VOLUME II
Administrative Review

Elections SK

September 27, 2021

The Honourable Randy Weekes
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
Room 129, Legislative Building
2405 Legislative Drive
Regina, SK   S4S 0B3

Mr. Speaker:

Pursuant to Section 286 of *The Election Act, 1996*, I am honoured to submit Administrative Review, Volume II in *A Report on the Twenty-Ninth General Election*.

This volume provides an administrative review of the election, including results of field study analysis of the delivery of the 29th General Election along with measurements of stakeholder perceptions. Data was collected impartially and independently through a combination of poll observations, surveys, interviews and focus groups.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael Boda, D.Phil., Ph.D.
Chief Electoral Officer
Province of Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan's Chief Electoral Officer and all who work for Elections Saskatchewan in fulfilling its legislative mandate acknowledge that we are on Treaty 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, & 10 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis Peoples.

We are committed to working together to build positive relationships with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, seeking to remove barriers to voting and democratic participation while moving forward together in reconciliation.

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Reporting on the General Election: Four Volumes

Saskatchewan's 29th General Election, held on October 26, 2020, was unlike any other in the history of the province. The event was administered in the midst of the global Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which resulted in significant changes not only to how voters and other key stakeholders were served but also to how Elections Saskatchewan conducted its work.

Elections Saskatchewan began laying the groundwork for the province's 29th General Election very shortly after the completion of the 28th General Election held on April 4, 2016. An updated strategic plan, covering the years 2017 – 2022 and incorporating input from both Elections Saskatchewan's head office and field leadership teams, was published.[1] This document was a deliberate effort to sustain systemic improvements made to the province's election system over the previous four-year cycle while also proposing significant process modernization.

This strategic plan included a dually focused strategic imperative for Elections Saskatchewan and an updated vision statement:

Strategic Imperative

- Sustain – refine and improve our organization for the efficient and effective delivery of electoral events.
- Modernize – Innovate toward best practice in election management.

Vision

We are a leader in establishing and refining best practice in election management.

This strategic imperative and vision statement would guide Elections Saskatchewan forward as it planned for the coming general election. A modernization initiative, which would have seen electronic poll books and ballot tabulators used at certain advance polls in the province, was proposed and planned for. These would have been among the most significant changes in election administration in Saskatchewan's history.

The updated strategic plan also included a set of values for the organization. These five values were:

- Professionalism
- Innovation
- Accountability
- Impartiality
- Service

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[1] Elections Saskatchewan. *Sustaining. Leading. Modernizing. Advancing Electoral Excellence in Saskatchewan: A Strategic Plan for Elections Saskatchewan, 2017-2022.* (Regina: Elections Saskatchewan, December 2017).

Ultimately, two significant events in the first quarter of the 2020 calendar year had drastic impacts on the administration of the coming election and would test the capacity and ability of the organization to react and respond to changing events and difficult situations. Yet, strong adherence to Elections Saskatchewan's strategic plan and accompanying strategic imperative, vision, and values allowed the institution to fulfill its mandate under extraordinary circumstances.

The first significant event was the possibility of a spring 2020 election call, which resulted in the shelving of modernization plans to allow for planning on a much shorter timeline to take place.[2] The second significant event to have a drastic effect on the implementation of this general election was the COVID-19 pandemic, with the first case of COVID-19 being confirmed in the province on March 12, 2020. The same day, Premier Scott Moe announced that there would not be an early election call. By the end of that week, Elections Saskatchewan staff had transitioned to working remotely, an arrangement which persisted until mid-summer. From redesigning voting processes to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 to procuring hundreds of thousands of pieces of personal protective equipment, the election ultimately delivered was far different than the one originally envisioned.

The story of Saskatchewan's 29th general election, held on October 26, 2020, will be told over the course of four volumes, each providing different kinds of insight into the overall success and challenges involved in planning for, organizing and implementing one of the largest events in the history of the province during a global pandemic. Together, these four volumes will constitute *A Report on the Twenty-Ninth General Election*.

- *Volume I - Statement of Votes* (published July 2021) provided data surrounding public participation in the 2020 electoral event. It collated information to provide a richer understanding of voting trends in the province. Information on candidates, registered political parties, historical data and poll by poll results was also included;

- *Volume II – An Administrative Review* (the current volume) offers a detailed look at how the 2020 general election was conducted. The volume looks at two sides of the electoral event. First, it focuses on how the electoral event was conducted based on in-person observations of advance and election day voting as well as other key activities, including vote counting. Second, the volume incorporates stakeholder perceptions, drawing conclusions from surveys, focus groups, interviews and other sources of data;

- *Volume III – Statement of Expenditures* will capture and provide context to the four-year costs of the event. Such costs are incurred years in advance of the election and continue to be accumulated well after Election Day. This volume will look at spending related to reimbursements given to eligible registered political parties and candidates (established within The Election Act, 1996) and will provide the total cost of administering the 2020 general election in 61 constituencies; and, finally;

- *Volume IV – Chief Electoral Officer's Recommendations for Legislative Reform* will take into account what has been learned over the course of the 29th electoral cycle in order to position the province — its voters, political parties, candidates and its provincial election management body —to conduct the 30th general election. It will be published following a thorough review and assessment of how the 29th general election was conducted considering best practice and changes being observed in electoral administration across the country. This volume will offer the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendation on how legislation should be changed to modernize the province's election system and more effectively serve stakeholders.

While the publication of this report will fulfil the Chief Electoral Officer's statutory duty outlined in *The Election Act, 1996*, its intent goes well beyond this. At present, Saskatchewan's provincial elections are conducted in much the same manner as they were when the province was founded in 1905. Modernization was a key component of Elections Saskatchewan's plans until the possibility of an early election forced a return to a more simplified approach. The presence of COVID-19 also resulted in changes to election administration – including a significant increase in demand for voting by mail – that must be considered moving forward.

This report will set the stage for the modernization of Saskatchewan's democratic processes. The hope is that by shining a light on all aspects of the election system, Elections Saskatchewan can work together with legislators, registered political parties, and other key stakeholders to design a democratic system that can serve the province for decades to come.

Michael D. Boda, D. Phil., Ph.D.
Chief Electoral Officer
Province of Saskatchewan

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2 Elections Saskatchewan. Elections Saskatchewan preparing to administer a general election when instructed. March 4, 2020, available at https://www.elections.sk.ca/media/news-releases/esk-preparing-for-general-election-when-instructed/.

841,807

Eligible voters in the province

CHAPTER TWO

Election
Overview

This chapter provides an overview of Saskatchewan's 29th General Election. It covers events leading up to the election, including the impact of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on the administration of voting and subsequent changes made to vote counting processes.

The Election Overview also includes details on the call of the election, including the impact that uncertainty regarding a potential early election call in spring 2020 had on planning. Key dates in the election calendar are provided, as is information on the several ways voters could cast their ballot.

This chapter will also provide general information regarding the administrative review of the 29th General Election. A general summary of social scientific methods is provided as well as a breakdown of the research instruments used. Further information can be found in Appendix A of this volume.

Background

Saskatchewan's 29th General Election was held on October 26, 2020. The election was held in 61 constituencies throughout the province, each electing a member to the Legislative Assembly through a first past the post (or single member plurality) electoral system. At the time of the election, the estimated population of Saskatchewan was 1,181,987 and Elections Saskatchewan, working with Statistics Canada, estimated that there were 841,807 eligible voters in the province.

Several external factors had a significant impact on the administration of this event, the greatest being the presence of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) which affected nearly every aspect of delivering, and participating in, the election. The election was also influenced by the possibility of an election being called earlier than the legislated date – a possibility which resulted in the postponement of planned modernization activities to the province's next general election. Finally, Saskatchewan's municipal elections were held just two weeks after Election Day, on November 9, 2020, which meant that campaign periods for provincial and municipal elections overlapped throughout the fall.

Impact of COVID-19 on Election Administration and Voting

In mid-March 2020, Elections Saskatchewan was preparing for the possibility of a spring election. While the province's set election date was October 26, 2020, there had been substantial public and media speculation of an early election call.[3] At the same time, however, the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was beginning to spread in Canada and on March 12, 2020, it was announced that there would not be a spring election.

The arrival of COVID-19 had an immediate impact on the work of Elections Saskatchewan. Head office staff members

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[3] See, for example, *Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe not ruling out early election*, The Globe and Mail, March 11, 2020.

transitioned to working from home, as did Returning Officers and Election Clerks (who had been preparing to find returning offices and polling locations for a possible spring election). For several months, most fieldwork was put on pause or conducted remotely.

At the same time, the Chief Electoral Officer began immediately to work with Government and Opposition members of the Legislative Assembly to ensure that the legislative/regulatory framework to conduct a safe election was in place. In mid-May 2020, changes to The Election Act Regulations were approved that clarified the Chief Electoral Officer's authority to adapt election processes in light of challenges introduced by COVID-19. The changes made to these regulations clarified the definition of an emergency in The Election Act, 1996 and ensured the Chief Electoral Officer had clear authority to adapt legislative provisions to protect the health and safety of voters, election workers and political stakeholders.[4]

Throughout the election period, the Chief Electoral Officer made a number of adaptations to The Election Act, 1996 to better protect the health and safety of voters and election officials as well as preserve the integrity and capacity of the election system. These adaptations were described and recorded in CEO Orders that were provided to key stakeholders and published on the Elections Saskatchewan website.[5]

In the months leading up to the election, the Chief Electoral Officer chaired an Electoral Advisory Group alongside Government and Opposition House Leaders as well as the province's Chief Medical Health Officer, Dr. Saqib Shahab. The purpose of this group was to allow the Chief Electoral Officer to receive advice from the Chief Medical Health Officer on the viability of conducting an election with COVID-19 present in the province and to allow the Government and Opposition House Leaders an opportunity to hear this advice and provide comment on it. The Group met four times in advance of the election, allowing key stakeholders to gain a more complete understanding of how the implementation of the election could be aligned with public health requirements and expectations. Based on these discussions, the Chief Electoral Officer was able to inform the Premier in early September that, at that time, there were no public health or operational reasons that

would inhibit holding an electoral event on October 26, 2020.[6] The Electoral Advisory Group was one source of information that the Chief Electoral Officer relied on to assist with making that recommendation and in understanding how to safely conduct an election during a pandemic.

Both in advance of, and during, the election period, the Chief Electoral Office worked on an ongoing basis with the Chief Medical Health Officer to understand the science and develop protocols that could ensure that voters could cast their ballot safely in locations where COVID-19 might be present.

Both in advance of, and during, the election period, the Chief Electoral Officer worked on an ongoing basis with the Chief Medical Health Officer to understand the science and develop protocols that could ensure that voters could cast their ballot safely in locations where COVID-19 might be present. These protocols were designed in collaboration with an Infection Prevention and Control consultant and reviewed by the Office of the Chief Medical Health Officer. Elections Saskatchewan also conducted research and closely observed elections being held during the pandemic in other jurisdictions including Australia, South Korea, the United States, and Canada in designing its approach to delivering the election.

Elections Saskatchewan was committed to providing a safe in-person voting experience but also needed to offer an option to vote remotely for those who did not feel comfortable voting in person. To that end, the capacity to offer voting by mail was greatly expanded and centralized, being managed out of Regina for the entire province as opposed to locally out of 61 returning offices. Increased vote by mail capacity also addressed a fundamental concern of the Chief Electoral Officer in a context where COVID-19 was likely to be present – that being the need to preserve the overall capacity of the election system while delivering

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[4] For more information, see The Election Act Regulations as well as the Chief Electoral Officer's May 13, 2020 news release, "Regulatory changes to provide clarification on Chief Electoral Officer authority" available at https://www.elections.sk.ca/media/news-releases/.

[5] All CEO Orders can be found online at https://www.elections.sk.ca/candidates-political-parties/bulletins-circulars/#ceo-orders.

[6] For more information, see the Chief Electoral Officer's September 4, 2020 news release, "Chief Electoral Officer recommends preparations continue for an October 26 vote" available at https://www.elections.sk.ca/media/news-releases/.

a safe voting experience for all electors. Directing voters to alternate channels, including vote by mail and advance voting meant that physical distancing and other COVID-19 protocols could be put in place on Election Day without stressing the capacity and integrity of the system.

> Elections Saskatchewan conducted a robust public advertising campaign designed to ensure voters knew that in-person voting would be safe.

During and after the Vote by Mail period, Elections Saskatchewan conducted a robust public advertising campaign designed to ensure voters knew that in-person voting would be safe. This campaign highlighted the many precautions that would be in place. While all election workers were required to wear masks, voters were also strongly encouraged to wear masks at all polling locations (at the time of the election, there was no mandatory mask requirement in the province). Clear dividers separated workers from voters and also provided a barrier between workers. Every voter was provided their own single-use pencil, hand sanitizer was provided throughout polling locations, and the overall design of every polling location in the province was reviewed to ensure that there was sufficient space to have adequate physical distancing between individuals.

Voter Registration

Voter registration for Saskatchewan's 29th General Election looked very different than it had in past elections. This was the first provincial election held using the Permanent Register of Voters (PRV), introduced shortly before Saskatchewan's 28th General Election in 2016, being fully operational. This meant that no extensive enumeration activities, either door-to-door or by mail, needed to take place during the election period. Instead, the PRV was regularly updated through data exchange agreements with Elections Canada and eHealth. Between January 2017 and September 2020, more than 121,000 new voters were added to the PRV, 37,000 were removed, and 317,000 addresses were changed.

In the immediate lead-up to Saskatchewan's October 26 election, a number of activities were undertaken to encourage the public to verify or update their voter information. This included a general outreach and advertising campaign as well as targeted activities aimed at First Nations communities and voters who were registered with a post office box as an address as opposed to a physical location. The large number of Vote by Mail applications, most of which were processed through an online portal, resulted in many updates being made to voter information.

Like other aspects of the election process, voter registration activities were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While a full, province-wide door-to-door enumeration is no longer required due to the PRV, targeted enumeration in areas with significant new construction or high mobility rates, can be effective in boosting coverage rates. Given the presence of COVID-19, however, Elections Saskatchewan opted not to pursue any in-person voter registration activities.

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Elections Saskatchewan's online portal generated 5,607 new voters and 14,884 address changes in the immediate lead-up to Election Day. Voters whose information was incorrect or who were not on the Voters List were able to complete an in-person process to update their details. In general, the smaller the number of in-person corrections or registrations required, the better the quality of the Voters List. In 2016, 6.4 percent of voters needed to register at the polls before voting. In 2020, that fell to 4.3 percent of voters required to register before receiving their ballot.

In advance of an election, Elections Saskatchewan sends Voter Information Cards (VICs) to all registered voters in the province. VICs include important information on where, when and what ID is needed to cast a ballot. In 2020, for the first time, Elections Saskatchewan allowed voters to choose to receive their VIC by email or text message rather than in hard copy through the mail. In total, 10,636 voters chose to receive their VIC electronically.

Issuance of Writs of Election

On September 29, 2020, the 28th Saskatchewan Legislature was dissolved pursuant to section 6 of The Legislative Assembly Act, 2007 by the Honourable Russ Mirasty, Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan. Later that day, an order was passed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council directing the Chief Electoral Officer to issue a writ of election to each of the province's 61 returning officers.

At dissolution, standing in the Legislative Assembly were 46 Saskatchewan Party MLAs and 13 New Democratic Party MLAs. Two seats, the constituencies of Regina Walsh Acres and Saskatoon Eastview, were vacant when the election was called.

Key Election Dates	
September 29	Writs of election issued
October 10	Nomination deadline
October 15	Last day for voters to apply to Vote by Mail or as an Absentee or Homebound Voter
October 20 - 24	Advance Voting
October 26	Election Day & First Preliminary Count
October 28 - 29	Second Preliminary Count
November 7	Final Count
November 18	Return to the Writ

Overview of Voting in Saskatchewan's 29th General Election

Specific information on all of the various voting opportunities available in Saskatchewan's 29th General Election can be found below. Most electors voted in one of three ways – by mail, during advance voting or on Election Day. There were also a number of special voting opportunities available to ensure that all voters, regardless of circumstances, had access to the ballot.

For the first time in the history of the province, less than 50 percent of voters cast their ballot on Election Day – in many previous elections nearly all votes would be cast on that day. Instead, a great number of voters chose to vote during advance voting or by mail. Some of this transition can no doubt be traced to the COVID-19 pandemic and a

desire on the part of many voters to avoid voting in person and avoid potential crowds on Election Day. This transition also assisted Elections Saskatchewan in ensuring that every way of voting, whether an advance or election day poll, had sufficient capacity to operate while maintaining all necessary COVID-19 related protocols. At the same time, this also reflects a broader trend evidenced in other jurisdictions and in previous Saskatchewan provincial elections – voters want more choice on when and how they vote.

Vote by Mail afforded any voter who had health or safety concerns the opportunity to participate in the election.

Vote by Mail (VBM) & Absentee Voting

Voting by mail has typically been a very small component of Saskatchewan provincial elections. During Saskatchewan's 28th General Election in 2016, for example, a total of 4,420 absentee votes were recorded (1 percent of all votes cast) – with absentee votes consisting of both mail in ballots and votes cast directly in the returning office. With the COVID-19 pandemic, Elections Saskatchewan knew that the number of voters interested in voting using the postal system and thereby avoiding having to attend a physical polling location, was likely to increase greatly.

To account for this, the Chief Electoral Officer opted to replace traditional absentee voting (with the exception of in-person absentee voting conducted in the returning office) with a centralized, reworked Vote by Mail process. An online application portal was created whereby voters could apply, upload the necessary identification documents, and complete the entire application process. The application portal opened to voters on August 15 and remained open until the end of the day on October 15.

Beginning in mid-August, a communications campaign informed voters of the option to Vote by Mail. While applications began being accepted on August 15, ballot kits could not be mailed to voters until the writs of election were issued on September 29. The deadline for voters to return their ballot kit to Elections Saskatchewan was 8 p.m. on Election Day, October 26. It needed to be received at Elections Saskatchewan's head office by 12 noon on November 5.

In total, Elections Saskatchewan received 62,935 applications to Vote by Mail. More than 97 percent of these applications were approved and had ballot kits mailed. Of those ballot kits that were mailed, 57,245 or 93.2 percent were returned to Elections Saskatchewan for adjudication. Adjudication refers to the process followed after ballots are returned to ensure that certain pieces of information, including the voters date of birth, signature and date are correctly included. Adjudication is a separate process from the counting of votes. After adjudication, 56,545 Vote by Mail ballots were taken forward for counting.


Traditional absentee voting continued to take place at each constituency returning office. Voters could visit their returning office in person and cast an absentee ballot between the start of the election on September 29 and the deadline to vote as an absentee voter, which was October 15. In total, 1,875 absentee voters cast their ballot at their constituency returning office.

Advance Voting

The advance voting period for this election began on Tuesday, October 20 and continued until Saturday, October 24. Voting took place from 12 noon until 8 p.m. each day, a change from previous elections, during which voting was held for seven hours each day and the hours were different on weekdays than on weekends. Between 31,000 and 43,000 people across the province voted on each day of advance voting. The fact that a significant number of people chose to vote each day shows that voters will choose to vote when and where is most convenient for them.

Two provincial records related to advance voting were achieved. First, a record 184,742 votes were cast at advance polls. This was a 66 percent increase over the 110,716 advance votes cast in 2016. Second, 41.51 percent of all votes were cast at advance polls, another record for the province.

Advance Voting Turnout 1982 to 2020
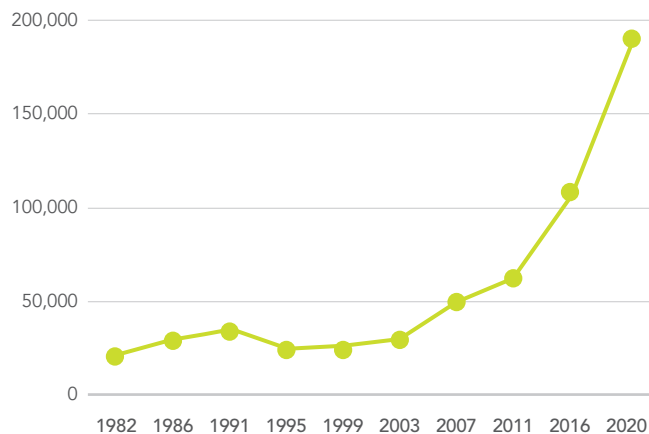
Election Day Voting

Election Day voting took place from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. throughout the province. That morning, all 2,814 polling stations in more than 1,100 locations around the province opened on time to serve voters.

For this election, the Chief Electoral Officer had recommended that schools throughout the province be closed to students for Election Day. This would allow Elections Saskatchewan to use schools, which have traditionally been amongst the very best polling locations in the province, without having too many individuals in the building, potentially increasing the risk of spreading COVID-19. In many school divisions, Election Day was designated a professional development day for teachers, meaning students would not be present. More than 390 schools throughout the province hosted election day polls.

The number of voters who opted to vote on Election Day continued to fall. In Saskatchewan's 27th General Election, held on November 7, 2011, the vast majority, 82.5 percent of all voters, cast their ballot on Election Day. In 2016, that fell to 73.4 percent and continued to fall in 2020 to less than half of all voters at 45 percent.

Special Voting

By legislation, Special Voting refers to all voting opportunities that take place outside of traditional Election Day voting. In practice, however, Special Voting refers more specifically to voting that takes place outside of the three largest opportunities to vote, those being Vote by Mail, Advance Voting and Election Day Voting. Special Voting opportunities help to ensure that everyone, regardless of circumstances, is able to cast a ballot if they choose to.

During Saskatchewan's 29th General Election, Special Voting options included Extraordinary Voting for those affected by COVID-19; a modified Homebound Voting process; Personal Care Facility voting and voting in hospitals and remand centres. Legislation also allows for voting to take place for voters temporarily displaced due to fires, floods, or other emergencies but there were no polls established for this purpose in 2020.

