

Voting by Special Voting Rules

Report on the Survey of Special Ballot Voters for the 43rd General Election

Research Division

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Acknowledgments

This research was undertaken by Elections Canada's Research division, on behalf of the Alternative Voting Methods and Operational Outreach (AVMOO) directorate within the Operations and Field Governance branch. The Research division led the research design and analysis, while an external research firm, Advanis Inc., managed the data collection.

Ongoing collaboration, consultation and expertise-sharing between the Research division and the AVMOO team enabled the co-creation of the survey and report.

Background and Objectives

Electors who vote by special ballot have a unique experience, facing a different voting process from those who vote at an ordinary or advance poll.

The Survey of Special Ballot Voters aimed to help evaluate the experiences of Canadian electors who voted by special ballot during the 2019 general election. They include electors who voted by mail (living in or outside Canada), on campus at a post-secondary institution, at an Elections Canada office, at an acute care hospital, by home visit or at a designated polling station for Canadian Forces electors. Incarcerated electors, who can also vote by special ballot, were not reached by this survey. This is the first time that this survey has been conducted.

The results of this survey will be used to inform future Elections Canada programs and services, as they relate to special ballot voting methods, and for evaluation purposes.

The survey included questions around the following themes:

- Sources of information about voting by special ballot
- Reasons for voting by special ballot
- Experience using this voting method (including the time it took to vote, ease of voting, and satisfaction with voting)
- Socio-demographics and characteristics of the target populations

Methodology

The experiences of electors who voted by special ballot were evaluated using an online survey.

To distribute the survey, special ballot voters were sent a bilingual survey postcard that contained a Quick Response code and website address, along with a unique reference code. The postcards were distributed to most special ballot voters (except for incarcerated voters).¹ Mail-in voters (national and international) received them in their voter kits along with their ballots, while voters at Elections Canada (EC) offices, campus voters, acute care voters, home visit voters and Canadian Forces voters were given a survey postcard after they had cast their ballot.

To take the survey, voters were required to enter their unique reference code. The survey was in field from September 16, 2019, until November 4, 2019, and 3,512 respondents completed it. It took an average of 5.7 minutes for respondents to complete the survey. This was a non-random sample, and therefore no margins of error are applicable, and it is not generalizable to the general population.

Data were weighted to reflect the population of special ballot voters by age and by voting method. See Appendix A for the profile of survey respondents and Appendix B for the distribution of administrative data compared with weighted survey data.

To read the full Methodological Report, containing details of the research sample, fieldwork, data management and other relevant information, click [here](#).

¹ Due to an unforeseen shortage of survey postcards (around 34,000), not all mail-in voters (in and outside Canada) received one. Once the shortage became known, however, between 1,500 and 2,000 postcards were distributed every Wednesday that followed, until the end of the fielding period.

Notes to the Reader

1. There were low response rates from individuals who voted on a Canadian Forces base, at an acute care hospital or by home visit. Therefore, these groups were excluded from the report.
2. The data have been weighted to be more representative of the special ballot voter population. However, the bases provided in the footnotes throughout the report are unweighted. The weighting scheme is included in the Methodological Report.
3. Certain questions allowed respondents to select multiple responses; these questions included a note to that effect.
4. The results for the proportion of respondents in the sample who either said “don't know” or did not provide a response may not be shown.
5. The results may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
6. Comparisons reported among socio-demographic groups are meaningful because they have a statistically significant relationship at the 95% confidence level.

Definitions

The following voters are referenced throughout the report:

International mail-in	Voters who reside outside Canada and who received and returned their ballot by mail.
National mail-in	Voters who reside in Canada and received their ballot by mail. This includes those who voted by mail either within or outside their electoral district. The ballot was returned either by mail, on campus or at an EC office.
Elections Canada (EC) office	Voters who received their ballot at an EC office. The ballot was returned either immediately at the EC office, at a later date at the EC office, by mail or on campus.
Campus	Voters who received their ballot on campus. The ballot was returned either immediately on campus, on campus at a later date, by mail or at an EC office.

Key Findings

Sources of information

- The most common source of information for finding out about the option to vote by special ballot was the Elections Canada website (28% of respondents).
 - For campus voters, the most common source of information for finding out about the option to vote was through notification by the post-secondary institution (23%).
 - One-fifth (20%) of international mail-in voters found out about the option to vote by special ballot through a friend, family member or acquaintance.

Reason for voting by special ballot

- Almost two in five (38%) respondents indicated that the reason they had voted by special ballot was that they were unavailable on advance polling days and election day.

Time it took to vote

- National mail-in voters reported that it had taken, on average, 7.8 days to receive their ballot in the mail after their application had been submitted to Elections Canada and another 4.5 days to put it back in the mail.
 - In total, it was reported that this process took almost two weeks (12.3 days). This does not include the time that it took for Elections Canada to receive the ballot.
- International mail-in voters who were not already on the International Register reported that it had taken an average of 11.6 days to receive their ballot in the mail after their application had been submitted to Elections Canada. Then it took another 5.4 days to put the ballot back in the mail.
 - The total reported process took an average of 17 days. This does not include the time that it took for Elections Canada to receive the ballot. Unsurprisingly, this process reportedly took longer than that of national mail-in voters, by just under five days.
- EC office voters said that they had waited in line at a voting place for an average of 2.6 minutes, followed by 4.1 minutes to complete the ballot and vote.
 - In total, the average reported voting experience for EC office voters was 6.7 minutes.
 - Campus voters said that they had waited in line at a voting place for an average of 3.9 minutes, and it had taken 4.7 minutes to complete the ballot and vote.
 - In total, the average reported voting time for campus voters was 8.6 minutes, which is nearly two minutes longer than the experience for EC office voters.

Ease of voting and completing ballot

- Nearly all (97%) voters found that the voting method that they used had been easy, with 85% finding it very easy to use and 12% finding it somewhat easy.
 - International mail-in voters were less likely to say that using that voting method had been very easy (69%) compared with those who had voted at an EC office (87%) and campus voters (89%).
- Completing the ballot was considered easy for virtually all voters (98%).

Satisfaction with voting experience and services

- Special ballot voters were satisfied with their overall voting experience (94%), with 91% of respondents being very satisfied and 14% of respondents being somewhat satisfied.
 - Of those who did not express satisfaction with their overall voting experience, 6% were dissatisfied, 4% were somewhat dissatisfied and 2% were very dissatisfied.
 - Campus voters were more likely to say that they were very satisfied (91%) compared with international (77%) and national (77%) mail-in voters.
- Nearly all respondents (98%) who had interacted with Elections Canada staff indicated that they were either somewhat or very satisfied with the services provided.

