

## POLITICS AS USUAL: None of the Above

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

As they say, it's all over but the crying. And I am sure there's lots of crying. And gnashing of teeth. And a few choice words for a party leader. Or two.

It's been two weeks now since the provincial election and while the punditocracy is still mewling about the 'surprise' majority of the Wynne liberals, there is 'finally' growing realization that there is a much bigger story in the midst of the results.

The Hudak campaign appears to have imploded from the weight of an ill-conceived 'plan' and Wynne's Liberals leveraged that disaster to snatch a victory. But that's not the story. The story is about the election itself and what it means about the state of democracy in our province.

The numbers don't lie. Fewer and fewer voters exercise their democratic rights. This time around, just slightly more than 50 percent of eligible voters bothered to vote. A slight uptick since the 2011 election, but not much, and certainly nothing to cheer about.

In our riding, around 52,000 people cast their votes from a potential pool of about 100,000 or so voters. Newmarket-Aurora was in line with the provincial average - just 52% voted. Of that (using rounded numbers) 22,900 voted Liberal (about 44%), 19,500 voted PC (or about 37%), 6,100 voted NDP (or about 11.5%) and 2,100 voted Green (or about 4%).

Those are the numbers, but what does that tell us?

It tells us that a majority, or win, is all relative. A majority of what - eligible votes or votes cast? In our riding, the 'winner' has taken the riding with 44% of votes cast but only 23% of eligible votes.

The numbers mirror what has occurred on a provincial level. The Liberals won 55% of the seats with 38% of the popular vote - of just 52% of eligible votes. You do the math on what a 'majority' truly looks like.

Electoral 'wins' are majorities based on those that chose to vote, not those that could vote.

This is not to knock the victors. The results are no different at any level of government - from municipal to federal.

With average voter turnout hovering at 40% - no party, no candidate can claim to have a 'clear mandate' having won less than 25% of the eligible votes. They are pyrrhic victories at best.

But there is a larger, more startling fact about the recent results. A sizeable number of voters chose to decline their ballots - in essence cast a vote for 'none of the above.' Voters went to their polling station, registered, and then handed back their ballot. Not spoiled. Declined. A polite, protest vote - in typical Canadian fashion.

Over 31,000 people declined their vote. Over 31,000 people thought that no party, no candidate was worthy of elected office. The highest number in over 40 years.

It was reported in one daily that if declined ballots were counted as a party, then 'they' would have finished fifth in the election or just behind the Green party.

I could not find figures about how many declined votes were cast in Newmarket-Aurora. Just over a hundred declined votes were cast in 2011. It would be interesting to see what happened this time around.

I am not sure of the utility of the declined vote in terms of protest, but in terms of symbolism, I think it makes an important point. Coupled with low voter turn-out, a 10-fold increase in declined ballots tells us that the time for dithering is over.

Unless we want to see the leader of the 'none of the above' party as our Premier, we need to find ways to re-engage in the democratic process.

Let's hope that four years from now, when we go to the polls again, we will cast our ballot with confidence not decline in protest. Until next week, stay informed, stay involved because this is - after all - Our Town.