



Meeting Notes

PRESENT

Elections BC

- Harry Neufeld, Chief Electoral Officer
- Linda Johnson, Deputy Chief Electoral Officer
- Nola Western, Executive Director, Electoral Finance and Corporate Administration
- Anton Boegman, Executive Director, Corporate Planning and Event Management
- Amie Foster, Executive Program Manager
- Cody Robertson, Information Technology Support

Political Parties (alphabetically by party name)

- BC NDP: Fleur Matthewson
- British Columbia Conservative Party: Wayne McGrath, Jeff Bridge, Peter Neville
- British Columbia Liberal Party: Dan Baxter, Chad Pederson
- Democratic Reform B.C.: David Mohr
- Green Party Political Association of British Columbia: Murray Weisenberger, Ryan Conroy
- Nation Alliance Party: Wei Ping Chen, Jun Cheng
- Reform Party of British Columbia: Ron Gamble, David Hawkins, Ross Eccles

HANDOUTS:

- [Agenda](#)
- [PowerPoint presentation: 2009 Event Overview: Highlights and Key Changes](#)
- [PowerPoint presentation: Political party survey results](#)
- [PowerPoint presentation: Corporate post-event evaluation results, planning](#)
- [PowerPoint presentation: Corporate post-event evaluation results, finance](#)

Introduction

In his introductory comments, the Chief Electoral Officer, Harry Neufeld welcomed all attendees and advised them that his term will end on June 3, 2010.

Elections BC has developed annual Political Party Information Sessions in the interest of fairness and transparency. While not required by statute, the purpose of the annual Political Party Information Session is to advise registered political parties on the role, programs and services of Elections BC, and to provide parties with information at key points in the election cycle.

The 2009 Political Party Information Session focused on feedback from a wide range of stakeholders including political parties, voters, non-voters, election officials and Elections BC headquarters staff following the 2009 General Election and Referendum on Electoral Reform.

All registered political parties were invited to send up to three representatives.

2009 Event Overview and Key Changes

Linda Johnson, Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, provided attendees with an overview of the electoral events conducted in 2009, and described key changes from previous events.

Enumeration:

The province-wide targeted enumeration was undertaken in advance of the 2009 General Election. The enumeration featured an addressed mailer to all residential addresses in the province. The addressed mailer included the names of all registered voters in that residence and encouraged voters to update their registration information by phone or online. The mail-based enumeration was conducted in February and March. The enumeration was completed in April 2009 when Elections BC conducted a targeted face-to-face enumeration of social service agencies, long term care facilities and homeless shelters. Face-to-face enumeration was important in these facilities to ensure that voters were aware of the new voter identification rules resulting from passage of the *Election Amendment Act, 2008*.

For the first time, voters were able to register by phone, and were allowed to remove other voters registered at their residential address who were no longer resident there. Update reminders were posted on public computer monitors in libraries and post secondary institutions and Elections BC sent a special mailer to residences on university and college campuses in the province.

Enumeration efforts resulted in a high quality revised voters list for the general election and fewer registrations in conjunction with voting than in 2005.

Redistribution:

A redistribution of provincial electoral district boundaries takes place after every second general election. Electoral district boundaries are recommended by an independent, non-partisan electoral boundaries commission consisting of a Supreme Court Justice or retired judge, the Chief Electoral Officer and a third member recommended by the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. While the Commission is independent of Elections BC, Elections BC provided cartography staff, base maps, and districting software to assist the Commission with their mandate.

On February 14, 2008, the commission tabled its final report with the Legislative Assembly. The MLAs accepted most of the recommendations of the boundaries commission, with amendments to protect the vote in rural ridings where populations are diminishing. The new boundaries took effect on April 14, 2009 when the writs of election were issued.

For the first time, the electoral district boundaries were established in using GPS coordinates on a CD instead of using traditional 'metes and bounds'. The digital format allowed Elections BC to efficiently redistribute the address register and voters list, and create the wide range of mapping products required to administer the general election.

In addition to implementing the province-wide electoral district redistribution, Elections BC also redistributed all of the voting areas in the province, resulting in over 10,000 voting areas for the 2009 General Election.