Likelihood of recommending special ballot voting to others

- Nearly all (96%) respondents stated that they were either very or somewhat likely to recommend voting by special ballot to others.

Main reason unable to vote

- Among respondents who had been unable to cast their ballot (4%), the most common reason provided was among mail-in electors, who could not mail in their ballot to Elections Canada by the deadline (33%).

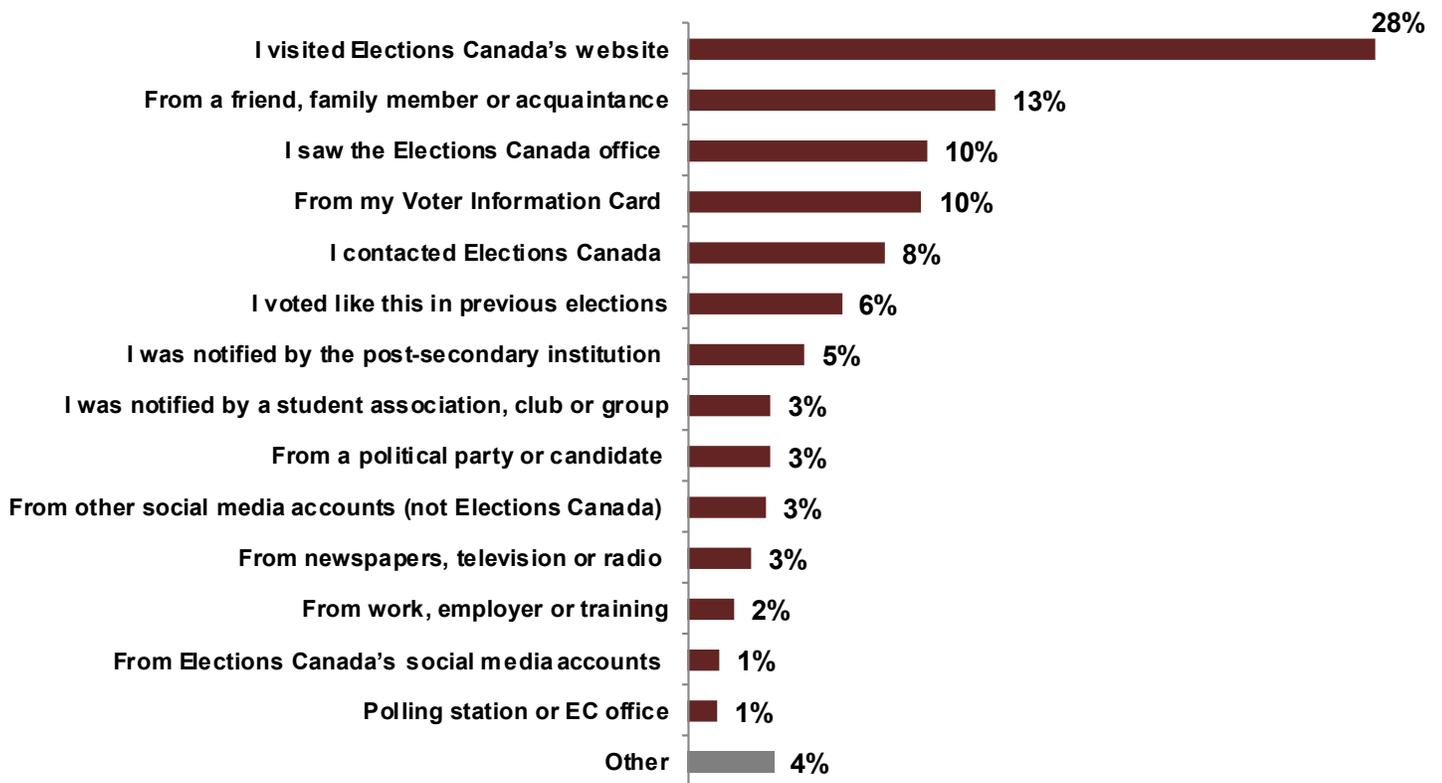
Detailed Findings

Electoral Information

Sources of information on option to vote by special ballot

Overall, the most common source of information for finding out about the option to vote by special ballot was the Elections Canada website (28%).

Sources of information on option to vote by special ballot²



For international mail-in voters, the most common sources of information for finding out about the option to vote by special ballot were visiting the Elections Canada website (34%); from a friend, family member or acquaintance (20%); or from non-Elections Canada social media (13%).

The most common sources of information for finding out about the option to vote by special ballot for national mail-in voters were visiting the Elections Canada website (42%) or from a friend, family member or acquaintance (14%).

² Q.11–14. How did you find out you could use that voting method? Base: $n = 3,339$: voters.

The most common sources of information for finding out about the option to vote by special ballot for EC office voters were visiting the Elections Canada website (32%); from their voter information card (13%); or from a friend, family member or acquaintance (11%).

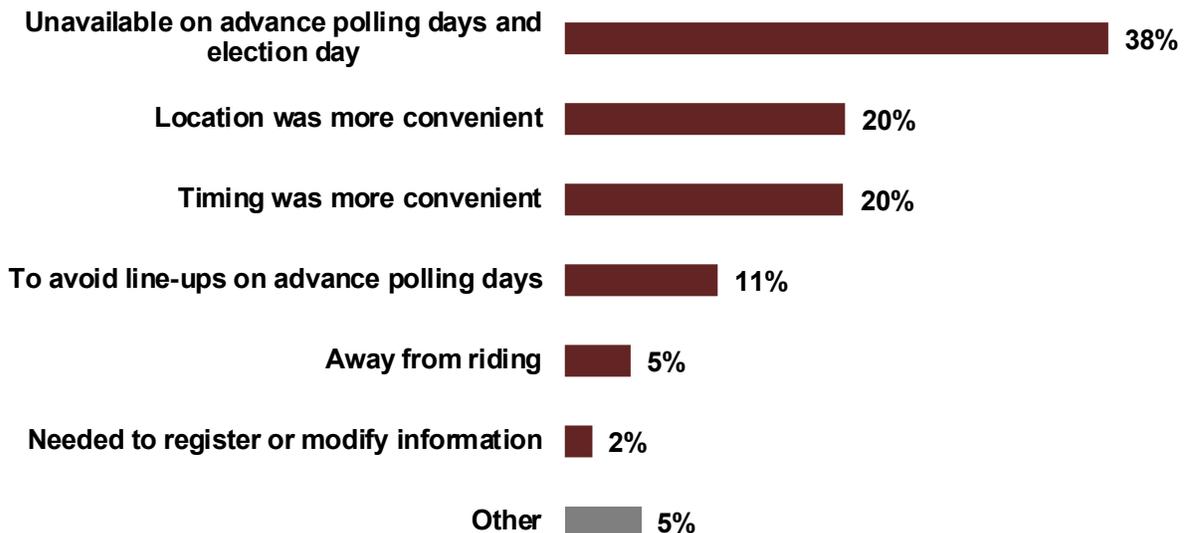
For campus voters, the most common sources of information for finding out about the option to vote by special ballot were being notified by their post-secondary institution (23%); being notified by a student association, club or group (18%); or from a friend, family member or acquaintance (14%).

