2%                      | 44.7%    |
| 2001     | 3.7%                           | 52.8%                      | 52.8%    |
| 1997     | 4.6%                           | 54.6%                      | 53.8%    |
| 1993     | 2.9%                           | 56.6%                      | 60.2%    |

The average voter turnout in the 10 divisions with the closest races continues to be similar to that of the provincial turnout in each of the past five elections (1993-2008). If there was a strong link between closeness of the race (proportional plurality) and voter turnout, we would expect the turnout in the low plurality divisions to be higher than the provincial average.



Table 5 illustrates the average plurality and turnout for the 10 divisions with the *highest* plurality in the previous five provincial elections.

**2007 report findings:**

The voter turnout in the ten divisions with the highest plurality in 2004 varies little from that of the province overall (43.3% vs. 44.7% overall).

**2008 report findings:**

Similar to the findings of 2004 election, there is only slight variation in the turnout in the highest plurality divisions compared to that of the province overall (43.4% vs. 40.6% overall).

**Table 5: Average Voter Turnout Versus Average Proportional Plurality  
-10 Highest Plurality Alberta Divisions 1993 – 2008 -**

| Election | Average proportional plurality | Average voter turnout       |          |
|----------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|
|          |                                | 10 high plurality divisions | Province |
| 2008     | 60.5%                          | 43.4%                       | 40.6%    |
| 2004     | 47.4%                          | 43.3%                       | 44.7%    |
| 2001     | 62.6%                          | 55.0%                       | 52.8%    |
| 1997     | 52.9%                          | 52.8%                       | 53.8%    |
| 1993     | 45.7%                          | 62.0%                       | 60.2%    |

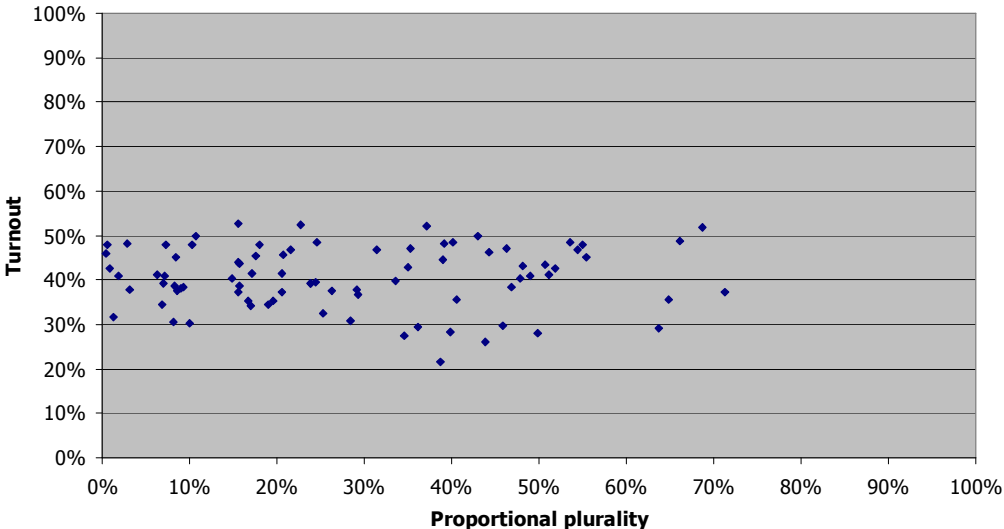
There are no substantial differences between the voter turnout in the divisions with the highest proportional plurality and the province overall. If plurality was a strong factor, we would expect the turnout in the high plurality divisions to be lower than the provincial average.

**Relationship between Proportional Plurality and Voter Turnout**

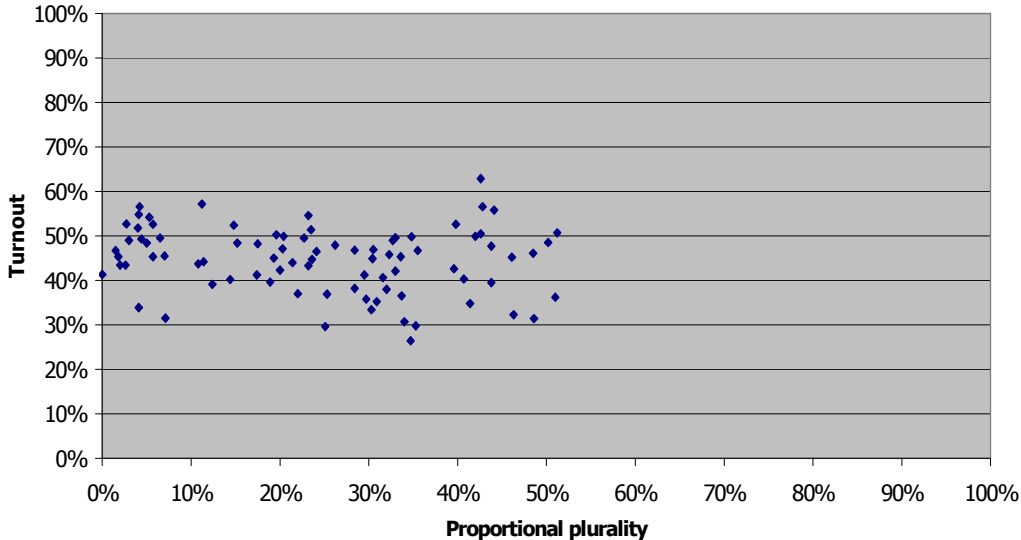
Figures 2 through 6 show the voter turnout by proportional plurality in each of Alberta’s 83 electoral divisions over the past five provincial elections (1993-2008).

