CONSIDERING VOTER TURNOUT

Virtually every resident of Saskatchewan who is a Canadian citizen 18 years or older has the right to vote in our provincial elections.

When voting, citizens need to prove their identity and address. They may do this by showing one piece of government-issued photo ID with a name and address (for example, a driver's license) or showing two original documents with the voter's name, from a list approved by Elections Saskatchewan. One of these documents must have the voter's address (for example, you could use a Saskatchewan health card and power bill).

If a voter cannot provide identification, another eligible voter can vouch for their identity and place of residence, so long as both of them are assigned to vote at the same polling district. An eligible voter can only swear an oath for one other person.

Identification requirements can create obstacles to voting. People such as the homeless or students living away from their hometown may not have the documentation needed to vote, and obtaining it can be difficult. These problems must not be overlooked or minimalised: while we need to ensure that fraudulent ballots are not cast, we also need to find ways to ensure everyone can exercise their right to vote.

Despite how easy it is for the masses to vote, a surprising number of people fail to exercise this right. The percentage of eligible voters casting ballots fell sharply in the mid-1990s, and has yet to return to its historical levels.

One way to increase voter turnout is to make voting mandatory, like in Australia. Australians who do not cast a ballot are fined unless they have a valid reason for not voting. This has led to roughly 95% voter turnout.

Mandatory voting increases turnout. However, requiring people to vote restricts our freedom. It takes away the right to freely sit out an election. Not voting can be a legitimate form of political protest.

In Saskatchewan, we have chosen to voluntarily encourage people to vote. One method to encourage turnout is providing greater access to polling stations. In the province,

- advance polling stations are opened for five days prior to the election
- polling stations are set up in seniors' and personal care homes
- polling stations are opened in hospitals for patients
- people who are homebound due to a disability (and their caregivers) may vote by appointment in their homes
- people can cast their ballot in person as an "absentee voter" at their returning office up until nine days before election day
- people can vote by mail

Nevertheless, other things could be done. For example, having advanced polling stations at universities and colleges could encourage younger people to vote.

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Voter turnout can be impacted by many factors, not all directly related to accessible voting. For example, the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy pointed out that in the 2020 provincial election:

- some constituencies where the election's outcome appears foregone (such as inner-city constituencies that almost always have landslide NDP victories) tended to have low turnout

- urban constituencies on city fringes made up of young families with above-average incomes and education levels tended to have higher turnout

- rural ridings where the Buffalo Party placed second to the perpetually-winning Sask Party candidate had high turnouts, suggesting the importance of mounting challenges to the status quo

ELIGIBLE* VOTER TURNOUT IN SASKATCHEWAN
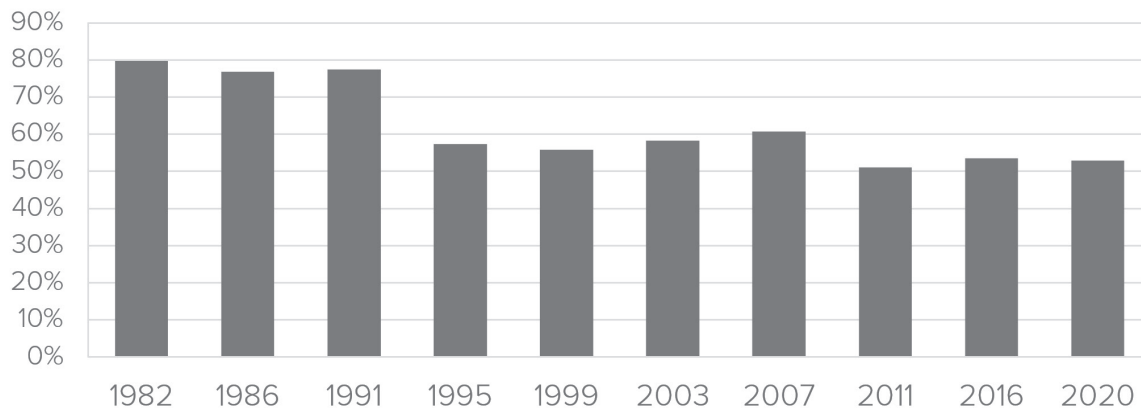
* Eligible Voters includes registered voters and people not registered to vote.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

Technology could change the ways we vote. Our current method of casting ballots is based on norms developed in the 19th century. Voters are given a paper ballot, they mark who they are voting for, and place it in a ballot box. When the polls close, the ballots are counted by hand. Scrutineers from candidates and political parties are invited to oversee the counting process. If a result is close, a judge may be asked to re-count the votes.

This is how we have voted and counted ballots in Saskatchewan since our first territorial elections in the 1800s. Elections Saskatchewan—the independent agency that oversees Saskatchewan elections—recently tried to change how votes are counted, by using electronic vote counting machines.

To make the case for changing to electronic vote counting machines, Elections Saskatchewan cited the efficiency of using electronic machines, and noted that several provinces use these methods to count votes. As well, Saskatoon and Regina use electronic counting methods for civic elections. It was also shown that electronic counting

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is more accurate than counting ballots by hand. They ran a trial in three recent byelections, and reported no problems.

However, the government was concerned that the integrity of elections—or at least the perception of integrity—could be negatively impacted by using electronic vote counting. They denied the election authority's request to change over to electronic vote counting.

VOTING ONLINE

A more radical change that has yet to be seen in Saskatchewan provincial elections is online voting. Being able to vote over the internet would make the process easier and could possibly increase voter participation.

Estonia was the first country to try online voting for a national election, in 2007. It has proven so popular there that about half of all votes are now cast online. Voter turnout in Estonia has also increased, although the research is not clear as to whether or not the increased turnout is the result of online voting. Closer to home, online elections have been implemented in several Ontario municipalities, and these elections have gone off without a hitch.

Detractors fear that online voting is less secure than casting physical ballots. Computer systems could be hacked, and even the principle of the secret ballot could be at risk. In Saskatchewan, Elections Saskatchewan has not proposed online voting.

Regardless of how or if we vote, we can be confident in the accuracy of election results in Saskatchewan. Our provincial elections have been virtually free from allegations of fraud and vote-counting irregularities. Citizens should carefully consider any changes proposed to our voting process, but should also be confident in Elections Saskatchewan, the province's election oversight body.

Paper ballots were first used in Rome in 139 BCE. Our modern system where voters are provided with a standard paper ballot that they secretly mark and immediately place in the ballot box originates in New South Wales, Australia, in 1858.

Prior to the Australian experiment, voters brought their own ballots to polling stations, marked with their candidate of choice. Sometimes, political parties would even print ballots for their supporters to use. Because the bring-your-own ballot method was open to all sorts of fraud, ballots were usually cast publicly. In fact, it was common practice to use glass jars as ballot boxes, to see what was being dropped inside.

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