Voting Experience

Reason for voting by special ballot

Almost two in five (38%) respondents indicated that the reason they voted by special ballot was because they were unavailable on advance polling days and election day. Other commonly cited reasons had to do with convenience: either the location (20%) or the timing (20%) was more convenient.

Reason for voting by special ballot³



³ Q15. What is the main reason you decided to use that voting method? Base $n = 1,454$: asked of national mail-in, EC office and campus voters.

Voting method

National mail-in and EC office voters were more likely to have voted by special ballot due to being unavailable on advance polling days and election day (41% and 46%, respectively) compared with campus voters (7%).

Campus voters were much more likely to have voted by special ballot due to the location being more convenient (62%) compared with EC office voters (9%).

EC office voters were the most likely to have voted using special ballot to avoid line-ups on advance polling days or election day (12%) compared with campus voters (8%) and national mail-in voters (6%).

Age

Younger voters aged 18 to 24 were more likely to state that they had voted by special ballot because the location was more convenient (53%) compared with older age cohorts, such as those aged 25 to 34 (21%), 35 to 54 (13%), 55 to 74 (8%) and over 75 years (5%).

Voters aged 55 to 74 were more likely to have voted by special ballot because they were unavailable during advance polling days (53%) compared with voters aged 35 to 54 (36%), voters aged 25 to 34 (30%) and voters aged 18 to 24 (11%).

Education

Respondents who had completed high school or less, or who had completed some post-secondary or college, were more likely to vote by special ballot due to the location being more convenient (34% and 25%, respectively) compared with respondents who had completed university (12%).

Respondents who had completed some post-secondary or college were more likely to vote by special ballot because the timing was more convenient (25%) compared with those who had completed university (15%).

Employment status

Retired respondents were more likely to vote by special ballot because they were unavailable during advance polling days (55%) compared with respondents who were employed (37%), students (14%) or unemployed (5%).

Time it took to vote by mail

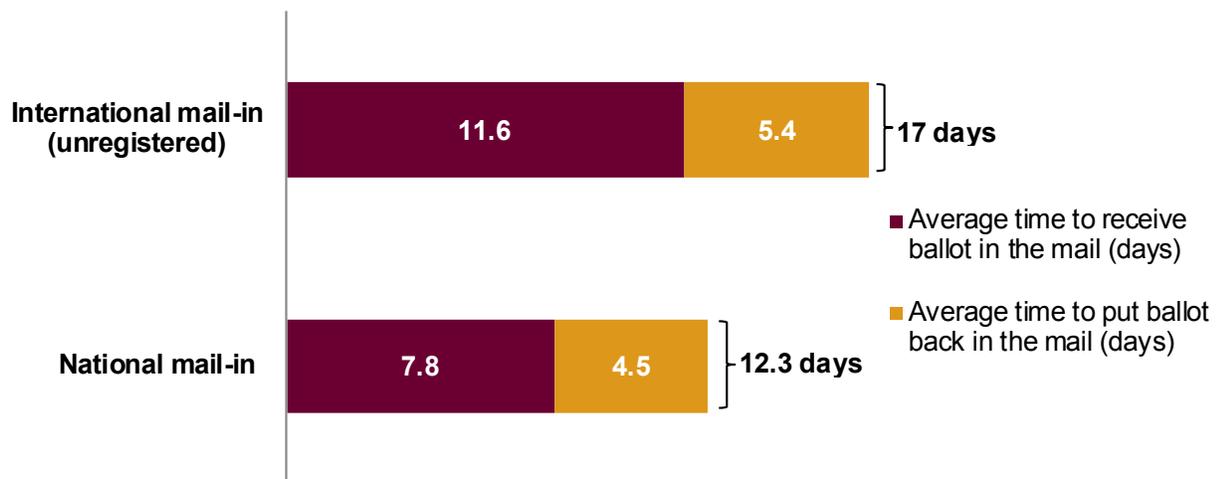
On average, it reportedly took just over one week (7.8 days) for national mail-in voters to receive their ballot in the mail, and it took another 4.5 days to put it back in the mail. In total, this process took almost two weeks (12.3 days).

For international mail-in voters who were not already on the International Register, it reportedly took an average of 11.6 days to receive their ballot in the mail. Then it took another 5.4 days to put the ballot back in the mail. The total process took an average of 17 days. Understandably, this process took, on average, longer than that of national mail-in voters.

For international mail-in voters who were already on the International Register for the 2019 general election, it took them nearly one week (6.8 days), on average, to put their ballot back in the mail once they had received it.⁴

These time frames do not include the time that it took for voters to complete the application documentation or the time it took for Elections Canada to receive the ballot in the mail.

Mean wait time for receiving ballot and putting it back in the mail⁵



⁴ Q20: Once you received your ballot, how long did it take you to put it back in the mail? Base: $n = 541$: international mail-in voters who were already on the International Register. Note: The average time to receive the ballot in the mail for electors on the International Register is not included. This depends on when the ballots were mailed out by Elections Canada and received by electors, which is unknown.

