Voting at Select Campuses, Friendship Centres and Community Centres, 42nd General Election

Elections Canada

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Executive Summary

In preparing for the 42nd general election, Elections Canada explored a variety of initiatives to increase access to voting for certain targeted groups, including youth and Indigenous electors. These groups had been less likely to vote in previous elections because of life circumstances and barriers to accessing the vote. One of the proposals was to open offices in select institutions across the country to make voting by special ballot more accessible to these groups.

In spring 2013, Elections Canada launched a pilot project to open temporary offices in locations regularly frequented by youth and Indigenous electors, such as campuses, Friendship Centres and community centres across the country. The pilot project had three principal objectives: to improve accessibility of the voting process by physically locating voting services closer to electors; to increase electors' awareness of their voting options; and to measure how well the service format would integrate into the current electoral process.

The agency met with key national stakeholders, including the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the National Association of Friendship Centres, YMCA Canada and Elections Canada's Advisory Committee of Political Parties (ACPP), at the outset of the project to gather their perspectives. The project received considerable support.

Ultimately, during the 42nd general election, 71 offices were opened at 39 post-secondary institutions, 13 Friendship Centres and 2 community centres from October 5 to 8, 2015, where a total of 70,231 electors voted. This turnout accounted for about 9 percent of the total targeted population.

Nearly all electors (99.4 percent) who completed an exit survey indicated that these offices offered a more convenient way to vote. Many students commented that Elections Canada should make this service available during every general election. Others stated that had it not been for these offices, they might not have voted.

A number of lessons were learned during the pilot project and were compiled to evaluate options and operational design should future initiatives be modeled on this project. The lessons were drawn from issues observed by Elections Canada during the initiative's deployment, as well as feedback received from participants and stakeholders.

Overall, returning officers and other stakeholders considered the pilot project to be worthwhile. They recommended expanding the service to more offices, over more days, in the next election. As a result of this project, Elections Canada will examine various scenarios and present recommendations for future implementation.

1. Background

1.1. Special Voting Rules

The Special Voting Rules, defined in Part 11 of the *Canada Elections Act*, provide another way for electors to vote if they cannot or do not wish to vote at an advance or ordinary poll during an election or referendum.

Under these Rules, using a special ballot, electors can vote by mail or in person at any returning office (also called a local Elections Canada office) or additional assistant returning officer (AARO) office (also called a satellite office). If electors are away from their electoral district, inside or outside Canada, they can also register to vote by special ballot with Elections Canada in Ottawa.

AAROs are appointed by the returning officer, with the approval of the Chief Electoral Officer, to operate a satellite office in a designated area. These offices provide many of the same services as the local Elections Canada offices, offering more convenient access for nearby electors. For the purpose of setting up offices at select campuses, and youth and community centres during the 42nd general election, the AARO office model was chosen and applied.

2. Objectives of the Pilot Project

After the 41st general election, Elections Canada examined options for using the Special Voting Rules as a way to increase access to voting by certain targeted groups for the 42nd general election. The option of establishing offices, through a pilot project, in locations such as university and college campuses, Friendship Centres and community centres was selected for youth and Indigenous electors.

The proponents of the pilot project considered several parameters for setting up the offices to allow voting by special ballot in targeted locations.

- **Target groups of electors** — While several groups of electors had been identified, analysis of several factors (the suitability of these offices to reach them, the ability to choose effective locations, and the specific barriers influencing each group) suggested that youth and Indigenous electors would be best suited as target groups. They could be reached with offices in post-secondary institutions, Friendship Centres and community centres.[1]

- **Number of sites** — It was proposed to set up 40 offices at post-secondary institutions across the country, and a similar number at Friendship Centres and community centres. This would strike a balance between improving access and managing risks. The projection in the business case was to target about 555,000 electors, or 17 percent of the estimated 3.3 million young electors in Canada. Elections Canada was confident that the recommended scale would prove the concept, deliver substantial benefit and demonstrate that the proposal is congruent with Elections Canada's goals, service standards and regulatory framework.

It was also recommended that provincial and territorial representation be proportional to their respective populations. The criteria developed to select institutions were as follows:

- the 10 largest post-secondary institutions in Canada (defined by size of student body);

- the largest post-secondary institution in each of the provinces and territories not represented by the 10 largest post-secondary institutions;

- the largest CEGEPs (Quebec);

- the most suitable community centres and Friendship Centres (with available office space that is large, secure and accessible).

The pilot project had three principal objectives:

1. Improve accessibility of the voting process by physically locating voting services closer to electors.

2. Improve accessibility of the voting process by increasing elector awareness of voting options.

3. Measure the extent to which the service format integrates well into the current electoral process.

The initiative would also attempt to engage youth directly in the electoral administration process as workers in these offices.