Extraordinary voting was the option put in place by Elections Saskatchewan to serve voters forced to quarantine due to COVID-19 or who lived in communities under pandemic-related lockdowns after the deadline to Vote by Mail...had passed.

Extraordinary Voting

Extraordinary voting was the option put in place by Elections Saskatchewan to serve voters forced to quarantine due to COVID-19 or who lived in communities under pandemic-related lockdowns after the deadline to Vote by Mail (October 15, 2020) had passed. Extraordinary voting was implemented using the Chief Electoral Officers authority to adapt legislation during a public health emergency.

The Extraordinary Voting process was similar to Vote by Mail; however, it did not rely on the postal system to distribute ballot packages. Instead, applications were processed, and ballot kits were delivered by a combination of couriers, messengers, and personal delivery. Extraordinary Voters had the same deadline of 8 p.m. on Election Day, October 26, to place their completed ballot kit in the mail and again, consistent with Vote by Mail, it needed to be received by Elections Saskatchewan by November 5.

There were two distinct types of Extraordinary Voting that were implemented during Saskatchewan's 29th General Election. The first type was for voters forced to self-isolate due to having COVID-19 or due to having been a close contact with someone who had COVID-19. This type of Extraordinary Voting was available from October 16 through October 20.

The second type of Extraordinary Voting was implemented for voters in Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation communities that entered a formal lockdown during the writ period due to the presence of COVID-19 in the area. Elections Saskatchewan worked closely with the Chief and Council from Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation in real-time during the writ period to develop a plan to serve voters using an Extraordinary Voting process and not offering in-person voting. This type of Extraordinary Voting was also available from October 16 through October 20. Closer to Election Day, Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation leadership opted to lift the lockdown and Elections Saskatchewan was able to re-implement most of the planned in-person voting locations for October 26. Anyone who had applied to vote as an Extraordinary Voter was still able to vote in that manner, provided they did not also return their Extraordinary Voting ballot kit.

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Ultimately, 339 voters, from 24 constituencies, cast ballots as Extraordinary Voters.

Homebound Voting

Homebound voting was introduced in advance of Saskatchewan's 2016 general election. This option was available to voters who were unable to vote at an advance or election day poll due to a medical condition or disability, or due to caring for an individual with a medical condition or disability. During that election, 574 voters cast their ballot without leaving their home. Voters were served by a team of two election officials who visited the voter at their home with a ballot and a ballot box and completed the voting process.

The COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible for Elections Saskatchewan to offer homebound voting in the same manner in 2020 as it had in 2016. Public health officials advised that it would not be safe to have election officials enter individuals' homes to offer Homebound Voting in person. Instead, Homebound Voting was offered as a form

of Vote by Mail. The option to use this modified form of Homebound Voting was advertised, and a dedicated online portal was created for potential Homebound Voters to apply through. In total, 91 voters applied through the Homebound Voting portal to use the Vote by Mail option. There are no discrete results available for these Homebound Voters; the results are captured within the Vote by Mail totals. Elections Saskatchewan plans to offer traditional Homebound Voting in future elections should the presence of COVID-19 allow for it.

Voting in Personal Care Facilities, Hospitals and Remand Centres

Preparations for voting in personal care facilities and hospitals were greatly affected by COVID-19. Elections Saskatchewan worked closely with the Saskatchewan Health Authority, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Social Services to facilitate safe access to voting for residents of personal care facilities and patients in the hospital on Election Day.

Voting in personal care facilities was offered during the advance voting period, from October 20 to October 24. Hospital voting was offered on Election Day, October 26, to eligible voters that were patients in hospitals that day as was remand centre voting. Strict COVID-19 protocols were in place for personal care facility, hospital and remand centre voting.

Vote Counting

Due to the high number of Vote by Mail ballots, the ballot counting process for Saskatchewan's 29th General Election was different than in previous elections. Typically, the vast majority of ballots have been counted after voting closed on Election Day. A few remaining types of votes, including absentee ballots and votes cast in hospitals and remand centres, are counted twelve days later during the Final Count.

During this election, however, the volume of Vote by Mail ballots had increased more than tenfold, meaning there were many more ballots still to be counted after Election Day. For this reason, the Chief Electoral Officer decided that the ballot counting process for this election would look different than in past elections. A First Preliminary Count of ballots took place after voting ended on Election Day. As with past elections, this consisted of all ballots from

advance, election day and personal care facility voting. A second Preliminary Count then took place in Regina beginning October 28 (two days after Election Day). For the first time in the province's history, a central count was conducted, tabulating all vote by Mail ballots that had been received by October 26. Updated results were announced throughout the two days of counting.

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The Final Count was held, as per legislation, twelve days after Election Day on Saturday, November 7. During the Final Count, all Vote by Mail ballots that were received after October 26 were counted, again using a central count. Also counted were absentee ballots cast in returning offices, hospital, remand and temporarily displaced voter ballots and Extraordinary Voting ballots. With the conclusion of the Final Count, the results of the election became official.

Administrative Review

The administrative review for the 29th General Election focused on the preparation undertaken for the election (the "Pre-writ Period") and the actual conduct of the election itself (the "Election Period"). Across the province, thousands of decisions were taken from the days following the 28th General Election through and beyond Election Day, October 26, 2020. Many of these decisions were the responsibility of the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff, but many others were delegated to a field leadership team consisting of 61 returning officers, 61 election clerks, and 12 supervisory returning officers (SRO), distributed across Elections Saskatchewan's administrative regions. The Election Act, 1996 provides the framework for these decisions, but the implementation of the Act's provisions, and the many operational and technical details, are placed in the hands of administrators to conduct in accordance with electoral best practice. It is this implementation that is the primary concern in this review.

To reinforce the independence for this review, the Chief Electoral Officer engaged electoral management experts from outside of the organization to undertake the administrative review activities reported in this document.

The election itself was planned and conducted within an extraordinarily dynamic environment, with speculation about an unscheduled election during spring 2020, and many subsequent COVID-related adjustments introduced throughout the period from early spring until the Election Day of October 26. The review of the election was designed by a Steering Committee constituted of the Chief Electoral Officer and two social scientists and experts in election administration beginning in early 2019, with major adjustments made in spring and throughout the summer of 2020.

Activities included in the scope of this review are:

- Strategies for mitigation of the spread of COVID-19 while conducting a general election;
- The quality of voter registration and lists of voters used for administering the election;
- The recruitment and training of the election workforce across 61 constituencies;
- Securing accessible voting places throughout Saskatchewan;
- Services for voters with disabilities;

- Services for First Nation voters;
- Political party and candidate support;
- Provision of voting information for voters;
- Administering absentee voting;
- Administering advance voting;
- Administering voting on Election Day; and
- Ballot counting and reporting procedures.

If the administration of the election fulfills legal requirements, but is perceived as unfair, inefficient, or haphazard, the electoral process itself is drawn into disrepute.

While evaluation of the conduct of an election begins with a consideration of whether legal requirements were met, an election management body's administrative success or failure is also a matter of stakeholder satisfaction. If the administration of the election fulfills legal requirements, but is perceived as unfair, inefficient, or haphazard, the electoral process itself is drawn into disrepute. For that reason, this review contains data on how the election was managed and includes data on public perceptions and the views of key stakeholders.

This review contains data on how the election was managed and includes data on public perceptions and the views of key stakeholders.

This review does not cover topics outside the remit of the Chief Electoral Officer even if they bear on or influence the administration of the election. Topics beyond the scope of this review include legislation regarding a fixed election date, election finance rules, the single member plurality electoral system, and the number, size and configuration of constituencies. The Chief Electoral Officer works within these rules and requirements but has no authority to change them.

Data Sources and Assessment Tools

The administrative review provided in this report relies on a variety of data sources. The surveys described below were developed by the Steering Committee and conducted by the Canadian Hub for Applied and Social Research (CHASR) at the University of Saskatchewan. CHASR also conducted the focus groups using questions developed by the Steering Committee and information on potential participants supplied by the Steering Committee or from CHASR sources. The review team conducted interviews with business officers and official agents and organized the on-site observation process. Focus groups were conducted within three weeks of the election; interviews were conducted over a longer period, from November 2020 to January 2021. The following data sources constitute the foundation for this report:[7]

- **Administrative Data.** These are data collected during the administration of the election from the early stages through the post-election period. They apply to all matters in which simple counts are possible—e.g., registrations, polling stations, ballots, turnout—and data or information privy to officials in the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer. All administrative data in this report have been gathered by the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer at the request of the administrative review Steering Committee.

- **On Site Observers.** With the assistance of the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, the review team recruited twelve University of Saskatchewan students and arranged for them to observe the voting process in twelve constituencies in or near Saskatoon (six from within the boundaries of Saskatoon, and six in the surrounding rural areas). Within these constituencies, 33 polling locations were visited on October 24 during the final day of advance voting and an additional 63 polling locations were visiting on October 26, Election Day. A debrief with all observers was conducted on October 27, the day after Election Day.

- **Mail-in ballot observation.** Elections Saskatchewan expected and experienced an unprecedented number of mail-in ballots for the 29th General Election. These ballots were collected at head office, adjudicated, and counted during the second preliminary count (October 28 and 29) for those that arrived by 8 pm on Election Day, and on November 7 for those that were postmarked by October 26, and that arrived after the close of polls on October 26, but before end of day on November 5. The review team observed the second preliminary count.

- **Voter/Non-voter Survey.** Immediately following the election on October 26, 2020 CHASR, conducted a random-sample telephone survey of voters and non-voters in Saskatchewan to assess various aspects of their voting experience. The sample of respondents included 2,120 voters and 280 non-voters.

- **Field Research Team Survey.** The Field Leadership Team (FLT) survey was an online survey administered to all Supervisory Returning Officers (including assistant SROs), Returning Officers, and Election Clerks. The survey launched on November 9, 2020 and closed on November 30, 2020.

- **Election Workers Survey.** The Election Workers (EWs) survey was an online survey administered to all those who worked at advance polls or election day polls. The survey was programmed on the Voxco online survey platform and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. It launched on October 28, 2020 and closed on November 13, 2020.

- **Field Leadership Focus Group.** Two focus groups were conducted, with nine participants taking part in the first group and two supervisory returning officers taking part in the second group. Focus groups took approximately 90 minutes and participants were asked questions related to election preparation, training, software systems, the election process itself, and any deficiencies they noted or were brought to their attention.

- **Accessibility Community Focus Group.** Prior to the Pre-Writ period, the Chief Electoral Officer engaged the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems to conduct consultations with accessibility groups within the province. After the election, one focus group was conducted by CHASR on behalf of the Administrative Review team with representatives of a variety of groups

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[7] For more detailed information, see Appendix A of this report.

dedicated to advancing the interests of those with visual, hearing, mobility and other challenges. Eight participants took part and the session lasted approximately 90 minutes. Participants discussed issues that included access to information about the election, voter registration, access to voting sites and the effects of COVID-19.

- *Indigenous Focus Group.* Prior to the Pre-Writ period, the Chief Electoral Officer engaged the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy and the International Foundation of Electoral Systems to conduct consultations with different First Nations Chiefs and band officials across southern Saskatchewan. After the election, two focus groups were conducted by CHASR on behalf of the Administrative Review team, with five participants taking part in the first group and six participants taking part in the second. One participant was unable to comment during the focus group and subsequently emailed their responses to CHASR. Focus groups took approximately 90 minutes and participants were asked questions relating to perceived barriers to voting, the location of polling stations, the responsiveness of Elections Saskatchewan to Indigenous issues and the impact of COVID-19.

- *Interviews with party officials.* Interviews were conducted with six business officers, each responsible for financial accounting for a single political party in a single constituency. Business officers from three political parties were included: the Saskatchewan Party, the NDP, and the Green Party. Participants were selected from names provided by Elections Saskatchewan. In addition, Chief Official Agents were interviewed from the Saskatchewan Party, the Green Party and the NDP. In one case—the Green Party—the interview included the party leader.

An Antiquated Approach to Delivering Elections

As the following chapters will show, the administration of Saskatchewan's 29th provincial general election was an administrative success from the viewpoint of the province's election stakeholders. Despite the unprecedented challenges associated with conducting a general election during a pandemic, there were no significant administrative difficulties. Although there were dramatic changes in how people cast their ballot, with significant increases in advance voting and voting by mail, the election results were widely accepted without controversy or dispute. While voter turnout remains a concern in Saskatchewan -- only 53.8 percent of registered voters and 52.9 percent of eligible voters participated – (down from 56.8 percent and 53.5 percent, respectively in 2016) this is a broader issue that all of Saskatchewan must face, not only those tasked with election administration.

In the administrative review of the 28th general election, the antiquated method of conducting a general election was discussed – two voting officials assigned to every ballot box, using a paper-based system to record voters in poll books, scrambling to relay this information to head office so that people voting in advance polls are struck off the voters lists used throughout the constituency. Election workers are required to work very long hours, responsible for understanding and administering multiple tasks. The scenario described for the election in 2016 was used to make a number of recommendations for changing and modernizing voting and election administration procedures, some of which were implemented for 2020, and many could not due to the circumstances surrounding the election. The portrait to emerge from the current review thus provides many similarities to the review in 2016 and leads to an even more compelling need for modernization. Proposed administrative changes will be described more fully in the recommendations section.

The Chief Electoral Officer's Recommendations for Legislative Reform, which will comprise Volume IV of A Report on the Twenty-Ninth General Election, is where the larger issues of legislative change will be addressed. That volume will present a vision of the kinds of legal framework changes legislators should consider to modernize Saskatchewan's election rules for 2024 and beyond.

53.8
percent of registered voters participated

52.9
percent of eligible voters participated

Contents of this Report

As the enumeration of data sources indicates, this administrative review has produced a great deal of information, not all of which could be included in this report. Care has been taken to convey the key findings in each section, beginning with the pre-writ period in **Chapter 3** and proceeding to the election period in **Chapter 4**.

Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of the impact of the COVID pandemic, followed by a discussion of voter registration, voting locations, and special sections on accessibility and Indigenous electors. **Chapter 4** covers the perspectives of the political parties whose electoral fate was decided during the election period, the provision of information to voters, the various methods of voting, and vote counting and reporting.

Elections Saskatchewan's planned response to the various assessment findings is detailed in **Chapter 5**. This includes clarifying the distinction between what can be changed administratively and what must first be changed legislatively. A full listing of the commitments for improvements in election administration is found in this chapter as well.

Appendix A provides a detailed description of the various assessment methods undertaken during the 29th General Election that contributed to this report. Finally, a listing of the people and organizations that contributed to this report is found in the Acknowledgements section.

SUMMARY OF COMMITMENTS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

In response to this assessment, the Chief Electoral Officer has committed Elections Saskatchewan to a number of administrative changes and improvements in advance of the next general election. For a complete list of administrative commitments and more detail on the items shown below, see Chapter 5 – Responding to the Assessment.

Voter Registration
- Explore new sources of data for maintaining the voter registry and pursue regular and timely updates.
- Expand the use of electronic voter information cards (VICs).
- Regularly measure the quality of data in the register of voters.
- Examine the feasibility of technology for electronic strike-off.
- Use scanning of barcodes on VICs for electronic strike-off.
- Improve registration for traditionally underserved groups.

Election Workers
- Build a community of election workers to facilitate recruitment.
- Innovate in methods of delivering training online and in person.
- Enhance testing program in the Take Part training app.
- Develop training system for centralized vote by mail process.
- Develop further videos to standardize in-person training of election workers.
- Conduct assessment of workload of advance poll workers versus election day workers.
- Conduct a focus group of Field Leadership Team on recruitment.
- Collaborate with other institutions and jurisdictions on the Take Part list.

Accessibility for Voters with Disabilities
- Intensify engagement with disability communities and stakeholders.
- Ensure that applying for a vote by mail ballot and voting by mail are accessible to all voters.
- Work toward full accessibility at advance and election day polls.
- Develop and implement a recruitment and training strategy for people with disabilities.
- Study the barriers experienced by voters with intellectual disabilities and develop a meaningful strategy for addressing them.

First Nations
- Build relationships with First Nation communities through outreach that focuses on maintaining ongoing, deep and long-term engagement with community leaders.
- Develop and implement a recruitment and training strategy for First Nations citizens.
- Review the languages in which election materials are translated to ensure translations meet current needs and community expectations.
- Build upon Elections Saskatchewan's success in outreach by focusing on barriers experienced by other groups such as First Nations voters not living on reserve and Métis voters.
- Begin to formalize administrative relationships between Elections Saskatchewan and First Nations.

Political Parties and Candidates
Note: Administrative commitments in this area related to electoral finance will be included in Volume III of this report, *Statement of Expenditures*.
- Further develop the option of delivering election information to political parties and candidates, through an electronic portal.
- Investigate opportunities within current legislation to further streamline administrative requirements related to candidates and parties.

Voter Information
- Adopt an approach of "continuous improvement" on voter registration and applying to vote by mail to ensure that the experience is as simple and efficient as possible for the voting public.
- Continue to engage with literacy organizations to review the content of all voter information.
- Complete an assessment of the provincial municipal election overlap issue based on the experience in 2020 and consultations with municipal election officials and offer a public recommendation on a solution.

Advance Voting

- Where legislatively and operationally viable, adopt electronic pollbooks at advance voting.
- Continue to examine workforce planning associated with the staffing of advance.
- Adjust the number of ballot boxes (and thus the number of DRO and poll clerk teams) assigned to each advance voting place during all of the periods of advance voting.
- Continue to research and test the most efficient methods available to accurately count the votes to ensure election night voting results are not delayed.

Vote by Mail and Absentee Voting

- Registered Political Parties should be invited to send observers to all administrative aspects of Vote by Mail.
- Design and implement a system for administering the Vote by Mail component of absentee voting from head office.
- Develop methods for voters with disabilities to request a Vote by Mail or absentee ballot with accessibility features designed to accommodate their disability.
- Design a ballot tabulation system that is specific to the Vote by Mail ballots that are administered centrally.

Election Day Voting

- Review current guidelines for placement of polling locations in order to ensure greatest access to voting through the various voting opportunities.
- Continue to use existing geographic information system (GIS) technology to review the travel times and distances.
- As necessary, adjust the guidelines for returning officers to follow when assigning voting places for use in the 30th General Election.

Ballot Counting and Reporting

- Review current guidelines for placement of polling locations in order to ensure greatest access to voting through the various voting opportunities.
- Continue to use existing geographic information system (GIS) technology to review the travel times and distances.
- As necessary, adjust the guidelines for returning officers to follow when assigning voting places for use in the 30th General Election.

CHAPTER THREE

The Pre-Writ Period

Preparing to Deliver an Election in Unprecedented Times

Throughout the past year, COVID-19 has had a staggering global impact. From changing the way business could operate to changing the way that families were able to socialize, there was very little untouched by the pandemic. In Saskatchewan, these changes impacted the entire democratic process including the ways in which voters, parties, candidates and Elections Saskatchewan itself conducted a general election.

The Timing of the Election

Although Canada announced its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on January 27, 2020, many businesses and organizations were still taking a "business as usual" approach to their operations in the first few months of the year. On February 26 Premier Scott Moe indicated that although the government remained committed to the fixed election date in the fall for the 29th general election, the Premier nonetheless retained the right to call an election at

an earlier date. That comment led to speculation in political and media circles about the possibility of a "snap" election being called for the Spring of 2020.[8]

In view of its mandate to administer elections whenever they are called, Elections Saskatchewan altered its planning position, which up to that time had been to prepare for a Fall election. On March 3, a training session was held for all members of the Field Leadership Team (FLT) – including Returning Officers, Election Clerks, and Supervisory and Assistant Supervisory Returning Officers. At this training session, members of the FLT were directed to immediately begin pre-writ activities such as establishing a returning office and identifying potential voting locations.

Preparations for an election earlier than the legislated date of October 26, had significant impact on Elections Saskatchewan's plans to offer a modernized voting experience in 2020. This modernization would have included electronic ballot tabulators to facilitate the counting of votes and electronic poll books to allow for

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[8] For more information on how Elections Saskatchewan prepared for a potential early election, see: https://www.elections.sk.ca/media/news-releases/esk-preparing-for-general-election-when-instructed/.

real-time strike-off of voters at advance voting in 28 of the province's 61 constituencies. Given the need to plan for a potential early election, the Chief Electoral Officer decided that these initiatives would be suspended for the 29th General Election.

During the next several weeks significant changes took place in the spread of COVID-19. While there were only 11 cases in Canada through February, by the middle of March there were almost 500. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the virus to be the cause of a world-wide pandemic. The following day, Premier Moe ended speculation about an early election by announcing that he would not be calling an election during the spring.

To further underline the significance of the COVID-19 pandemic, on March 13, the day after the Premier confirmed that there would be no spring election, all staff at Elections Saskatchewan began working remotely where possible, a reflection of the commitment at the time to "flatten the curve" and to keep all staff as safe as possible. Work in the field by Returning Officers and Election Clerks paused as well, with only activities that could be conducted remotely taking place.

To prevent the spread of the virus in overcrowded polls, the Chief Electoral Officer intentionally increased capacity in the election system across the three primary approaches to balloting – vote by mail, advance voting, and election day voting.

A key goal in planning for a safe election during the pandemic was to introduce COVID-19 mitigation measures while keeping voting processes as similar as possible to a "regular" election. At the same time, to prevent the spread of the virus in overcrowded polls, the Chief Electoral Officer intentionally increased capacity in the election system across the three primary approaches to balloting – Vote by Mail, advance voting, and election day voting. In this way, no single method of voting would lead to long lines and safety would be enhanced for all. To this end, Elections Saskatchewan encouraged the trend towards advance voting and modernized the absentee voting provisions through the development of a centrally managed Vote by Mail process, described below.

