

Voter ID Clinics During the 2015 Federal Election

The Hamilton Neighbourhood Action Strategy, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, and the Hamilton Public Library, partnered to administer voter ID clinics during the 2015 federal election. **The purpose of the clinics was to increase voter participation by breaking down barriers to voting, including acquainting voters with ID requirements and new changes to ID requirements, and in some instances, helping people find their poll locations.**

The clinic team held 33 clinics over four weeks prior to the October 19, 2015 election. Locations included: the Central and Turner Park Libraries, the Dominic Agostino Riverdale Community Centre (DARCC), St. Helen's at McQuesten Community Centre, Westmount Recreation Centre, 541 Eatery & Exchange, and candidate forums. Elections Canada staff facilitated four of the clinics.

Background

Elections Canada no longer enumerates voters door-to-door; the voter's list, called the National Register of Electors, is compiled throughout the year to pre-register citizens. As of August 2015, 91% of citizens were registered to vote at their current address.¹ Some reasons as to why the remainder of citizens were not registered are: if a person had recently moved, if a person were transient, or if a person had no permanent address.

Citizens who had a permanent address, and were registered there, would have received a Voter Information Card (VIC) prior to the October 19 election. This card contained information on where to vote at advanced polls, where to vote on election day, and the location of their local Elections Canada office. In the 2011 federal

election, it was reported by Elections Canada that VICs were the main source of voter information compared to other sources, by a substantial margin.²

In 2011, VICs were a legislated form of address ID for voting. After the Fair Elections Act was passed in 2014, this was no longer the case. There was large concern from various democratic watchdog groups that this change would pose a challenge to people without a government issued ID containing a photo and address. Elections Canada attested that this change should not have caused a large problem because 2011 was the only year in which VICs had been previously used as proof of address [personal communication].

1 Elections Canada. (n.d.) FAQs on Registration. Retrieved from <http://www.elections.ca/content2.aspx?section=-faq&dir=reg&document=index&lang=e>

2. Elections Canada. (2012). Report on the evaluations of the 41st general election of May 2, 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/eval/pes2011/eg&document=p1&lang=e>

If a person were not registered to vote, they could register at their poll on Election Day, as long as they had valid ID and went to the poll which corresponded to their address. Having a permanent address, and hence, being able to receive a VIC, eases the voting process. The only alternate ways of finding one's poll information was through Elections Canada's online Voter Information Service, or by visiting an Elections Canada office (office locations, however, are also found online).

Voters without a permanent address were required to provide a piece of address identification (to prove they were a resident of their electoral district). One of the options for doing this was to obtain a Letter of Confirmation of Residence from a "shelter, seniors' residence, long-term care facility, student residence, or soup kitchen".¹ The residence or agency was required to have been verified by the local Elections Canada office, an activity which is often the responsibility of Elections Canada Community Relations Officers.

In the 2011 federal election, prior to the introduction of the Fair Elections Act, Community Relations Officers were mandated to target groups with low voter participation, including ethno-cultural communities, youth, people experiencing homelessness, Aboriginal peoples, and senior electors.² It is unclear as to whether the Fair Elections Act hindered these outreach goals in the 2015 election. Explicitly encouraging any elector to vote was barred from Elections Canada's mandate, however there were many poll locations set up in seniors' and student residences, as well as universities.

Findings

The voter ID clinic team reported that the clinics were worthwhile for voters in the communities they served. Many voters were unaware of the changes to voter ID requirements and did not have a driver's license (one of the easiest ways to provide ID to vote). Outreach members found that the one-on-one conversations with voters highlighted several information gaps between Elections Canada and voters, especially people experiencing homelessness and people who were transient.

The clinics reached 744 voters, most of whom were contacted at the library locations and 541 Eatery & Exchange.

Challenges

A common challenge was that many people did not realize they were eligible to vote, despite not having a permanent residence. Those involved with the clinic agreed that it would have been helpful if it was made more prominent on Elections Canada's materials that a permanent residence is not required to vote.

The clinic team also found it difficult to engage peoples' interest in voting at times. Many people voiced that they did not feel their vote would count. Furthermore, because the materials from Elections Canada listed a driver's license as the first ID option, and, because having a driver's license allowed a person to vote with one piece of ID, some people without a driver's license said they felt "less eligible to vote". In actuality, a driver's license or two other forms of acceptable ID are equally valid ways of proving identification. Some voters, however, did not feel this was conveyed by the informational materials.