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[1] Community centres were added to the mix in order to reach youth who are not enrolled in post-secondary institutions.

3. Stakeholder Engagement

Elections Canada consulted with community, student and Indigenous groups such as the National Association of Friendship Centres, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (since renamed Universities Canada), YMCA Canada and Elections Canada's Advisory Committee of Political Parties before rolling out the pilot project. There were several purposes for this engagement:

- Since this was a pilot project at the federal level, it was important to gain stakeholders' perspectives on it, both to alleviate concerns about how it would be rolled out and for Elections Canada to adjust the path forward accordingly.

- Stakeholders were made aware of the pilot project in advance to allow them to prepare for its roll out, which in some cases included helping to communicate the initiative to target groups of electors.

- The involvement of some stakeholders was logistically necessary to setting up these offices.

3.1. Post-secondary organizations

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (since renamed Universities Canada) is an advocate for 97 post-secondary institutions across all provinces. Elections Canada met with the association's representatives in summer 2013 to discuss plans to open offices on post-secondary campuses, seek their feedback on potential issues and explore avenues for their participation.

The Association representatives showed an interest in the initiative and in helping to increase youth turnout. They expressed concerns about the availability of appropriate spaces at post-secondary institutions and suggested that Elections Canada begin talking to potential tenant institutions in 2014, which the agency did. They also recommended that Elections Canada consider targeting post-secondary institutions with large concentrations of Indigenous youth.[2]

Elections Canada then contacted the post-secondary institutions that fit the selection criteria established for the project, and asked for their participation in the pilot project. The agency also communicated with student associations, including the Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec, the Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec, the Canadian Federation of Students and the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations.

Feedback was generally positive. Student organizations were especially receptive, with some of them expressing a desire that offices be established at all post-secondary institutions, which was out of the scope and budget for this pilot.

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[2] This factor was considered a secondary evaluation criterion that would be used when two institutions had an equal rating after the primary evaluation.

3.2. National Association of Friendship Centres

The National Association of Friendship Centres is a network of 118 Friendship Centres and seven provincial and territorial associations. Friendship Centres, located in both urban and rural areas, offer services to Indigenous people living off-reserve.

Elections Canada met with the association's representatives in June 2013 to discuss the plan for Indigenous people's access to the pilot project, to seek feedback on potential issues and to explore avenues for the association's participation.

The representatives expressed support for the initiative and stated that increasing youth voting was important to them. They offered to assist Elections Canada in contacting individual Friendship Centres.

On behalf of Elections Canada, the association launched a national call of interest to all Friendship Centres, along with a questionnaire that would help qualify whether the centres had the appropriate space, security, facilities and availability to host the offices. The aim was to involve at least 40 Friendship Centres that could accommodate Elections Canada's needs; ideally, those centres would be ones that served a large volume of young people.

Over 20 Friendship Centres responded to the call of interest. After evaluation, 13 of these centres were ultimately able to participate in the initiative. Some could not take part because of logistical requirements or proximity to other Elections Canada offices.

3.3. YMCA Canada

YMCA Canada has a federated model with 125 independent members, giving it a broad presence across most large Canadian communities and connecting it to a diverse population. Many YMCAs focus on target demographics such as youth or Indigenous people. Furthermore, in previous elections, many had served as polling places and venues for candidates' debates.

In June 2013, Elections Canada met with YMCA Canada to gauge its support for the pilot project, to seek feedback and to explore how the organization could help Elections Canada implement it.

At the meeting, YMCA Canada expressed support for the pilot project and an interest in helping to develop, promote and deliver it. Representatives identified access to secure premises as a key challenge, as most YMCAs would not meet the space, security and availability criteria for hosting an office. The organization committed to identifying 10 to 20 appropriate sites and contacting the respective members to determine their interest. In response, six YMCA members indicated that they were interested and had appropriate spaces available for rent. Elections Canada then sought to engage the chief executive officers of those locations directly.

Once the returning officers had conducted the pre-event tasks, only two YMCAs were able to participate. The primary obstacle was their inability to lease closed and lockable office spaces for the necessary two-week period.

3.4. Advisory Committee of Political Parties

Elections Canada's ACPP brings together party representatives and agency officials. It serves as a forum for sharing information, fostering good working relations, and resolving administrative issues that may affect parties and candidates.

In November 2013, Elections Canada presented the pilot project to the ACPP. The agency detailed the rationale behind the pilot project, how the offices would be selected and set up, and how they would operate.

Many participants welcomed the initiative. They also gave practical suggestions on communicating the guidelines, such as using information sheets, webcasts, web videos, brochures, posters and plain-language tools, and offered to raise awareness among their youth wings and youth representatives before the election.