Engagement with the Chief Medical Health Officer

Elections Saskatchewan has had a long-standing relationship with the province's Chief Medical Health Officer to ensure workplace and voter safety in the province. However, with the rapid escalation of public health concerns following the declaration of a pandemic in March 2020, engagement with the Chief Medical Health Officer involved more direct discussions about potential risks of COVID-19 exposure and the identification of mitigation procedures. Between March and October 2020, the Chief Electoral Officer and/or other senior staff met roughly 50 times with the Chief Medical Health Officer or his senior staff. Discussions with the Chief Medical Health Officer included the review of the state of the pandemic throughout the different regions of the province, the identification and possible sourcing of specific supplies, such as personal protective equipment
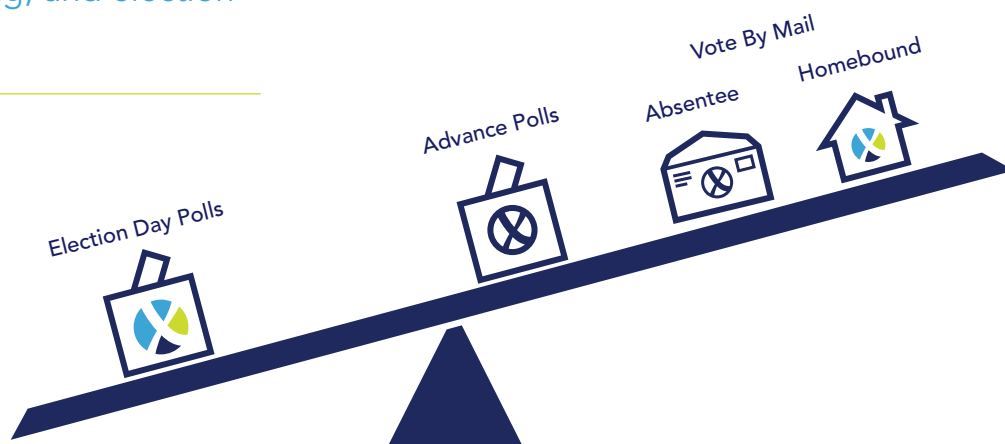
(PPE), as well as the review of specific operational protocols, such as mask-wearing in voting places by staff, voters, and candidate representatives. All recommendations of the Chief Medical Health Officer were adopted by Elections Saskatchewan.

Establishing COVID-19 mitigation protocols

In developing a strategy to provide a safe election during a pandemic, initial steps included conducting a review of existing legislation and making recommendations for regulatory and legislative changes in areas in which it was believed that improvements could be made. The Chief Electoral Officer offered four key recommendations:

- Provide Elections Saskatchewan with exclusive access to schools on Election Day. This would be accomplished by declaring Election Day a professional development day, so that no in-class schooling would take place.

- Assist Elections Saskatchewan in obtaining access to PPE through government sources.

- Grant to the Chief Electoral Officer additional authority to adapt legislative requirements for voting to facilitate a rapid response to a quickly evolving situation.

- Form an Electoral Advisory Group, consisting of the Chief Electoral Officer, the Chief Medical Health Officer, and the two house leaders in the Legislative Assembly (the Saskatchewan Party and the NDP). The purpose of the group was to share information and provide advice to the Chief Electoral Officer. The Chief Electoral Officer would use this information, along with other data sources, to make a recommendation to the Premier as to whether an election could safely be held.

> Elections Saskatchewan's message… was that voting would be safe, and that [it] would be pro-active in putting in place COVID-19 mitigation protocols.

Three of the four recommendations, including closing schools on Election Day, providing access to PPE through government sources and creating an Electoral Advisory Group, were accepted. The fourth request, to provide the Chief Electoral Officer with additional authority in legislation to adapt legislative requirements, was addressed but not through legislation. Instead, The Election Act Regulations were modified to indicate that "emergency" under *The Election Act, 1996*, would now include a public health emergency. Over the course of the election, 13 CEO Orders adapting legislation due to the pandemic were adopted.[9] These legislative adaptations helped to ensure that voting was safe and that there was sufficient capacity in the election system.

In its planning for a safe election, Elections Saskatchewan designed its plans and protocols in conjunction with an Infection Prevention and Control Consultant before requesting they be reviewed by the Office of the Chief Medical Health Officer. This led to changes in many aspects of the administration of the election. For example, much of the training of the FLT was changed from in-person to online training, and the training was expanded to include implementing COVID-19 mitigation efforts in the returning offices as well as for all types of voting opportunities, including election day voting, advance voting, and special voting. The term "special voting" includes voting in hospitals, remand centres, and care facilities as well as curbside and homebound voting.

In addition to COVID-19 mitigation, it was vital for Elections Saskatchewan to communicate to voters and to other electoral stakeholders the steps it had taken. The advertisement on the accompanying page demonstrates some of the key elements of that communication.[10] The principal message overall was that the election management body was committed to making voting a safe experience for voters. To accomplish this, however, it had to implement a number of changes from the usual voting experience. The changes that were implemented for polling places are summarized in the attached advertisement.

Elections Saskatchewan's message, delivered through television and radio ads directly to householders, on billboards, and on buses or other transit facilities, was that voting would be safe, and that Elections Saskatchewan would be pro-active in putting into place COVID-19 mitigation protocols.

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9 CEO Orders are posted on the Elections Saskatchewan website at https://www.elections.sk.ca/candidates-political-parties/bulletins-circulars/#ceo-orders
10 Elections Saskatchewan also maintained a website with resources for municipalities on how to safely run an election during a pandemic. These resources can be found at https://www.elections.sk.ca/what-we-do/covid-19-and-electoral-best-practice/

Making voting safer at the polls

1 This election is different.
There are new safer voting measures in place at polls.

2 We're making voting places safer with:

A. All workers in masks

E. Hand sanitizer at polls

B. Clear dividers between workers and voters

F. Single-use pencils

Garbage

C. Voters strongly encouraged to wear masks

G. Surfaces in polls disinfected throughout the day

D. Physical distancing — stay 2 metres apart at the polls

2 metres
6 feet

3 Voters experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 should stay home.
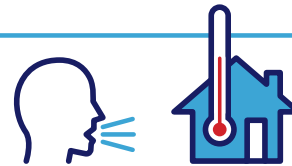
4 Voting by mail is an option for all voters not wishing to vote in person. The deadline to apply to vote by mail is October 15.

Learn more at elections.sk.ca

Elections SK

SK VOTES 2020

Voting safely is our priority.

Findings

A survey of FLT members, completed by Supervisory Returning Officers, Returning Officers, and Election Clerks, indicated a high level of perceived COVID compliance. More than 95 percent of FLT respondents agreed that there was a safe voting experience for voters and for election workers, and that staff were committed to implementing safety procedures. More than 90 percent agreed the procedures made for a safe experience for FLT members and election workers, but a similar percentage agreed that the pandemic made recruitment of election workers more difficult. About 85 percent of respondents said that closing schools on Election Day made it easier to find polling locations.

The survey of election workers was overwhelming in its consistency. Over 90 percent of respondents both for advance voting and election day voting said the voting place at which they were working was big enough to ensure physical distancing, that voters were required to sanitize their hands upon entering the voting place, that they wore a mask at all times when interacting with voters, that candidate representatives observed required protocols, and that voters were respectful of COVID-19 procedures.

When asked about their overall satisfaction with the COVID-19 safety precautions put in place by Elections Saskatchewan, almost all workers indicated they were satisfied (96.9 percent). Furthermore, election workers felt that both their own safety, and the safety of voters, were matters of concern to Elections Saskatchewan. When asked whether their personal safety was protected by efforts put in place by Elections Saskatchewan, 98.5 percent agreed. Almost an identical assessment was made about the safety of voters, with 99.1 percent agreeing that voters' safety was protected.

The survey of voters provides insight into electors' perceptions of safety. Election Saskatchewan's public information campaign regarding making voting safer appears to have been effective, as 85 percent of respondents said they were knowledgeable of efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 at the polls. There was a very high level of satisfaction with the mitigation steps instituted by Elections Saskatchewan: 95 percent of voters said they were satisfied, and similar percentages agreed that almost all of the specific steps taken, such as providing larger voting places, providing hand sanitizer at voting places, requiring election workers to wear masks

and requiring election workers to work behind lightweight cardboard dividers, were satisfactory.

As part of the administrative review of the election, external observers were deployed to oversee voting procedures at a number of advance and election day voting locations. Included in their observations were the extent of COVID-19 mitigation compliance. Overall, compliance was found to be very high. Well over 90 percent of polling places were found to have hand sanitizer on all tables, had COVID-19 mitigation signage posted, election workers wearing masks at all times, and appropriate physical distancing. While slightly lower levels of compliance were observed around the regular cleaning and disinfecting of work surfaces when observing interactions between voters and election workers, there was a high incidence (about 90 percent) of all voters using the required protocols to present their identification.

> Without exception, political party representatives interviewed were complimentary in their assessment of the efforts and achievements of Elections Saskatchewan in conducting an election during a pandemic.

Interviews were conducted with the party leader and/or the Chief Official Agent of three of the province's six political parties (the administrative review team was unsuccessful in scheduling interviews with the other parties). Without exception, political party representatives interviewed were complimentary in their assessment of the efforts and achievements of Elections Saskatchewan in conducting an election during a pandemic. One interviewee provided the following assessment,

"The thing that affected the election the most was the pandemic. The vote-by-mail procedure was unique and done well … in the context of the legislation, Elections Saskatchewan did a good job … People in the party have been very complimentary about Elections Saskatchewan. I have heard nothing negative."

Lessons from an Election During a Pandemic

The provincial election of 2020 was the first, and hopefully the last, election held in Saskatchewan during a pandemic. Its impact was ubiquitous, as virtually all administrative procedures were impacted. In the end, it is apparent that the view is widely held, among election workers, voters, and political parties, that Elections Saskatchewan performed very well under the challenges presented by COVID-19. The following lessons can be drawn from this experience:

- *Partnerships and relationships were key to the successful implementation of the election.* A number of partnerships and relationships, nurtured in advance of the pandemic, were called upon to implement a successful event. These include an ongoing relationship with the Chief Medical Health Officer, good channels of communication with leadership within political parties, and good relationships with First Nations communities and disability groups. This also included an effective partnership with the Saskatchewan Health Authority and the Ministries of Health and Social Services.

- *Communication is vital to maintaining voters' confidence in the process.* Perhaps the fundamental question posed by all voters during the pandemic of 2020 was, "is it safe to vote?" Elections Saskatchewan identified early the importance of this question, and actively developed protocols to ensure a safe election, and then communicated this repeatedly to voters and other election stakeholders. In the end, most voters said they were knowledgeable about the steps taken to ensure their safety, and overwhelming majorities indicated that they indeed felt safe in voting.

In the context of a pandemic, building voting capacity to reduce crowding at the polls was the highest priority. This was accomplished with a heightened awareness that circumstances could change at any time.

In recent years, accessibility to the ballot has become increasingly flexible. Voters can now vote in advance without providing a reason, they can more readily request an absentee ballot and, in certain cases, they can even vote in their residence or at the curbside of a polling location. As legislators expand the diversity of voting opportunities, there is a continual need for an election management body to match opportunities with capacity. The centralization of Vote by Mail at head office is a good example of Elections

Saskatchewan's success in the 29th General Election. But providing increased voting opportunities and designing these opportunities to make voting easier and more accessible is not just important in the extreme case of a global pandemic. It is also central to maintaining alignment with changing citizen expectations of public services and with the values Elections Saskatchewan embraces.

Voter Registration

Voter registration is the term used to describe the process whereby an election management body confirms that a person has met the eligibility requirements for voting, and places that person on the register of electors. The eligibility requirements for voter registration in Saskatchewan are dictated by The Election Act, 1996. To be registered, electors must be at least 18 years of age, a Canadian citizen, and they must have resided in Saskatchewan for the previous six months.

A high-quality voters list is vital to administering an election. The list facilitates planning by ensuring that an appropriate number of polling locations are established in all parts of a constituency with sufficient supplies and staff. As well, the voters list creates an efficient voting experience by allowing the process of confirming one's eligibility to vote to be separated from the process of casting a ballot. With a good voters list, most voters can cast their ballot in only a few minutes. Finally, the voters list is an important tool for political parties and candidates as it is the means whereby they can ensure that voters are informed and engaged. As has often been said, a successful election begins with a high-quality voters list.


42%

The number of changes made at the polls to the register declined by 42% from 2016

Elections Saskatchewan adopted a permanent register of electors in advance of the province's 2016 election. In the period leading up to that election, it conducted the last

province-wide enumeration. The register of electors is now updated largely through data exchange agreements with agencies such as Elections Canada, SGI, and eHealth. A permanent register is usually more accurate than traditional enumeration and can reduce the need for voters to update their information when voting.

The 2020 election demonstrated that the permanent register is accomplishing that goal. The number of changes made at the polls to the register declined by 42% from 2016.

Voter Registration Changes at the Polls

Legend:
- Completely New Registrations
- Updates to Existing Registration Information
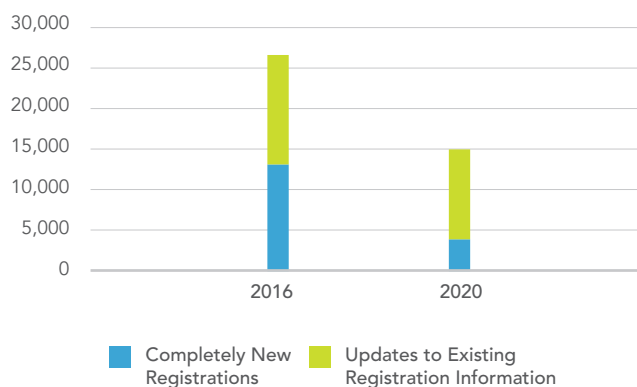
Findings
It has become standard among election management bodies to measure the quality of a voters list[11] according to three criteria – the list's coverage, currency, and accuracy.

- **Coverage,** or completeness, refers to the percentage of voters who are registered compared to the number of eligible persons in the province;

- **Currency** is a measure of the relative decay of information from the time it is collected to the time it is needed. It refers to whether the list is up-to-date, i.e., whether an individual named at a specific address continues to reside at that location; and

- **Accuracy** refers to whether the information on the list is correct in terms of not containing spelling errors, data entry mistakes or other more serious inaccuracies, such as the inclusion of ineligible or duplicate voters. It is the percentage of correctly listed names and addresses compared to the total number of names on the list.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that while having one's name on the voters list is a requirement for voting, it is ultimately an elector's choice whether or not to be included in the permanent register. Therefore, the quality of the voter's list does not rest solely with the election management body: voters also bear responsibility for its quality.

Although there is no universally accepted standard for voter list quality, the Administration and Cost of Elections (ACE) project suggests reasonable targets of 90 percent for completeness, 85 percent for currency and 97 percent for accuracy of voter lists. The quality of the voters list can also be assessed by using the quality measures employed in the 2016 elections as a benchmark.

Coverage
The permanent register has produced a significant improvement in the quality of voter registration, as measured by coverage (2011 was the last provincial election featuring a door-to-door enumeration).

Voters List Coverage
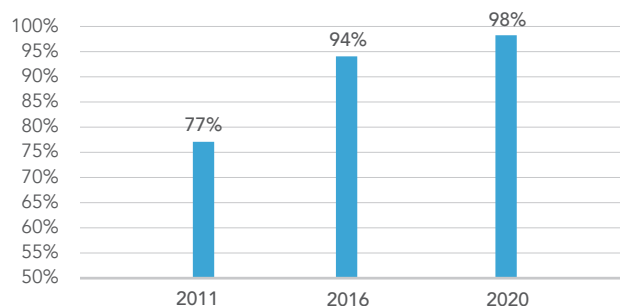
As can clearly be seen, Elections Saskatchewan has achieved a high degree of success both in implementing its permanent register of electors and in its register update strategies.

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[11] For more information, visit https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/vr/introduction/vr20.

Currency

A high-quality voters list contributes to a much more efficient experience when voters cast a ballot. When the voter's identification matches their information on the voters list, the deputy returning officer (DRO) and poll clerk are able to immediately complete the strike-off and issue a ballot. Where the information about the voter is either incorrect on the voters list, or missing, then a revision of the voters list must take place in conjunction with voting. Sometimes a polling location features a separate registration table (with dedicated staffing) and other times this is done by the DRO and poll clerk. Such revisions not only increase the time it takes to vote (and for anyone else in line behind the voter), but they also result in increased staff costs where separate registration stations must be used. Observers noted wait times significantly increased for all voters at locations where DROs managed revisions.

When measuring the currency of the permanent register, the starting point is the list of electors that is produced following the close of the revision period, which for the 2020 election occurred on October 15. Any changes made to the register after that date in conjunction with voting are based on voter's information not being current and, in particular, on the absence of a current address. For 2016, the "non-currency" rate was 2.97 percent. If one assumes the same non-currency rate among voters and non-voters (i.e., among all 750,893 people on the voters list), then information for just over 22,000 electors was not current. These calculations have been repeated for the 2020 election. There were 10,409 changes in registration (not including additions) in 2020, a decrease of about 17 percent from the 12,514 changes in 2016. Overall, the percentage of changes among registered voters was 2.4 percent in 2020, indicating a very high degree of currency of the register.

Accuracy

The third measure of the quality of a voters list is the accuracy of the information. Although all election management bodies in Canada make efforts to ensure that only eligible electors are included on the voters list, recent accounts suggests that no list can be 100 percent accurate. For example, prior to the 2019 Federal Election, Elections Canada identified over 100,000 non-Canadians across the country who were incorrectly included in the federal voter register.[12] Elections Canada shares information from

National Register of Electors with Elections Saskatchewan. In addition, there is typically a lag between the time that an elector passes away, and when this information is received at Elections Saskatchewan from eHealth. As well, inevitably, there are always at least some mistakes in the names of some electors. Although opportunities exist for electors to inform the election management body about such errors, they are not always pursued.

The approach taken by Elections Saskatchewan is to continually update the voters list based on data sharing with other government agencies and departments, and to communicate with electors directly about eligibility requirements, while advising electors about the information currently included on the voters list. Changes are then made based on requests from voters. Leading to the 2020 election, Elections Saskatchewan did not undertake an assessment of the accuracy of the voters list due to the cost and time involved in doing so. However, specific and targeted data cleaning strategies were used to ensure a high level of data accuracy.

One method of indirectly measuring accuracy of the voters list is through the survey of voters and non-voters described in chapter 2. The survey probed respondents' experience with Voter Information Cards (VIC), the information for which is drawn from the voters list. VICs are one of the key methods used by Elections Saskatchewan to communicate with electors about when, where and how to vote. Over 9 in 10 respondents in the survey of voters indicated they received a VIC from Elections Saskatchewan, almost all of which came through regular mail (87 percent). 9 percent of respondents indicated they did not receive a VIC. When asked whether their VIC was accurate, 97 percent of respondents confirmed that it was. When asked about their satisfaction with the continuous voter registration method, more than 9 in 10 respondents (92 percent) indicated satisfaction.

Taken together, these numbers indicate a very high-quality permanent register in Saskatchewan. Available evidence indicates the register scores high on all three measures of quality – completeness, currency and accuracy, and that it has improved markedly upon the voters list created by a door-to-door enumeration in advance of the 2011 election. Survey research also show a very high degree of satisfaction among voters with the permanent register.

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[12] See, for example, https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/elections-canada-set-to-eliminate-100-000-non-citizens-from-voters-registry-1.4403532.

Ease of Use

One can examine the usefulness of the voters list in Saskatchewan from a number of perspectives – those of the voters, of election staff, and of political parties and candidates. Drawing on data from the survey of 2,400 voters and non-voters conducted in the weeks following the election, almost 9 in 10 confirmed that they were on the voters list at the time of the election. Of those who were required to register during the pre-election period, almost all (98 percent) indicated that doing so was easy.

Election officials also tend to hold positive views of voter registration and the voters list. The online surveys conducted with the FLT show that 92 percent reported that they were satisfied with the quality of voter registration and the voters list. Further, 94 percent of election workers reported that they agreed with the statement "The Registration process was correctly administered."

In order to gauge the views of a number of election stakeholders, focus groups were commissioned with a variety of stakeholder groups. Interviews were also conducted with people who served as financial agents for candidates as well as with party leaders (when available) and parties' chief official agents. Participants in the focus group for voters with disabilities, suggested that Elections Saskatchewan continue engaging with the disabilities community to ensure that accessibility remains a priority in all registration activities.

Perhaps the most positive comments about voter registration and the voters list came from some senior members of the political parties during interviews with them. Due to some electoral modernization initiatives that had been introduced by Elections Saskatchewan, the election management body was able to provide a more timely and complete list of voters who had already voted and had been struck-off the voters list throughout the period of voting. In the past, political parties and candidates had to rely on candidate representatives (sometimes called scrutineers) visiting polling places to obtain this information for their "get-out-the-vote" efforts. For the 2020 election, Elections Saskatchewan provided this information directly to the parties throughout the voting process, thereby allowing them to be much more efficient in their efforts to contact and mobilize their

supporters. Senior staff in a number of political parties were enthusiastic in their support for these procedures. As the process for completing this strike off was time consuming and labour intensive, Elections Saskatchewan will need to investigate alternative measures to meet or exceed the same level of service in 2024.

Election Workers

Recruitment of workers is a critical task for any election management body. Administering voting remains a very manual, labour intensive activity in most jurisdictions.

Elections Saskatchewan head office team hired its FLT comprising 61 returning officers (ROs), 61 election clerks (ECs), and twenty-one supervisory and assistant supervisory returning officers (SROs & ASROs).

For administrative purposes, the province was divided into eleven zones, and each zone was assigned an SRO, who together with their assistants, supported the ROs and ECs.

