COVID-19 AND VOTING

COVID-19 has changed the provincial election. To meet public health guidelines, political parties have used social distancing while campaigning. As well, much of the emphasis has shifted from rallies and gatherings to electronic strategies.

Elections Saskatchewan—the agency in charge of provincial elections—has also made changes to ensure public health guidelines are met for the voting process. For example, at polling stations social distancing will be required, everyone will get their own pencil to mark the ballot, and the use of masks will be strongly encouraged. Perhaps the biggest change, though, is this election's emphasis on voting by mail.

Voting by mail is not new to Saskatchewan. In the 2016 provincial election, about 1% of ballots—4,420—were cast through the mail. Most commonly, mail-in ballots were used by students studying outside the province or snowbirds who spend winter living abroad. However, the onset of COVID-19 has prompted many more people who would regularly vote in person to vote by mail.

To vote by mail, voters must make an application to Elections Saskatchewan. Applications can be sent online or through the mail. Voters must provide proof of identity and address, and if their application is approved, they will receive a mail-in ballot package, that includes a postage-paid envelope to return the ballot to Elections Saskatchewan.

Voters can fill out their ballot and mail it at any time, up until when polls close on election day, October 26th. Ballots postmarked after then will not be counted. However, to be on the safe side voters may want to send ballots in earlier: ballots must be received by Elections Saskatchewan no later than noon on November 5th or they will not be counted.

Voters must properly fill out the ballot and return it in a particular way, or it cannot be counted. A marked ballot must be placed in the "ballot envelope," then placed in the "certificate envelope." Together, these two envelopes are mailed to Elections Saskatchewan. The certificate envelope is signed by the voter, so that Elections Saskatchewan can keep track of who returned their ballot. The ballot envelope will be removed from the certificate envelope, and then placed in a ballot box. This double-envelope process ensures that the secrecy of the ballot is maintained, and helps prevent voting fraud by verifying the authenticity of returned ballots.

On election day, the counting process begins. The ballot box will be emptied, and the envelopes containing marked ballots will be opened so the ballot can be counted. Because ballots may arrive after election day, the final results of the election may not be known on October 26th. If a considerable number of mail-in ballots are outstanding on election day, it would be impossible to declare a winner. Given that in 2016, the winning candidate in seven constituencies won by fewer than 400 votes, there is a very real possibility we will not know the full results of the election until early November.

Discuss

1. We may not know the results of the election on election night. Why is patience and a respect for processes important for democracy to work properly?

2. Would you use a mail-in ballot if you were voting? Why or why not?

3. If, unfortunately, a candidate dies during an election campaign, a new election day will be set for the constituency where the deceased candidate was running. This allows the party who lost the candidate to nominate another person to run in that constituency. In every other constituency across the province, the election will continue as scheduled.

    a) The rule for deceased candidates applies to every constituency, including party leaders'. What would be the practical effect on an election campaign if a party leader died?

    b) Do we focus too much on party leaders and not enough on party policies and individual candidates?

ACTIVITY