3.5. Communications and outreach

In preparing to open the offices on campuses, Elections Canada met with representatives from four national organizations representing student associations and student administrators. The goal of these consultations was to obtain feedback and advice on the design of the pilot project, seek support for implementation and begin to identify areas of collaboration. Consultations were consistently positive; the organizations appreciated Elections Canada's proactive approach, offered support in implementing the pilot and were eager to help inform students about it and the election using Elections Canada's voter information products within their own outreach campaigns.

The agency developed an approach that included communication and outreach with external groups, advertising campaigns and the promotion of its voter information material.

External groups

As soon as the list of participating institutions was made public in late August 2015,[3] Elections Canada reached out to partners to inform them about the pilot project and share key information on how to help spread the word. Partners included post-secondary student associations, organizations working with youth, and participating YMCAs and Friendship Centres.

A subsequent communication was sent to all participating student associations. It included talking points that student leaders could use to promote the initiative, a calendar clarifying the various ways students could vote and an Elections Canada icon that they could add to their website or Facebook page.

When invited to contact their local Elections Canada office to get material and coordinate outreach activities, 13 participating institutions (or their student associations) ordered voter information products and promotional material. The student postcard was the most ordered item.

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[3] A decision was made in June 2015 to publish the list in August 2015, on the basis that most institutions would have signed their leases by then.

Information and advertising campaign

Beginning on August 28, 2015, Elections Canada posted information about the offices on its website. This included the locations and opening hours of each office, and information about voting by special ballot. The agency made weekly updates to these postings until September 27, 2015 (the day on which most leases became effective). Every time an office was confirmed and was posted on the website, Elections Canada tweeted the information and sent an email to the participating student association.

The advertising campaign on post-secondary campuses began on September 21, 2015, and ran for two weeks. It included print ads in 29 student newspapers, 30-second spots on digital screens at 28 institutions, and Facebook ads targeting students at 34 schools. The information in the advertisements dealt solely with where, when and the ways to vote, with reference to the offices and special ballot voting.

4. Observations and Measures

To evaluate the success of the pilot project, during operating days, Elections Canada gathered statistics on voter participation at each office and distributed surveys to electors who used the service, the general public and electoral staff. Elections Canada monitored traditional and social media to detect issues and trends. After the event, feedback was solicited from stakeholder groups.

4.1. Voter participation

Voter participation was the main performance indicator of the pilot project. It was the principal way of determining whether the pilot project had improved the accessibility of the voting process.

Table 1. Measurements by day of operation						
Scope	**Daily measures**	**Oct. 5**	**Oct. 6**	**Oct. 7**	**Oct. 8**	**Total**
Registrations and voting	Special ballot applications completed and ballots cast (local electors)	2,415	2,917	4,242	6,031	15,605
	Special ballot applications completed and ballots cast (national electors)	7,447	11,240	14,483	21,456	54,626
Revision	Revisions performed (local electors)	45	113	370	697	1,225

*Revision: The 28-day revision period usually begins 33 days before election day and ends at 6:00 p.m. on the sixth day before election day. During the revision period, electors may correct their names and addresses on the lists of electors, add their names to those lists, ask to remove their names, etc.

Overall participation

A total of 70,231 electors registered and voted at these locations. The voter turnout equates to 9 percent of the population of the institutions served. The overall daily turnout increased by approximately 30 percent each day.

Participation by specific groups

Of the 70,231 ballots cast at the offices in campuses, Friendship Centres and community centres, 78 percent were cast by national electors (those voting outside their electoral districts) and 22 percent by local electors (those voting within their electoral districts). The pilot project generated approximately one third of the 150,000 national ballots cast during the 42nd general election. The high proportion of national electors demonstrates that the service aided electors voting outside of their electoral districts.

Average turnout rates varied greatly among the types of institutions hosting the offices:

- universities: 1,900 electors per institution
- colleges and CEGEPs: 550 electors per institution
- YMCAs: 180 electors per institution
- Friendship Centres: 50 electors per institution

Various factors may explain why turnout was higher at post-secondary institutions. One explanation is that most post-secondary institutions have student associations that help mobilize and engage students, which made outreach more prevalent on campuses than at other institutions. According to the elector data gathered during the four days of operations, a large part of student populations are national electors, who face accessibility barriers to voting in their own electoral districts.

Lineups

Voters at several offices encountered lineups. In almost all cases, these lineups were no longer than an hour. The delays were largely attributable to the relatively slow registration process and the fact that arrivals tended to cluster around certain peak times (for example, between classes).

Identification requirements

There were no widespread issues reported with the requirement for voters to provide acceptable proof of identity and address. The Elections Canada Support Network needed to assist staff in fewer than 10 cases, where the voter's identification listed a post office box.

Presence of candidates and representatives

Though some candidates or their representatives observed proceedings at these offices, their presence was modest—on each day, between 9 and 16 offices reported their presence, in most cases reporting one single representative.