The FLT was recruited throughout the 29th electoral cycle in anticipation of a fall 2020 election. Rumors of a possible spring 2020 election led to an expedited training schedule, as the entire FLT took part in an abbreviated training session on March 3. Subsequently, the lack of certainty over the election date, combined with adjustments that were required to address the COVID pandemic, meant that much of the remaining FLT training was conducted through regional support (involving the SROs), online training sessions, and training materials delivered through newsletters.

Returning officers, assisted by election clerks, hired an average of 179 election workers in each constituency. Election workers comprise poll officials such as deputy returning officers and poll clerks, and support positions such as information officers, registration officers, and others.

Elections Saskatchewan recruited roughly 11,000 temporary workers[13] to administer voting services at 3,132 regular and advance polling locations across the province. In addition, about 90 full-time or part-time staff were hired to administer the Vote by Mail process at head office. The recruitment of election workers remains one of the

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[13] The total number of temporary workers in an election always remains an estimate as there are last minute additions and subtractions due to everyday occurrences such as sickness. This situation was exacerbated during the 29th General Election due to a general apprehensiveness surrounding COVID-19 and led to the need for using estimates both with respect to the number of workers needed (prior to the election) and the number of workers ultimately used.

biggest challenges for the FLT. When ROs and ECs were asked in a survey how easy it was to recruit election workers, more than 61.7 percent said it was difficult, an increase from the 45 percent who said it was difficult in 2016.

97%

of ROs and ECs said that COVID-19 made recruitment of election workers more difficult

Undoubtedly, a significant reason for the increased difficulty of recruiting election workers was the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to survey questions on the difficulty of recruitment, 97 percent of ROs and ECs said that COVID-19 made recruitment of election workers more difficult. This factor contributed to the shortage of election workers that persisted in some constituencies right up to Election Day and prompted the Chief Electoral Officer to encourage recruitment throughout the election period.

The extremely long workday for election workers continued to contribute to recruitment challenges, as it did in previous elections. Election day workers were required to arrive before polls open at 9 am, work continuously (with masks and other forms of PPE) until the close of polls at 8 pm, and then begin the challenging task of ballot counting. The highly prescriptive elements of The Election Act, 1996 provide little discretion to adjust working conditions for election workers, even considering that these conditions appear out of step with contemporary expectations of workers.

One of the initiatives that continues to support recruitment is the Take Part Program, first introduced in advance of the 2016 election. When asked whether the Take Part Program assisted with their recruitment efforts, 80 percent of FLT members said it helped, compared to 75 percent who said so in 2016. The effectiveness of this program also is apparent from responses to the question of how many election day workers were recruited through this program. 17 percent said most of their election day workers were recruited through the Take Part Program, 29 percent said

about half, and 31 percent said about a quarter were recruited from this pool. From the perspective of the FLT, the Take Part Program is an important recruitment tool and should be further enhanced throughout the electoral cycle.

The training of election workers is a challenge for all election management bodies. Most workers have not done the job previously, and most will work only on one day – Election Day. A much smaller number, often including those with previous experience as election workers, will work during the five days of advance voting. To prepare election workers for their roles, Elections Saskatchewan used a variety of training methods, all conducted with physical distancing and strict observance of COVID-19 protocols. These included providing written material, developing online resources, and offering in-person training sessions. In addition, training was expanded to include specific training on COVID-19 mitigation procedures. The training proved effective. Even with the new material and new physically distanced approach to training, 85 percent of election workers felt prepared to work, the same percentage as in 2016.

When assessing the effectiveness of election workers, it is important to remember that for the voting public, they are the "face" of Elections Saskatchewan. They are the ones who interact directly with voters. Consequently, voters' perceptions of their interactions are probably the most important metric of the effectiveness of this group. In the survey of voters, almost all respondents (96.4 percent) said they were satisfied with their interaction with election workers.

For the 28th General Election, held in 2016, Elections Saskatchewan provided a statistical profile of the FLT and election workers. For the FLT, 80 percent were doing their job for the first time, more than 60 percent were 60 years or older, 81 percent were female, 55 percent were retired, and more than 70 percent had attended or completed university. For the 29th election, most aspects of their profile persisted. 65 percent were doing their job for the first time, about 90 percent were 55 years or older, 75 percent were retired, and about 70 percent had attended or completed university.

As was the case with the 28th General Election, the profile of election workers is similar in some respects, and differs in others, compared to the FLT. Just over 60 percent said they were doing their job for the first time and about

three-quarters were female. However, they were somewhat younger (60 percent are 55 years or older), and just over 4 in 10 were university educated.

Findings

Election management bodies are unique organizations, where a small core of permanent staff develops policies and procedures under the guidance and direction of a Chief Electoral Officer, and their implementation falls almost entirely to a much larger team of temporary staff. Developing positive relationships and interactions between the field staff, particularly those who hold positions as members of the FLT, and the headquarters staff is especially important for the success of the organization.

In the survey of the FLT, respondents were asked to comment on various aspects of the election. As the chart below shows, there was a very high level of satisfaction with the quality of election materials, support and communication from head office, the performance of election workers and some lesser but still very high support for their training.

FLT Satisfaction with Various Elements of the Election	
Quality of election materials	94.2%
Support from head office	92.5%
Performance of election workers	89.1%
Communication between head office and FLT	87.5%
Your training	73.3%

On the key relationship between head office and the field offices, satisfaction was very high, and this proved vital for the successful delivery of the election. Respondents were asked about their assessment of their support from head office and from the head office support desk. Over 90 percent indicated that they were satisfied with the support from head office (up from 72 percent in 2016), and 85 percent felt satisfied with support from the help desk (up from 80 percent in 2016). In response to the question of whether they felt part of the Elections Saskatchewan team, about 9 in 10 members of the FLT felt a part of the Elections Saskatchewan team, up from 78 percent in 2016.

> The success of Elections Saskatchewan will continue to be dependent upon it being able to recruit and train a very large, temporary workforce....

The success of Elections Saskatchewan will continue to be dependent upon it being able to recruit and train a very large temporary workforce, to implement the core policies and procedures of the Chief Electoral Officer, with the assistance of his or her relatively small permanent staff. This is no small task. The task can first of all be addressed by accessing the knowledge and experience of those on the frontlines. To this end, the FLT should be thoroughly debriefed after the election to gain further understanding of the unique challenges that recruitment poses.

Beyond this, however, The Election Act, 1996 is very prescriptive in its description of voting processes, mandating the assignment of one deputy returning officer and one poll clerk to each poll. It also places a limit of 300 electors per polling division. The result is that as the population increases, so too does the number of polls and the number of election workers, all of whom must be recruited, hired, trained, deployed and paid.

The lower rate of voter turnout in recent elections (54.17 percent in 2020), coupled with greater use of advance voting, and in this election, the greater use of Vote by Mail, means that fewer voters are voting at their assigned polling place on Election Day. Providing the Chief Electoral Officer with greater flexibility in determining the size of polling divisions (as has recently been done in British Columbia) would improve efficiency in the system while still providing voting service at a level the voting public expects.

Significant improvements to training of election workers were introduced in advance of the 2016 and 2020 elections and based on the response of the FLT and election workers, these are having positive effects. Continued investment in the effective training of staff, combining the principles of blended learning, where in-person training is complemented by online materials, should continue. Lessons from the study of adult learning, which emphasize the efficacy of hands-on problem-solving during in-person instruction, should be continued.

Constituency Voting Locations and Office Space

The returning office in each of the 61 constituencies serves as the headquarters of voting operations for the constituency, accommodating planning, recruitment and staff training. The office is the place for the receipt and dissemination of voting supplies and serves as the hub for candidate nominations and other election-related functions. Returning offices are expected to be fully accessible and have other features such as adequate parking and security.

In order to meet the accessibility, parking and security requirements of the returning office, for the 2016 election, six of the returning offices were established in shared office facilities with another returning office outside the constituency boundaries, and another six returning offices were established as stand-alone offices outside the constituency. Therefore, 20 percent of the returning offices during the 2016 election were outside the constituency.

For 2020, 49 were located within and 12 were outside the constituency they served (the same number as in 2016), and 3 shared space with another returning office. Returning officers sometimes select offices outside their constituency, although always located very near their constituency, if the proposed office offers significant advantages over what they can secure within the constituency, particularly as it relates to accessibility issues. All 61 returning offices used during the 2020 election met all mandatory accessibility requirements.

For this election, there were unique challenges to securing appropriate space to serve as returning offices. The first was the timing of the election. In early March, when Elections Saskatchewan was preparing for the possibility of a spring election, returning officers were instructed to identify and secure appropriate space for the returning office. When it was confirmed several weeks later that there would not be a spring election, returning officers were directed to nullify the lease if possible (if one had been signed). As a result, a small number of returning offices were secured by the end of March, some of which remained leased throughout the period until the election. Most returning offices, however, were rented beginning in September.

As well, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the difficulty of finding appropriate returning offices, as physical distancing requirements meant an overall increase in space requirements (both for returning offices and voting locations). For the 2016 election, of the approximately 1,700 polling locations, five advance voting and 14 election day polling locations did not meet the desired standards for accessibility by voters with disabilities, and no alternative facilities that were both accessible and available could be found in those communities. Therefore, 98.9 percent of polling places met all desired accessibility criteria, including level access, during that event.

Returning officers were instructed to find polling locations that met all desired accessibility criteria. The closing of schools on Election Day, as recommended by the Chief Electoral Officer, greatly facilitated meeting accessibility requirements. Where the polling place initially was found to be deficient in any way (such as, for example, not having level access), remediation measures (such as making a ramp available) were provided. As a result of this plan, and of the accessibility assessment by the returning officers, during the 2020 election 6 of the 243 advance polling (2.5 percent) and 49 of the 1,345 election day polling locations (3.6 percent) did not comply with all accessibility requirements, for an overall compliance of 96.6 percent. The Accessibility Plan anticipated that there may be less than 100 percent compliance for polling location accessibility, and provides alternative measures (including curbside voting, and expanded use of absentee balloting) where a facility is not fully compliant with the standards.

Findings

Returning officers were, almost without exception, able to meet their needs for a good quality space for their returning office. 98 percent of returning officers and election clerks said they were satisfied with their office space, 97 percent of them agreed that they were able to take possession of their space with sufficient lead time, 95 percent agreed that they had a sufficient budget to secure the type of space required, 85 percent said the amount of space was suitable. However, there were some difficulties reported. Only 63 percent said it was easy to find suitable space (one-third said it was difficult). Also, fewer than one in three (31 percent) said they had a number of options to choose from – rather, for most ROs, there was only one option, and fortunately they were able to secure it.

The closing of schools on Election Day proved integral to conducting a safe election during a pandemic. These advantages make it worthwhile to consider requesting

that schools be closed during future elections. Elections Saskatchewan has made great strides in providing fully accessible office space and polling places and needs to continue with these efforts. The high priority on ensuring that all returning offices meet all accessibility requirements reinforces the importance of ensuring that returning officers have the ability to use facilities that meet those requirements, even if they are not situated within the constituency.

Voters with Disabilities

In May 2019, Elections Saskatchewan renewed its partnership with the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy (JSGS) and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) to conduct consultations with accessibility groups in Saskatchewan in advance of the 29th General Election. These consultations highlighted, as they did in 2016, that the ideal voting experience for persons with disabilities is "To vote independently, in private, and with dignity."

In response to recommendations arising from these consultations, Elections Saskatchewan adopted the Open Accessibility Plan, a comprehensive program of improvements in accommodation for voters with disabilities. Broadly speaking, the plan addresses the following areas:

- Accessibility standards for polling places that were developed in the 2016 election were maintained and complemented with COVID-19 mitigation requirements. These standards include adequate parking, level access to buildings, wider doorways and passages, appropriate signage and sufficient lighting.

- Voting opportunities have been expanded for all voters. These include additional advance voting hours, voting in hospitals and personal care facilities, and of course, the expanded Vote by Mail.

- Additionally, measures were introduced in the 2016 election and continued to provide assistance where needed at the polling location. This includes the ability for someone to act as a friend in supporting the voters, increased use of directional signs and mandatory sensitivity training for all staff.

- In 2020, voters were for the first time allowed the use of smart phones and other devices so that those who required could use apps to assist them.

- Finally, voter information and public education are key to Elections Saskatchewan's outreach for voters with disabilities. This includes using VICs to identify fully accessible polling locations and providing materials in accessible formats.

Findings

As noted in the section on voting locations, returning offices in 2020 met all accessibility requirements. For polling places, 96.6 percent met all accessibility requirements. In those cases where full accessibility was impossible, Elections Saskatchewan provided information on the voter information card that advised voters of accessible alternatives. In addition, the significant expansion of absentee voting through the Vote by Mail process meant that any voter, including voters with disabilities, could vote without leaving their home.

> For polling places, 96.6 percent met all accessibility requirements. In those cases where full accessibility was impossible, Elections Saskatchewan provided information on the voter information card that advised voters of accessible alternatives.

The information on the high degree of accessibility of polling places for advance voting and election day voting was well received by both election workers and voters, including voters with disabilities. Over 96 percent of workers at advance and election day polls were satisfied with the accessibility of their polling location. Voters showed a similar level of satisfaction. Among voters with a disability, 96.8 percent said they were satisfied with the accessibility of their polling place, almost identical to the satisfaction among voters who did not consider themselves to have a disability (97.7 percent). By all of the measures,

it appears that the Election Saskatchewan's approach had a very positive effect in ensuring that barriers to voting, at least as regards the physical accessibility of polling places, are being reduced.

An accessible election for all voters is not only about the physical accessibility of polling locations. It also includes diverse voting options (such as absentee, homebound or curbside voting), good support systems in place to provide the supports voters require (such as providing magnifiers for ballots or permitting the use of helpers or assistants while voting), and good communication and information sources (including, for example, the use of TTY or braille). The commitment to a multi-pronged approach to accessibility is reflected in levels of satisfaction. For example, when voters were asked in the survey about their satisfaction with the way the election was run by Elections Saskatchewan, 90 percent of voters with disabilities and 93 percent of voters without disabilities said they were satisfied. It should be noted, however, that some participants in focus groups drew attention to the lack of an option on absentee ballots for those with visual impairment. Overall, however, most participants spoke positively about recent efforts by Elections Saskatchewan to engage with the disability community. In the words of one participant, "I think there's been a good effort to engage with the disability community, and I know with (my organization), we've engaged with them quite a bit. We were part of a video that they made to help with the training that they did. So, I think they definitely have made an effort in that, in trying to train people who are going to be working at the election to know more about disability." Other participants agreed and suggested that the efforts to train staff about sensitivity in interacting with voters with disabilities should be expanded.

Internal data show that only 3 percent of election workers identified as a person with a disability. When people with disabilities among the election day workers survey group were asked about working with Elections Saskatchewan, about 80 percent agreed that Elections Saskatchewan does a good job hiring people with disabilities, provides good supervisory opportunities for people with disabilities, and provides the tools for them to be successful at their job. About 70 percent of them said Elections Saskatchewan does a good job in training people with disabilities, and that it does a good job encouraging people with

disabilities to be involved in provincial elections. Notwithstanding these generally positive assessments, the low percentage of persons with disabilities working either as election workers or as part of the FLT suggests that more can and should be done to employ persons with disabilities. Greater efforts to engage with the disability community in support of this objective would be timely.

Participants in the focus group noted the positive outcomes that have been produced to date from consultations between Elections Saskatchewan and the disability community and encouraged a continuation of those discussions. Elections Saskatchewan should be proud of the strides it has made in providing accessible voting over the past two elections for those with physical disabilities. Moving forward, it should extend these efforts by studying any barriers that may be faced by those with intellectual disabilities in order to establish best practices in this area as well.

First Nations Voters

Saskatchewan has seventy-four First Nations with a total First Nations population of 114,570.[14] There are five major linguistic groups: Cree, Dakota, Dene (Chipewyan), Nakota (Assiniboine) and Salteaux. As of 2016, 50.5 percent of status First Nations peoples in Saskatchewan live on reserve land.

Building on the success of the 28th General Election, Elections Saskatchewan launched the *First Nations Electoral Access Initiative* that was based on consultation and collaboration with First Nations Chiefs and band officials. This plan initially involved data analysis and improvements to the Permanent Register of Voters to ensure better coverage of reserves. Following this, consultations were conducted by the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems with First Nations participants in order to achieve a better understanding of barriers that First Nations voters face in electoral participation and to craft communications and voter guidance that spoke to the First Nations experience. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Chief Electoral Officer devoted considerable time to building collaborative relationships with First Nations Chiefs throughout the province.

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[14] These numbers can be found at https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-PR-Eng.cfm?TOPIC=9&LANG =Eng&GK=PR&GC=47

Partnerships were also developed in anticipation of the need to establish Letters of Authorization, which are a regulated form of acceptable identification, signed by the Chief of each participating Band, which can be used to legally establish the identity of Band members and verify that they live on a reserve. While signed Letters of Authorization could be used as one piece of identification for voting, a second identification document also needed to be provided by the voter. These letters play an important role in reducing barriers for First Nations voters who may not have the same access to identification documents as others.

Additionally, an international team of experts in elections administration visited bands in the winter of 2019-20 and consulted with First Nations Chiefs and band officials. The results of these consultations were incorporated into the Electoral Access Initiative to craft a collaborative and respectful approach that would engage First Nations in the election both as election workers and as voters.

Findings

Immediately following the 2016 election, Elections Saskatchewan formed focus groups with First Nations voters to understand the effectiveness of communications and outreach materials. These conversations led to a much better understanding the diversity of First Nations communities and resulted in targeted materials that better reflected the interests and life experiences of both northern and southern First Nations. Looking forward, these measures should be supplemented with reviews of the translations of all materials to ensure that they are providing accurate messaging to First Nations linguistic groups.

Over the year prior to the 29th General Election, Elections Saskatchewan then worked in collaboration with Chiefs and band officials to ensure the polls could be held on reserves and that First Nations voters could be served, as are all other voters, by their neighbors who live in the same community.

To that end, during this election 69 First Nations bands had election day polls on their reserves. This practice of voting in ones' own community is vital to removing barriers to voting and to demonstrating that this is an event for which all voters play a part.

Under *The Election Act, 1996* election workers are meant to work in the constituencies in which they reside and to this end, Elections Saskatchewan strives to ensure that those who serve as election workers live as close as possible to the polls in which they work. In the 29th General Election, 6.9 percent of election workers identified as Aboriginal. This is an indication that collaboration with First Nations, when it comes to election administration, is beginning to bear fruit, however, Elections Saskatchewan should undertake a recruitment and training strategy to ensure that First Nations are adequately represented at the polls.

This was the first election in which advance polls were held in First Nation communities, not only providing First Nations voters with a service not previously available to them but allowing First Nations bands to play host to a broader community…

The benefits of this collaboration can also be seen in the fact that this was the first election in which advance polls were held in First Nation communities, not only providing First Nations voters with a service not previously available to them but allowing First Nations bands to play host to a broader community as all residents of a constituency are eligible to attend any advance poll they choose.

Elections Saskatchewan's outreach to First Nations has clearly been a success in the 29th General Election. It was the relationship-building that had been underway since the last election that built the trust required for Elections Saskatchewan to be welcomed onto so many reserves throughout the province. That trust was even more important during this election as public health concerns related to COVID-19 were foremost in the minds of all. When the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation locked down their reserve at the last minute due to COVID-19 activity, it was the relationship between the Chief and the Chief Electoral Officer that allowed a unique form of Extraordinary Voting to be developed and implemented that allowed some 300

voters access to the ballot who otherwise may not have been able to vote. Several other First Nations communities also experienced COVID-19 related lockdowns in the lead up to Election Day. In each case, solutions to provide access to the ballot for affected voters were provided.

…Elections Saskatchewan has thus far had no specific strategy to address potential barriers faced by either Métis voters or First Nations voters who live off reserve. Elections Saskatchewan should undertake study of these two groups in advance of the next election.

These measures, along with the consultation that preceded them, accounts for the fact that 94.5 percent of Indigenous voters surveyed said they were satisfied with the way the election was run by Elections Saskatchewan. While Elections Saskatchewan needs to continue to work to maintain important relationships with First Nations communities, additionally, it need to study how it can engage meaningfully with other Indigenous groups who may experience barriers to participation. For example, Elections Saskatchewan has thus far had no specific strategy to address potential barriers faced by either Métis voters or First Nations voters who live off reserve. Elections Saskatchewan should undertake study of these two groups in advance of the next election. Such study should be followed by new initiatives to remove barriers for the next election where warranted.
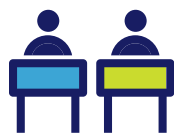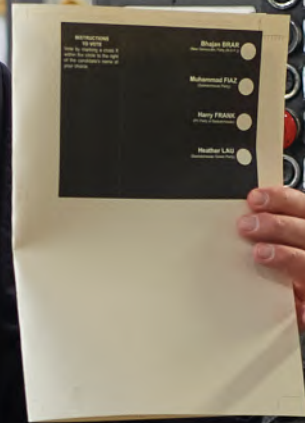
236

Candidates nominated,
32 fewer than 2016

CHAPTER FOUR

The Election Period

For the 29th General Election, the election period ran from the time the writs were issued on September 29, 2020, until the completion of the Final Count on November 7, 2020, 12 days after Election Day. During each general election, this time span represents a period of heightened activity in the life of an election management body and offers an integral opportunity to learn through careful study and assessment. The following chapter offers a description of the period along with key findings gathered through administrative data, surveys, and direct observation.

Political Parties and Candidates

Elections Saskatchewan provides registered political parties and candidates with a wide range of support materials, including manuals and guides, forms for candidate nominations and financial disclosures, copies of the voters list, maps to be used for electoral purposes, street indexes and community name guides. Additionally, information and materials (such as bulletins) are provided that help to ensure compliance with the requirements of *The Election Act, 1996*.

