

Voting is the basis of our democracy, the political act that gives the actions of the government their legitimacy and power. It is also dying, with every election seeing fewer and fewer people casting their ballots. Our most recent provincial election saw only 40.6% of eligible voters coming out to the polls and even fewer young Albertans.

Unfortunately the democratic system itself is partially to blame for this poor turnout, particularly among post-secondary students. There are numerous barriers for students to get through in order to vote. Some of those barriers are knowledge-based – students, particularly those voting for the first time, do not have the knowledge needed to ensure their vote is cast in the election. Some of those barriers are access-related – students are all too often in the wrong location on election day to vote, without the time to find their correct polling station in another community before polls close. And some come as a result of an Elections Act that tries to fit students in an anachronistic category of children living away from home rather than the independent adults most students are.

During any given provincial election hundreds of students are turned away from what they assume is their polling station, told that they would need to vote elsewhere – this is not the pattern to repeat in order to reverse the trend of declining voter turnout and civic engagement. We need to make it easier for Alberta's students to vote and we need to do more to actively encourage their votes, along with all Albertans, to make sure our democracy is healthy. These changes are necessary to ensure our government is able to tell the country and the world that our democratic processes are representative of our values and views.

Our Elections Act and the policies governing elections are long overdue for changes.

Students and younger Albertans in general find it frustrating to be told that their issues are not at the forefront of the agenda because “they don't vote.”

They likely find much in common with the subject of Eddie Cochran's 1958 hit “Summertime Blues” when he laments:

*I'm gonna take my problem to the United Nations
Well I called my congressman and he said quote:
“I'd like to help you son but you're too young to vote”
Sometimes I wonder what I'm gonna do
But there ain't no cure for the summertime blues.*

In this case however, the age and status discrimination is not overt but rather built subtly into the system. It breeds cynicism and establishes a positive feedback cycle of disenchantment that leads to further retreats from the political process by an entire generation.

Fortunately, there are some clear and easy changes that the Government of Alberta and Elections Alberta can do before the next provincial election to make it easier for post-secondary students to vote. The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS), representing students at the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge are making five recommendations to break down the barriers to voting by Alberta's post-secondary students.

STUDENTS RECOMMEND:

- Allow students to choose between their home during studies and their family home to be their ordinary residence;
- Establish advance voting stations for multiple constituencies on post-secondary campuses;
- Permit advance voting for all electoral divisions at any returning office as well as at any advance voting station;
- Select returning officers earlier in the electoral process; and
- Have Elections Alberta and individual returning officers work with students' unions to increase communications with students and encourage voter turnout among students.

HOW A STUDENT CASTS THEIR BALLOT AND WHERE IT IS COUNTED

Broadly speaking, Alberta post-secondary students cast their ballots the same way as everyone else in Alberta – they determine whether they are eligible, they figure out where their polling station is, and head off to vote for their candidate on election day. The barriers arise when the student looks to implement those steps.

Almost all students at Alberta's universities and colleges are eligible to cast a ballot during a general election. The Elections Act specifies the qualifications for being an elector by stating:

16 Subject to section 45, a person is eligible to have the person's name included on a list of electors if that person as of a date fixed by the Chief Electoral Officer

- (a) is a Canadian citizen,
- (b) is at least 18 years of age,
- (c) has been or will have been ordinarily resident in Alberta for at least 6 months as of that date, and
- (d) is ordinarily resident in the electoral division and subdivision for which that person is to have the person's name included on the list of electors.

The obvious exceptions to this set of criteria are international students, those under 18 and those students who have not been ordinarily resident in Alberta for six months. The first three of those criteria are straight forward and quickly determined by the student – the final one, determining where the student is ordinarily resident, is the origin of much of CAUS' concerns.

The Elections Act defines what an "ordinary residence" is, saying "a person's ordinary residence is the place where the person lives and sleeps and to which, when the person is absent from it, the person intends to return" and clarifying that regardless of the circumstances, a person may only have a single residence. Through this legal language

the act provides a solid definition most identify with – your home is where you live and sleep, and where you return when you are done work, finish your vacation or whatever else has led you out of your home temporarily.

This is more than the legal definition – it is the one that most Albertans, including students identify with. Left at that, Alberta students would be able to determine fairly quickly where their ordinary residence is. The act does not finish describing the definition of ordinary residence there however, offering a single exception for students:

1 (2) Subject to section 121, for the purposes of this Act, ordinary residence is determined in accordance with the following rules...

(c) a student who

- (i) is in attendance at an educational institution within or outside Alberta,
- (ii) temporarily rents accommodation for the purpose of attending an educational institution, and
- (iii) has family members who are ordinarily resident in Alberta and with whom the student ordinarily resides when not in attendance at an educational institution

is deemed to reside with those family members;

How does this manifest itself on election day? Hundreds of students show up at a polling station, with identification and are ready to cast a ballot only to be led aside by a deputy returning officer and asked if they are a student, where their family comes from and then are told that they will have to cast a ballot in the electoral division where their family lives. For many students on election day this is tantamount to complete disenfranchisement, as election day is far too late to obtain a special ballot and return it to the returning officer elsewhere. Moreover, it is too onerous to expect a student to travel to the polling station near their parents' home simply to cast their vote.

