

For fair elections, we're no Mexico

When it comes to ensuring that only those who are eligible to vote get to vote, Canada is a poor example

Tom Flanagan and Jonathan Denis

Citizen Special

Friday, September 22, 2006

Canada often sends observers and advisers to emerging democracies to help them run free and fair elections, but our own procedures for conducting federal elections are not as good as we may think. Indeed, countries such as Mexico, which more recently have revised their procedures, are in better shape than we are when it comes to making sure that only those who are entitled to vote actually do vote.

A contemporary example of electoral hanky-panky in Canada was the hotly contested riding of Edmonton Centre, where former Liberal deputy prime minister Anne McLellan narrowly won elections in 1993, 1997, 2000 and 2004 and then was defeated in 2006 by Conservative Laurie Hawn. In the last week of the 2006 campaign, Mr. Hawn's campaign gave the Edmonton Journal evidence of numerous irregularities, including voters registered at business premises in the riding, addresses that did not exist, and purported residences at commercial mailbox establishments.

These did not seem like random administrative errors. They looked like an attempt to exploit weaknesses in electoral procedures to allow people living outside Edmonton-Centre to vote in that riding. But whether or not these hundreds of discrepancies were intentional, they illustrated weaknesses in electoral rules. So what went wrong, and what needs to be fixed?

High on our repair agenda would be the National Registry of Electors, which is updated every year from federal income tax returns. Tax filers can tick off a box authorizing the Canada Revenue Agency to provide their names, addresses and dates of birth to Elections Canada. The problem with this policy is that everyone, including landed immigrants and visa workers earning income in Canada has to pay taxes, but only Canadian citizens have the right to vote. The current procedure is an open invitation for non-citizens to get on the federal voters list.

Two questions should be added to the income-tax form: Are you a Canadian citizen? And do you reside at the address listed on your income tax return? Also, the penalty for declaring false information should be mentioned on the form. These simple measures would go a long way toward cleaning up the voters list and reserving the franchise for Canadian citizens.



CREDIT: Imelda Medina, Reuters

A woman casts her vote in a Mexican village in this year's election. While Canada likes to export its expertise in running clean and fair elections, countries with new systems, like Mexico's, are actually better than ours in many respects.

Elections Canada also needs to adopt more stringent identification policies for voters who are not on the National List of Electors. The current policy requires that they present "one valid official document showing your name, address and signature (such as a driver's licence); or two valid official documents, one showing your name and address (such as a telephone or electricity bill), and one showing your name and signature (such as a health card or a library card)." Astonishingly, there is no requirement to show government-issued photo identification.

Photo ID is hardly a rarity in today's world. You may have to show it to board an airplane, cash a cheque, rent a movie or buy a six-pack of beer. Is it too much to ask that you identify yourself clearly before exercising the solemn privilege of voting for members of Parliament?

Of course, there are people who have neither driver's licence nor passport, so Elections Canada may have to devise some back-up procedures; but surely photo ID should become the norm if we are serious about running clean elections.

Honest elections should not be a partisan issue, and the current minority government presents a unique opportunity for all four parties to work together to improve our electoral system. We were pleased to see signs of such co-operation this spring in a report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, which is responsible for considering the Canada Elections Act. Members of all four parties united to support asking about citizenship on the income-tax form and requiring voters to show photo ID at the polling place.

Chief Electoral Officer Jean-Pierre Kingsley is already on record as favouring the change to the tax form, and we don't see why he should oppose a requirement for photo ID.

The ball is now in the government's court. If it comes forward with these and perhaps other amendments to the Canada Elections Act, the prospect for passage looks very good.

Because of the Adscam scandal, Parliament and voters are in a reforming mood. Let's take advantage of it to get rid of anachronistic embarrassments such as those reported in Edmonton-Centre. Maybe we can catch up to Mexico.

Tom Flanagan is a professor of political science at the University of Calgary and former Conservative campaign manager.

Jonathan Denis is a lawyer with the Calgary firm Chipeur Advocates LLP. He has a special interest in electoral law.

© The Ottawa Citizen 2006

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2006 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.