⁵ This graph consists of the following questions:

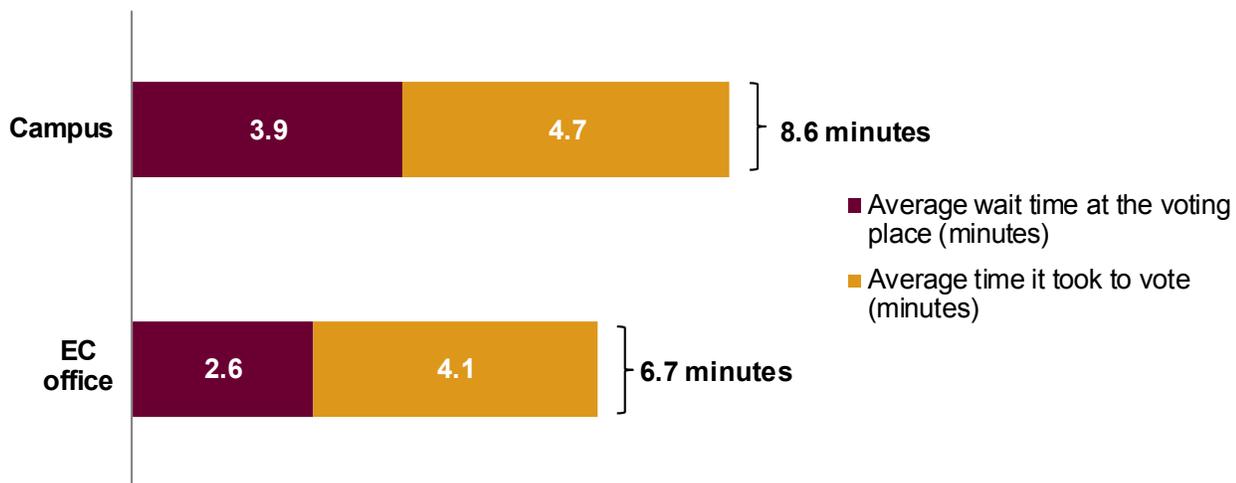
- Q18: Once you submitted the documentation, how long did it take to receive your ballot in the mail? Base: $n = 1,274$: national and international mail-in voters.
- Q19: Once you received your ballot, how long did it take you to put it back in the mail? Base: $n = 1,511$: national and international mail-in voters.

Wait time at voting places

On average, campus voters reportedly waited in line at the EC office for 3.9 minutes, and it took 4.7 minutes to complete the ballot and vote. In total, the average reported voting experience for campus voters was 8.6 minutes.

EC office voters reportedly spent, on average, 2.6 minutes waiting in line at the office, followed by 4.1 minutes to complete the ballot and vote. In total, the average reported voting experience for EC office voters was 6.7 minutes, nearly two minutes (1.9) faster than the wait time for campus voters.

Mean wait time to vote at an EC or campus office⁶



⁶ This graph consists of the following questions:

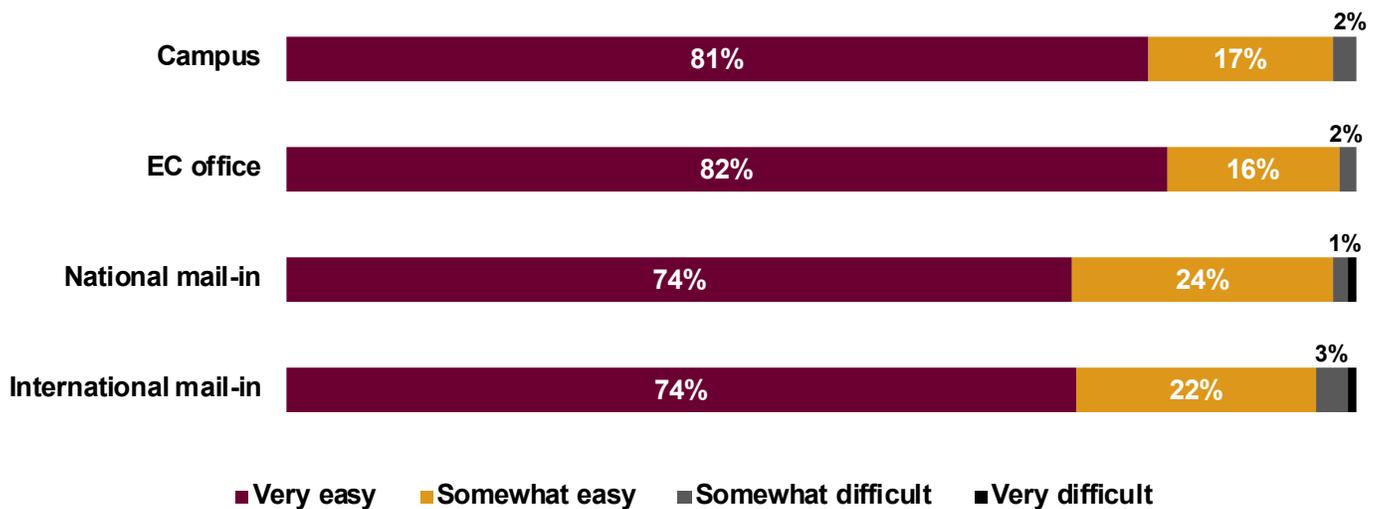
- Q27: Before an election officer began serving you, how long did you wait at the EC office? Base: $n = 406$: EC office voters who voted immediately.
- Q28: Once an election officer began serving you, how long did it take to vote? Base: $n = 421$: EC office voters who voted immediately.
- Q29: Before an election officer began serving you, how long did you wait at the EC office on campus? Base: $n = 425$; campus voters who voted immediately.
- Q30: Once an election officer began serving you, how long did it take to vote? Base: $n = 439$: campus voters who voted immediately.

Ease of completing the ballot

Overall, virtually all voters considered it easy to complete their ballot (98%), claiming that it was either very easy (81%) or somewhat easy (17%).

Ease of completing the ballot remains similar across voting methods. The voters who reportedly faced the most difficulty were international mail-in voters: 4% indicated that completing their ballot was difficult, 3% indicated that it was somewhat difficult, and 1% indicated that it was very difficult.⁷

Ease of completing the ballot, by voting method⁸



⁷ The graph does not display figures less than 1%, which fall into the “Very difficult” category.

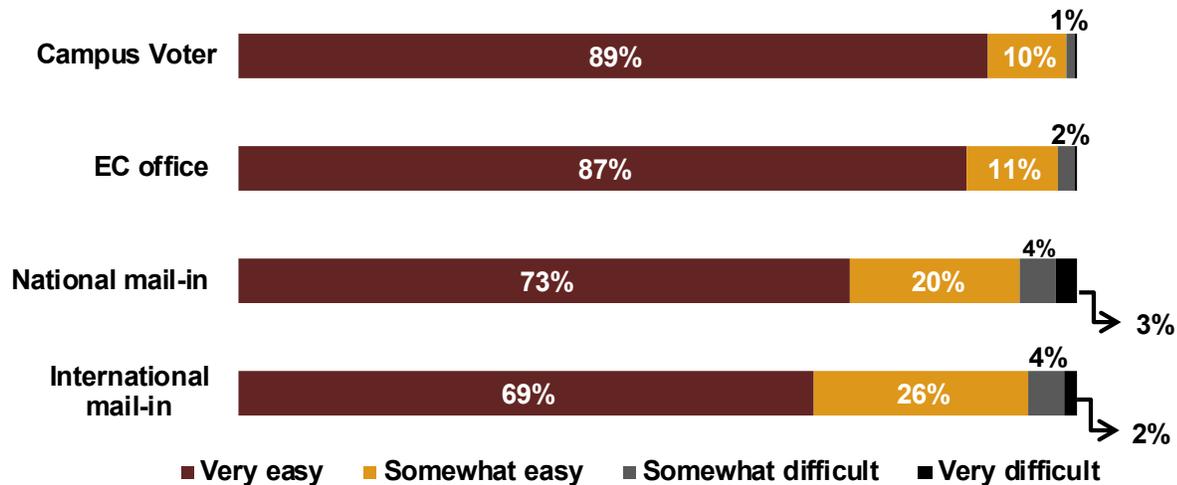
⁸ Q58. More specifically, would you say that completing the ballot was ... Base: $n = 3,339$: voters.