Redistribution was a success; of more than 2 million residential addresses, only 50 required correction and most were resolved before the writs were issued. In very few cases (200 voters in 7 voting areas), new Where to Vote cards and voting books were issued to correct outstanding issues. Elections BC's post-election survey revealed that there was a higher acceptance of voting places by voters in 2009 than there was in 2005—when no redistribution took place.

General Election and Referendum:

The *Election Amendment Act, 2008* resulted in 90 changes to the *Election Act* prior to the 2009 General Election. As a result of these changes, it was the first time voters in B.C. were required to provide identification to vote in a provincial election. Additionally the nomination period was decreased, nomination requirements were increased, new third party advertising rules were established, and advance voting hours were extended. The challenge in implementing this level of change so soon before the election was compounded by referendum Regulations established just five months before the referendum. Additionally, Elections BC was implementing the new province-wide electoral district boundaries and voting areas, and, just two months prior to the general election, the new third party advertising rules were struck down by the courts.

To administer the general election, Elections BC employed 175 District Electoral Officers and Deputies, approximately 1000 field office staff and nearly 37,000 election officials. For the first time, Elections BC contracted Service BC to operate the call centre.

Elections BC's comprehensive communications campaign was very effective. A survey of voters prior to the election showed that 96% of respondents had seen some form of Elections BC communications regarding the events.

In 2009 Elections BC saw a dramatic increase in the number of voters using advance voting. Research shows that this was likely a switching behaviour from general voting, as overall turnout declined. Absentee voting rates have remained relatively constant.

Accessibility remains a priority for Elections BC. In 2009 Elections BC offered Braille candidate lists, a voter template for visually impaired voters, oversized signage with the ballot information and provided special training to election officials in every voting place on how to best serve voters with disabilities. The feedback received from voters with disabilities was very positive.

Attendees asked for clarification regarding the call centre period of operations, outreach to students during enumeration and how electoral boundaries are determined.

Political Party Survey

Amie Foster, Executive Program Manager, provided an overview of the results of a survey of the political parties that endorsed candidates in the 2009 General Election. The political party survey was conducted in the fall of 2009. 12 of the 15 parties that endorsed candidates responded to the survey.

The results were highly positive. Areas of excellence included results reporting, DEO knowledge, suitability and impartiality, and nominations and endorsements. Written comments praised the efficiency and responsiveness of Elections BC.

One of the areas identified for improvement was enumeration, where comments highlighted a division in opinion regarding the best approach - from not-at-all to a full-scale door-to-door enumeration. And, while voter identification was challenging for some, Elections BC was able to learn from the experiences of Elections Canada during the last federal election and worked to minimize the potential issues related to the new statutory requirements. Issues management was also identified as an area for improvement. Elections BC strives to provide the highest quality service to all clients, and will continue to refine future efforts.

Detailed survey results are available on the Elections BC website at www.elections.bc.ca.

Corporate Post-Event Evaluation

Overview:

Anton Boegman, Executive Director of Corporate Planning and Event Management, described the process followed by Elections BC in post-event evaluation. All staff at Elections BC, including front-line-staff and all levels of management, came together for a full-day meeting following the 2009 General Election and referendum. The objective of this meeting was to recognize successes and identify and prioritize areas for improvement. Senior management felt that the perspective of staff at all levels was critical to this process.

Candidate services and nominations:

In 2009 Elections BC saw a clear decline in candidate participation. The number of candidates was down 16% from 2005 and the number of parties represented was down 40%. Candidate participation overall has declined 33% from 1996. While there is no clear reason for this decline, it is of concern to Elections BC.

Successes in this area included timely reporting of candidate status on the Elections BC website, effective communication with political parties, and an efficient process for filing financial disclosure documents with the Clerk's office.

Suggested areas for improvement were identified as the need for more online-fillable forms, a requirement for political parties to supply email addresses to speed communication with the parties, web-based or in-person training for financial agents, and more training for District Electoral Officers on nomination procedures.

Voting administration:

In 2009 there was a decline of 7% in voter participation from 2005. This was accompanied by a change in voter behaviour, moving from general voting to advance voting. The causes of these changes are not fully understood.

Some of the successes in this area included the vote-by-mail processes, the administration of voting for military personnel, the administration of voter ID requirements, the election official training model and event night reporting. Suggestions for future improvements include a regional service delivery model, additional training for DEOs and other election officials, improved election official and DEO communication with scrutineers, and the earlier assignment of liaison officers.

