

Response to the Consultations on the New Voter Identification Requirements

1. Introduction

In the spring and summer of 2008, Elections Canada prepared to implement the new voter identification requirements for the next general election by undertaking consultations with individuals and organizations representing electors who may have greater difficulty meeting these requirements.

The Centre for Excellence in Communications conducted consultations with representatives of seniors' groups and residents of long-term care facilities and with representatives of student and homeless electors. It also conducted interviews with field staff, candidates and members of Parliament in areas where the requirements had already been implemented during by-elections. The group Apathy is Boring conducted interviews with a variety of stakeholders in the North, in the riding of Desnethé–Missinippi–Churchill River and with members of Parliament whose ridings lie directly above or below the 60th parallel, in addition to Elections Canada field staff in those areas.

These consultations aimed to garner insights into the potential challenges posed by the ID requirements as well as potential solutions. In fact, these discussions yielded valuable information about not only this topic but also the impact of our outreach and communications activities.

The timing of the October 14, 2008, general election limited our ability to respond to the recommendations or implement changes beforehand. However, we have now reviewed and considered each of the recommendations, together with the results of our [comprehensive evaluations](#) of the general election, and we will be making appropriate administrative changes in both the short and longer terms. Some of these changes were discussed during the Chief Electoral Officer's October 8, 2009, appearance before the House of Commons [Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs](#).

It should be noted that some of the suggestions and recommendations fall outside our administrative authority and would require legislative change; they may be included in a report to Parliament in spring 2010.

2. What We Heard

While the consultations resulted in a wide range of recommendations covering diverse areas of our activities, several themes emerged.

2.1 Implementing the Voter Identification Requirements

Difficulties with the new voter identification requirements identified through the consultations were two-pronged: communications and operations.

From a communications standpoint, feedback pointed to a need for clearer and more targeted communication of the requirements, both in our advertising and communications products such as the voter information card and householder (sent to all homes during the election), and in communications by field staff. In addition, recommendations emerged for clearer and simpler language.

From an operational perspective, difficulties were raised with the Letter of Attestation process, which was not well understood and was seen as cumbersome and restrictive. Recommendations were also made for additions to the list of authorized ID to more easily prove address, changes to processes at the polls to accommodate voters without the necessary ID, and additional training of field staff to ensure that the requirements are applied consistently at the polls.

2.2 Field Communications Materials and Advertising

Participants suggested that new and updated products be supplied to Elections Canada's field staff and stakeholder groups to augment the materials now in use. If possible, these products should be available in a simple "one-stop shop" format such as a tool kit (both in hard copy and on-line). Participants also expressed a desire for materials designed for specific audiences and available in Aboriginal and heritage languages, as well as items that can be customized and printed by community service groups. Elections Canada already produces several key products (such as the voter information guide) in Aboriginal and heritage languages; therefore, this suggests a need to both review and better communicate the multi-language options and services available to electors.

2.3 Field Operations

Increasing accessibility for Aboriginal, northern, rural and remote communities formed the basis of several recommendations. Suggested improvements included changes to training, implementation of on-line registration, increased mobile and advance poll opportunities, and expanded and improved targeted revision practices. Another suggestion concerned our two primary field outreach initiatives, the Community Relations Officer Program and the Aboriginal Elder and Youth Program. While both are well received, it was recommended that they be reviewed and supported by expanded training. Another recommendation was to create community relations officer positions that focus on seniors and residents of long-term care facilities.

2.4 Outreach and Communications Strategy

Consultations identified the need for a comprehensive, multi-year communications and outreach strategy, both between and during elections, that would include formal and informal partnerships to focus and guide our activities. To more effectively deliver our current programs and any new or expanded programs at the local or national level, field staff recommended increased human resource capacity as well as improved communication between Elections Canada staff in Ottawa and in the field.

While consultations took place before the October 14, 2008, general election, some of what we heard was reinforced by the results of our formal [post-election evaluations](#) and informal reports from the election. This is particularly true for students, Aboriginal and rural electors, and seniors in long-term care facilities, who, compared to the electorate as a whole, experienced greater difficulties in meeting the identification requirements, specifically proof of address.

3. Our Action Plan

We have developed an action plan, outlined below, that addresses the recommendations from the consultations as well as the results of the post-election evaluations by implementing improvements to both our Ottawa-based and our field activities over the coming years. Because we need to focus on staying election-ready during a minority government, we have adopted an incremental approach to making changes.

3.1 Implementing the Voter Identification Requirements

The voter identification requirements were the focus of our communications activities and the main message throughout the election, and our post-election surveys indicate that 94 percent of electors were aware of the rules. In spite of this, the recall of the information, particularly the proof of address requirement, was not consistent among all electors, especially among Aboriginal and rural voters.

In response to recommendations for clearer and simpler language, advice was sought from organizations such as the Movement for Canadian Literacy. We have already made improvements to the householder, media releases and posters, and we will continue to make changes to our Web site. We have also improved the design of our communications products, and developed new ones, to facilitate better understanding and recall of the ID requirements. In addition, we will continue to upgrade our training materials and programs for staff to ensure that they give electors correct and consistent information about the requirements during electoral events.