Overall ease of voting

Virtually all (97%) voters found that, overall, the special voting method that they used was easy: 85% of voters found it very easy, and 12% found it somewhat easy.

When considering the different voting methods used, ease of voting remained high; however, international mail-in voters were less likely to say that using that voting method was very easy (69%) compared with campus voters (89%) and EC office voters (87%).⁹

Overall ease of voting, by voting method¹⁰



Employment

Retired respondents were more likely to have found that voting by special ballot was very easy (91%) compared with those who were students (83%) or employed (82%).

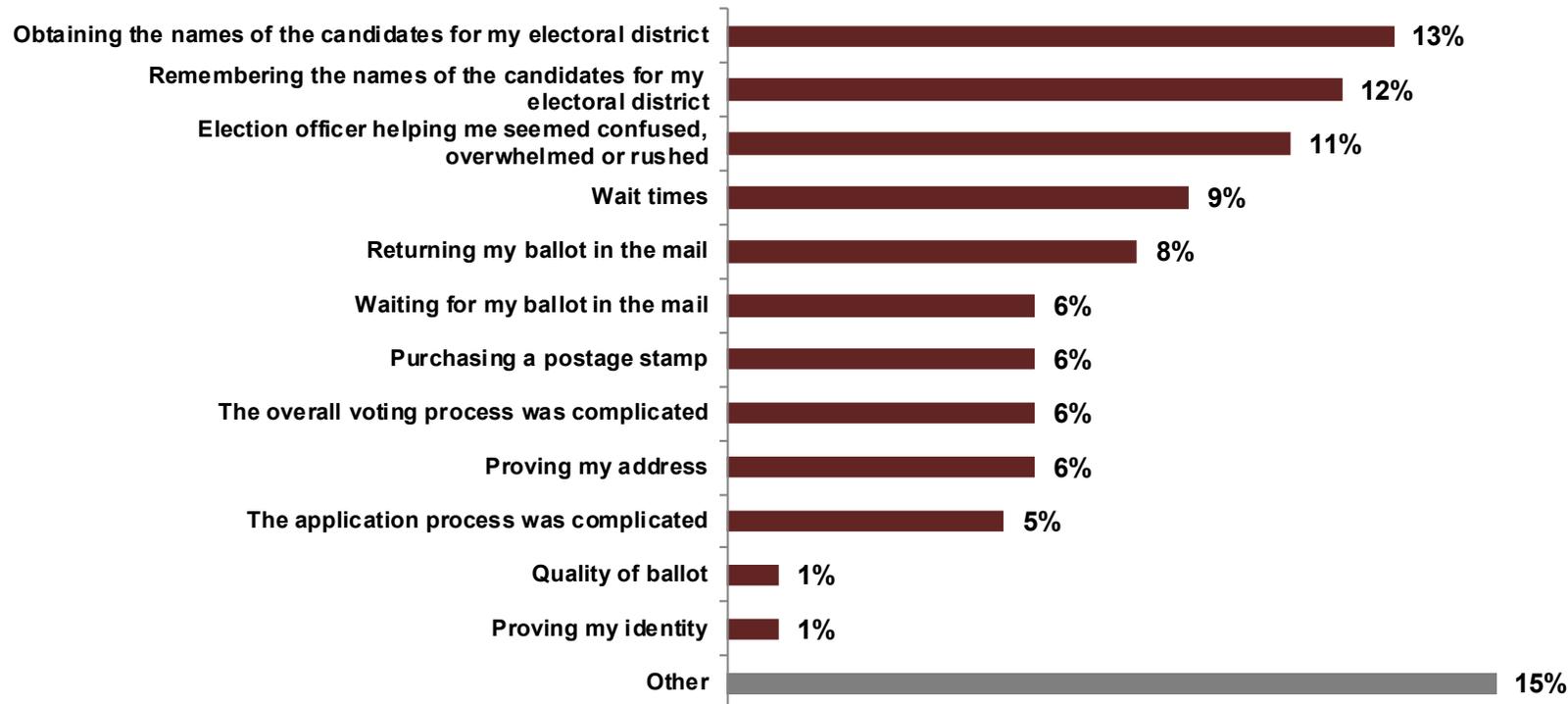
⁹ The graph does not display figures less than 1%, which fall into the "Very difficult" category.

¹⁰ Q52. Overall, would you say that using that voting method was ... Base: $n = 3,339$: voters.

Difficulty with voting method

Among respondents who indicated that using the voting method was difficult, the most common difficulty mentioned was obtaining the names of the candidates (13%), and remembering the names of the candidates (12%), for a given electoral district.

Difficulties with the voting method used¹¹



Among national mail-in voters, the most commonly mentioned difficulties were returning their ballot in the mail (18%), waiting for their ballot in the mail (15%) and purchasing a postage stamp (15%).

Similarly, international mail-in voters most commonly cited the following difficulties: returning their ballot in the mail (20%), waiting for their ballot in the mail (16%) and obtaining the names of the candidates for an electoral district (16%).

For EC office voters, common difficulties included remembering the names of the candidates for an electoral district (16%); obtaining the names of the candidates for an electoral district (15%); the election officer serving the voter seemed confused, overwhelmed or rushed (15%); and wait times (15%).

The difficulties faced by campus voters almost exclusively involved the election officer seeming confused, overwhelmed or rushed (55%); and wait times (13%).

¹¹ Q53–57. What did you find difficult about the voting method you used? Multiple responses. Base: $n = 168$: respondents who said that using the voting method was somewhat or very difficult.

