

Is it too late? Theorizing after a research report is completed

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The research report

“Electoral Participation of Electors with Special Needs and Related Outreach: Persons with Disabilities, Homeless People, and Individuals with Low Literacy Skills in Canada.”

Prepared for Elections Canada, May 2006



As commissioned research

- Client agency set:

Topic area and scope of inquiry

Key terminology

Research questions

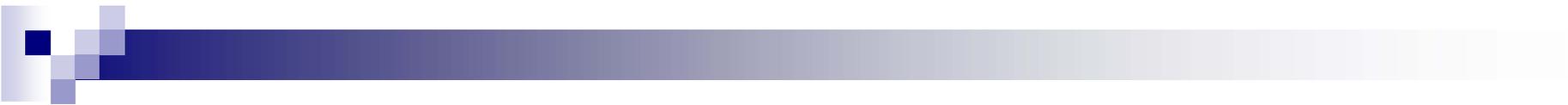
Main methods

Timelines for completing study



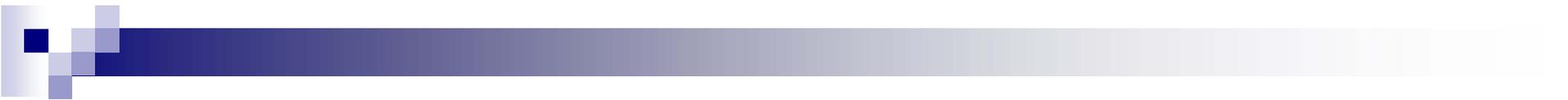
Nature of the report

- To examine the electoral access and involvement of three groups of electors
- What do we know about the voting behaviour of these groups?
- How do election laws and systems encourage participation?
- Which outreach practices seem effective?
- What additional reforms to consider?
- Knowledge gaps and research needs.



Is government commissioned research theory-free?

- The research did not begin with a fixed a priori theory to be tested
- Yet, theoretical elements -- “a way of thinking and making sense about a topic” -
- are evident in (a) the terms of reference, (b) the literature reviewed, and in (c) the analysis and writing up of the report



Can fuller theorizing be done after the report is finished?

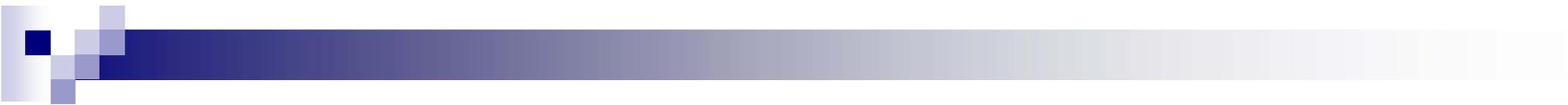
- A final report is never the final word on a issue -- whether empirically, conceptually, discursively, practically
- “The published word is not the final one, but only a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory.”

(Glaser and Strauss 1967: 40)



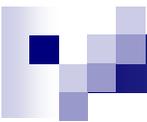
Why try to theorize now?

- Data are there
- Social justice significance: marginalized groups
- Political matter of the topic: declining voter turnout
- To develop further concepts, categories and relationships among ideas



How further theorizing can still be done

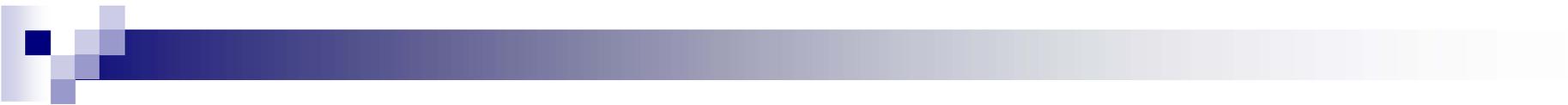
- Elaboration of concepts
- Comparisons with other topics, literatures
- Modifying (testing) existing theories
- Levels of analysis: individuals, groups and processes, organizations and systems
- Generation of themes and categories
- Looking for and generating propositions



Excerpt # 1

People with mobility limitations

- A person who is a wheelchair user, discovered he could not enter the advance polling station without help from two scrutineers: “I got in to vote but felt it was degrading.”
- Another voter: “I don’t feel I should have to vote in a parking lot. In this day and age, they should make sure all polling stations are accessible.”



Excerpt # 2

The vote for homeless people

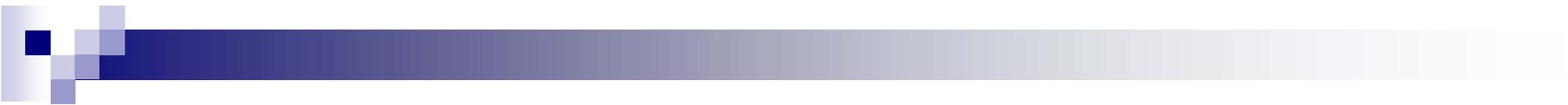
- “I think (the vote) is a big step.... When you’re on the street, you still hear what’s going on, you see newspapers.”
- “This is really a token, but it’s a good one.”
- “It would be legitimating a system that has screwed you to the walls over and over again, so why bother?”



Excerpt # 3

People with literacy challenges

- “Each voting day is an exercise in humiliation for people who are illiterate. They can get help from a scrutineer or accompanying person, but they have to declare in front of a lineup they need such help”.... with “a daunting list of local candidates they can’t make out.”



Some questions of theorizing

- What is going on in these excerpts?
- How do these people interpret the voting process, politics and social world?
- What meanings and expectations are being expressed?
- What might be the object of further theorizing?