Areas identified for future thinking included the long-term sustainability of the voting administration model we currently use, and the possibility of electronic voting.

Campaign finance:

Nola Western, Executive Director of Electoral Finance and Corporate Administration, described the lessons learned in a number of areas of interest to the audience. In 2009, parties and candidates continued to struggle with the need to have authorization statements on election advertising and Elections BC received complaints from all sides about unattributed ads. Most of the complaints involved internet pop-up ads and banner ads that, when clicked, would take the user to the sponsor's

website. Elections BC saw this mistake being made by candidates of all parties that had a large internet presence.

Elections BC is now reviewing all of the election financing reports to ensure compliance with the *Election Act*. Although many of the reports were audited, the *Election Act* does require some unusual accounting treatment which complicates the bookkeeping and reporting.

While most parties were not involved in the Referendum on Electoral Reform, there were campaign finance responsibilities related to it. Proponent and opponent groups selected by the Ministry of Attorney General were each provided with \$500,000 of public money by Elections BC which was to be used to “get the word out”. They were also permitted to accept referendum contributions from other sources and both groups did so. Like political parties and candidates, these groups were required to file audited financial reports after the event and both have complied with that requirement. Those reports are available for public viewing on the Elections BC website.

Constituency association deregistration:

The electoral district redistribution resulted in the disestablishment of the “old” 79 EDs and the establishment of 85 new ones. All of the registered constituency associations under the old EDs had to voluntarily deregister early or be automatically deregistered on April 14, Writ Day. Of the 164 registered constituency associations, 131 deregistered early and only 33 were deregistered on Writ Day. This allowed the constituency associations and EBC to finalize most of the related paperwork before the election period started.

Under the new electoral districts there are now 90 registered constituency associations; it is apparent that some of the political parties have decided not to continue with registered associations. Political parties and constituency associations are reminded that registration does have its benefits—registered constituency associations may issue tax receipts, incur election expenses and give money, goods or services to a candidate, a political party or another constituency association.

Third party advertising:

Third party advertising rules applied to both the referendum and the election.

Changes to the *Election Act* added new complexity to the third party advertising rules. The time period for which third party advertising provisions applied was increased and came into effect 60 days before the start of the campaign period. Any individual or organization that sponsored election advertising from February 13 to General Voting Day was required to be registered, to be independent of candidates and political parties and to comply with new spending limits.

The new spending limits established by the *Election Act* were \$3,000 in a single ED and \$150,000 overall for the 60 day pre-campaign period and the campaign period. However, the rules changed part way through that period when Justice Cole of the B.C. Supreme Court found that the spending limits in the 60 day pre-campaign period were unconstitutional because they violated the right of freedom of expression. The rules requiring registration and disclosure during the pre-campaign period were unchanged by the judge’s ruling. The Ministry of Attorney General has appealed Justice Cole’s decision so it remains to be seen if third party spending limits in the pre-campaign period will apply for the next general election.

There were very few registered third party referendum advertising sponsors and only 3 reported spending more than \$500. The biggest spender spent less than \$3,300.

Participants asked questions on a variety of topics, including the nomination process, Orders of the Chief Electoral Officer, and constituency association registration.

Voter Turnout

Harry Neufeld, Chief Electoral Officer, provided a summary of the voter surveys conducted by Elections BC and what further steps are being taken by Elections BC to understand voter turnout.

Voter and non-voter surveys:

In early 2009 Stats BC conducted a Pre-Election Voter Awareness Survey on behalf of Elections BC. It was followed by a Voter/Non-Voter Survey following the provincial general election. While the results of the Pre-Election Voter Awareness Survey yielded positive results, the collection of this type of data can be problematic. In order to collect 765 responses, researchers contacted 17,867 people. Stats BC has found that those who are more likely to vote may also be more likely to respond to this kind of survey.

The survey indicated that 94% of respondents intended to vote, that most eligible voters agreed that voting was easy, and that they knew what they needed to do to vote. Additionally, 97% knew that they needed to prove their identity to vote, 88% knew that they could access advance voting if they chose to do so, and 84% knew that they needed to update their voter registration if their residential address had changed. A full 96% of respondents had seen at least one piece of election communications. Elections BC was surprised, however, that only 63% knew of the upcoming referendum despite considerable funds being spent in public information campaigns. It simply did not resonate like the election messaging did.

