

# Voting Service Interruptions on First Nations Reserves in the 42nd General Election

Administrative Review



## Summary

- Five out of 14 polling places experienced a voting service interruption on election day due to ballot shortages, resulting in 13 electors, all at one polling place, being unable to vote.
- These service disruptions, however regrettable, were isolated cases. Elections Canada sincerely regrets that these electors could not exercise their franchise.
- Elections Canada will work toward mitigating the factors that make planning voting operations on First Nations reserves challenging.

## Background

Surveys and other assessments show that the 42nd general election of October 19, 2015, was administered successfully. Voter turnout reached its highest point in 20 years. When the increased turnout meant ballot supplies ran low in some places, the Chief Electoral Officer instructed election officers to reallocate or photocopy ballots in order to ensure an adequate distribution. This appeared to have resolved the supply issue.

There were, however, isolated reports in media and social media that voting was interrupted on some First Nations reserves on election day as a result of ballot shortages, or for other reasons. Following the election, Elections Canada conducted this administrative review to determine what happened in each reported case of voting service interruption.

## Research method

This review is limited to 14 polling places within the nine electoral districts listed below where media or social media reported interruptions in voting on election day.

Electoral district name	Community	Province
Algoma–Manitoulin–Kapusking	Whitefish River First Nation	Ontario
Kenora	Fort Hope	Ontario
Kenora	Onigaming First Nation	Ontario
Kenora	Sandy Lake First Nation	Ontario
Kenora	Shoal Lake 40	Ontario
Timmins–James Bay	Moose Factory	Ontario
Churchill–Keewatinook Aski	Lake St. Martin	Manitoba
Churchill–Keewatinook Aski	Tataskweyak Cree Nation	Manitoba
Carlton Trail–Eagle Creek	Beardy's and Okemasis First Nations	Saskatchewan
Desnethé–Missinippi–Churchill River	Big River First Nation	Saskatchewan
Desnethé–Missinippi–Churchill River	Sandy Lake	Saskatchewan
Prince Albert	One Arrow First Nation	Saskatchewan
Bow River	Siksika Nation	Alberta
Central Okanagan–Similkameen–Nicola	Merritt	British Columbia

For each polling place, analysts reviewed statistics on elector counts, registrations, ballot availability and votes cast, drawing on information contained in databases at Elections Canada headquarters and in paperwork provided by the local returning office. Analysts spoke with local returning officers; election workers; staff at the Assembly of First Nations who had also received reports of ballot shortages; and, where possible, other local contacts. They also spoke with three local Saskatchewan campaign administrators from the Liberal Party of Canada who had informed us that they had information on ballot shortages. In some cases, the individuals Elections Canada spoke to were in the actual polling places in question and, in other cases, they relayed information that they heard second-hand.

## Results

The review found that a total of 14 on-reserve polling places in nine electoral districts ran low on ballots on election day. In nine of these polling places, voting was not interrupted. Election officers were able to replenish the ballot supply before it was completely exhausted by reallocating ballots from another polling place or from the returning office. In some cases, they used photocopied ballots, as per instructions from the Chief Electoral Officer. In three First Nations communities, the issue was resolved within 10 to 12 minutes, while in One Arrow First Nation (Saskatchewan), service was interrupted for 30 minutes. There were no eye-witness accounts of electors leaving the polling place without voting in these locations. In an isolated incident, one polling place in Lake St. Martin (Manitoba) ran out of ballots before the close of polls. Election officers were uncomfortable using photocopied ballots and refused to offer them to voters. As a result, 13 electors were unable to vote. Elections Canada sincerely regrets that these electors could not exercise their franchise.