Among the most critical support provided to political parties and candidates is an update during the voting period on who has voted. While this information is gathered by Elections Saskatchewan as a means of safeguarding the integrity of the ballot, it is also key to parties and candidates as it facilitates their "get-out-the-vote" efforts during the voting period. Knowing who has already voted enables parties and candidates to focus their efforts on their supporters who have not yet voted.

In previous Saskatchewan provincial elections, parties and candidates were provided information on who has voted in two ways. At the end of each day of advance voting, Deputy Returning Officers (DROs) would gather at the returning office and use a paper list to strike the names of all who voted that day. The candidates would then be provided with a copy of these lists. Then, on Election Day,

candidate representatives could visit polling locations and pick up copies of information forms ("bingo sheets") that provide the voters list sequence number for each voter who cast a ballot. For the parties, working with these information sources is a labour-intensive (and largely volunteer-driven) activity.

In 2020, this system was changed for advance voting for several reasons. A key reason was that an anticipated increase in advance voting turnout would have made the previous system of nightly strike off unsustainable. In addition, advance poll voting hours had been extended by an hour each day, and COVID-19 restrictions made nightly in-person gatherings impossible. A revised process involved DROs providing poll books to the returning office at the close of voting each day of advance voting. They were scanned and sent to head office, where a team struck voters off electronically. Revised lists, with voters struck off, were sent back to the returning offices to be used on subsequent days. Political parties could then download this information on a regular basis.

Part of Elections Saskatchewan's modernization initiative undertaken in advance of the 29th General Election, which was suspended until the 2024 election, would have provided the ability to digitally strike-off voters at advance polls in 28 of the province's 61 constituencies. Parties and candidates would then have had real time access to this data. Even with this modernization effort being delayed, the partial implementation of this process, in which parties were provided with regular data extracts of who voted during advance voting, was well received.

Elections Saskatchewan maintains close contact with the political parties throughout the election cycle, through ongoing informal communications, a Registered Political Party Annual Meeting, as well as through a system of communiques in the period leading up to and including the writ period. As of March 3, 2021, the Chief Electoral Officer issued 61 communiques to the parties containing information and instructions for the 29th General Election.

At the close of nominations on October 10, 2020, 236 candidates were nominated, 32 fewer than the record number of 268 candidates in 2016. Two hundred and thirty-three of the candidates represented one of the six registered parties, and three were independent.

Findings

A selection of candidates' business managers (responsible for the filing of financial disclosure statements for the candidate) as well as a number of chief official agents for the parties and party leaders were interviewed as part of the information and data gathering efforts for this project.

Overall, the business managers, chief official agents and party leaders were complimentary of the performance of Elections Saskatchewan during what all agreed was a challenging time. Business managers expressed a high level of satisfaction with the timeliness of Elections Saskatchewan head office staff and returning officers in responding to questions. Interactions with ESK staff were minimal, but when they occurred, they were uniformly positive, particularly with the help desk.

> Party leadership officials were very pleased with the seamless manner in which Elections Saskatchewan accommodated significant increases in demand for advance voting, and with the design and implementation of the new Vote by Mail opportunity.
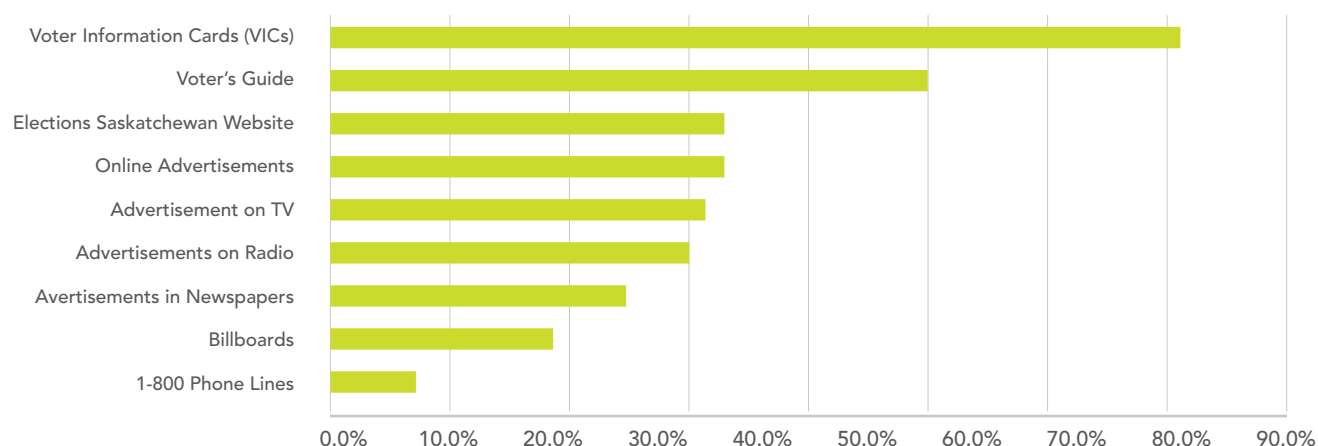
Party leadership officials were very pleased with the seamless manner in which Elections Saskatchewan accommodated significant increases in demand for advance voting and with the design and implementation of the new Vote by Mail opportunity. Chief Official Agents particularly appreciated the data extracts of advance voters, and the innovation of electronic VICs was also praised.

Some proposals for improvement were identified. Similar to the findings in 2016, it was proposed to introduce standing nominations in advance of writ day. Some observed that the increased use of advance voting and Vote by Mail effectively reduces the campaign period for those who vote before Election Day. Allowing for standing nominations, as is done in some other provinces, would provide extra time for candidates to become better known

Percentage of Voters Surveyed Who Reported Using the Following as Sources for Information about the Election

Source	Percentage
Voter Information Cards (VICs)	~81%
Voter's Guide	~56%
Elections Saskatchewan Website	~36%
Online Advertisements	~36%
Advertisement on TV	~34%
Advertisements on Radio	~32%
Avertisements in Newspapers	~27%
Billboards	~20%
1-800 Phone Lines	~7%

Scale: 0.0% 10.0% 20.0% 30.0% 40.0% 50.0% 60.0% 70.0% 80.0% 90.0%

in their constituency. Others suggested that refunding of nomination fees should be based on candidates fulfilling administrative requirements (such as completing financial disclosure forms) and not on the candidate receiving a certain percentage of the vote.

The oversight of Saskatchewan's political finance regime is an important part of Elections Saskatchewan's mandate. However, as most of its activities occur in the year following the election, a review of that process will be completed after the publication of this volume. The results of that review will be included in the next volume of this report, *Volume III: Statement of Expenditures.*
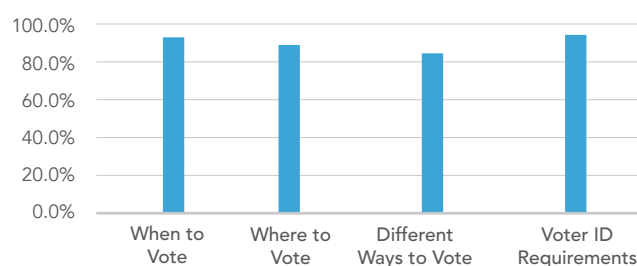
Voter Information

Elections Saskatchewan is responsible for ensuring that voters have information about when, where and how to vote. To this end, a broad portfolio of communication tools has been developed to reach voters.

Respondents who used the above information sources were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with each. Levels of satisfaction are very high, ranging from 98.1 percent for Voter Information Cards (VICS) to 87.8 percent for the 1-800 phone line. It is notable that the information materials sent directly by Elections Saskatchewan to each voter at their household (VICs and the voters guide) are used most frequently by voters and register the highest satisfaction level (98.1 percent and 98.5 percent, respectively).
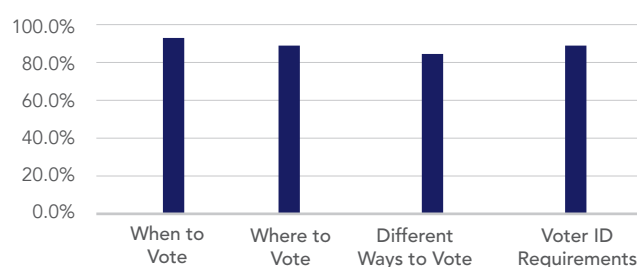
Findings

The data gathered in the administrative review suggests the overall success of Elections Saskatchewan's communication efforts. Voters overwhelmingly indicated that they found it easy to gather information on essential aspects of the election.

How easy was it to get information on...?

Category	Percentage
When to Vote	~93%
Where to Vote	~89%
Different Ways to Vote	~85%
Voter ID Requirements	~95%

Scale: 0.0% 20.0% 40.0% 60.0% 80.0% 100.0%

Furthermore, voters indicated that they felt knowledgeable about all major aspects of voting.

Did you feel knowledgeable about...?

Category	Percentage
When to Vote	~93%
Where to Vote	~89%
Different Ways to Vote	~85%
Voter ID Requirements	~89%

Scale: 0.0% 20.0% 40.0% 60.0% 80.0% 100.0%

Beyond where and when to vote, equally important for voters is information on how the voting process itself works. Interviews with business managers and chief official agents, while very complimentary overall of Elections Saskatchewan's implementation of a greatly expanded Vote by Mail balloting, did indicate that a small minority of voters had some difficulty in requesting a Vote by Mail package. But overall, the act of voting itself was clear to virtually everyone. 98.5 percent of survey respondents said

they found it easy to understand how to cast their vote. While First Nations respondents generally indicated in focus groups that they were satisfied with the communications efforts of Elections Saskatchewan, further effort should be made to determine whether this satisfaction extends beyond the reserve to First Nations living off reserve as well as to Métis voters.

> An issue that caused some confusion among voters was the close timing of the provincial election with municipal elections held just two weeks apart.

An issue that caused some confusion among voters was the close timing of the provincial election, with municipal elections held just two weeks apart (municipal Election Day was Monday, November 9, 2020). Fully one fifth of voters, about 20 percent, indicated that they were confused about which candidates were running provincially and locally and whether issues they heard discussed related to the provincial or local election. To prevent this confusion in future, over half of all respondents said that provincial and local elections should be moved farther apart, and in fact, should be separated by at least a season (such as one in fall and one in spring). It is important that the Chief Electoral Officer engage with municipal counterparts to develop a solution that will work for elections conducted at both levels of government.

Vote by Mail

Absentee voting has traditionally been a way to ensure that people who were temporarily absent from the province during a general election could vote. For the 2016 election, it was also viewed as part of Elections Saskatchewan's accessibility plan, whereby voters who were unable to attend a polling place, for example, due to mobility impairment, could obtain and return a ballot by mail. Absentee voting can also take place in the returning office, with voters able to vote in person at any point between the issuance of the writ of election and the legislated absentee voting deadline. Absentee voting has traditionally been a little-used voting option. For example, in 2016, of the

434,244 people who voted, only 4,420 (1.0 percent) voted by absentee ballot.

The use of absentee ballots changed considerably for the 2020 election. Administering a general election during a pandemic led to changes that were intentionally designed to ensure that voters and election workers alike could participate safely. The Chief Electoral Officer developed and implemented a strategy focused on encouraging people to use a variety of voting procedures with the goal of reducing an overwhelming demand on any one approach. This strategy worked to spread out pressures on the election system. Of 445,011 ballots cast in the 2020 election, only 45 percent of those were on Election Day, by far the lowest number recorded in the province's history.

Initially, when Elections Saskatchewan was preparing for a possible spring election (and before that when it was planning for a fall election without the presence of COVID-19), no changes to the absentee voting process were anticipated. The absentee ballot process was expected to be administered through the returning offices in each constituency, and at the time, it was not anticipated that there would be an increased interest in or demand for absentee ballots. However, the development of a vote by mail process was always a part of the modernization plan put forth by the Chief Electoral Officer after the 2016 general election. In Volume 4 of the report on that election, a three-stage modernization plan was presented that would see ballot tabulators and electronic poll books implemented gradually across three elections. As part of that plan, the Chief Electoral Officer wrote that "Because voting locations must serve the population of geographically large areas in remote and lightly populated rural areas of the province, it is suggested that voters in these areas be able to vote with newly defined postal voting provisions."[15] With the societal changes that accompanied COVID-19 from mid-March and thereafter, discussions began on how best to prepare for an election in a pandemic environment; the Chief Electoral Officer elected to move this aspect of modernization forward and implement it on a much wider scale. During planning, the Chief Electoral Officer made two significant decisions that affected how an expanded absentee balloting provision, referred to publicly and internally as Vote by Mail, would be implemented. First, he determined that responsibility for administering mail in voting would

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[15] *A Report on the Twenty-Eighth General Election, Volume I: Statement of Votes*, Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Saskatchewan, Regina, January 2017, p. 12.

be assumed by Elections Saskatchewan's head office rather than by the returning offices. Returning offices would continue to administer in-person absentee voting. This meant the need to build capacity at head office to administer this program. Second, because mail in voting requires a considerable amount of coordination with the voter's list (to prevent multiple voting), bulk mailing capabilities, and significant data processing, he decided to outsource many of these functions. As a result, contracts were put in place with a number of experienced vendors to assist with the processing of absentee ballot applications and the mailing and processing of Vote by Mail ballots. The actual processing of applications, the adjudication of certification envelopes, and the counting of Vote by Mail ballots were all done by Elections Saskatchewan staff in Regina.

To design, manage, and implement a process that could handle such a large increase in Vote by Mail ballots, Elections Saskatchewan established a team of full-time and part-time staff that operated throughout the election period. This team was responsible for processing Vote by Mail ballot requests, most of which arrived through an online portal designed for this purpose, with a smaller number being received on a paper form. If the request was approved by Elections Saskatchewan staff, a ballot package request was sent to a partner organization for preparation and mailing, and the voter was struck-off the voters list. Once the completed ballot package was received from the voter, the certificate envelope was reviewed for compliance with integrity requirements (including that it was signed by the voter who was issued the package). If there were errors on the certificate envelope, Elections Saskatchewan would attempt to contact the voter to resolve deficiencies.

Once the certificate envelope was accepted, the secrecy envelope was removed, and the ballot (while still inside the secrecy envelope) was placed into a ballot box for the appropriate constituency. This was done by the staff involved in the adjudication process. The final step was the counting of ballots, which was done in two stages at a hotel in downtown Regina. The first, for ballots received by Election Day, took place on October 28 and 29, and the second, for ballots received after but postmarked by Election Day, took place at the Final Count on November 7.

In discussions with party leaders and chief official agents, Elections Saskatchewan drew universal praise for its efforts to run an expanded and efficient Vote by Mail experience....

Findings

As many of the processes established for Vote by Mail were new to Saskatchewan, design continued throughout the pre-election period. As a result, survey instruments could not be used to assess the experience of the staff that were engaged in the processing of Vote by Mail ballots. However, an assessor engaged for this review was present to act as an external observer during the processes of envelope receipt, certificate envelope adjudication, and ballot counting. The impression gathered from direct observation was that the staff worked in highly effective teams, processing a large volume of ballot envelopes as the envelopes arrived throughout the election period. For a process that was developed from scratch in the months preceding the election, based on changing requirements due to COVID, to operate as seamlessly as it did was a significant accomplishment. Still, given the likelihood that the use of Vote by Mail will increase in the future, Registered Political Parties should be invited to observe the different facets of the Vote by Mail process to ensure that the process not only

Given the likelihood that the use of Vote by Mail will increase in the future, Registered Political Parties should be invited to observe the different facets of the Vote by Mail process to ensure that the process not only continues to be conducted with integrity, but that it is also seen to do so.

continues to be conducted with integrity, but that it is also seen to do so.

In discussions with party leaders and chief official agents, Elections Saskatchewan drew universal praise for its efforts to run an expanded and efficient Vote by Mail voting experience that offered a safe voting option for electors concerned in a context where COVID-19 was present. In the words of one interviewee, the election management body acted with "innovation, good spirit, lots of work and courage." Others believe that the overall positive experience with mail in voting in 2020 will lead to increasing interest in this voting method in the future.

The survey of voters indicates differences among age groups in voters' preferences for various voting alternatives. Young voters have a stronger preference for Voting by Mail than either middle-aged voters or seniors, while seniors have a stronger preference for advance voting than do younger voters.

Voting Preference by Age
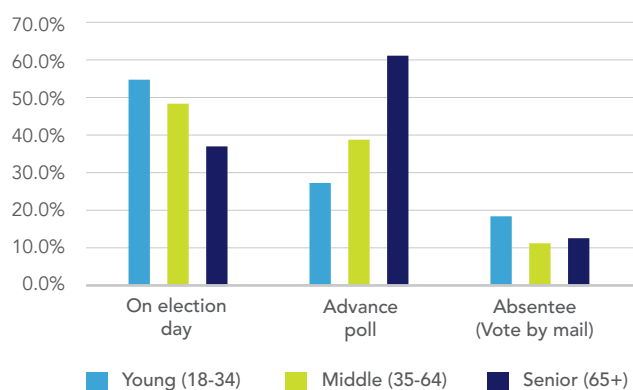
Voters were asked whether their choice of voting was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and very significant differences emerged. 85 percent of people who voted by mail said their decision to do so was affected by COVID-19, compared to only 19 percent of those who voted on Election Day and 38 percent who voted in an advance poll.

There are some slight differences in views about election integrity resulting from Vote by Mail ballots. For example, 37 percent of voters said that mail in ballots might have led to increased voter fraud, although that view was held by a much smaller percentage of people who actually voted by mail (13.6 percent). There were also large differences in

views on whether Vote by Mail ballots should be used more in future elections. Whereas 54 percent of election day voters and 65 percent of advance voters agreed, fully 90 percent of people who voted by mail in 2020 thought that Vote by Mail should be used more in future elections.

These numbers point to the fact that ensuring the integrity of election results is a primary responsibility of Elections Saskatchewan. Rigorous procedures have been put in place to ensure that Vote by Mail and absentee voting, more generally, do not compromise faith in the integrity of elections. To the extent that the recent increases in absentee voting may persist or even increase in future, it is particularly important that Elections Saskatchewan communicate with voters and other election stakeholders about the processes that ensure election integrity is maintained.

Advance and Election Day Voting

In 2020, the number of people who voted increased overall from 434,244 in 2016 to 445,011. However, because the population of the province increased more rapidly in the period, the percentage of eligible voters who participated declined slightly, from 53.28 percent to 52.86 percent.

Beyond the modest change in the number of votes cast, a dramatic shift in voting experience occurred in the 2020 election.
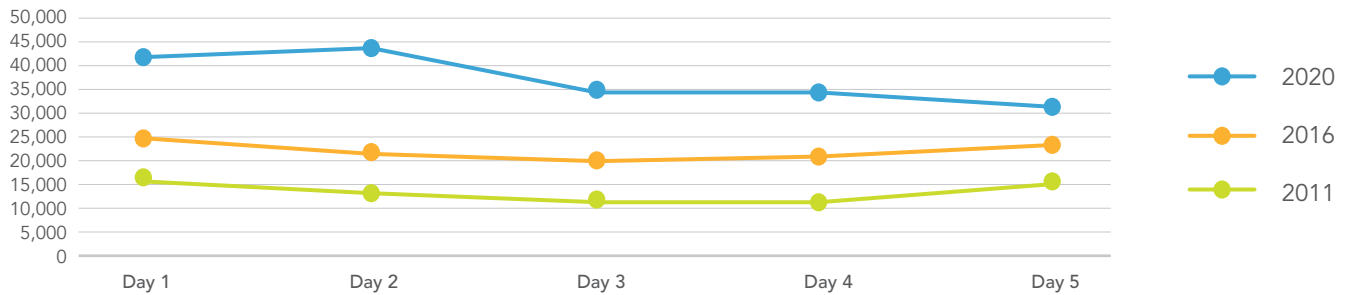
In 2016, about three-quarters of all votes were cast on Election Day, a total of 315,990 votes of the total of 434,244. About a quarter of the votes were cast in advance voting (110,716). And, only about one percent of votes were cast either through absentee (4,420) or special (3,118) voting procedures.

In 2020, only 200,449 votes were cast on Election Day, accounting for about 45 percent of the total, whereas nearly as many (184,366) were cast in advance voting. A further one-eighth of votes were cast by mail in ballot (56,547), while special balloting remained at under one percent (3,273).
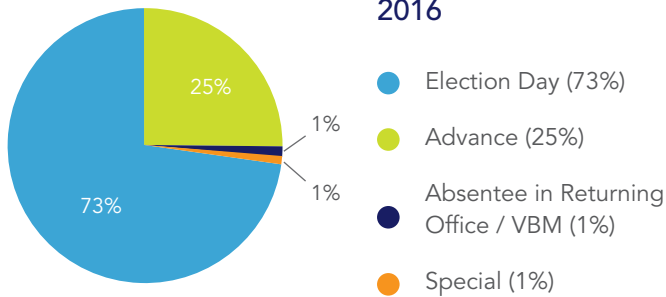
As a whole, the strategy of avoiding crowding at the polls was successful as election day voters shifted in unprecedented numbers to both Advance voting and Vote by mail.
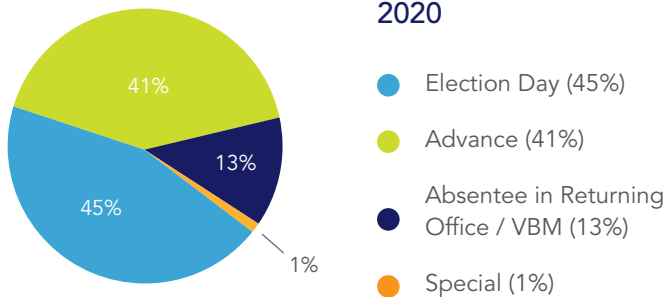
Advance Voting Turnout by Day 2011 to 2020

2016

- Election Day (73%)
- Advance (25%)
- Absentee in Returning Office / VBM (1%)
- Special (1%)

2020

- Election Day (45%)
- Advance (41%)
- Absentee in Returning Office / VBM (13%)
- Special (1%)

Advance Voting

There has been a dramatic increase in the use of advance voting in Saskatchewan general elections in recent years. For the 29th general election, advance voting ran from October 20 to 24, with all advance polls open from noon until 8 pm on each day. To service the community, a total of 243 advance voting locations were used, up from 173 for the 2016 election, an increase of 40 percent.

