

# Alleged robo-calling may have significantly impacted voting

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In a new [paper](#), a Simon Fraser University economist finds that robo-calling, if the phenomenon did occur, could have significantly influenced voter turnout and ballot results in the last federal election.

Anke Kessler's discussion paper is available on her [website](#) and on [Worthwhile Canadian Initiative](#), an economics blog.

Elections Canada is investigating New Democrat and Liberal party allegations that the Conservatives hired companies to robo-call voters in ridings across Canada, thereby influencing the Tories' 2011 federal election win.

The term robo-calling describes a variety of tactics used to influence [voter turnout](#) and behaviour, including making harassing phone calls and advising voters to go to the wrong polling stations.

The number cruncher compared the voter turnout and ballot results in all ridings across Canada in the 2008 and 2011 federal elections. In those ridings where Elections Canada is investigating robo-calling allegations about the 2011 election, Kessler teased out estimates on the number of voters per riding who were discouraged from going to the polls.

“Ridings where voters were allegedly targeted by robo-calls — meaning they were possibly discouraged from voting or directed to the wrong polls — experienced an estimated decline in voter turnout of three percentage points on average. This reduction in turnout translates into

roughly 2,500 fewer eligible (registered) voters going to the polls.”

Kessler’s study indicates that in five ridings with the alleged robo-calling fewer than 2,500 votes were needed to ensure a Liberal or NDP victory. Hence her conclusion that any alleged robo-calling could have secured a Tory victory in those ridings.

“The average winning margin for districts with no robocall-allegations was 10,913 votes or 22.6 percentage points,” explains Kessler. “Ridings where allegations of impropriety have emerged, in contrast, had a margin of victory that was almost 28 percent lower: 8,719 votes or 16.4 percentage points.”

Kessler says curiosity about whether publicly available Elections Canada data on election results supported or negated the idea that robo-calling could influence voter turnout and ballot results drove her to download the data.

“It is important to note that my findings in no way can prove whether misconduct or an illegal act has occurred,” emphasizes Kessler, who regularly analyses political organizational design, government structure and elections. “I wish to emphasize that my analysis and the corresponding results are not suited to bring into question the election outcome in any particular riding.”

That being said, Kessler continues: “My analysis of the Elections Canada data suggests that any alleged robo-calling had a statistically significant impact on voter turnout and [election](#) results.”

Provided by Simon Fraser University

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