

In this country, everyone gets to vote. Pity.

By DAN LEGER

IS THERE such a thing as an ideal citizen? And if so, should those citizens have rights some others don't enjoy, like voting?

That's a decidedly undemocratic concept, but some scholars are daring to think about it, if only in theory. It's not hard to see why.

Voter turnout is dropping just about everywhere elections are held, including in Canada. Many people proudly ignore political news in the newspapers and on TV. They can't be bothered to find out who is leading them and they dismiss politicians with smug generalities about corruption and self-aggrandizement.

Citizens closer to the democratic ideal are committed to the political process and understand the principle of public service. They do care about who is governing them and how they're doing it. They make the effort of citizenship.

But often those citizens are subject to the insults of the wilfully ignorant who, despite their civic laziness, enjoy precisely the same democratic rights and privileges as the well-informed.

It's far too easy to blame Stephen Harper or Rodney MacDonald or Peter Kelly for our carelessness about politics. The problem is not only with the parties or their leaders, although their obsessive self-interest is part of it.

I think the deeper problem resides in us.

On the federal level, turnout hit a low of less than 61 per cent in 2004, but rebounded some in 2006 to just under 65 per cent. But as recently as the late 1980s, more than 75 per cent of those eligible voted.

And those are federal numbers. In federal elections, parties spend massively to advertise, promoting the election along with their own messages. It stands to reason that if people are aware that an election is going on, chances are better they will vote.

Turnout is plummeting in the provinces, even in places where traditional turnout is high. In the 2006 provincial election here in Nova Scotia, 61.6 per cent of eligible voters cast ballots, the lowest participation rate since Confederation.

But while fewer people want to think about politics, they still have opinions, and those opinions have an influence on government behaviour.

Economist Bryan Caplan argues in a new book, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, that most people are not rational when it comes to politics, the economy or public policy.

For example, people mistrust markets, so they favour regulation. In Nova Scotia, people demand gasoline regulation even though it actually makes gas more expensive.

People don't understand foreigners, so they demand trade barriers to protect home markets from competition. Call the Council of Canadians for more on that.

Caplan also points out that people think employment and prosperity are the same thing, so they defend jobs in obsolete industries. We've seen plenty of that in Nova Scotia over the years.

In fact, many people vastly overrate the ability of government to improve their lives. So politicians who promise simple solutions to the complex problems of modern society tend to get elected.

But since complicated problems aren't solved simply, government often seems

dysfunctional. Elected politicians do things that are not in the public interest, notoriously in the way George W. Bush invaded Iraq to "fight terrorism" and ended up encouraging it.

Politicians also make mistakes because they rely too much on public opinion polls that have operated almost unchanged since they were invented by George Gallup in the 1930s.

Gallup's techniques capture snapshot information about what people are thinking on a given day, at a given time. They don't tell the whole story.

Polling expert James Fishkin of Stanford University has developed an entirely new kind of poll, in which people spend time learning about political or economic subjects before they take a survey.

In Fishkin's "deliberative polls," people think before they respond. They don't just give instant reactions. Their views are informed, giving the poll value well beyond the snapshot.

Perhaps elections should adopt a similar model. Perhaps people should actually have to study the candidates, parties and issues before they are handed a ballot. They would then cast an informed vote, not make a wild guess.

The media would have to change the way they cover politics and public attitudes, but that's not a bad thing. It would certainly change the tone and content of partisan political advertising.

It might even result in better governing or at the least, to less complaining from those among us whom the law defines as citizens but who do so little to earn the honour.

(dleger@herald.ca)

Dan Leger is director of news content for The Chronicle Herald. The opinions expressed here are his own.