A number of recommendations concerned additions to the list of authorized pieces of ID. While post-election surveys indicated that less than one percent of electors could not vote because they lacked proper ID, the findings also reinforced that those groups we have engaged in consultations were the same that experienced difficulty providing the required ID (mainly to

prove address). While some of the recommended changes require more extensive study, such as adding the voter information card, we have already implemented the following:

a) Additions and changes to the list of authorized pieces of ID

- Hospital bracelet worn by residents of long-term care facilities
- Trapping licence
- CNIB ID card
- Broadening of documents accepted from students to include all correspondence issued by their school
- Shelters, soup kitchens, student residences, seniors' residences and long-term care facilities will be able to use *one* of the following items to provide electors with proof of address: letter of stay, admission form, statement of benefits or Elections Canada's existing letter of attestation.
- For electors residing in seniors' residences and long-term care facilities, a photocopy of an item on the list. This change addresses the fact that when these electors are admitted to a residence, they routinely hand over the originals of their ID to the administrator.

b) Letter of Attestation

The Letter of Attestation was, for some electors, the only document available to them that could provide proof of address.

Several recommendations were made to allow a wider range of organizations to issue the Letter of Attestation and to allow it to serve a broader purpose. However, the consultations and evaluations also highlighted difficulties with the process, as it was not well understood and was seen as cumbersome and restrictive. We have therefore focused our efforts on improving the training of field staff. We have also developed new tools, such as an information guide for those working with the homeless and an information guide and poster for long-term care facilities, to assist electors and those working with them to better understand the rules. In addition, accepting a broader range of documents issued by facility administrators, as listed above, should address some of the difficulties identified.

3.2 Field Communications Materials and Advertising

The feedback from stakeholder groups about the need for clearer, more targeted advertising and communications products and tools was echoed by field staff, particularly the community relations officers. In the short term, we have made minor but important changes to existing products, such as posters and pamphlets. Based on feedback from the consultations and the last general election, we created a new pamphlet specifically for students in time for the November 2009 by-elections.

In the medium and longer term, we will focus on the following:

- We will continue to consult with stakeholder groups and seek their feedback as we refine our communications approach and materials. Consultations with post-secondary student organizations, to take place in the next year, will launch this process.
- Also in the next year, we will produce tool kits for field staff that include the types of products and information identified as most relevant and useful. The content and format of these kits will be determined through formal and informal consultations with our partners. The kits will then be refined for use by external stakeholder groups in the medium term and may include, for some of the products, the ability for groups to customize information.
- Several key products, such as the voter information guide, are available in 11 Aboriginal languages and 27 heritage languages. Television, radio and print advertisements use many of these languages during an electoral event and a telephone relay service offers verbal translation. To ensure that these languages correspond to those that electors most require, we will be reviewing their suitability. We will also be exploring ways to better communicate the multi-language options and services available to electors.
- A Web site redevelopment project already underway will improve the organization of information targeted at different groups of electors. We are also exploring the idea of developing an extranet to improve communications with field staff and offer them on-line training.

3.3 Field Operations

The consultations generated several recommendations for changes to the rules and processes for registration and voting, as well as to our field outreach programs, including targeted revision, the Community Relations Officer Program and the Aboriginal Elder and Youth Program. While we can respond to some of the recommendations in the short term, others require longer-term study and planning.

The following highlights our action plan in each of these areas:

- We will review the Community Relations Officer Program and Aboriginal Elder and Youth Program in the medium term as part of developing our outreach framework and strategy. In the short term, we will focus on developing tools to assist field staff, such as new and improved communications products, as described above.
- We will continue to make improvements to our training programs to ensure that both election rules and service standards for student electors are applied consistently.
- We have reviewed the number and location of advance polls in rural areas with a view to increasing the accessibility of polling sites. For the next general election, approximately 400 additional advance polls will be set up.
- As described in our *Strategic Plan 2008–2013*, we are committed to increasing the accessibility of the electoral process by testing innovative ways to vote and offering electors additional ways to register. For example, we are developing a process whereby electors can register over the Internet. E-registration will be phased in by 2011, beginning with on-line

confirmation (“Am I on the list?”) and partial on-line updating (“Change of address”). We would also like to conduct an on-line voting pilot project, in a by-election, by 2013. Such a project must have the approval of Parliament, as required by the *Canada Elections Act*. We also recognize that for this initiative to succeed, it must preserve the security and integrity of the voting process and thus be carried out in a controlled environment.

- As mentioned earlier, several recommendations fall outside our authority and would require legislative change. We believe that there is an opportunity to further examine some of these, such as expanding the use of mobile polls and the current vouching rules, and we will be seeking the input and advice of registered political parties in reviewing them. A report on recommended amendments to the Act will be completed by spring 2010 and may include some of these items.

3.4 Outreach and Communications Strategy

Elections Canada recognizes that it needs to develop a comprehensive outreach and communications strategy, one that engages stakeholder groups based on their needs and, where appropriate, reaches out to groups between electoral events. We therefore need to establish an outreach capacity whose initiatives are informed by both research and feedback from stakeholder groups.

Research in support of strategy development is already underway. Elections Canada commissioned three [academic papers](#) to explore factors that influence the participation of Aboriginal voters in federal elections, which were presented at the 2009 Aboriginal Policy Research Conference in March of this year. These papers will help guide our future research and initiatives. Another recent report that we commissioned is *Youth Electoral Engagement in Canada*. It updates previous research into the causes of youth electoral engagement (and non-engagement) in Canada, identifies research gaps and makes suggestions for further study.

4. Conclusion

Holding these consultations allowed Elections Canada to hear first-hand what our successes and challenges are from those who are affected by electoral legislation and the processes we put in place to administer it. These discussions provided a unique window onto our activities. As a result, and together with the [results of our evaluations](#), we have developed action plans that we believe will assist electors in exercising their right to vote. Although some recommendations require longer-term planning to ensure that changes are well informed and executed, we have already begun to implement others, as described in this report.

We thank the approximately 175 electors, members of Parliament, candidates and Elections Canada staff from across the country who took time to participate in this process and share their insights and recommendations. Elections Canada is committed to working with electors and other stakeholders in our efforts to make the electoral process more accessible to all Canadians.