

DECLINED BALLOTS

For many reasons, some people choose not to vote. This is their right. However, voting is important to a well-functioning democracy. For citizens who do not want to vote for a particular candidate, they have options other than not showing up.

REJECTED BALLOTS

When a ballot is marked improperly or illogically by a voter, it is considered a rejected ballot.

Ballots are rejected during the counting process for such reasons as being marked for more than one candidate or being defaced. While this is commonly referred to as a “spoiled ballot,” under Saskatchewan’s electoral law a spoiled ballot is something different. A spoiled ballot is a ballot retained by the deputy returning officer and not counted. Ballots can be considered spoiled if there is a printing problem with the ballot. Ballots can also be considered spoiled if a voter improperly fills it out, and exchanges the improper ballot for a new one.

With rejected ballots, it is impossible to know the voter’s motivations. Some voters may have been genuinely expressing dissatisfaction with the candidates or with the system of government in general. Other rejected ballots are simply the result of people making genuine mistakes when filling in their ballots.

To help clarify when a voter is purposely expressing dissatisfaction, some jurisdictions have embraced the idea of the declined ballot.

DECLINED BALLOTS

When a voter receives a ballot at the voting station, they have the option of declining their ballot. To decline a ballot, the voter must give the ballot back to the election official without filling it in, declaring that they wish to “decline their ballot.” When this happens, the election official must record the ballot as declined.

Voters can decline their ballots in Saskatchewan’s provincial elections. However, those ballots are not counted specifically as a “declined ballot.” Instead, the ballot is counted but lumped in with all the rejected ballots. This means that when the election results are published, the public has no way of knowing how many ballots were purposely declined and how many ballots were rejected for other reasons.

Other jurisdictions recognise that declining your ballot is a unique form of political expression. For example, in Alberta and Manitoba election results include a breakdown of rejected ballots and declined ballots. Ontario goes one step further, by breaking down rejected ballots, declined ballots, and ballots left blank but placed in the ballot box.

DECLINED BALLOTS AND THE SECRET BALLOT

Secret ballots are a cornerstone idea of liberal democracies. When the public votes in elections, there is a risk that they may be intimidated or threatened for their political choices. By making your ballot secret, only you know who you voted for. Secret ballots were first used in Canada’s 1874 federal election.

While declining your ballot is a legitimate form of political expression, it is not a secret process. Voters must publicly declare their desire to decline a ballot and hand it back at the polling station. On the other hand, voters who cast a vote for a candidate or deface their ballots do so in secrecy. The public nature of declining a ballot can be seen as undermining people’s right to political privacy.



DECLINED BALLOTS... CONTINUED

Manitoba's election laws acknowledge the issue of secret ballots by allowing voters to write "declined" on their ballot and placing it in the ballot box. This way the voter retains their political privacy while having their ballot counted as declined.

WHY DECLINE YOUR BALLOT?

Declined ballots offer voters a chance to fulfill their democratic responsibility of voting, while concurrently allowing an opportunity to officially register their political dissatisfaction. Such expression is especially useful for citizens in jurisdictions that publicly report declined ballots separately from other rejected ballots. Thus, it is possible to participate in the voting process without actually endorsing any particular candidate or party.

Discuss

1. Declining a ballot is a legitimate political expression. However, citizens should consider several things before declining their ballot.
 - a) Should citizens learn about and speak with all candidates in their constituency before declining their ballot?
 - b) Getting involved with a political party is a way to change politics from the inside. Is this a more constructive way to effect political change?
 - c) What other constructive ways can citizens participate in the political process if they are dissatisfied with the candidates or the system of government as a whole?
2. In 2014, an Ontario citizen launched a non-partisan campaign called "Decline Your Vote." It was meant to raise awareness of declined ballots for that year's provincial election. The campaign appeared to have had an impact: 31,399 ballots were declined, compared to just 2,335 declined ballots in the previous provincial election.
 - a) Do you think more people would decline their ballots if they were aware of the option?
 - b) Whose responsibility is it to make people aware of the declined ballot option?
3. In Saskatchewan, declined ballots are counted separately from other rejected ballots. However, when election results are published declined ballots are lumped into the "rejected" category. Would it be useful if Saskatchewan's election laws were changed so that declined ballots were reported separately?
4. What do you think would happen if declined ballots outnumbered ballots cast for candidates in an election? In other words, what would happen if declined ballots "won"?
5. Under what circumstances do you think it is okay to decline a ballot?