Using correlation analysis, there was no strong correlation found in the 2008 elections between the turnout in an electoral division and the proportional plurality (resultant correlation factor of 0.006). This is consistent with the findings of the previous four elections in Alberta.

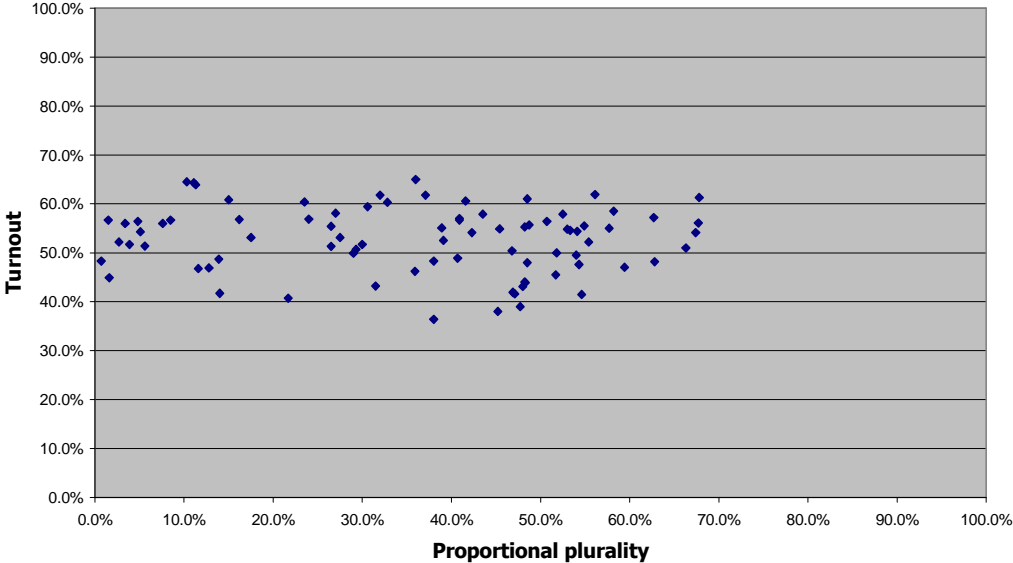
**Fig. 2: Proportional plurality and voter turnout by electoral division: Alberta 2008**



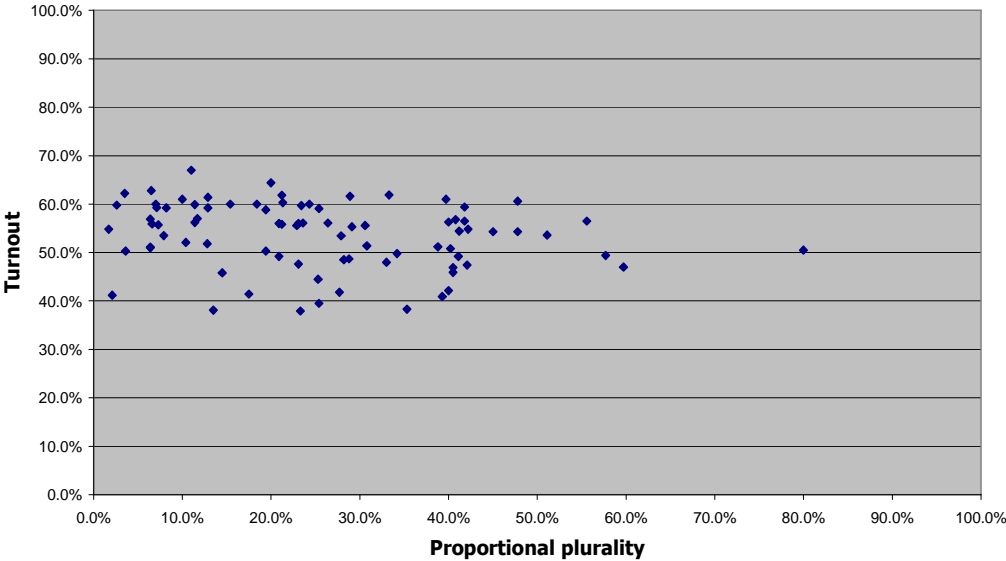
**Fig. 3: Proportional plurality and voter turnout by electoral division: Alberta 2004**