1. Elections Canada. (n.d.) ID to Vote. Retrieved from <http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=vot&dir=ids&document=index&lang=e>

2. Elections Canada. (2012). Report on the evaluations of the 41st general election of May 2, 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/eval/pes2011/ege&document=p1&lang=e>

As noted, for persons without a permanent address or who were transient, Elections Canada allowed the use of a Letter of Confirmation of Residence, which is signed by a verified agency. It is the responsibility of local Elections Canada offices to maintain the list of verified agencies in their electoral districts. Unfortunately, while the clinic team was familiar with this ID option, front-line staff at agencies, as well as local Elections Canada offices, were often unaware of the option.

“...because having a driver’s license allowed a person to vote with one piece of ID, some people without a driver’s license said they felt ‘less eligible to vote’.”

In one instance, on October 16, 2015, an individual who was living at a shelter came to the Central Library clinic and asked how they could vote. The clinic team called the shelter they were staying at and asked staff if they could provide a Letter of Confirmation of Residence. The shelter staff were unfamiliar with the letter, and subsequently the outreach member contacted the local Elections Canada office.

This incident occurred after October 13, which was the deadline for registering to vote online, over the phone, or at an Elections Canada office. After this date, voters had to register or update their information at their poll location. Most

important to note however, is that no one was “shut out” of registering to voting after that date.

When Elections Canada was contacted on October 16 in regards to the provision of a Letter of Confirmation of Residence from the shelter, a representative stated it was too late to register. Because the clinic team was aware of the option of registering at the polls, they persisted with the representative that the individual was still able to vote. The Chief Returning Officer at the office was eventually reached; they confirmed that the individual could vote, and that the shelter in question was verified to provide a Letter of Confirmation of Residence.

While the correct information was eventually communicated in this particular situation, it is likely that this confusion occurred in other instances, deterring people from voting.

The role of agencies in assisting with voter ID

Because many agencies have the ability to vouch for community members’ addresses by signing a Letter of Confirmation of Residence, there is cause for inquiry as to whether agencies can play a larger role in facilitating the voting process. The clinic team found that it was not widely known among agencies that a Letter of Confirmation of Residence existed as a proof of address.

Voter ID Clinic Location	Voters Reached
McQuesten Bistro + Movie Night	64
541 Eatery & Exchange	260
Riverdale Fallfest	67
Central Library	151
Turner Park Library	105
DARCC	68
Memorial School Candidates’ Forum	21
Doctors Without Borders Candidates’ Forum	8
Total	744

* Data was not available for Westmount Recreation Centre.

Clinic Locations

The clinic team found that people were eager to talk to them at 541 Eatery & Exchange and the libraries, which are familiar and safe spaces for many community members. People who visit the library daily were quick to notice the voter ID clinic.

The voter ID clinic at St. Helen's Community Centre ran during the hours of the food bank, however participant turnover over those hours was quite low. As a result, only 10-15 people were contacted during each of these clinics.

The candidate forums also reported low numbers of voters contacted. Voters at the forums were often knowledgeable about voting requirements, and there did not seem to be a need for the ID clinics.

Promotion of Clinics

An asset of many of the clinic locations is that they were set up in high traffic areas, and therefore reached many voters without widespread promotional efforts. It is likely there is opportunity for enhanced promotion of future ID clinics throughout the city, and more clinic locations/hours, to further increase participant turnout.

Internet and WiFi

In many instances, voters had not received a VIC and wanted to find out where to vote. At St. Helen's Community Centre, outreach members used a smartphone to determine where voters' poll locations were by accessing the Elections Canada website. At the Central Library, outreach members used a laptop to access the Elections Canada website and assist people in finding their poll location.

Knowledge of, and access to, the Elections Canada website proved to be extremely useful for voters who otherwise may not have been contacted by Elections Canada or received a VIC.

Registration

The clinic team did not attempt to register voters, or update registration, during the clinics, because the Elections Canada website was known to have glitches, and the process was expected to be too time consuming.

A more user-friendly and faster online registration process would help to register voters during the clinics, ensuring voters receive confirmation of their pole location.

In general, registration for the 2015 federal election could be done online, by mail, or in person at Elections Canada offices. It was noted, however, that the office in east Hamilton was located at Barton and Nash, which is difficult to access by public transit.

Conclusion

The voter ID clinic team reported that the clinics were highly valuable to voters. The clinic team felt that the information they communicated to voters was previously unknown in the majority of cases.

Voter ID clinics in the next election would be best suited to high traffic locations, such as 541 Eatery & Exchange, and the Central and Turner Libraries. Promotional efforts were minimal this election; it is expected that increased promotional efforts in advance of the clinics would result in a higher participant turnout.

The clinic team voiced that it would be easier to engage people at the clinics, if it were easier for people without permanent addresses, or those who have recently moved, to vote.

There is cause for further inquiry into how the role of the Elections Canada outreach activities can be expanded within the communities reached through the voter ID clinics.