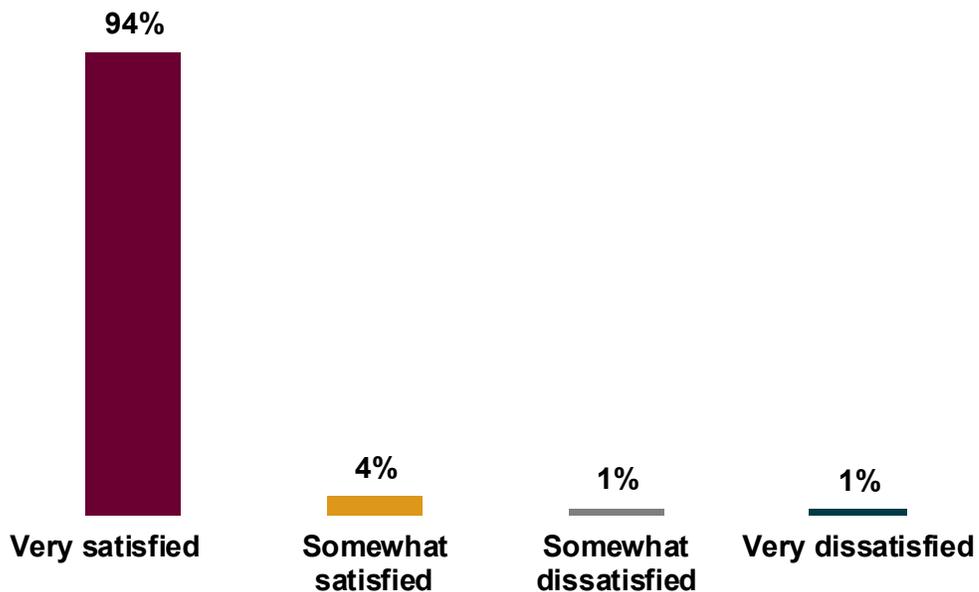
Satisfaction with services provided by Elections Canada staff when voting

Overall, the survey respondents were satisfied with the services provided to them by election officers. Nearly all respondents (98%) indicated that they were either somewhat or very satisfied with the services provided. Only 2% indicated that they were either somewhat or very dissatisfied with the services provided by Elections Canada staff.

Satisfaction levels across voting method did not differ significantly. Among the EC office voters who were satisfied with the services provided by the election officer, 94% were very satisfied, and 3% were somewhat satisfied.

Among the satisfied respondents who voted on campus, 93% were very satisfied, and 5% were somewhat satisfied.

Overall satisfaction with services provided by election officer(s)¹²



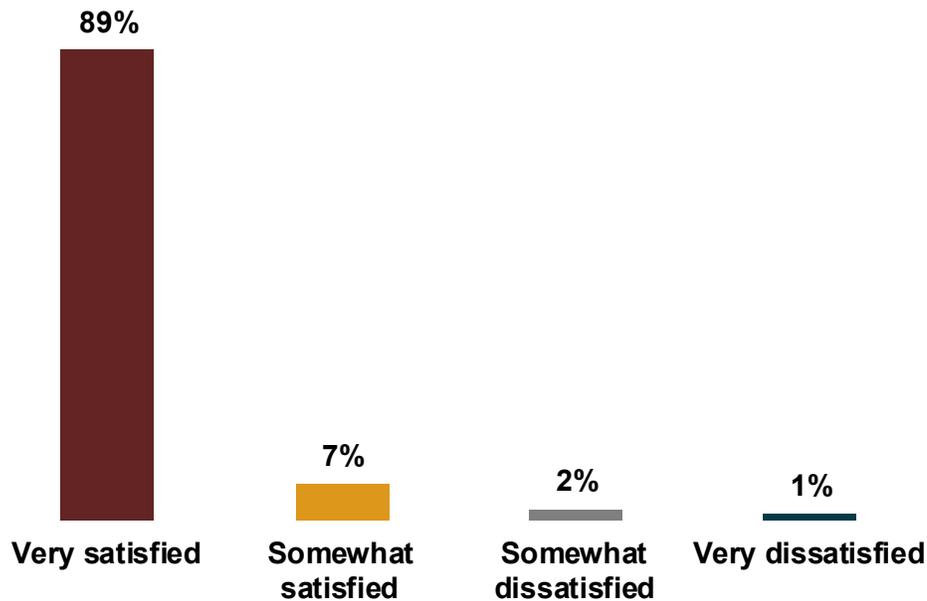
¹² Q62. Overall, how satisfied are you with the services provided by the election officer(s)? Base: $n = 1,136$: respondents who interacted with an election officer, either when receiving or when returning their ballot.

Satisfaction with overall voting experience

Overall, respondents were satisfied with their voting experience (96%), with 89% being very satisfied and 7% somewhat satisfied. Among those who were dissatisfied with their overall voting experience (4%), 2% were somewhat dissatisfied, and 1% were very dissatisfied.¹³

Overall satisfaction levels were similar across voting methods. International mail-in voters (94%), national mail-in voters (92%), EC office voters (97%) and campus voters (98%) were either very or somewhat satisfied with their overall voting experience.

Overall satisfaction with voting experience¹⁴



Voting method

While satisfaction levels were similar across voting method, those who voted on campus were more likely to say that they were very satisfied (91%) compared with both international mail-in (77%) and national mail-in (77%) voters.

¹³ Note: due to rounding, figures may not add up to combined categories.

¹⁴ Q61. Overall, how satisfied were you with your voting experience? Base: n = 3,339: voters.

Ways Elections Canada can improve services

All respondents were given the opportunity to provide suggestions for ways that Elections Canada can improve its services in the future. In over one-third of cases (38%), respondents took this opportunity to highlight their satisfaction with the voting process instead of providing suggestions for EC services.

One-tenth (10%) of respondents indicated the desire for an online voting service, and 8% wanted more advertising for voting by special ballot.