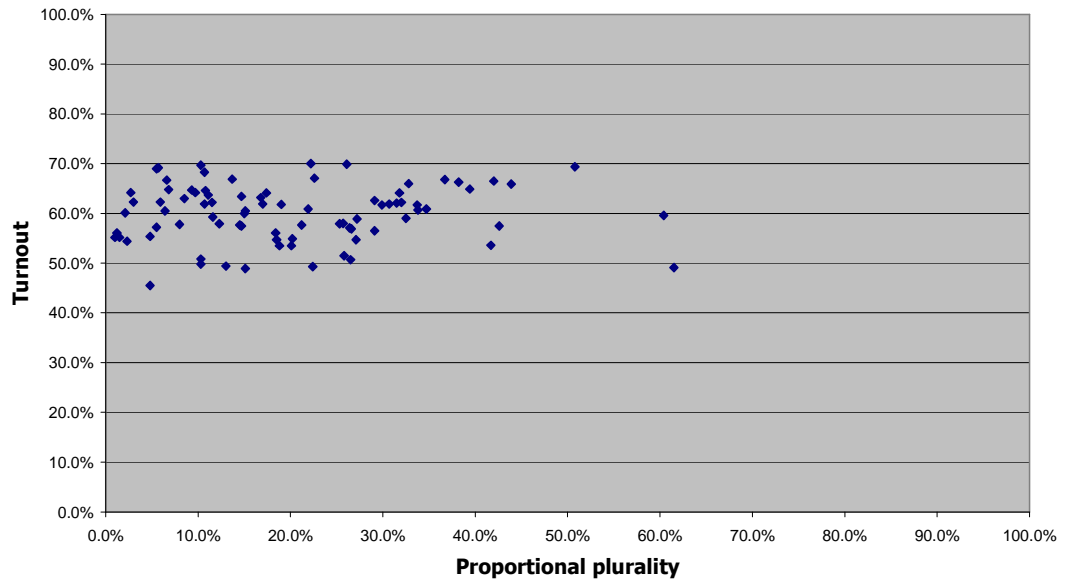
**Fig. 4: Proportional plurality and voter turnout by electoral division: Alberta 2001**



**Fig. 5: Proportional plurality and turnout by electoral division: Alberta 1997**



**Fig. 6: Turnout and proportional plurality by electoral division: Alberta 1993**



## **Persistence of Low Voter Turnout**

The persistence of low voter turnout in divisions from one election to the next is shown in Table 6.

### **2007 report findings:**

The ten electoral divisions with the lowest voter turnout are fairly consistent, although not uniform, from one election to the next, with five of the divisions with the lowest turnout in the 2004 elections also appearing in the top 10 rankings for the previous three elections. These are Calgary-Montrose, Calgary-Cross, Peace River, Calgary-Buffalo, and Calgary-McCall.<sup>4</sup>

Several other divisions have also consistently been in the top 10 electoral divisions for low voter turnout for three of the last four elections (1993-2004): Red Deer-North; Calgary-Fort and Calgary-East.

### **2008 report findings:**

Except for Grand Prairie-Smoky, all other nine divisions with the lowest turnout for 2008 also appear in the rankings of ten lowest voter turnout divisions in the previous four elections. The divisions in 2008 that appear on all five of the previous five year lowest voter turnout rankings are: Calgary-Cross; Peace River; Calgary-Buffalo; and Calgary-Montrose. The only division which appeared on the list throughout 1993 to 2004 but does not appear in 2008 is Calgary-McCall.

The divisions that have consistently been in the top 10 electoral divisions for low voter turnout for four out of five elections are: Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo/ Fort McMurray; Red Deer-North; and Calgary-McCall.