STUDENTS AND DEMOCRACY

The process which students are supposed to follow is much more complicated. Elections Alberta suggests students fall into one of three categories: students living “at home”, students living “away from home”, and students living “on their own”. For those students living at home, or in a residence with their immediate family during the school year it is fairly straight forward – you vote in the electoral division where you live. For the other two it becomes much more murky. A student who moves away from home to go to school could fall under either of the two categories, and the act makes it difficult to self-identify. The language of “temporarily rents accommodation” and “with whom the student ordinarily resides when not in attendance at an educational institution” suggests that students who move away from home for the first time to study and never intend to move back with their family would still meet the definition of the act that deems the student living at a home they never intend to return to.

For those students deemed to reside in an electoral division different than the one they live in during the school year, they are responsible for obtaining and returning a special ballot from the returning officer of that division. This process is not well-communicated in a timely fashion to Albertans and the onus largely resides on the individual Albertan to determine weeks ahead of time if the only way their vote will count is by getting a special ballot and returning it before polls close on election day.

The expectation of students is the same as all Albertans: to participate in the election, vote on

election day where their neighbours do, and be a part of our democratic process. The reality is that many students are unable to follow that path and leave the polling station denied their right to vote.

HOW OTHER JURISDICTIONS ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO VOTE

It would be fair to say that Alberta is the province where it is the most onerous for students to vote, especially in not allowing students to self-identify where they consider their ordinary residence to be. That would help explain a part of why Alberta’s voter turnout in general and especially among youth is the lowest across Canada. Other provinces take a different approach to engaging students and encouraging them to vote – a task that Elections Alberta and the legislation governing our elections have failed to do.

Of the five recommendations CAUS is making to the Government of Alberta we can see that no one jurisdiction meets them all, however every single province has already adopted some of our recommendations.

On the topic of our first recommendation, every province except Nova Scotia eschews Alberta’s outdated definition of how ordinary residency applies to post-secondary students in favour of greater self-identification. There is some diversity of course, with Ontario and Prince Edward Island for example having similar definitions to Alberta but with the important exception of not specifically making a suggestion in regards to post-secondary students within the

	BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	NS	NB	PEI	NF	CAN
Allows students to choose their ordinary residence	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES
Have advance polls at post-secondary institutions	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO						
Permit advance voting for all electoral divisions at polls	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO
Select returning officers earlier in the electoral process	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES
Have election officials work with students’ unions	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO

legislation, allowing students to self-determine which constituency they call home. Other provinces, like Saskatchewan, explicitly offer the choice to students – they can choose to vote where their family resides or they can choose to vote where they reside while in-study.

The open policy of “anywhere voting” – where electors are allowed to cast a ballot for their electoral division from the returning office of another electoral division – is one that makes sense here in Alberta. The antiquated idea of ballots only being cast in the riding or constituency where the ballot counts is a throwback to a time before the telephone and certainly the internet. The steps required to ensure that electors do not have the opportunity to vote more than once while offering the opportunity to cast a ballot elsewhere either prior to polling day or on polling day itself are available. Manitoba presently offers this opportunity to voters to cast their ballot up to a week ahead of polling day in any returning office in the province and this has presented no problems in the most recent election with relatively low incidents of voters trying to cast multiple ballots or additional costs incurred by Elections Manitoba from workloads associated with offering “anywhere voting”.

British Columbia and their 2009 provincial election provides the perfect case study of best practices Alberta could follow in terms of reaching out to students, removing the typical barriers students face in trying to vote and overall adopting an ethos of encouraging more youth and students to exercise their democratic rights.

First, British Columbia adopts a similar position to Saskatchewan allowing students entirely to choose what constitutes their ordinary residence – be it where they live while studying or where they lived prior to going to university or college. The specific language in the British Columbia Elections Act around determining where a voter is resident is similar to Alberta’s, but contains the clause:

32 (3) As an exception to subsection (1), if for the purposes of attending an educational institution an individual establishes a new place where the individual is a resident that is away from the usual place where the individual is a resident, the individual may choose for the purposes of this Act either the usual place or the new place as the place where the individual is a resident.

This language unlocks the opportunity for the student to choose where they consider their residence for the purpose of voting, provided they meet the criteria and have sufficient identification.

British Columbia also embraces “anywhere voting”, by allowing voters who are unable to attend their assigned voting place on election day or the advance poll in their electoral district of residence to vote at any other voting place in the province. For students in British Columbia this is ideal, allowing a polling station to be set up on campus where a student need only provide their identification proving age, citizenship and residency prior to casting a ballot, regardless of what their electoral district is.