The 2016 election in Saskatchewan was the first in which advance voting was available to all voters, without a specific and legislatively defined reason for not voting on Election Day. In 2020, Elections Saskatchewan took this one step farther: the need to avoid crowding at election day polls led to adopting a strategy of actively encouraging voters to consider voting at opportunities other than on Election Day. This was done by highlighting the convenience and increased physical distancing afforded to those voting in advance. The messaging worked. The number of ballots cast in advance voting almost tripled between 2011 and 2020, from 66,394 to 184,742, with higher numbers of ballots cast on each day of advance voting.

Between 31,000 and 43,000 people voted on each day of advance voting, and overall advance voting accounted for 41.5 percent of all votes cast in 2020, compared to 25.9 percent in 2016.

On average, 3,029 voters in each constituency voted in an advance poll. However, interest in advance voting was not uniform across the province. It ranged from a low of 1,071 and 1,380 advance ballots cast in Athabasca and Cumberland to a high of 5,530 in Regina Wascana Plains. Although it is not a perfect relationship, in general, the constituencies with the largest number of advance votes were in the larger cities, and those with the lowest number of advance votes were in the more rural areas.

Findings on Advance Voting

With such a dramatic increase in the number of people voting at advance polls, one might have anticipated line-up issues. However, the findings on this matter are nuanced. In the survey of advance poll workers, 63 percent reported that they witnessed line-ups over the course of the 5 days

of advance voting, a decrease from 76 percent of advance poll workers who said this in 2016. And, like the finding in 2016 that the highest percentage of those who experienced line-ups did so on day 1 of advance voting, the same was reported in 2020. Indeed, the percentage of advance poll workers who observed line-ups steadily decreased across the 5 days of advance voting, from 89.5 percent on day 1 to 42.4 percent on day 5. When asked to explain what caused line-ups, the most common response among advance poll workers was a higher than expected turnout (57.6 percent), followed by voters were lining up before the polls were open (48.9 percent). Almost a third of advance poll workers who experienced line-ups said it was because COVID protocols slowed down the voting process (32.9 percent). Interestingly, when asked about their satisfaction with wait times for advance voters overall, 96 percent of advance poll workers said they were satisfied with wait times.

> …94.4 percent of election day voters and 97.5 percent of advance voters said they were satisfied with the time it took to vote.

The generally positive perception of wait times among advance poll workers was shared by voters. Our survey of voters asked respondents how long it took to vote, from the time they arrived at the voting place until the time they departed. About three-quarters of people who voted on Election Day or at an advance poll said it took them 10 minutes or less. Over 90 percent of both groups said it took 20 minutes or less. Moreover, this is a level of efficiency that seems very acceptable to the vast majority of voters. When asked about their satisfaction with the time it took to vote, 94.4 percent of election day voters and 97.5 percent of advance voters said they were satisfied with the time it took to vote. Therefore, although there were some line-ups in advance voting, they declined over the 5 days of advance polls, and for many line-ups occurred only when polls opened. The increased number of advance voting locations and of advance voting stations has helped to address this matter, although observers noted that even in the same location, some polls experienced line-ups while others did not.

> The continued growth in the popularity of advance voting raises questions about whether there should continue to be a differentiation between voting on Election Day versus voting in advance.

The continued growth in the popularity of advance voting raises questions about whether there should continue to be a differentiation between voting on Election Day versus voting in advance. Rather than consider these as two separate voting opportunities, it may be time to expand the concept of election day to incorporate a longer period, such as election week. Interviews suggest there would be little or no resistance from political parties. If the processes for registering and accessing a ballot are consistent between the current advance and election day voting, then they need not be differentiated at all. Election administration is far more efficient for the current system of advance voting with 243 advance voting locations than election day polling, with 1,345 voting locations. In 2020, each process administered roughly equal numbers of votes. As there would be a need to develop a process that accounts for differences in rural/remote needs and the needs of urban constituencies, a complete and more rigorous analysis of moving toward greater administrative efficiency is required.

Election Day Voting

Election Day for the 29th General Election was held on October 26, 2020. 2,794 polling stations were established, and held voting from 9:00 am until the polls closed at 8:00 pm. Between 2016 and 2020, the percentage of voters who cast a ballot on Election Day declined from 73 percent to 45 percent. In 2016, a total of 315,990 votes were cast on Election Day, while in 2020, only 200,449 votes were cast.

For the 2020 election, a number of mitigation measures were introduced to make voting safer. Perhaps the most significant change was due to the need to accommodate greater physical distance at the polls to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. One of the key ways this was done was to close schools for the day. This ensured that polls could be safely held in facilities of the required size in communities across the province. As a result of this

innovation and the overall strategy of building capacity in different methods of voting to reduce crowding, there was no significant bump in active COVID-19 cases due to the 29th General Election.

Findings on Election Day Voting
The survey with those election workers who worked on Election Day suggests the strategy to avoid crowding was largely successful. Of these workers, 73.9 percent reported that they experienced no line ups throughout voting on Election Day. Perhaps significantly, of the workers who did report lineups, the largest portion, 57.9 percent, reported the line ups occurred around 5:00 p.m. or when the work day ended. This suggests innovations in flexible staffing models might be worth exploring as a means of accommodating delays in voting in the future. It should also be noted that 89.8 percent of those who worked during Election Day reported that their experience showed them there were sufficient hours for voting.

Findings on both Advance and Election Day Voting
For all voting at the polls, Elections Saskatchewan established protocols for the interaction between voters and election workers, and election observers were tasked with observing and recording a number of these interactions. Some elements related to COVID-19 mitigation efforts and some related to voting procedures.

Compliance with the expectation that information officers ask voters to sanitize their hands upon entering the voting place was less than universal, as this was observed for about 70 percent of advance voters and only slightly more than 50 percent of election day voters.

Producing voter identification at the time of voting is an important part of the requirements in *The Election Act, 1996*, and observers confirmed a very high level of compliance. In fact, compliance was universal on Election Day and nearly universal during advance voting.

As voters shared their identification document(s) with election workers, there were protocols in place for the safe sharing of the documents, either visually through clear plastic screens or by handing the document to election workers on a clipboard. Observers recorded that sharing the documents through processes consistent with COVID-19 mitigation protocols took place about 95 percent of the

time during advance voting and 90 percent on Election Day. When asked whether the voter's name was crossed off in the poll book, an action that was observable in most instances by the observer team, the compliance rate was essentially 100 percent both for advance and election day voting. A similar finding of virtual universal compliance was reported with regard to removing the counterfoil from the ballot.

Some election workers said the job was too demanding, and others said the hours of work were too long.

It is important for Elections Saskatchewan staff to be rigorous in ensuring compliance with the administrative requirements of *The Election Act, 1996*, and thereby to ensure a high level of trust in how elections are run and in the outcome of the election. It is also important that election workers not be overly officious but rather bring a service-oriented mindset to their work. Evidence from the voters' survey suggests that in the 2020 election, a balance between these principles appears to have been achieved. On the one hand, there were very high levels of satisfaction with voters' interactions with the election workers with whom they interacted. 95 percent of election day voters and 97 percent of advance voters indicated they were satisfied with election workers. As for belief in the integrity of the election, more than 95 percent of voters believe their ballot was counted, and a similarly high percentage believe that only those eligible to vote were able to cast a ballot. A belief in the integrity of the election was shared by election day workers. When asked in the survey whether they believed the election was run fairly, 99 percent of election day workers agreed.

This is not to suggest that there were no perceived problems with the election. Some election workers said the job was too demanding, and others said the hours of work were too long. Some mentioned the amount of paperwork required, and others disparaged the amount of writing required, as each voter's name must be manually written into the poll book. And many workers complained that the mitigation procedures made their jobs more complicated and onerous. Some of these challenges, such as implementing COVID mitigation procedures, are unique

to this election, whereas others present ongoing challenges to Elections Saskatchewan if they are not addressed. But notwithstanding these challenges, it is notable the voters and election workers alike viewed the outcome of the election as having integrity. Interviews with senior party officials revealed that this perspective was shared among the parties and candidates as well.

Making voting easy and convenient for voters is a high priority for election management bodies. One of the principal benefits of the voting system used in Saskatchewan elections is that the ballot used for advance and election day voting is easy to understand and simple to use – the voter simply marks an X next to the candidate they prefer, and the candidate with the most votes wins. Coupled with the idea that voting should be easy is the idea, which has gained prominence over the last few decades, that voters should be able to vote at times and in places that are convenient for them. The broader acceptance of these principles has led to a loosening of restrictions on advance voting and absentee voting in many jurisdictions, including Saskatchewan. And of course, the COVID-19 pandemic served to extend these principles in many jurisdictions in the period since the spring of 2020.

Among the elements that contribute to the ease and convenience of voting are how far voters must travel in order to get to the polling location and how long it takes to cast a ballot. In view of the significant increase in the number of people who voted at an advance polling place and the decrease in the number who voted on Election Day, it is timely to compare the distances and times involved, as well as the satisfaction with these elements.

> …when voters were asked whether they were satisfied with the distance required to vote, 98.1 percent of Election Day voters and 97.2 percent of advance voters indicated that they were.

Perhaps surprisingly, when asked how far they travelled in order to vote, people who voted on Election Day responded similarly to those who voted at an advance poll.

It is surprising because there are far fewer polling places for advance voting than there are for election day voting – indeed, in many constituencies, there were only two or three advance voting places, compared to well over 10 voting locations in a constituency on Election Day. Despite this difference, about half of those who voted on Election Day and who voted at an advance poll indicated that they travelled one kilometre or less. About 80 percent of both groups said they travelled less than 10 kilometres to vote. Despite many fewer voting places for advance voting, those who voted in advance were not more likely to say they had to travel farther. And, to reinforce this point, when voters were asked whether they were satisfied with the distance required to vote, 98.1 percent of Election Day voters and 97.2 percent of advance voters indicated that they were.

The amount of time it took to vote was assessed through direct observations and by asking voters about their voting experience. Observers were asked to record the timing on three separate activities – the time from a person's arrival at the polling place until they were greeted by the information officer, the time from when they left the information officer until they were greeted by the DRO or poll clerk, and the time from when they were greeted by the DRO/PC until they were issued a ballot. Voters presenting themselves at the polling place typically had very little wait time before they were greeted by the information officer. For advance voting, the range in time to be greeted was between one second and 1 minute 20 seconds, and the average wait time was seven seconds. For election day voters, the range was from one second to three minutes 30 seconds, and the average was 10 seconds. When measuring the time it took for voters to be greeted by the DRO, the averages for advance and election day voting were 1 minute, 14 seconds and 55 seconds, respectively. The average time for the ballot to be issued was 1 minute 38 seconds and 1 minute 24 seconds for advance and election day voters, respectively. For some voters, this experience was much shorter (in some cases just a few seconds), whereas, in other instances, it involved a wait of up to 15 minutes.

Voters were asked to estimate the total time involved in voting, from when they arrived at the voting place until they were finished voting. For those voting on Election Day, 76 percent said the experience took less than 10 minutes, a similar percentage among advance voters (72 percent). When asked whether they were satisfied with the length of time it took to vote, 94 percent of election day voters and 97 percent of advance voters said they were satisfied. The

survey of election day workers revealed similar findings – 96 percent of workers at advance polls and 97 percent at Election Day polls indicated they were satisfied with the wait times experienced by voters.

For those voting on Election Day, 76 percent said the experience took less than 10 minutes

Thus, in sum, although there were significant shifts in voter behaviour during the 2020 election, nonetheless satisfaction with the voting experience, including distance travelled to vote and time taken to vote, remained very high, both among those who voted in an advance poll and for those who voted on Election Day. That these high levels of satisfaction were maintained in an election so significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic speaks very highly to the adaptability of voters, election workers and Elections Saskatchewan.

A number of process improvements can and should be introduced into the voting process, some of which already are now included in *The Election Act, 1996*, and others have emerged as timely potential improvements. Perhaps the most important trend in the 2020 election was the significant increase in the number of people who chose to vote at an advance poll instead of on Election Day. Whereas in 2016, there was a three-to-one preference for election day voting versus advance voting, for 2020, the number of voters choosing each option was about even. Surveys found that satisfaction with the voting experience was similar for those voting either in advance or on Election Day. As more and more voters take advantage of the advance voting option, it will be useful to consider removing the distinction between advance voting and election day voting and instead to consider combining them into a multi-day voting period.

There are a number of advantages to doing so. The number of advance voting locations is a small fraction of those used for election day voting – there were 243 polling locations and 323 polling stations for advance voting compared to 1,345 polling locations and 2,794 polling stations for Election Day. Even if one were to double the polling locations used

in advance voting for an extended voting period (of, say, six days), it would still require less than a third of the polling stations used on Election Day. There would also be a dramatic reduction in the number of staff that need to be recruited, hired and trained for service, thereby allowing these resources to be redirected to further building capacity in other voting opportunities such as Vote by Mail. Further, such a move would allow greater focus and refinement in the domain of special ballots, which could be employed in a more targeted way to further reduce barriers for voters.

Technology improvements also can and should be introduced into the voting experience. The anticipated introduction of electronic poll books for advance voting put on hold for the 2020 election should now be piloted in any by-elections that occur for the 29th session of the legislative assembly. Planning should continue for the introduction of electronic poll books for the 2024 election. These would eliminate the need to write the name of each voter into the poll book, and instead, they can simply be struck-off electronically when voting. Such a process would contribute to enhanced election integrity while also providing the ability for Elections Saskatchewan to provide political parties and candidates with near-real-time information on whether a person voted, assisting the parties' voter mobilization efforts.

The experience with the rapid growth in voting by mail voting for the 2020 election suggests that it, too, should be examined more closely as a way to expand voting opportunities and to better serve the demand of voters. Those who used this system in 2020 had highly positive perceptions of the integrity of this voting method, a view that was not always shared by those who voted in advance or on Election Day. Further communications by Elections Saskatchewan about the steps it takes to ensure voters cannot vote more than once, or impersonate other voters, can help alleviate any such concerns.

Overall, the survey of voters revealed that satisfaction with one's voting experience was very high both among those who voted on Election Day (97.5 percent satisfied) and in advance voting (98.6 percent satisfied). Among those voting on Election Day, there were also very high levels of satisfaction (over 90 percent satisfied) with the steps taken by Elections Saskatchewan to minimize the spread of COVID, and nearly 100 percent satisfied with how easy it was to vote (98.5 percent), with how easy it was to understand instructions for voting (99.7 percent), and with

the feeling that their privacy was protected while voting (99.6 percent). In general, then, voting at the polls was a success from the standpoint of voters.

Voting by Special Ballot

Special ballots provide additional support for voters who otherwise would be unable to cast a ballot using other voting arrangements. During this election, Special Voting options included Extraordinary Voting for those affected by COVID-19, a modified Homebound Voting process, Personal Care Facility voting and voting in hospitals and remand centres. Although legislation provides for temporarily displaced polls in the event of floods, fire or other natural disasters, there were no such polls in 2020.

With respect to homebound voting, it should be noted that, in 2020, it was administered through the Vote by Mail procedures. While in 2016, it had been administered through home visits by poll workers, under the advice of the Office of the Chief Medical Health Officer, these visits were deemed unsafe during the pandemic.

3,273
total special ballots were cast in 2020
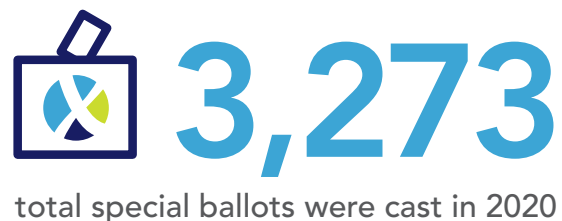
A total of 3,273 special ballots were cast in 2020, comprising less than 1 percent of all votes cast in the election, a figure similar to the use of special ballots in 2016. The use of special ballots ranged from a low of 7 in Regina Wascana Plains and 9 in Kindersley to highs of 249 in Saskatoon Eastview and 343 in Cumberland. The relatively large number of special ballots cast in Cumberland, where 8 percent of all votes were cast by special ballot, was largely due to the adoption of extraordinary voting measures due to the pandemic-related lockdown for the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation.

Elections Saskatchewan also provided the vote to over 5,000 residents of personal care facilities throughout the province. Voting was conducted under protocols designed in conjunction with the Office of the Chief Medical Health

Officer and implemented with assistance from the staff who work at these facilities. Regrettably, Elections Saskatchewan was unable to offer in residence voting for those who live at unlicensed care facilities as has been done in previous elections. The risks of COVID-19 made providing this service impossible. Moving forward, Elections Saskatchewan should make every effort so that these voters are provided with voting options that suit their needs.

Extraordinary Voting Measures: In response to a recommendation of the Chief Electoral Officer for enhanced authority in *The Election Act, 1996* to respond to special needs arising from conducting an election during a pandemic, the government instead amended *The Election Act Regulations*, which provided the Chief Electoral Officer with authority to adapt legislatively prescribed procedures due to the pandemic. While that authority was used in a number of ways that are detailed in the CEO Orders posted on the Elections Saskatchewan website,[16] particular use of that authority was required early on when it became clear that a potential gap in voting opportunity would be created by the province's public health order and its requirements for isolation. While the deadline to apply for an absentee ballot was October 15, it was conceivable that someone could have been forced to isolate after that date, preventing them from using either advance or election day polls. Extraordinary Voting was designed to close that gap as much as possible in a way that would provide equal opportunity to vote for anyone throughout the province. To that end, a process involving couriers, messengers, and personal delivery was designed that extended the voting from October 16 through to October 20. After that point, there would be no time remaining to receive an application, distribute a ballot and receive it back throughout the province.

While Extraordinary Voting was used by a number of voters throughout the province, its single largest use came when on October 8, to address an outbreak of COVID-19, an indefinite lockdown was placed on the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation by the Chief and Council. The lockdown prevented residents from visiting polling places to vote, prevented non-residents from entering the community, and prevented mail from being delivered, thus interfering with the use of the general absentee voting provisions.

The Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation is located in the northeastern part of Saskatchewan and stretches across a number of constituencies, including Cumberland, Saskatchewan Rivers and constituencies in Prince Albert. It consists of nine communities and a number of reserves.

An extraordinary voting measure was put in place to ensure that all eligible voters within the lockdown communities could request and complete a voting package. The completed voting packages were picked up by the Extraordinary Voting team (comprised of residents of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation) or dropped off at a collection site on at least two days, one of which was Election Day October 26. These provisions ensured that special arrangements could be used to provide voting opportunities to these voters. In total, 376 extraordinary ballots were requested from the constituency of Cumberland, which were almost exclusively from members of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, and an additional 53 extraordinary ballots were requested from other constituencies which were principally from people experiencing COVID-19 symptoms. A total of 320 extraordinary ballots were validly cast and accepted in the election.

Findings

Currently, many of the provisions of special balloting are well-suited to serving the needs of voters. In particular, the expanded use of absentee voting in 2020 provides an opportunity to serve significant parts of the community who may face challenges in voting using other voting opportunities.

The pandemic revealed, however, a gap in legislative authority for the Chief Electoral Officer to respond to unique and unanticipated situations, where the specific provisions of voting as outlined in *The Election Act, 1996* cannot reasonably be implemented and where adaptations to the Act are insufficient.[17] The Chief Electoral Officer should strive to ensure as few voters as possible are disenfranchised due to administrative and legislative requirements. Elections Saskatchewan is ideally suited to notice and address, or recommend a legislative solution to, gaps in the current arrangement of voting opportunities that could be addressed to provide better access to the ballot.

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[16] See https://www.elections.sk.ca/candidates-political-parties/bulletins-circulars/

[17] Regulatory changes made in advance of the election strengthened and clarified the Chief Electoral Officer's authority to adapt legislation during a situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic but did not allow for new legislative provisions or voting types to be implemented.

This was clearly demonstrated through the Extraordinary Voting process. The deadline to apply to vote by mail was October 15. Elections Saskatchewan knew that there would be voters forced to isolate due to COVID-19 after this date who would be unable to vote in person at either an advance or election day poll. Extraordinary voting, which relied on couriers and personal delivery of ballot packages, was designed to minimize this period of time as much as possible. The deadline to apply for Extraordinary Voting was October 20.

After October 20, a voter forced to isolate due to COVID-19 would be unable to cast a ballot. There was no practical way for Elections Saskatchewan to provide equal opportunity to apply for, and receive, a ballot package throughout the entire province after that date. As designed and implemented, the Extraordinary Voting solution pushed the Chief Electoral Officer's authority to adapt existing legislation to the limit. Putting in place, a solution that would have allowed these voters to cast a ballot would have required creating an entirely new voting opportunity not considered within existing legislation. This was not within the Chief Electoral Officer's authority.

The Chief Electoral Officer should continue to pursue administrative solutions to address this issue and possibly recommend legislative change whereby any period of potential disenfranchisement could be minimized if not eliminated. This could mean, for example, a process whereby a voter interacts by telephone or video conference with a team of election workers who record the voter's intentions and deposit a marked ballot into a ballot box on behalf of the voter.

Counting and Reporting Elections Results

Counting votes in three stages: In most Saskatchewan elections, there are two vote counts. The first occurs on election night and includes votes that were cast at each polling station on Election Day and all the votes cast in advance voting. The second count, called the final count, occurs about two weeks later and includes absentee ballots and ballots cast at remand centres and hospitals.