**Table 6: 10 Lowest Voter Turnout in Alberta Electoral Divisions by Election Year**

| <b>Electoral division</b>                | <b>2008</b> | <b>2004</b> | <b>2001</b> | <b>1997</b> | <b>1993</b> |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo/Fort McMurray | X           | X           | X           |             | X           |
| Lesser Slave Lake                        | X           | X           |             | X           |             |
| Calgary-Cross                            | X           | X           | X           | X           | X           |
| Grande Prairie-Wapiti                    | X           |             |             |             |             |
| Peace River                              | X           | X           | X           | X           | X           |
| Bonnyville-Cold Lake                     | X           | X           |             |             |             |
| Red Deer-North                           | X           |             | X           | X           | X           |
| Grande Prairie-Smoky                     | X           |             |             |             |             |
| Calgary-Buffalo                          | X           | X           | X           | X           | X           |
| Calgary-Montrose                         | X           | X           | X           | X           | X           |
| Calgary-Fort                             |             | X           | X           | X           |             |
| Calgary-McCall                           |             | X           | X           | X           | X           |
| Calgary-Hays                             |             | X           |             |             |             |
| Calgary-East                             |             |             | X           | X           | X           |
| Livingstone-Macleod                      |             |             | X           | X           |             |
| Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan             |             |             |             | X           |             |
| Calgary-Mountain View                    |             |             |             |             | X           |
| Edmonton-Norwood                         |             |             |             |             | X           |

<sup>4</sup> The names of the Divisions are the same; the geography may have changed from election to election.

There continues to be consistency from one election to the next, although the same divisions may not be on the list every year.

## **Persistence of High Voter Turnout**

The persistence of high voter turnout in divisions from one election to the next is shown in Table 7.

### **2007 report findings:**

Only one division appears in the rankings for all four elections: Olds-Didsbury. The divisions of Edmonton-Riverview, Edmonton-Gold Bar, St. Albert, Edmonton-Whitemud, Barrhead-Westlock, and Vegreville-Viking have appeared among the top 10 high voter turnout divisions in three of the last four elections.<sup>5</sup>

### **2008 report findings:**

Olds-Didsbury is the only division that consistently appears in the ranking for previous elections (1993-2008) and only the division of Edmonton-Riverview has appeared among the top 10 high voter turnout divisions in four of the last five elections. Sherwood Park appears among the highest voter turnout divisions for the three most recent elections (2001-2008).

**Table 6: 10 Highest Voter Turnout in Alberta Electoral Divisions by Election Year**

| <b>Electoral division</b>        | <b>2008</b> | <b>2004</b> | <b>2001</b> | <b>1997</b> | <b>1993</b> |
|----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Edmonton-Riverview               | X           | X           | X           | X           |             |
| Dunvegan-Central Peace           | X           | X           |             |             |             |
| Sherwood Park                    | X           | X           | X           |             |             |
| Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville     | X           |             |             |             |             |
| Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills*       | X           | X           | X           | X           | X           |
| Calgary-Varsity                  | X           | X           |             |             |             |
| Battle River-Wainwright          | X           |             |             |             |             |
| Lac La Biche-St. Paul            | X           |             |             | X           |             |
| Drayton Valley-Calmar            | X           |             | X           | X           |             |
| Edmonton-Whitemud                | X           | X           |             | X           | X           |
| Edmonton-Glenora                 |             | X           |             |             |             |
| Edmonton-Gold Bar                |             | X           | X           | X           |             |
| Edmonton-Rutherford              |             | X           |             |             |             |
| St. Albert                       |             | X           | X           | X           |             |
| Barrhead-Westlock                |             |             | X           | X           | X           |
| Vegreville-Viking                |             |             | X           | X           | X           |
| Calgary-Elbow                    |             |             | X           |             | X           |
| Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert |             |             | X           |             |             |
| Chinook                          |             |             |             |             | X           |
| Pincher Creek-Macleod            |             |             |             |             | X           |
| Calgary-Glenmore                 |             |             |             |             | X           |
| Calgary-Lougheed                 |             |             |             |             | X           |
| Calgary-Foothills                |             |             |             |             | X           |

\* Formerly the Electoral Division of Olds-Didsbury (1993)

<sup>5</sup> The names of the Divisions are the same; the geography may have changed from election to election.

In contrast to the low voter turnout divisions (Table 6), there continues to be less consistency in the top 10 rankings of high voter turnout from one election to the next, with only one division appearing in the rankings for all five elections: Olds-Didsbury.

## Conclusion

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Consistent with results of the previous four elections in Alberta (1993-2004), there is no strong link in the 2008 election between proportional plurality (i.e. closeness of the race) at the provincial electoral division level and voter turnout. There may be other factors that play a more significant role in determining the level of turnout.

Although proportional plurality does not appear to play a substantial role in voter turnout in Alberta provincial elections, there does appear to be a pattern that turnout in the top 10 electoral divisions with the lowest voter turnout is fairly consistent from one election to the next.