

Subject: 2026 Municipal Election Voting Methods

Recommendation:

BE IT RESOLVED THAT Council receive Report #2024-0104 – 2026 Municipal Election Voting Methods, for information.

Background:

This report is provided to Council to provide context for planned upcoming community consultation regarding how the Town will conduct the 2026 municipal election. The Clerk's Department intends to consult with the community and return with a future report to assist Council in making the decision about what format and technology to employ for the next election.

Analysis:

The 2026 Municipal Election Day is Monday, October 26, 2026.

Pursuant to the *Municipal Elections Act* ("MEA") the municipal Clerk is responsible for conducting the municipal election and establishing all procedures, forms and providing for any matters necessary for conducting the election. Having said that, there are certain matters related to the election that do require Council consideration and direction. Specifically, Section 42(1) of the MEA requires that:

The Council of a local municipality may pass by-laws:

- (a) authorizing the use of voting and vote-counting equipment such as voting machines, voting recorders or optical scanning vote tabulators; and
- (b) authorizing electors to use an alternative voting method, such as voting by mail or by telephone, that does not require electors to attend a voting place in order to vote.

Furthermore, the MEA requires the municipal Council to pass said by-law for use of voting and vote-counting equipment, authorizing electors to use an alternative voting method and circumstances in which the municipal Clerk shall hold a recount on or before May 1st in the year of the election.

In determining voting methods, three primary considerations warrant careful attention:

1. **Secrecy and Confidentiality:** Ensuring the secrecy and confidentiality of the vote is paramount for maintaining the security of the electoral process.
2. **Integrity and Verifiability:** It is essential that the integrity of the voting process is upheld, and that the final results accurately reflect the votes cast by the electorate.
3. **Accessibility:** The voting process should be accessible to all eligible candidates and voters, ensuring that barriers to participation are minimized.

Prior to the 2020 Ward One By-Election, the Town of Pelham had conducted conventional in-person voting with paper ballots. However, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the implementation of a hybrid approach; in-person paper ballot voting and on-demand mail-in ballot voting.

In the following section, we present an overview of the various voting methods utilized in municipal elections. Understanding these methods is important for promoting transparency, optimizing efficiency, and ensuring informed decision-making in the electoral process. We will explore commonly used voting methods in Ontario, detailing their processes, advantages, and potential challenges.

Online Voting (Internet Voting)

Online voting has emerged as a preferred voting option among Canadians. While its impact on voter turnout has not yet been proven substantial, it holds the potential to attract younger generations.

Online voting enables electors to cast their ballots from their homes or anywhere in the world during the designated voting period. This digital shift eliminates manual paper ballots, leading to expedited tabulation of results. Online voting presents a modern, efficient, and accessible way for electors to participate in the democratic process.

Advantages

- **Attraction of Younger Voters:** The convenience of online voting is likely to appeal to younger generations.
- **Greater Accessibility and Equality:** Online voting enhances secrecy and autonomy for electors with disabilities, allowing them to vote unassisted and anonymously.
- **Increased Voting Opportunities:** Individuals with illnesses or those traveling abroad can participate in elections without the need to be physically present.

present at a polling station. This expands voting opportunities for those who might otherwise be unable to vote.

- **Cost Savings:** There are significant reductions in material and supply costs due to the elimination of ballot production and polling station supplies. The elimination of the need for external polling station staff translates to minimal labor costs.
- **Instant Vote Tabulation:** Provides for immediate vote tabulation, providing faster results.
- **Enhanced Voter Experience:** Eliminating the need for travel and wait times improves the overall voting experience for electors.
- **Environmental Benefits:** The reduction in paper usage makes online voting an environmentally desirable option.

Disadvantages

- **Reliability and Security:** Online voting systems are vulnerable to technical failures and security breaches. For instance, in 2018, 43 municipalities in Ontario faced website failures during elections, leading to 35 municipalities extending their voting deadlines by 24 hours.¹
- **Access:** While online voting can increase accessibility for many, it can also create disparities. Not all voters have access to high-speed internet, particularly those in rural areas where connectivity is limited.
- **Education:** Introducing online voting requires substantial education and communication efforts. Educating voters and election officials about the new system can incur significant costs.
- **Cost:** While online voting can be more cost-effective than manual voting methods, the initial implementation can be expensive. Municipalities may need to invest in kiosks or devices like iPads to facilitate internet voting at designated stations for those without access to the necessary technology.
- **Social Networking:** Voting traditionally serves as a social activity. Online voting might diminish this, as it encourages individuals to vote independently rather than as part of a communal event. This could lead to a less engaged electorate.
- **Fraud or Coercion:** Voter notification cards, which contain unique passwords necessary for casting a vote, can be intercepted. Unlike in-person voting, verifying the voter's identity remotely is challenging. Although multi-

¹ Katawazy, A. (2023). Identifying Challenges and Advantages of Internet Voting and Assessing the Impact on Voters Turnout in Municipal Elections. *MPA Major Research Papers*. 236

factor authentication can mitigate some risks, it cannot fully eliminate the possibility of fraudulent activities.