The 2020 election, due to the changes introduced to account for the presence of COVID-19, included three vote counts. The first, called "the first preliminary count," was conducted on election night, October 26, and included ballots cast on Election Day, in advance voting and personal care facilities. The second, called the "second preliminary count," was conducted on October 28 and 29 and included ballots that were cast by mail and returned to Elections Saskatchewan by Election Day, October 26. The third, called final count, was conducted on November 7 and included Vote by Mail ballots that were received between 8 pm on October 26 and 11:59 pm on November 5, as well as special (hospital, remand, temporarily displaced, absentee at returning office, extraordinary) ballots.

How will ballots be counted?

Results may not be known on October 26

Use of Vote by Mail ballots has increased significantly during this election. Winners in some constituencies may not be known on the night of Election Day. Candidates in some constituencies may have to wait until the completion of the final count for a winner to be declared.

1 First Preliminary Count
Election Day (October 26)

Ballots from advance voting, election day and personal care facilities are counted.

2020 Oct. 26
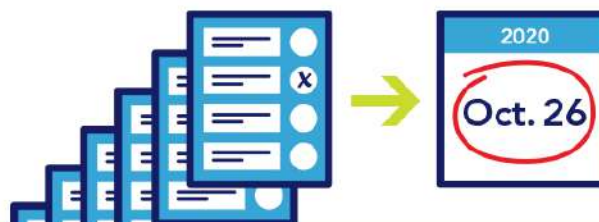
2 Second Preliminary Count
Two Days after Election Day (starting Oct. 28 until complete, 9-5 each day)

Vote by mail ballots received by Oct. 26 are counted. All constituencies collected and counted in Regina. Results cumulative.

2020 Oct. 28

3 Final Count
Twelve Days after Election Day (starting Nov. 7 until complete, 9-5 each day)

Final count to include Vote by Mail ballots received after Oct. 26; In-person Absentee ballots cast at returning offices, Hospital, Remand and Temporarily Displaced Voters ballots; and Extraordinary Voting ballots. Results cumulative and final results produced.

2020 Nov. 7

First Preliminary Count: After administering the voting process for the 11 hours in which polls are open on Election Day, the DRO and poll clerk must count the ballots cast at their polling station and communicate the results to the returning office. There the information is entered into Elections Saskatchewan's election reporting system and then communicated publicly. The counting of ballots is an open and transparent process in which candidate representatives may observe ballot counting.

While counting is taking place of election day ballots, the DRO and poll clerk that worked at an advance poll also count the ballots cast at their voting station. The dramatic increase in the number of voters who voted at an advance poll, coupled with the much smaller number of polling stations at advance voting compared to election day voting, means that most advance polling stations have far more ballots to count than election day polling stations do. As the results of the election are reported from the polling station to the returning office and then through the election night reporting system to the media, it has become common that the results from the large advance polling stations are reported relatively later in the evening.

Once the counting of ballots is completed, the DRO and poll clerk package the ballots, ballot reconciliation materials, and polling station materials into the ballot box, seal the box and transport it to the returning office for secure storage by the returning officer. The materials are accounted for and are available, if necessary, for a recount. The ballot papers themselves are securely stored for a year as a legislative requirement. Similar to the experience in 2016, the observers who oversaw the vote counting and securing of election materials on election night reported complete compliance with administrative procedures.

On election night, a total of 385,461 ballots were counted, down from 426,706 ballots that were counted on election night in 2016.

On election night, a total of 385,461 ballots were counted, down from 426,706 ballots that were counted on election night in 2016. The preliminary results were reported that night on Elections Saskatchewan's website and widely reported in the media.

Second Preliminary Count: In a typical Saskatchewan provincial election, absentee ballots are administered through the constituency returning office and are counted in the returning office during the final count. For the 2020 election, the Chief Electoral Officer instituted a central count for Vote by Mail ballots, something which had never been done in the province before. This central count allowed all Vote by Mail ballots to be counted through head office, which had the resources and facilities to conduct it in an efficient, secure, and safe manner both for election workers and for candidate representatives who were present.

The second preliminary count was of absentee ballots received by 8 pm on election night. Due to the large number of ballots cast by Vote by Mail, a number of electoral contests were still in a state of uncertainty after election night. The Chief Electoral Officer instituted the second preliminary count with the goal of reducing the amount of uncertainty both for candidates and for the voting public. A total of 40,209 ballots were counted during the second preliminary count. The counting took place centrally in Regina, with 18 teams, each consisting of a DRO and poll clerk, working on a single constituency at a time, and with each of the candidates entitled to a representative to observe each constituency count. When the counting for one constituency was concluded, the DRO and poll clerk would count the ballots of another constituency. At the completion and reconciliation of each constituency, Elections Saskatchewan reported the results on its website and provided results to the media.

Final Count: Per legislation, the final count of ballots took place on November 7. The returning officer and election clerk counted ballots from their constituency that were cast at hospitals and remand centres, as well as temporarily displaced and absentee cast at the returning office. Extraordinary Voting ballots were counted at Elections Saskatchewan's head office. This included a total of 3,273 special ballots. In addition, 16,338 ballots that were cast by mail were postmarked by October 26, and were received between 8 pm October 26 and 11:59 pm November 5, were counted centrally in Regina, in a manner consistent with the second preliminary count.

With a large number of votes left to be counted after Election Day, it is perhaps not surprising that in two constituencies, a person who was not leading after the first preliminary count gained enough votes during the second

preliminary count to win the election. In the other 59 constituencies, the person leading after the first preliminary count was the eventual winner. There were no instances in which a person who was not leading after the second preliminary count won the election.

Findings
Similar to the findings from 2016, overall, the ballot counting and reporting procedures were observed to have been completed accurately and successfully. However, the following topics were identified as areas that could receive additional attention.

> …the need to increase the time spent during the training sessions on COVID compliance procedures may have left less time available for training of ballot administration and counting, and…it might have most negatively affected the training on counting.

First, many observers noted that the transition from administering voting to counting and reconciling ballots did not flow smoothly. It appeared that many of the DROs and poll clerks did not fully understand the procedures to follow at the close of voting, and the supervisory deputy returning officers were not always able to assist. There was a perception that the need to increase the time spent during the training sessions on COVID compliance procedures may have left less time available for training of ballot administration and counting and that it might have most negatively affected the training on counting.

Second, the significant increase in the use of absentee ballots in 2020, the decision to administer this ballot from head office, and the introduction of a second preliminary count significantly impacted the time required to complete the vote count. Although the final count, about two weeks after the preliminary count, was not new in 2020, what was new was the number and potential significance of votes that were not counted during the first preliminary count. In 2016, 98.3 percent of all votes were counted on election night, whereas, in 2020, only 86.6 percent of votes were

counted on election night. This raises the obvious question about the future of Vote by Mail in Saskatchewan. If the number of people voting by mail in 2020 was simply due to the unique circumstances of having an election during a pandemic, then the future may resemble 2016, in which almost all ballots are counted on election night. However, if the 2020 election instead indicates a trend of future elections, then under the current system of processing Vote by Mail ballots, it can be expected that uncertainty about the winner in some constituencies may become a feature of future elections. Elections Saskatchewan needs to continue its communications strategy to ensure that stakeholders, including the media, political parties and candidates, and the voting public, are fully informed about when they can be certain about the results of their elections.

…if the 2020 election instead indicates a trend of future elections, then under the current system of processing Vote by Mail ballots, it can be expected that uncertainty about the winner in some constituencies may become a feature of future elections.
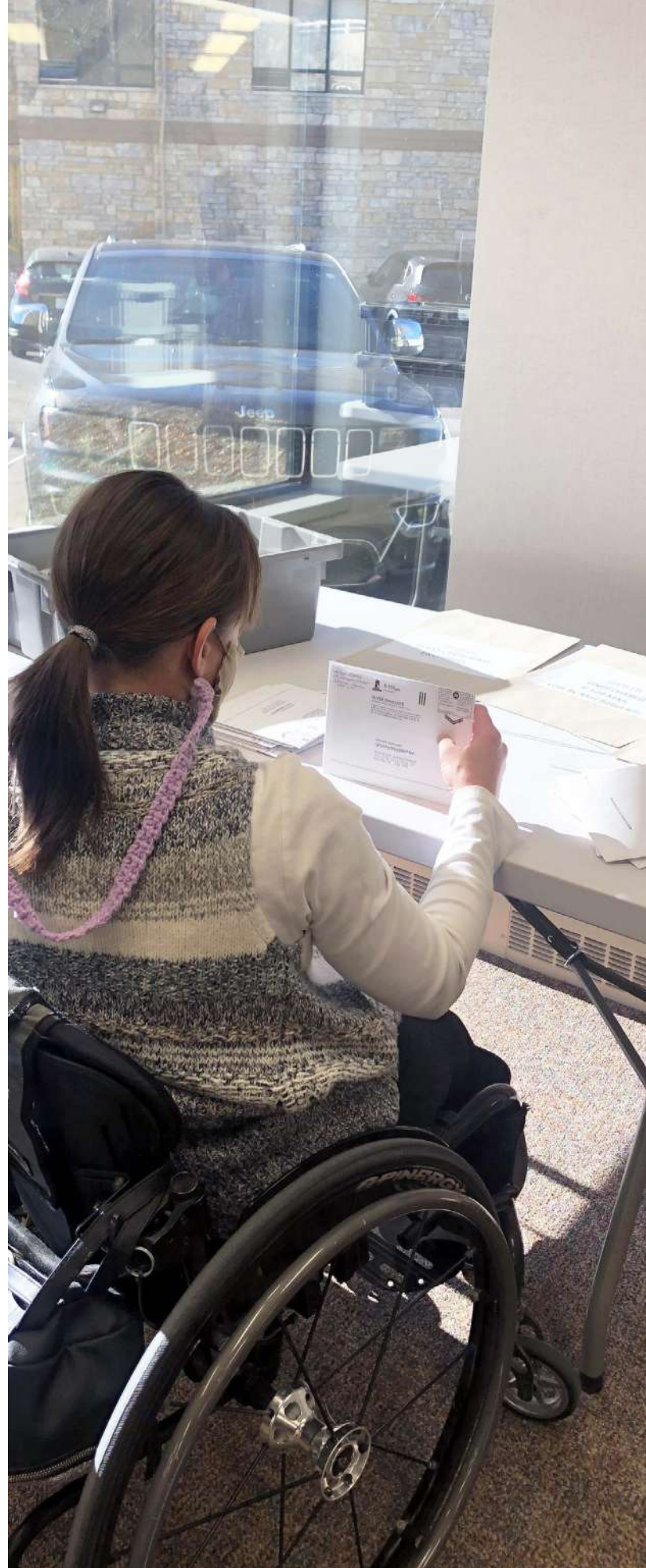
Thank you for voting.

CHAPTER FIVE

Responding to the Assessment

Administrative vs. Legislative Response Requirements

Elections Saskatchewan faced unprecedented challenges in delivering the province's 29th General Election. All aspects of the administrative process associated with the election were affected by the initial uncertainty regarding the election date and then by the COVID-19 pandemic. From the organization of polling places to the issuing of ballots, from the hiring and training of staff to dramatically expanding Vote by Mail opportunities, the 29th General Election was, in all respects, a unique event. Notwithstanding the challenges associated with conducting an election under these circumstances, the administrative processes involved with the election were accepted and endorsed by voters, candidates, political parties, and other electoral stakeholders.

A primary imperative for Elections Saskatchewan, and a key message throughout the campaign and voting period, was to provide a safe environment for all eligible electors to vote. This meant encouraging voters to select from a variety of voting options, such as voting at an advance poll, or voting by absentee ballot, instead of casting ballots on Election Day as they might traditionally have done. In doing so, Elections Saskatchewan's aim was to spread out opportunities to vote across a number of voting channels with the explicit goal of decreasing the potential for voters being forced to gather in large numbers at a time when COVID-19 could be present in a community. The strategy worked very effectively. More people voted in advance polls, and more used absentee ballots, than in any previous election. Although there were some media reports of line-ups at some advance polls during the initial days of advance voting, these were soon replaced by those emphasizing the success of the event.

As part of this administrative review, surveys were conducted with electors, the field leadership team and election day workers.[18] Focus groups were held with the field leadership team, First Nations electors, and electors

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[18] An overview of the sources used for the Administrative Review is found in Appendix A.

with disabilities. Interviews were conducted with candidates' business managers, and with the Chief Official agent, and in one case with the leader, of several political parties. This rich data source confirmed overall a high level of satisfaction with the way the election was administered. However, the information obtained through these sources also provided a broad range of suggestions and advice on ways in which the election process can be improved and modernized. There was widespread support for steps taken in 2020 to expand voting opportunities.

The emerging consensus is that voters should not be limited to voting only on Election Day and only at their assigned poll. Instead, voters appreciated the greater flexibility provided through broad accessibility of advance voting, and large numbers of voters took up the opportunity to Vote by Mail. Election workers commented on how the administration of the vote at the polling station seems out of step with a modern technological society. The requirement to visually check a person's ID documents, write their name in the poll book, and physically strike off their name on the voters list seems inefficient and antiquated. So too do the very long hours, virtually with no breaks, that election day workers are required to work. Simply finding enough people to hire and train as election workers has become more problematic, and in 2020 there continued to be staff shortages in some polling places right up to the eve of Election Day.

Addressing some of these challenges involves changes to *The Election Act, 1996* and, therefore, will remain in the hands of the legislative assembly. Other changes are more administrative in nature. The results of this assessment also provided numerous details about how the administration of the next general election could be improved regardless of whether the core voting model is legislatively revised or not. In many ways, these are incremental changes and improvements that would be expected from any administrative review examining what worked well, what could be done better, and what is urgently in need of repair.

To the extent to which the changes recommended in this assessment can be made without any legislative change, Elections Saskatchewan is committed to making the improvements required. The actions that will be taken, provided the necessary resources are made available, are listed in summary on the pages that follow. Elections Saskatchewan recognizes that service improvements can no longer depend, as they have in the past, on simply increasing the number of election workers at polling locations. As well, the provincial election management body recognizes that it will need to take greater advantage of available information and communication technology if it is to align modern electoral management with citizens' evolving service expectations. To move ahead with these changes, Elections Saskatchewan will require additional flexibility under *The Election Act, 1996*. In the coming
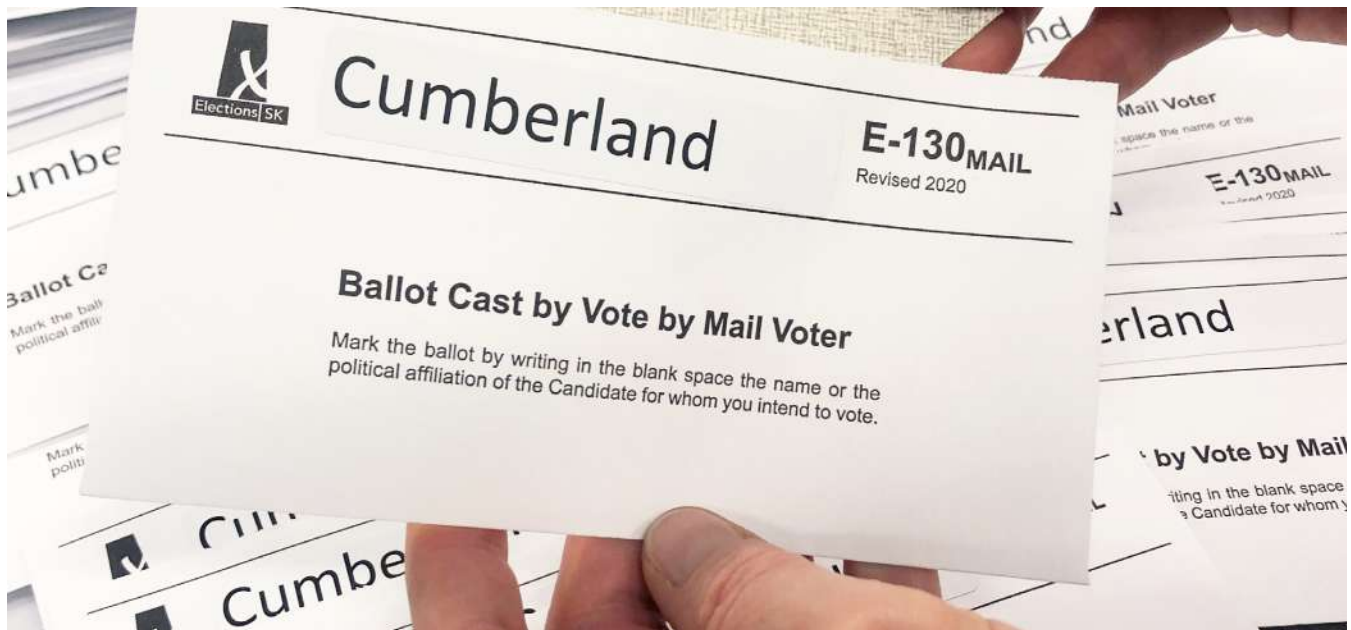
months, the Chief Electoral Officer will submit a report to the Legislative Assembly recommending legislative amendments that will enable modernization while maintaining or enhancing the integrity of the electoral process. These topics will be the subject of *Volume IV, A Report on the Twenty-Ninth General Election, The Chief Electoral Officer's Recommendations for Legislative Reform.*

Administrative Commitments Following 2016 General Election and Responses Leading to 2020 General Election

In Volume II, A Report on the Twenty-Eighth General Election, Administrative Review, the Chief Electoral Officer made a number of commitments for improvement. The following table lists the commitments from the last election as well as the efforts made to satisfy each.

Voter Registration

Commitment	Response
Endeavor to obtain reliable external public sector data sources of citizen name and address records for maintaining the voter registry, and actively pursue methods of ensuring address updates for registered voters are processed in a regular and timely fashion.	Agreements have been signed between Elections Saskatchewan and Elections Canada, eHealth, SGI and other data sources to ensure that the voter register is maintained with the most current, available data.
Design a highly efficient and effective voter registration update program to be implemented in advance of each general election, with the objective of minimizing the number of new registrations and address updates that need to be processed at the time of voting.	Regular updates to registration data from partner sources resulted in a significant reduction in the number of new registrations and address updates at the polls for the 29th General Election.
Regularly measure the quality of the data contained in the register of voters using the most accurate demographic statistical information available for reference use.	Election Saskatchewan employs data analysts who now continuously monitor and measure the quality of the data and work to refine the register as a whole using data sharing agreements with other agencies.
Review the specific needs for election poll officials in terms of providing advance and election day voters list sortation that lends itself to efficient voter processing, with all printed lists provided with font sizes and line spacing that makes them easily readable by poll officials of all ages.	Lists were reviewed following the 28th General Election and improvements were made to readability by sorting all voters alphabetically and removing the occupation data from the list to produce a less cluttered list.

Election Workers

Commitment	Response
Encourage new members of the election workforce who assisted with the 28th General Election to sign on to work at the 29th General Election.	Elections Saskatchewan piloted a "Youth in the Booth" campaign to recruit 16-year-old future voters to work during the Regina Northeast By-election in 2018. This program was then expanded and fully implemented during the 29th General Election. As well, Elections Saskatchewan aggressively recruited first time workers, given the higher COVID risk for those who have traditionally tended to serve as election workers.
Continue, and enhance, the Take Part Program by collecting further relevant details regarding the applicant's skills and aptitudes to allow more informed employment screening to be made earlier in the process.	The Take Part Program now asks specifically about past electoral employment history to facilitate the screening process and provide better skills matching.
Encourage new and additional subsets of the citizen population to "take part" and complete an application that indicates their willingness to play a role in the administrative delivery of a provincial electoral event.	Elections Saskatchewan launched an initiative that specifically targeted historically underserved communities to participate as electoral workers. Specifically, it focused on future voters and new Canadian citizens.
Simplify and streamline the range of training modules developed for election officials (advance, regular, mobile and HRT-hospital/remand/temporary displaced) and support workers based on adult learning principles.	The preparations for the 29th General Election involved a complete redesign of the training for election officials. Using dedicated trainers to increase consistency across the training process, election worker training now incorporates adult learning principles and makes use of targeted, streamlined approaches.
Explore and test the use of web-based e-training methods for temporary election workers and implement their use if they are found to be an effective teaching solution.	Elections Saskatchewan developed a Take Part Training App for enhanced e-training. The app was piloted in the Regina Northeast By-election in 2018 and then used widely in the 29th General Election.

First Nations Voters

Commitment	Response
Continue outreach plans based on a continuing, deep and long-term engagement with band leaders, focusing on engagement of First Nations' personnel as election workers, and addressing remaining barriers to election participation, such as access to identification documents for First Nations voters and timely delivery of voter information cards to all registered voters living in reserve communities.	A multi-year initiative was undertaken to engage Chiefs and Band Administrators as partners in reducing barriers and facilitating communication with First Nations voters living on reserves and ensuring reliable delivery of Voter Information Cards. Additionally, a team with members from the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School for Public Policy and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems was sent to directly consult with members from bands across south Saskatchewan.

Accessibility for Voters with Disabilities

Commitment	Response
Intensify engagement with disability communities and stakeholders, especially with respect to voter education, improved sensitivity training for poll workers and research focused on accessibility issues faced by Indigenous voters with disabilities.	The Open Accessibility Strategic Initiative held consultations with the disability community to elicit recommendations for improvements to electoral service delivery. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems and the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy conducted these consultations prior to the 29th General Election and then returned to assess Elections Saskatchewan's performance. Included within their mandate were voter education, sensitivity training for poll workers and unique issues faced by Indigenous voters with disabilities.
Implement further practical measures for improving physical access to polling places by voters with disabilities, including better signage to direct voters to an accessible entrance and the provision of chairs for use by voters with disabilities who are waiting.	Enhanced signage was developed for use in the 29th General Election, and the provision of chairs is now standard in all polling locations. As well, prior to the 29th General Election, legislation was changed to allow the use of smart phones and tablets in polling places as assistive devices in response to requests from voters with disabilities.
Ensure all advance voting locations in a constituency are fully accessible for voters with disabilities if any election day polling place in that constituency does not meet accessibility standards.	In 95 percent of all constituencies, this commitment was met for the 29th General Election. In those where it was not, remediation steps were employed as needed.[19]
Explore the feasibility of installing a short-wave radio doorbell in the polling place parking lot of any voting locations that do not meet standard accessibility criteria (so officials inside can be alerted to the need to administer curbside voting).	A study revealed that short-wave radio doorbells were not feasible given design of some of the polling locations in the province. However, information officers continued to be deployed in locations where they could maintain eye contact with access points to assist with doors as necessary.