Table 2. Visits from candidates and representatives			
Number of offices that received visits from candidates or their representatives			
October 5, 2015	October 6, 2015	October 7, 2015	October 8, 2015
9	16	10	15

Promotion by student groups

Many universities and colleges had already planned campaigns to promote voting, independent of Elections Canada. In particular, the Canadian Federation of Students sent organizers to every campus that hosted offices to encourage students to use them. Elections Canada encouraged the Federation's leaders to coordinate their efforts with their local Elections Canada offices. Feedback from the leaders on their interaction with local staff was very positive.

Some student groups held their own initiative and put up signs offering incentives to students who planned to vote. One group also paid to have a band play. These types of promotion were deemed legitimate and did not include any involvement from Elections Canada.

4.2. Elector surveys

Exit surveys of electors were conducted at these offices, and Elections Canada reviewed approximately 8,600 responses.[4]

Overall, the surveys indicated a very positive response. Convenience and ability to vote while away from one's home electoral district were recurring themes. A few electors expressed dissatisfaction with the wait times at some locations, but most rated them as "satisfactory" and "very satisfactory."

Among survey respondents, 8,566 (99.4 percent) agreed that the offices were a convenient way to vote. A quarter of electors (about 2,000) said they would not have voted, or were not sure if they would have voted, had these offices not been available.

These statistics suggest that the pilot project achieved its overall objective of making the voting process more accessible.

Elections Canada also conducted site population surveys, which revealed the following main reasons why electors did not use the services offered at the offices:

- Wait times were inconvenient.

- Voters were not aware that they could vote at these offices.

- The office hours were inconvenient.

4.3. Stakeholder feedback

On the closing day of the pilot project, surveys were issued to AAROs and their staff. After the event, feedback was solicited from internal stakeholders, including returning officers and representatives from various sectors within Elections Canada. External stakeholder feedback was also sought from the institutions and student associations.

Overall, internal stakeholders reported that communication and co-operation among the various groups was generally good. Mainly, their constructive feedback was related to increasing procedural efficiencies, both at Elections Canada Headquarters and in the field, to accommodate a potentially larger scope if the pilot project is repeated in the future.

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[4] Elections Canada received approximately 15,000 completed elector surveys. However, with limited resources for the evaluation, the agency determined that it had established a sound baseline and trend after examining 8,600 surveys.

5. Performance Indicators

5.1. Quantitative

Elections Canada's main performance indicator for the pilot project was voter turnout at the temporary offices.

Elections Canada had set the benchmark at 25 percent turnout among the targeted populations. This benchmark was established based on youth voter turnout from the previous general election, and on the turnout from similar on-campus voting initiatives held during elections in Nova Scotia, Quebec, and New Brunswick in previous years:

Nova Scotia, 2013

For the 2013 provincial general election, Elections Nova Scotia opened additional polling stations at hospitals, shelters, prisons, nursing homes and campuses. At the 13 campus stations, students, faculty and staff who met the six-month residency requirement were able to vote in advance of regular polling day, choosing either the electoral district of their current residences or where they lived off-campus.

Quebec, 2014

For the 2014 provincial general election, the Directeur général des élections du Québec opened additional polling stations, referred to as *bureaux de vote en établissement d'enseignement*, at campuses on March 28 and April 1, 2 and 3. Electors who met the six-month residency requirement to vote were able to cast ballots at these stations for the electoral districts where they reside.

New Brunswick, 2014

After a successful pilot project aimed at increasing student voting in 2010, Elections New Brunswick expanded its campus outreach to include voting stations at 13 post-secondary institutions during the September 22, 2014, provincial general election.

Overall, participation at satellite offices during the 42nd general election was 9 percent of the eligible population.

5.2. Qualitative

It should be noted that, although returning officers highlighted areas that needed further attention, they related to the inner workings of the project. Their opinions of the overall project characterized it as very worthwhile.

Most of the qualitative feedback was compiled from the exit surveys distributed to electors who used the service and expressed the electors' appreciation for the opportunity to vote at these convenient locations, as well as a hope to see the service return in future elections. However, negative feedback reflecting such concerns as the need to use less paper and reduce wait times was also expressed.

6. Conclusion

The pilot project reached its overall objectives of making the electoral process more convenient and accessible to the young electors it targeted. It showed that this type of service offering can integrate well within the federal electoral process and, given certain conditions, could be scaled or tailored to a broader national level.

6.1. Recommendation for moving forward

Elections Canada will develop an options analysis, outlining various scenarios in moving forward with pilot project, that will recommend the most feasible, viable and cost-effective option for the future. The options analysis will take into account the information yielded from the pilot project as well as other opportunities undertaken by the agency.