

Vote by Mail

At a Glance

Vote by Mail has been common in most jurisdictions for a number of years. While the particular rules and approaches might vary, the idea of sending a ballot in the mail is not new. What is new, however, is the importance of vote by mail as a tool of physical distancing in a COVID-19 world.

What is Vote by Mail?



The term “Vote by mail” embraces a number of different systems that all use postal balloting.

In Saskatchewan at the provincial level, vote by mail has been used for absentee ballots for a number of elections. In this process, voters must fill out an application and provide identification (either in person, online, or by telephone).

Once that application has been adjudicated, the voter is sent a ballot through the mail which they must fill in and then mail back. In other jurisdictions, such as British Columbia during its recent referendum, the term refers to a process whereby registered voters are automatically sent postal ballots which they then fill and return by mail. In this case no initial application is required.

What are some of the concerns related to vote by mail?

The concerns that tend to be associated with vote by mail are generally of two types:

1. **Logistical Issues.** There are many issues that need to be considered when anticipating both the volume of applications and ballots as well as managing the timelines for receipt and counting.
2. **Integrity Issues.** Here, concerns may be raised regarding how

an election management body can be certain that each voter receives one ballot and that each voter is the one who marks each ballot.

What can I do to make vote by mail safe and reliable?

Once again, the options here can be considered in terms of the two types of issues raised above.

1. Logistical Issues. Solutions here will all lay in *anticipating* demand and *building capacity* in your vote by mail system.

Anticipating demand. The best indicator of future demand is previous demand. How has demand for vote by mail been increasing in the past? This is your best indicator. Next, look at electoral events across Canada and in the US. The more similar the societies and electoral systems, the more well-grounded the inference. Try to build a broad sample of what demand was like prior to COVID-19 and then what it was during the pandemic. Even if you exclude those jurisdictions that en-

forced 100% postal voting, you will still see a strong increase in demand for postal voting and it will at least give you a starting assumption for your own event.

Building Capacity. Here the goal should be to consider the different interactions required to vote by mail. First, the elector will apply for a ballot. That application needs to be adjudicated. Second, a ballot package must be assembled and sent to the voter. Third, the voter will return a completed ballot that must be processed and counted. The number of expected voters and the overall timelines must be considered for all three phases. How many applications can be adjudicated by one person per hour? Only by addressing the task at this level can you have a reasonable sense of the capacity required.

From there, you will have to consider if the process can be handled internally or if it needs to be outsourced so that it can be automated as much as possible. There are vendors with precisely this

sort of experience that can be contracted for your event. However, only a reasonable sense of the task and your internal capacity will tell you if this is the right course of action for you.

2. Integrity Issues. Here a *balanced approach* is required.

It is important that all stakeholders have confidence in the integrity of elections. Among other things, this means that they are confident that all eligible voters can vote if they choose and that no voter can vote more than once.

Balancing these two elements of integrity requires that the processes created prevent any individual from casting multiple ballots, while not being so challenging that they effectively disenfranchise eligible voters.



With respect to voting by mail, the important thing to remember is that requirements for identification should mirror those for in person voting.

What implications does COVID-19 have for Vote by Mail?

Broadly speaking, there are two ways in which COVID-19 can affect vote by mail.

1. Volume and Capacity

As yet, very few elections have occurred since the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the data is strongly pointing to a significant uptake in demand for vote by mail.

This means that election administrators should plan their election by assuming that a significantly greater volume of ballots will be administered through the mail.

Again, election administrators should undertake an assessment of their vote by mail systems to ensure they are capable of handling a larger volume.

2. Safety and Ballots

Election administrators should also consider the facilities they will use for sorting and counting large volumes of mail. These facilities need to be of a size sufficient to accommodate workers and public health guidelines regarding

physical distancing.

As well, workers should be trained in proper hand hygiene (up to and possibly including the use of rubber gloves). In the same way in which these requirements have altered how businesses and offices are organized and staffed, election administrators need to factor them into their logistical plans for vote by mail.

Where can I find more information?

Information regarding municipal elections can be found from the Ministry of Government Relations.

306-787-2680

Further information on electoral best practice during the COVID-19 pandemic can be found here:

<https://www.ifes.org/publications/guidelines-and-recommendations-electoral-activities-during-covid-19-pandemic>

<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/elections-and-covid-19>

About Elections Saskatchewan

Elections Saskatchewan is the province's impartial, independent, election management body. Given a mandate from the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, it organizes, manages and oversees provincial electoral events

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