Voting service available all day, with no interruption		
Electoral district	Community	Province
Algoma–Manitoulin–Kapuskasing	Whitefish River First Nation	Ontario
	Sandy Lake First Nation	Ontario
Kenora	Shoal Lake 40	
	Onigaming First Nation	
Churchill–Keewatinook Aski	Tataskweyak Cree Nation	Manitoba
Desnethé–Missinippi–Churchill River	Big River First Nation	Saskatchewan
	Sandy Lake	
Carlton Trail–Eagle Creek	Beardy’s and Okemasis First Nations	Saskatchewan
Central Okanagan–Similkameen–Nicola	Merritt	British Columbia

Voting suspended for 10–12 minutes		
Electoral district	Community	Province
Bow River	Siksika Nation	Alberta
Kenora	Fort Hope	Ontario
Timmins–James Bay	Moose Factory	Ontario

Voting suspended for 30 minutes		
Electoral district	Community	Province
Prince Albert	One Arrow First Nation	Saskatchewan

Voting service disruption (no ballots available for 13 electors)		
Electoral district	Community Name	Province
Churchill–Keewatinook Aski	Lake St. Martin	Manitoba

## Other reasons for delays at polling places on reserves

The administrative review also uncovered other circumstances which slowed voting on some reserves and which, in some cases, seemed to lead to some electors leaving the polling place without voting.

- **Some electors could not meet identification requirements**

Anecdotal reports suggest some electors could not provide proof of identity and address as required by law, so they had to leave the polling place without voting.

- **Some electors showed up to vote at the incorrect polling place**

In Siksika Nation (Alberta), electors living just outside the reserve voted at the Siksika Community Centre on the reserve, even though they were assigned to a polling place outside the reserve within the same electoral district. This resulted in over 400 registrations at the polling place in the Siksika Community Centre. To accommodate these voters, the returning officer reallocated ballots to the Siksika Community Centre polling place.

- **Some electors faced long lines**

In many polling places across the country, turnout was higher than in previous elections; this led to lineups to register and vote. Some voters on reserves had to wait in an additional lineup—before they lined up to register and vote, they waited in line to get a *Letter of Confirmation of Residence* issued by their band office as their proof of address to vote.

A few of these factors point to *common underlying challenges*:

- **Relatively few electors on reserve were registered in advance**

On reserves, voters lists tended to be less complete and current than in other parts of the country. There are several reasons for this. First, targeted revision (door-to-door registration) is generally less effective in isolated areas. Second, residents of reserves were less likely to have used Elections Canada's online voter registration service to register or update their address because it cannot process the non-standard address types often found on many reserves. As a result, many voters on reserves were not registered in advance, and voters lists did not always reflect the true number of electors qualified to vote there.

- **Ballot allocations were insufficient for some polls**

Returning officers allocate ballots based on the number of electors on a voters list, and add an extra cushion to account for electors who may register on polling day. If advance registration is low, as it was on many reserves, the actual number of ballots forecasted for a community may be underestimated. The large increase in turnout further exacerbated this, resulting in some locations exceeding the number of ballots allocated.

- **Isolation made it harder to redistribute ballots**

As ballot supplies ran low, election officers made every effort to reallocate or photocopy ballots, but large distances between polling places and to the returning office made it more difficult to shift supplies. In one case, staff had to drive 260 km round trip to replenish the ballot supply.

## **Enhancements to improve service**

The administrative review points to several steps Elections Canada can take to improve registration and voting service to electors on First Nations reserves, both before and during elections.

### **Improve ballot supply forecasting**

Elections Canada has adjusted their ballot forecast formula for returning officers to reflect higher turnout and increase the cushion of extra ballots for remote areas.

### **Improve advance registration rates on reserves**

Elections Canada will examine ways to improve its elector registration services by providing more choices for electors who do not have civic addresses, or who have non-standard addresses. This may include improvements to the online registration service and the promotion of mail-in registrations.

## **Conduct continual outreach to First Nations communities**

Elections Canada will consider conducting ongoing outreach initiatives with First Nations communities and local band administration to ensure that all steps in the electoral process are better understood by community leaders and electors living on reserve. This should include how electors register to vote ahead of an election call and the registration options available; how electors are assigned to polling stations based on their primary residence address; employment opportunities with Elections Canada as election workers; and ways to share information about the electoral process within their community. This would improve the voting experience at the polls for all electors wanting to vote, and it would allow Elections Canada to better prepare and serve electors.

Elections Canada will also consider expanding initiatives to send information packages directly to these communities as part of outreach initiatives to promote increased community participation. There is also a need to review, in partnership with the community and the returning officers, geographic coding for all areas on and around the reserves to ensure proper assignment of electors and polling places.

## **Fine-tune field staff training and recruitment**

Elections Canada will refine its field training materials and curriculum to enhance election workers' effectiveness and will consider extra efforts to recruit First Nations employees.