British Columbia’s returning officers are appointed much earlier in the election cycle than Alberta and are required to liaise with groups like students’ unions to ensure that voting is done smoothly and efficiently come polling day. However, more importantly, Elections BC takes seriously their role in fostering a democratic climate among students and youth, appointing a youth liaison officer and working closely with groups like students’ unions and Apathy is Boring to promote an election to students.

Alberta lags behind the rest of the country when it comes to encouraging students to vote, and CAUS believes it is time that we adopt some of the best practices from other jurisdictions and make it easier for students to cast their ballot.

THE 2008 ALBERTA ELECTION AND STUDENT RECOMMENDATIONS

The general election in Alberta on March 3, 2008 had a record low voter turnout of 40.6% and represents a lowest point of a steady decline that should lead us to wonder how low it will go if the trends continue. In all, of the eligible 2.3 million voters who could have cast a ballot, less than a million showed up. You do not need to be a political scientist to know that voter turnout that low erodes the legitimacy and efficacy of our democracy and is a clear signal of disenchantment of not just our politics, but the democratic system itself. Students believe in the wake of the 2008 election Alberta needs to take steps to improve our Elections Act and make voting more accessible, for students and for all Albertans.

While the demographics of Alberta's post-secondary student body encompasses all ages it continues to be dominated by the traditional bracket of 18-24 year olds, and the Elections Alberta Survey of Voters and Non-Voters provides a good view of that demographic and why they did not vote. The survey, conducted by Leger Marketing notes that an Albertan between 18-24 is significantly less likely to vote than other demographics, by a rate of nearly 2-1 when compared to Albertans over 55. This bodes particularly poorly for Alberta's future voter turnout, as the likelihood of voting in your second and third eligible election is directly linked to if you cast a ballot in your first.

What reasons did those Albertans aged 18-24 years give for not voting? The largest single change they listed that would allow them to vote in the next election was to be allowed to vote at any polling station – which was referred to by 69% of non-voters. Other changes that would make 18-24 year old non-voters more likely to vote include providing more opportunities to vote before election day (60%) and keeping polling stations open longer (54%) – all of these things speak to the accessibility of the ballot box, not a general expression of distaste for voting or disinterest. Younger Albertans are also less satisfied with Elections Alberta's ability to get them the necessary information to vote and were particularly less knowledgeable about the basic

mechanics of voting. For example, only 57% of 18-24 year olds knew that they would still be able to vote even if their name was not on the voters list. Once you reconcile the fact that younger Albertans are also much less likely to be on the voters list helps explain why youth voter turnout needs help to be improved.

Younger Albertans need better access to the ballot box if we are going to reverse this trend of declining voter turnout.

Elections Alberta agrees with students. In their report on the 2008 general election, Elections Alberta made four recommendations that CAUS supports: establishing a more flexible definition of ordinary residence, permitting voting at any advance voting location, permitting additional advance voting stations in high traffic locations such as post-secondary campuses and providing for returning officers earlier in the election process.

Students are calling on the Government of Alberta to make five improvements to our election process that will make it easier for students to vote in the next provincial election.

Allow students to choose between their home during studies and their family home to be their ordinary residence. The vast majority of students do not return home following their post-secondary education, and students are the best judge of where they consider their home to be. Students should not be treated as a special class of voter that has additional barriers placed between them and their vote being counted and by restricting the definition of what constitutes a student's ordinary residence our electoral system does just that.

Establish advance voting stations for multiple constituencies on post-secondary campuses. A university or college campus is a place where thousands of students spend the majority of their time – it only makes sense that in these high traffic areas Elections Alberta set up advance voting areas. These stations could be easily advertised and would make it easier and more straightforward for students to ensure that their voice is heard in our democracy.

Permit advance voting for all electoral divisions at any returning office as well as at any advance voting station. Students who presently want their vote to count in the electoral division they lived in prior to starting their studies must obtain a special ballot from the returning officer of that constituency and then return it before polls close – and most importantly they need to know that process in order to initiate it. It would be much easier if the ballot box were able to come to them.

Select returning officers earlier in the electoral process. The writ period is a hectic one, with students and Albertans being bombarded with hundreds of political messages on top of the daily life and distractions in our society. Communicating in this period is a challenge and an impossible one without a solid plan of action and some early steps taken. Students are not sufficiently knowledgeable about how to vote come election day, and having returning officers appointed earlier would make a communications plan to voters significantly easier, in particular in those constituencies with high numbers of students.

Have Elections Alberta and individual returning officer work with students' unions to increase communications with students and encourage voter turnout among students. Students need better communication with Elections Alberta and there are no experts at communicating with students than students themselves. Students' unions across our province are elected by students and their political knowledge of the student body can be put to use to increase voter turnout among Alberta's post-secondary population.

The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) represents over 70,000 university students across Alberta. We represent undergraduate students from the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge to the public, government and other post-secondary education stakeholders.

Based in Edmonton, CAUS is a non-partisan and active advocacy group looking to ensure an accessible and quality post-secondary education system in Alberta.

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