

CONSIDERING VOTER TURNOUT

Virtually every resident of Saskatchewan who is a Canadian citizen 18 years or older may vote in our provincial elections. The only limitation is that they must have lived here for six months prior to the election call.

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, 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: creating barriers to practicing basic democratic rights is wrong.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of Saskatchewan citizens have the documentation required 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 registered 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 by taking away the right to freely sit out an election. Not voting can be a legitimate form of political protest.

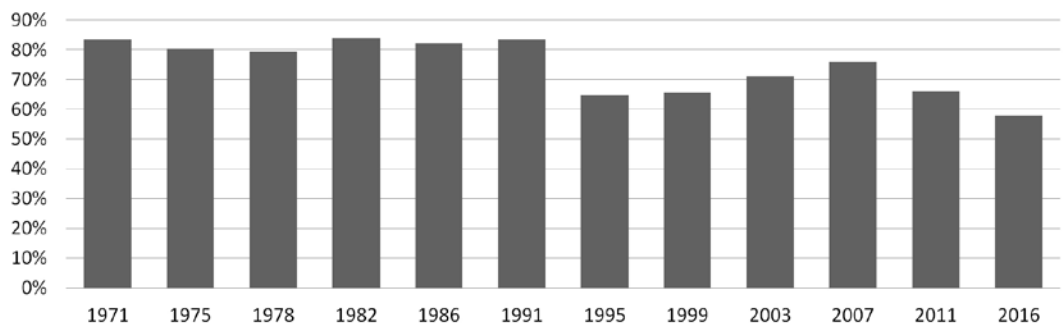
In Saskatchewan, we have chosen to voluntarily encourage people to vote. One method we encourage turnout is by providing greater access to polling stations. In the province,

- advance polling stations are opened for five days just 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 apply to vote by mail

Nevertheless, more could be done. For example, having advanced polling stations at universities and colleges during provincial elections could encourage younger people to vote.



VOTER TURNOUT IN SASKATCHEWAN



TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

A spirited debate has opened up on how to use modern technology to make voting more efficient and accessible. 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 all the 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 has been the method used for voting and counting since our first territorial elections in the 1800s.

Elections Saskatchewan—the independent agency that oversees Saskatchewan elections—had plans to start changing how votes are counted for the 2020 provincial elections, but these plans were postponed. The first wave of change had included the trial use of electronic tabulators. Unlike our current method of hand-counting ballots, machines would have been used to count ballots.

Changes to how we count votes must be carefully made. For example, in the United States reports constantly emerge about problems with their electronic ballot-counting systems. In contrast, Saskatchewan’s paper-ballot elections almost never end with lingering doubts about the vote count. That said, electronic tabulators have been used in many Saskatchewan municipal elections with no reported problems. While tabulators may speed up vote counts, it is hard to imagine electronic vote counts leading to increased voter turnout.

VOTING ONLINE?

A more radical change that has yet to be seen in Saskatchewan provincial elections is online voting. There is little doubt that being able to vote over the internet would make the process easier for tech-savvy people, 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 almost 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. After all, many factors shape a person’s decision on whether or not they will vote. Closer to home, online elections have been implemented in several Ontario municipalities, and have had few difficulties.

Detractors fear that online voting is far less secure than casting physical ballots. Computer systems could be subject to tampering, fraud, and cyber-attacks. Even the principle of the secret ballot could be at risk, given that your vote is transferred over the internet.

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 the independence of 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.