How can Elections Canada improve their services in the future?¹⁵	Percentage of cases, %
Offer online voting	10
More advertising for special voting methods	8
Provide list of candidates on ballot or in voting kit	7
Improve training for staff	4
More signs to make polling place visible	4
Complaints about envelopes or ballots	3
Provide paid postage	3
Make voting more accessible	2
Complaints or suggestions regarding the Elections Canada website	2
Voting process or wait times are too slow	2
Concerns regarding secrecy or security of voting method	1
Reduce time to receive ballot	1
Simplify the voting process (too complicated)	1
Allow for voting places abroad, at embassies or consulates	1
Other¹⁶	22

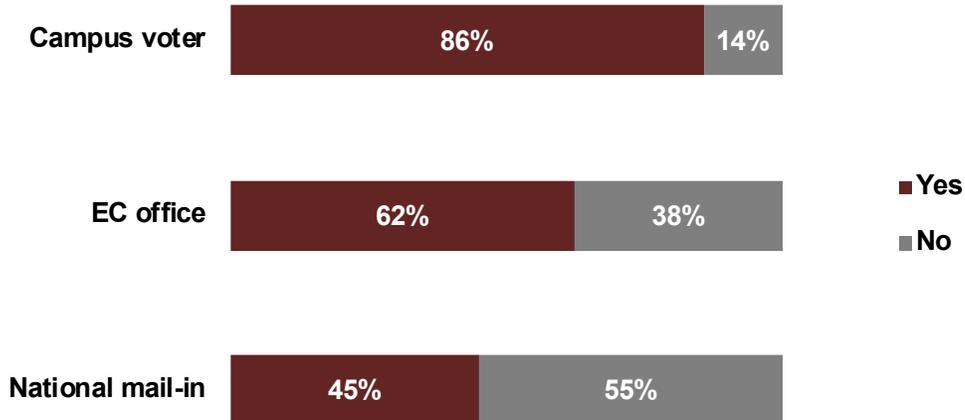
¹⁵ How can Elections Canada improve their services in the future? Open-ended question asked at the end of the survey. Base: $n = 3,514$: all respondents. Percentages in the table reflect the proportion of cases.

¹⁶ "Other" category includes suggestions that did not contain enough common responses to form a new category; it accounted for at least 1% of responses.

Would have voted otherwise

Overall, one-third (34%) of campus, EC office and national mail-in respondents said that they would not have voted at all had it not been for the option to vote by special ballot.

Would have voted at all, by voting method¹⁷



Voting method

If they had been unable to vote by special ballot, national mail-in voters were most likely to say that they would not have voted at all (55%) compared with EC office voters (38%) and campus voters (14%).

Age

Voters aged 18 to 24 were more likely to state that they would have voted if they had not been able to use this voting method: 82% claimed that they would have voted using another method. This compares with 66% of voters aged 25 to 34, 65% of voters aged 35 to 54, 59% of voters aged 55 to 74 and 60% of voters aged 75 and over.

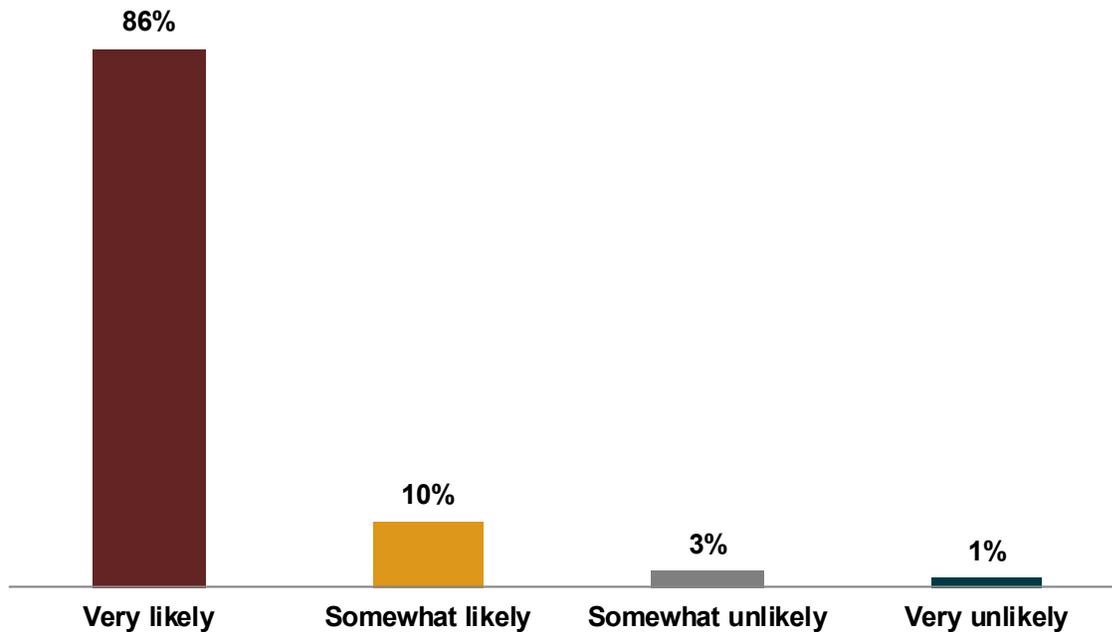
Voted in 2015

Respondents who voted in the 2015 general election (64%) were much more likely to say that if they could not have voted by special ballot, they would have voted using another method compared with those who did not vote in 2015 (36%).

¹⁷ Q16. If you had not been able to use that voting method, would you have voted otherwise? Base: $n = 1,200$: national mail-in voters, campus voters, EC office voters. International voters were not asked Q16.

Likelihood of recommending special ballot voting to others

Nearly all (96%) respondents were either very or somewhat likely to recommend voting by special ballot to others.¹⁸



Voting method

Nearly all (96%) international mail-in voters were either very or somewhat likely to recommend special ballot voting.

Among national mail-in voters who were likely to recommend special ballot voting to someone, 77% claimed that they were very likely, and 18% indicated that they were somewhat likely, to do so. Only 3% of national mail-in voters stated that they were somewhat unlikely, and 3% were very unlikely, to recommend the option to others.

Nearly all (96%) respondents who voted at an EC office were either very or somewhat likely to recommend special ballot voting.

