

SUMMARY

When measuring the success of an electoral event, many turn to the voter turnout percentage. Presented as a simple math problem; the number of registered electors divided by the number of electors who cast a ballot shows that 44% of electors attended the polls for the 2015 Territorial General Election. This is a lower percentage than the 2011 event which saw a 47% turnout.

The use of the percentage calculation leaves the impression the 2015 event was less successful and that a steady decline in voters visiting the polls continues in the Northwest Territories. However, further analysis shows a 7% increase in the number of electors who cast ballots during this event. A number of other factors point to the overall success of the 2015 Territorial General Election: increased voter attendance, three judicial recounts that upheld the original outcomes of their respective districts, and an event that came in under budget.

In addition to 19 appointed Returning Officers and a temporary workforce of more than 360 people, the planning, promotion and delivery of the 2015 Territorial General Election was overseen by the staff of the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer.

The 2015 Territorial General Election served more electors, was accurate, and was fiscally responsible. Further to that, the prevalence of micro-successes becomes apparent to readers of the Report, which brings attention to the numerous components of an electoral event comprised of people, logistics, communications, and all the activities that occur before, during and after the writ period.

Elections NWT is of the mind that an educated electorate is an engaged electorate, therefore, this report has been prepared for a wide audience that includes law makers, stakeholders, and the general public with the goal of expanding readership.

In order to better serve stakeholders and experience positive movement in election administration, five significant recommendations presented in this report should come to the forefront:

1. Rewrite the *Elections and Plebiscites Act*
2. Leverage technology
3. Operational model review
4. Expand the Elections NWT mandate
5. Enact Saturday as ordinary polling day

1 Guiding legislation needs to significantly evolve in the coming years to ensure elector accessibility, administrative efficiency, and substantive economics. The word “guiding”, with respect to legislation, is a key term when it comes to writing laws that allow flexibility for election administrators. Transitioning some sections of legislation into associated regulations would provide flexible parameters needed to make practical management decisions as electoral events unfold.

2 The language in the *Elections and Plebiscites Act* is highly prescriptive and presents as legacy legislation written for superseded paper-based processes and administration. It does not contemplate online platforms for election management or for offering a voting procedure that meets societal expectations. Technological intervention in the electoral process is unavoidable and should be leveraged now in order to maintain pace with increasing demand and be incorporated into the next election cycle. If not, the next opportunity will be 2023.

3 Elections NWT is not government. Elections NWT in its simplest description is a voter-centric event planner; an election management body with a fixed-date 4 year calendar. Delivering electoral events that meet the needs of all stakeholders involves unique undulating operational requirements and planning practices.

Elections NWT would be better served by an operational model that supports its individuality as an independent agency. Under the current framework, the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer is restricted in making decisions that are efficient or practical from an operational and reporting perspective, and productivity and economic sensibility are compromised as a result of having to work within the confines of government policy and systems that are not well matched to the agency’s operational requirements.

4 Elections NWT would also benefit from expanding its mandate. Planning and administering elections is its business, and administering both the *Elections and Plebiscites Act* and the *Local Authorities Elections Act* is a logical conclusion: it could realize a GNWT cost savings through amalgamating election material inventories; it would allow election officials to become more proficient in their roles due to an increased frequency in delivering events; and it would become the sole-source provider of information and guidance on election matters, providing continuity of election integrity across the territory. There may be additional value in extending offers to aboriginal governments to access expert knowledge and well-practiced administration procedures through intergovernmental administration agreements.

5 When we vote is also an important consideration. Internationally, Sunday is the most popular day to cast a ballot, with Saturday coming in second. There are a number of solid reasons to change ordinary polling day to a Saturday. The first is the convenience for electors to attend a poll without

having to schedule it into a busy work day and thus increase voter attendance numbers. Secondly, many polling stations occur in schools and a Saturday poll would alleviate any security concerns associated with the presence of children. Thirdly, a Saturday event would allow for a significantly expanded human resource pool for staffing elections positions with individuals that possess adequate numeracy, literacy, and computer skills who would be otherwise engaged during the business week.

Any elections management body will attest to already planning the next event as they move through the planning and delivery of the event at hand. Many issues arise and are resolved in the moment, while others are noted and require further effort to achieve appropriate solutions.

The 43 recommendations included in this report not only address the issues encountered during the planning and delivery of the 2015 Territorial General Election, but also lay the necessary groundwork to ensure the agency moves forward with a vision, a continued sense of purpose, and effective legislation that benefits all stakeholders.

MOVING FORWARD

If the efficacy of Elections NWT continues to be measured solely by voter turnout, there is a need to engineer significant improvements within the existing electoral modality, or embrace radical innovation that will accommodate the incremental societal expectation of election technology.

Election practices inevitably need to adapt over time in order to effectively ensure that minimal or no barriers exist for stakeholders, that the utmost integrity of the vote remains unquestioned, and that economic prudence rules the day.