With positive feedback about the election communications campaign and a high degree of voter knowledge of the process, it was surprising when voter turnout numbers for the 2009 General Election showed that only 51% of eligible voters actually voted.

After the 2009 General Election, BC Stats conducted the Voter-Non-Voter Post Election Awareness Survey on behalf of Elections BC. This type of survey is very time consuming and expensive. Again finding respondents was a challenge—more than 52,000 people were called in order to survey just 750 non-voters.

Some interesting findings resulted from the second survey. Voters tended to be older, long-term residents of B.C. with a post secondary degree. Individuals were more likely to vote when other members of the household also voted and voters tended to be more engaged in civic life than non-voters—more than 99% said they were interested in politics at some level, while 13% of non-voters were not interested in any way. A full 65% of non-voters were disengaged or pessimistic, sceptical, lacked interest, disliked the candidates or parties, or felt that their vote did not matter.

The most surprising result from the Voter-Non-Voter Post Election Awareness Survey was that 45% of all non-voters made their decision to not vote on the day of the election.

Further research:

Elections BC is undertaking further research regarding voter behaviour to determine if there are commonalities between those who do not vote. At issue is the legitimacy of B.C.'s democratic institutions with declining voter turnout. Jurisdictions all over the democratic world are wrestling with the same issues. The 2008 American presidential election of Barack Obama drew only 62% of the eligible voters in the United States.

Some jurisdictions saw electronic voting as the solution to declining voter turnout only to realize that it resulted in a minor bump in turnout, followed by a predictable drop. Some have argued that a province-wide door-to-door enumeration will re-engage people; however our research has indicated that there is no proof of this in areas where door-to-door enumerations currently take place.

Elections BC works hard to make voting accessible, but must remain non-partisan. Some of the responsibility to increase voter engagement must rest in the hands of the political parties, and voters themselves.

The executive summaries for both surveys as well as the data files can be viewed at www.elections.bc.ca. Results from similar surveys conducted in 2005 are also on the Elections BC website.

Attendees asked about mandatory voting, the ability to cast a protest vote and voters' guides.

Next Steps

Linda Johnson, Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, provided an update on a number of upcoming activities and events.

Reports:

The redistribution report was tabled in the Legislative Assembly in October and is available on the Elections BC website at www.elections.bc.ca. The Statements of Votes for both the 2009 General Election and the 2009 Referendum on Electoral Reform will be available to the public on the Elections BC website in early January. The Report of the Chief Electoral Officer, which contains election financing summaries, and the enumeration report will follow in March. Finally, the 2010 CEO Recommendations for Legislative Change Report will be tabled in April 2010.

Election Advisory Committee (EAC):

As required by law, the Election Advisory Committee consists of two representatives from each party represented in the Legislature, and one from each party which endorsed candidates in half of the electoral districts in the last general election.

As a result of the 2009 General Election, the appointment of all members of the EAC have been rescinded, and a new appointment process is underway. The new EAC will consist of two representatives from each of the British Columbia Liberal Party and the BC NDP, and one representative from the Green Party Political Association of British Columbia.

As required by section 16 of the *Election Act*, the CEO must consult with the EAC regarding any recommendations for legislative change. The next meeting of the EAC is expected to take place in early 2010 to discuss the CEO's recommendations in this regard.

Follow-up activities:

The meeting notes and presentations from this information session will be available on the Elections BC website in late December.

Next meeting:

The next Political Party Information Session is expected to take place in the fall of 2010. If political parties have recommendations for agenda topics or have questions before the next time this group meets, they are invited to call Elections BC at any time.

Closing Comments

Parties were thanked for attending and reminded that the next Political Party Information Session is expected to be held in the fall of 2010. Registration information will be distributed to party contacts well in advance of the meeting date.

Parties were reminded that they are key players in B.C.'s democracy, in both the political debate and in addressing voter turnout.

Questions regarding information presented at the Political Party Information Session should be directed to Amie Foster, the Executive Program Manager by telephone (250-952-6226), for forwarding

to the appropriate program area for response. However, questions specific to campaign financing are best directed to the staff in Electoral Finance.

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