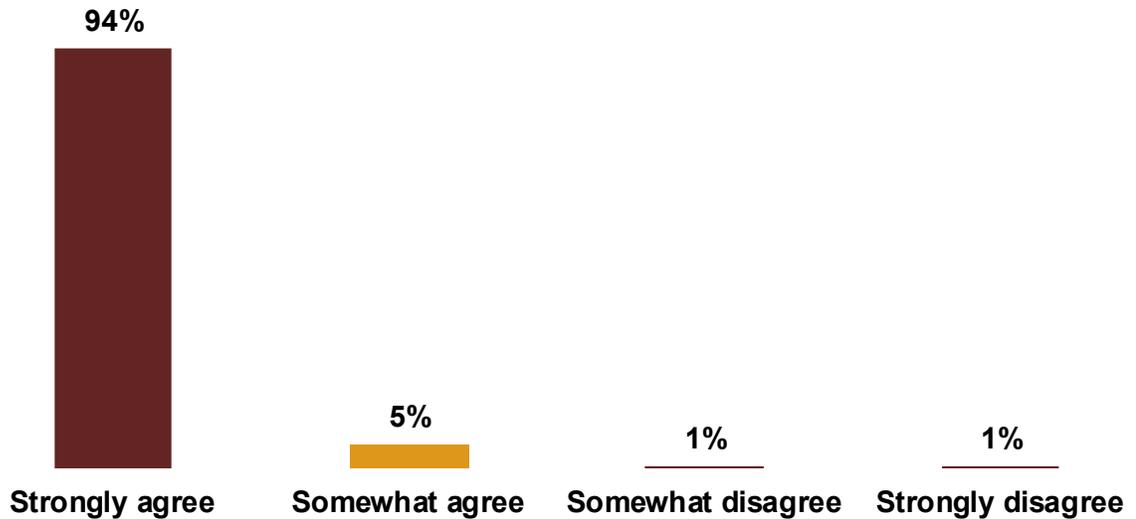
Virtually all (99%) campus voters were either very or somewhat likely to recommend special ballot voting to others.

¹⁸ Q63. Based on your experience, how likely are you to recommend this voting method to friends and family?
Base: $n = 3,339$: voters.

Perception of secrecy of the ballot

Overall, virtually all (99%) respondents agreed that the secrecy of their ballot was protected during the voting process, with 94% stating that they strongly agreed and 5% stating that they somewhat agreed. Only 1% of respondents disagreed that the secrecy of their ballot was protected during the voting process.

Perception of the secrecy of the ballot during the voting process¹⁹



Voting method

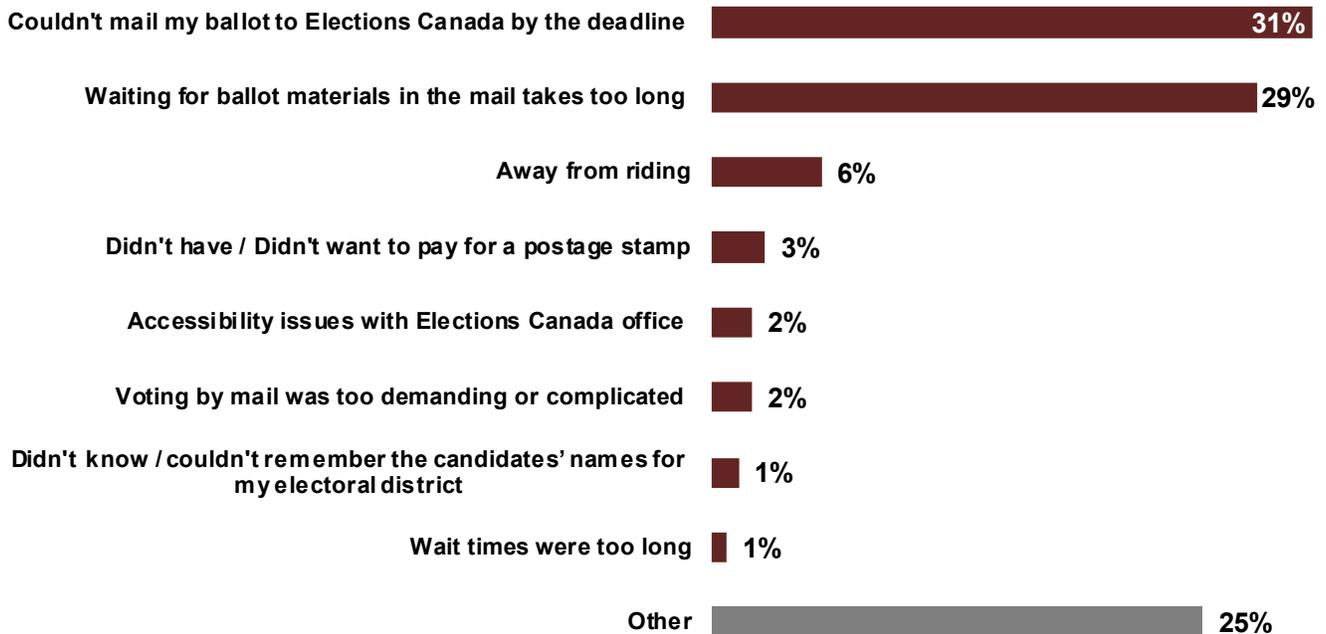
International mail-in and national mail-in voters were less likely to strongly agree that the secrecy of their vote was protected during the voting process (81% and 85%, respectively) compared with campus voters (95%) and EC office voters (94%).

¹⁹ Q64. The secrecy of my vote was protected during the voting process. Base: $n = 3,339$: voters.

Reason Unable to Vote by Special Ballot

Of all respondents, only 4% had not successfully returned their ballot. Among those who had been unable to cast their ballot, the most common reason provided for not being able to do so was among national and international mail-in electors, who could not mail in their ballot to Elections Canada by the deadline (33%).

Main reason unable to vote²⁰



²⁰ Q67-69. What is the main reason you were unable to vote? Base: $n = 140$: those who did not return their ballot. The data for these questions are unweighted.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Profile of Survey Respondents

This appendix provides a profile of the respondents who completed the Survey of Special Ballot Voters.

Gender	Unweighted, %	Weighted, %
Female	44	48
Male	51	51
Non-binary	< 1	< 1
Other	< 1	< 1
Prefer not to answer	4	1

Age groups	Unweighted, %	Weighted, %
18–24	19	20
25–34	23	15
35–54	33	21
55–74	22	35
75+	3	9

Region	Unweighted, %	Weighted, %
British Columbia	4	9
Alberta	5	17
Prairies	4	7
Ontario	10	19
Quebec	10	32
Atlantic	2	4
North	0	0
International	54	9
Prefer not to answer	1	0
Unknown	9	3

Education	Unweighted, %	Weighted, %
High school or less	7	12
Some post-secondary/college	24	36
Completed university	67	51
Other	2	1
Prefer not to answer	2	1

Employment status	Unweighted, %	Weighted, %
Employed	58	44
Unemployed	3	2
Homemaker/caregiver	2	2
Student	19	19
Retired	14	31
Other	4	3
Prefer not to answer	3	1

Functional disability	Unweighted, %	Weighted, %
Yes	9	10
No	87	86
Prefer not to answer	4	4

Indigenous	Unweighted, %	Weighted, %
Indigenous	2	2
Non-Indigenous	96	97
Prefer not to answer	2	2

Appendix B: Administrative Compared with Weighted Survey Data

Proportion of Elections Canada administrative data compared with weighted survey data, by voting method