Ballots

Commitment	Response
Examine the opportunities within the current legislation to regionalize the printing of ballots using printers that can meet stringent requirements for timeliness, consistency and quality.	As part of the work towards modernizing voting services and enhancing Vote by Mail, selected printers were contracted while the oversight and administration of the process was centralized at head office.
Develop improved controls at various points in the ballot preparation process, placing stringent information access limits on party and candidate name changes at the close of the nomination period, using a centralized election management system.	Communications have been increased with parties via Communique concerning deadlines. A new election management system is in development for the 30th General Election.
Explore methods available to apply integrated information technology for populating the content of ballot printing orders	Uncertainty surrounding the election date prevented any improvements in this area, however, a new election management system is in development that may address this commitment.

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[19] The advance voting locations all had ramps that did not meet Elections Saskatchewan accessibility standards. In all cases, Information Officers were stationed in view of the ramps to provide assistance as needed

Political Parties and Candidates

Commitment	Response
Examine the opportunities within current legislation to streamline administrative requirements related to the completion of nomination papers by candidates, collection of witness signatures, notarization of completed nominations papers, and payment of nominee fees.	Elections Saskatchewan has created streamlined, fillable forms as well as a new Guide to Completing Nomination Forms. As well, Elections Saskatchewan has introduced the option of party-wide payment of candidates' fees instead of individual nomination deposits.
Identify needs and improve efficiencies in supporting candidates' business managers, ensuring they have access to the specific and succinct information required to fulfill their legislated responsibilities.	A Business Manager Communications Strategy was implemented that involved creating a series of training videos made available to all business managers, designing a targeted page on the ESK website for Business Managers, using mass email functionality for scheduled distribution of informational emails, developing "Tools, Tips, and Business Rules" in ELMS to assist with completion of returns, and conducting Zoom training sessions for managers.

Voter Information

Commitment	Response
Review the design of the voter information card (VIC) in collaboration with experienced field staff and voter focus groups to better distinguish the location of advance and regular polling places and the voting dates and times associated with each voting opportunity.	Voter information cards (VICs) were redesigned and tested throughout the by-elections between the 28th and 29th General Elections. As well, electronic VICs were available for the first time in the 29th General Election.

Advance Voting

Commitment	Response
Examine workforce planning associated with the staffing of advance polls to better predict peak demands, especially on the first day of advance voting.	Significant work was done in advance of the 29th General Election forecasting voter behaviour with respect to voting. This analysis was then used for all workforce planning.
Explore the range of available administrative flexibility for providing adequate staffing to cope with increased advance voting demands.	This was examined extensively in the preparations for the composition of Volume IV. The determination was made that any administrative flexibility in staffing would require legislative change. Hence the recommendations represent Elections Saskatchewan's response to this commitment
Research and test most efficient methods available to accurately count the votes contained in advance voting ballot boxes to ensure election night voting results are not delayed.	Extensive simulations were conducted with tabulators in the period following the 28th General Election. While they could not be used in the 29th General Election due to uncertainty regarding the election date, Elections Saskatchewan intends to use them in the 30th General Election in 2024.

Election Day Voting

Commitment	Response
Review current guidelines for placement of polling locations and the maximum distance voters should be expected to travel to attend their assigned poll on Election Day.	All guidelines were reviewed, and results will be a part of the legislative recommendations included in Volume IV of this report.
Use existing geographic information system (GIS) technology to review the travel times and distances voters required to reach their most convenient advance poll site and their assigned election day voting location in the 2016 General Election	GIS technology was fully utilized in the poll division review conducted prior to the 29th General Election.
Evaluate current advance poll ballot count staffing arrangements and find effective methods to ensure the results of each advance poll are released as early as possible on election night.	Completed as part of the poll division review conducted prior to the 29th General Election.

Counting and Reporting Election Results

Commitment	Response
Evaluate current advance poll ballot count staffing arrangements and find effective methods to ensure the results of each advance poll are released as early as possible on election night.	While modernization of advance voting had to be suspended due to uncertainty regarding the Election Day, the 29th General Election made significant innovations on counting the high volume of Vote by Mail ballots in order to ensure timely release of results. These were processed by means of central counts held two days after Election Day and then on Final Count day.
Explore methods of reliably recruiting skilled and experienced poll supervisors, and ensure they receive appropriate and adequate training to fulfill their leadership role in each polling location.	Elections Saskatchewan has implemented values-based hiring to ensure the best fit for prospective supervisors. Training has also been redesigned using adult-based learning principles.
Standardize the methods, processes and instructions regarding the telephone reporting of polling station results to the returning office on election night.	Reporting processes were reviewed and training was updated for greater compliance with procedure.
Develop, test, document and implement a highly effective, standardized approach to the orderly return delivery of ballot boxes and polling materials that must be transported from voting locations to their corresponding constituency returning office on election night.	All return and storage procedures were refined during the by-elections held between the 28th and 29th General Election.

Administrative Commitments Following 2020 General Election

In response to the results of the assessment made of the 29th Provincial General Election, the Chief Electoral Officer is committed to making administrative changes and improvements to their preparations for and delivery of the 30th General Election. Specific administrative changes that will be prepared for full implementation at the 30th General Election are as follows:

Voter Registration

- Continue to explore new sources of reliable external public sector data sources of citizen name and address records for maintaining the voter registry, and actively pursue methods of ensuring address updates for registered voters are processed in a regular and timely fashion.

- Expand the use of electronic delivery of voter information cards by encouraging voters to register for delivery electronically.

- Regularly measure the quality of the data contained in the register of voters using the most accurate demographic statistical information available for reference use.

- Examine the feasibility of using technology for accessing an electronic version of the register of electors at polling stations. Strike-off voters electronically in real time.

- Use scanning technology to read barcodes on the VIC for electronic strike-off. Pilot this system in a by-election if possible.

- Endeavour to improve registration rate for traditionally underserved groups such as First Nations, Métis, and new Canadians.

Election Workers

- Innovate in building a community with previous election workers throughout the entire election cycle in order to facilitate future recruitment.

- Expand the range of training materials that are available for delivery online. Pursue further innovation in methods of delivering training online and in person.

- Further enhance the testing program contained in the Take Part App that confirms successful completion of training modules.

- Plan for the administration of vote by mail to continue to be implemented by head office and develop a training system for election workers for vote by mail.

- Develop further videos that help standardize in-person training of election day workers. Develop a specific module that focuses on the transition from administering voting to ballot counting. Include a ballot counting and reconciliation module in the in-person training.

- Conduct an assessment of the workload of advance poll workers versus election workers. Consider whether the schedule of fees for these positions should be adjusted.

- Conduct a focus group of the Field Leadership Team to review advice provided on recruitment, including emphasis on the Take Part Program, the timing for hiring election workers, employing international students, and other recruitment matters..

- Demonstrate progress in ongoing collaboration and sharing of Take Part list with other jurisdictions and public institutions that use the same workforce.

Accessibility for Voters with Disabilities

- Intensify engagement with disability communities and stakeholders, especially with respect to voter education, improved sensitivity training for poll workers, and research focused on accessibility issues faced by Indigenous voters with disabilities.

- Engage with the disability communities on all aspects of the vote by mail process. Ensure that applying for a vote by mail ballot and voting by mail are accessible to all voters.

- Work toward full accessibility at advance and election day polls, offering transparency and clarity for all voters where accessible facilities are unavailable.

- Develop and implement a recruitment and training strategy for people with disabilities, for both the field leadership team and for election workers.

- Study the barriers experienced by voters with intellectual disabilities and develop a meaningful strategy for addressing them.

First Nations

- Build relationships with First Nation communities through outreach that focuses on maintaining ongoing, deep and long-term engagement with community leaders and addressing remaining barriers to election participation, such as access to identification documents for First Nations voters and timely delivery of voter information cards to all registered voters living in reserve communities.

- Develop and implement a recruitment and training strategy for First Nations people for both the field leadership team and for election workers.

- Review the languages in which election materials are translated, in conjunction with a selection of First Nations groups, to ensure translation services meet current needs and community expectations.

- Build upon Elections Saskatchewan's success in outreach by focusing on barriers experienced by other groups such as First Nations voters not living on reserve and Métis voters.

- Begin to formalize administrative relationships between Elections Saskatchewan and First Nations through Memoranda of Understanding in advance of the general election.

Political Parties and Candidates

Note: Administrative commitments in this area related to electoral finance will be included in Volume III of this report, *Statement of Expenditures*.

- Further develop the option of delivering to political parties and candidates, through an electronic portal, information on who has already voted, for use during advance voting and election day voting. Include information in the portal on who has requested an absentee ballot package.

- Investigate opportunities within current legislation to further streamline administrative requirements related to the completion of nomination papers by candidates, collection of witness signatures, notarization of completed nomination papers, and payment of nominee fees.

Voter Information

- Conduct further testing on the portal for voter registration and for applying for vote by mail. Adopt an approach of "continuous improvement" on these to ensure that the experience is as simple and efficient as possible for the voting public.

- Continue to engage with literacy organizations to review the content of all voter information, ensuring it meets the needs of the public.

- Complete an assessment of the provincial-municipal election overlap issue based on the experience in 2020 and on consultations with municipal election officials and offer a public recommendation on a solution.

Advance Voting

- Where legislatively and operationally viable, adopt electronic pollbooks at advance voting. Strike-off voters electronically and upload the strike-off data on a regular basis for access by head office.

- Continue to examine workforce planning associated with the staffing of advance polls to better predict peak demands.

- Adjust the number of ballot boxes (and thus the number of DRO and poll clerk teams) that are assigned to each advance voting place during all of the periods of advance voting.

- Continue to research and test the most efficient methods available to accurately count the votes contained in advance voting ballot boxes to ensure election night voting results are not delayed.

Vote by Mail and Absentee Voting

- Registered Political Parties should be invited to send observers to all administrative aspects of Vote by Mail, including ballot reception, adjudication, and ballot counting.

- Design and implement a system for administering the Vote by Mail component of absentee voting from head office, in the expectation that there will be increased voting by mail in future elections and that the system will be administered centrally.

- Develop methods for voters with disabilities to request a Vote by Mail or absentee ballot with accessibility features designed to accommodate their disability.

- Design a ballot tabulation system that is specific to the Vote by Mail ballots that are administered centrally in anticipation of legislative change that would support such a system. Pilot such a system in a by-election, if one is conducted at an appropriate time.

Election Day Voting

- Review current guidelines for placement of polling locations in order to ensure greatest access to voting through the various voting opportunities available within the election system.

- Continue to use existing geographic information system (GIS) technology to review the travel times and distances voters required to reach their most convenient advance poll site and their assigned election day voting location in the 2020 General Election.

- As necessary, adjust the guidelines for returning officers to follow when assigning voting places for use in the 30th General Election.

Ballot Counting and Reporting

- Adjust advance poll ballot count staffing arrangements and find effective methods to ensure the results of each advance poll are released as early as possible on election night.

- Hire poll supervisors earlier in the campaign period, and increase the amount of training provided to them to ensure they fulfill their leadership role in each polling location. Develop additional training modules specific to poll supervisors.

- Review methods, processes and instructions regarding the telephone reporting of polling station results to the returning office on election night to ensure reporting is as efficient and orderly as possible.

- Implement additional training modules for election workers to transition from voting administration to counting and reporting.

- Engage a focus group of election day workers to review and enhance the "placemat" designed to assist in understanding and implementing the steps involved in ballot counting and reconciliation.

- Continue and refine the practice of centralized counting of Vote by Mail ballots, including, where administratively possible, the practice of second preliminary counting held prior to the final count.

Description of Assessment Methods[20]

Election Assessment Planning

In January 2019, the Chief Electoral Officer recruited a senior election administrator from an outside jurisdiction and a leading academic authority from within the province to join him in developing a project plan for the independent assessment of the administration of Saskatchewan's 29th General Election. The Chief Electoral Officer had initiated a similar assessment of the 28th Provincial Election to provide benchmark data on election administrative practices in the province. The current assessment was intended at the outset as a continuation and extension of the previous assessment. However, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the need to adjust a number of administrative practices while also requiring some adjustments in the measures and methods used in this assessment.

The starting point for the assessment was the range of assessment tools used in 2016 – pre-election consultations with key stakeholder groups, post-election surveys of voters and non-voters, of members of the field leadership team and of election workers. In 2016, it also included a peer assessment, based on direct observations at polling places, conducted by twelve seasoned election officials drawn from election agencies across the country. A survey of candidates for office and interviews with a selection of financial agents and with the parties' chief official agents rounded out the research. This range of assessment tools applied social science research principles of combining survey research with direct observations and interviews with informed participants.

To ensure that the data gathered from survey research was consistent with rigorous social scientific standards, the core external assessment team developed the survey instruments with the support of the University of Saskatchewan's Canadian Hub for Applied Social Research (CHASR). In view of the need to include questions on COVID-19 mitigation strategies and perspectives into the surveys and given that these strategies were still being finalized by Elections Saskatchewan over the summer months, the questionnaires themselves were finalized in September.

Pre-Election Consultations

Prior to the Election period, consultations were conducted on behalf of Elections Saskatchewan by two independent groups comprised of member of the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy (JSGS) and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). The goal was to speak with key stakeholders, gauge experiences with the electoral system in Saskatchewan. and identify barriers to participation. These consultations provided a baseline for the assessment team to then compare with the results of the focus groups and surveys conducted afterwards. On the accessibility side, the group was composed of Dr. Elizabeth Schwartz (JSGS), Virginia Atkinson (IFES) and Hilary Collins (IFES). On May 22-23, 2019, they held consultations in Regina with a variety of accessibility groups in the province. Leading First Nations consultations were Dr. Ken Coates (JSGS), Chad Vickery (IFES) and Kyle Lemargie (IFES). Also present during the First Nations consultations were Rick Temporale (Chief Electoral Officer, Nova Scotia) and Charles Porter (Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, Electoral Operations, British Columbia). On February 4-5, 2020, this group travelled to Saskatchewan to meet with a variety of First Nations Chiefs and band administrators from throughout the province.

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[20] It should be noted that the administrative review published in this volume does not include any data gathered during the political finance portion of election administration. That data, along with discussion of methodology, will be included in the third volume of this report, *Statement of Expenditures.*

Observational Data

The overall purpose of the observation program was to gain insight into the degree to which the procedures and protocols developed by Elections Saskatchewan for the administration of the election were followed by the temporary field staff members during advance voting and on Election Day. As was the case in 2016, this observer program engaged 12 observers, assigning each to one constituency on day 5 of advance voting (October 24) and on Election Day (October 26), to conduct observations based on specific checklists. A debriefing session was held in Saskatoon on October 27. Some of the observations focused on elements of the voting place itself, such as compliance with accessibility guidelines or COVID-19 protocols. Some of the observations focused on specific activities at certain times of the day, such as poll opening and closing. And some observations focused on the interaction between voters and election workers.

There are two principal differences between the observers program in 2016 and 2020. First, while the program during the 28th General Election in 2016 focussed on 12 constituencies in and around Regina and Swift Current, with six urban and six rural constituencies, for the 29th General Election in 2020 the focus was on Saskatoon and the surrounding communities. Like in 2016, six urban constituencies and six rural constituencies were included. Second, the observers in 2016 were drawn from the full-time staff of federal, provincial and municipal election agencies. The COVID pandemic precluded using such staff from across the country for the observers in 2020. Instead, a partnership was formed with the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan to recruit 12 students, nine of whom were currently enrolled in JSGS, two were Political Science students, and one was a law student. We are grateful to the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy for their support of this project.

Beyond observing various aspects of voting administration, the observers recorded compliance rates with various aspects of COVID-19 mitigation efforts. The 29th provincial general election was unprecedented in the procedures required due to the pandemic, and this proved to be an important component of the overall administrative challenge of delivering this event. The COVID-19 mitigation protocols themselves made it challenging to complete all of the observations done previously – in fact, in view of the distance required for our observers to be away from election officials, some observations had to be dropped from our plans, while others were included, but made difficult to observe in some circumstances. The observer plan resulted in observations at 96 polling places (33 during advance voting and 63 on Election Day), and data gathered on 1,502 interactions between voters and election officials.

In addition to observations at polling places, one of the senior members of the assessment team conducted observations of the processing of Vote by Mail absentee ballots at Elections Saskatchewan head office in the period immediately preceding Election Day. In addition, direct observation of the counting of absentee ballots was conducted during the second preliminary count on October 28 and 29.

Immediately following the election, focus group studies were conducted by staff of the Canadian Hub for Applied Social Research (CHASR) on several groups – a selection of members of the Field Leadership Team, persons in the disability community, and First Nations electors.

Senior members of the assessment team also conducted interviews with eight business managers (who act on behalf of individual candidates), the chief official agent of three of the political parties, and one leader of a party.

Post-Election Surveys of Key Stakeholders

The Canadian Hub for Applied Social Research (CHASR), a component of the University of Saskatchewan, was contracted to administer independent surveys and the key stakeholder focus groups, with a focus on their perceptions of how the election was administered, and their attitudes and views of Elections Saskatchewan. Surveys, focus groups and interviews were conducted with:

Voters and Non-voters – Immediately following the election on October 26, 2020, CHASR conducted a random-sample telephone survey of voters and non-voters in Saskatchewan to assess various aspects of their voting experience. The sample of respondents included 2,120 voters and 280 non-voters. This sample size produced a margin of error of +/- 2.00% (19 times out of 20). Taken separately, the voters sample has a margin of error of +/- 2.13% and the non-voters margin of error is +/- 5.86%. Questions included such things as interest and knowledge in the election, assessment of Elections Saskatchewan's communications with voters, satisfaction with the voter registration process, satisfaction with the voting experience, time spent and distance travelled to vote, perceptions of electoral integrity, satisfaction with COVID-mitigation efforts, and (in the case of some respondents) reasons for not voting.

Field Leadership Team Survey – The Field Leadership Team (FLT) survey was an online survey that was administered to all Supervisory Returning Officers (including assistant SROs), Returning Officers, and Election Clerks (n = 143). Fourteen invitees did not participate. Nine participants dropped out of the survey before completion and were not included in the analysis, resulting in 120 completed surveys and a response rate of 84%. The survey launched on November 9, 2020 and closed on November 30, 2020. The survey included assessment of hiring and training, satisfaction with materials and supports from head office, satisfaction with the recruitment, training and deployment of election workers, experiences with COVID-mitigation strategies, and the like.

Election Workers Survey – The Election Workers (EWs) survey was an online survey administered to all those who worked at advance polls or election day polls (n = 8,999). Eighteen emails were undeliverable, so 8,981 received the invitation. Five hundred and eighty-three participants dropped out of the survey before completion and were not included in the analysis. 4,364 election workers completed the survey (a 49% response rate). The survey launched on October 28, 2020 and closed on November 13, 2020.

The survey included assessment of hiring and training, assessments of voter registration and voting procedures, the impact of COVID-mitigation procedures on the voting experience, assessments of voter accessibility in the polling place, and vote counting and reporting procedures.

Field Leadership Team Focus Group – Two focus groups were conducted, with nine participants taking part in the first group and two supervisory returning officers taking part in the second group. Focus groups took approximately 90 minutes, and participants were asked questions related to election preparation, training, software systems, the election process itself, and any deficiencies they noted or were brought to their attention.

Accessibility Community Focus Group – One focus group was conducted with representatives of a variety of groups dedicated to advancing the interests of those with visual, hearing, mobility and other challenges. Eight participants took part and the session lasted approximately 90 minutes. Participants discussed issues that included access to information about the election, voter registration, access to voting sites and the effects of COVID-19.

Indigenous Focus Group – Two focus groups were conducted, with five participants taking part in the first group and six participants taking part in the second. One participant was unable to comment during the focus group and subsequently emailed their responses to CHASR. Focus groups took approximately 90 minutes and participants were asked questions relating to perceived barriers to voting, the location of polling stations, the responsiveness of Elections Saskatchewan to Indigenous issues and the impact of COVID-19.

Interviews with party officials – Interviews were conducted with eight business managers, each responsible for financial accounting for a single candidate in a single constituency. Business managers from three political parties were included: the Saskatchewan Party, the NDP, and the Green Party. Participants were selected from names provided by Elections Saskatchewan. In addition, Chief Official Agents were interviewed from the Saskatchewan Party, the Green Party and the NDP. In one case—the Green Party—the interview included the party leader.

Elections SK

DEDICATION

This volume of *A Report on the Twenty-Ninth General Election* is dedicated to Harry Neufeld, a pioneer in election assessment in Canada. A long-time election administrator and former Chief Electoral Officer of British Columbia, Mr. Neufeld consistently encouraged election administrators across the country to evaluate the approach taken to implementing elections in order to determine how they might more effectively pursue electoral best practice in future electoral processes. He was among the first election administrators in Canada to work on electoral assessments independently of election management body activity and his work helped to inspire the format of this administrative review. Mr. Neufeld dedicated several years of service to Saskatchewan as an outside consultant to Elections Saskatchewan, most recently during the province's October 26, 2020 General Election. He passed away on June 30, 2021 and will be sadly missed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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