Postal Voting (Vote by Mail)

Similar to online voting, postal voting offers high accessibility, enabling voters to participate from any location with postal service availability. In this method, paper ballots are mailed to voters who then complete and return them to the municipality. Returns can be made either via postal service or by depositing them in secure drop-box locations designated by the municipality, anytime before election day.

A municipal election can adopt an all-posting voting approach, eliminating in-person voting opportunities. Alternatively, postal voting can be provided as an option alongside other voting methods, offering voters multiple ways to cast their ballots.

Advantages

- **Increased Voting Opportunities:** Individuals with illnesses or those traveling abroad can participate in elections without the need to be physically present at a polling station. This expands voting opportunities for those who might otherwise be unable to vote.
- **Enhanced Voter Experience:** Eliminating the need for travel and wait times improves the overall voting experience for electors.
- **Greater Accessibility and Equality:** Postal voting enhances secrecy and autonomy for electors with disabilities, allowing them to vote unassisted and anonymously.
- **Attraction of Voters:** The convenience of postal voting can attract more voters, potentially increasing overall voter turnout by making it easier for people to participate in the electoral process.
- **Cost Savings:** Significant reductions in supply and labor costs can be achieved by eliminating the need for numerous staffed polling stations.

Disadvantages

- **Fraud or Coercion:** Voting in an uncontrolled environment can lead to coercion or ballot interception. While voters are required to take an oath verifying their identity, completely ensuring the voter's identity remotely is challenging.
- **Dependence on Postal Service:** The effectiveness of postal voting is reliant on the postal service, which may face disruptions or inefficiencies. Delays in voters receiving their ballots or municipalities receiving completed ballots can occur. For example, in 2018, the possibility of a Canada Post strike around election day caused significant concern for municipalities using postal voting.

- **Reliability and Security:** There is a risk of ballots being damaged or lost in transit. Additionally, voters may not fully understand the instructions, leading to incorrectly submitted ballots without the required signed paperwork. Although mitigation efforts are in place, these issues cannot be completely guaranteed.
- **Social Networking:** Voting traditionally serves as a social activity. Postal voting might diminish this, as it encourages individuals to vote independently rather than as part of a communal event. This could lead to a less engaged electorate.

In-Person Voting

Traditional in-person voting is the oldest and most familiar method of casting ballots, widely accepted by the electorate. This method requires voters to personally visit a polling station either during advanced voting periods or on election day. At the polling station, voters physically complete a paper ballot, which is then processed through a vote tabulator on-site.

Advantages

- **Familiarity:** As the longest-standing method, in-person voting requires fewer campaigns and advertisements to educate voters about the process.
- **Voter Assistance:** Election officials are present to provide immediate assistance and guidance to voters, ensuring that ballots are correctly completed and submitted.
- **Perceived Trustworthiness:** Despite the rising popularity of online and postal voting, many voters still prefer in-person voting due to its observable and transparent process, which fosters trust in the outcome.
- **Identity Verification:** Polling station staff can directly verify the identity of voters and uphold the integrity of their ballots, free from concerns about cyber threats or online security issues.
- **Social Engagement:** Voting in person promotes civic engagement and community participation, allowing voters to interact with one another.

Disadvantages

- **Accessibility:** Despite ongoing efforts to improve accessibility, in-person voting can still present physical barriers for voters with disabilities or those unable to visit polling stations due to illness or location.
- **Long Wait Times:** During peak voting hours, such as before work or after business hours, long lines can deter voters.
- **Limited Voting Hours:** In-person voting is confined to specific hours on advanced poll days and election day, which may not accommodate voters

with busy schedules or unexpected conflicts. Inclement weather or external events can further disrupt turnout.

- **Health Concerns:** Particularly highlighted during the pandemic, in-person voting involves the highest level of human contact compared to other voting methods, raising safety concerns for some voters.
- **Cost:** In-person voting requires significant expenses for ballot procurement, polling station supplies, and staffing, making it more costly compared to alternative voting methods.
- **Polling Station Employees:** Finding qualified and willing individuals to staff polling stations has become increasingly difficult, posing logistical challenges during elections.

Proxy Voting

Proxy voting permits an elector to delegate their voting power to a representative, ensuring their vote is cast even if they cannot attend in person. To do this, the elector must pre-select their proxy and submit a completed form to the municipal clerk to be certified. The MEA allows for proxy voting in conjunction with in-person voting.

Advantages

- **Greater Accessibility:** Proxy voting allows electors to cast their vote through a representative when they cannot physically attend the polling station. This option is beneficial for electors who are abroad, in remote areas, ill, or facing other barriers to in-person attendance. Consequently, it can positively impact voter turnout.
- **Dependability:** In-person voting via proxy does not rely on postal services or internet connectivity, ensuring a reliable alternative voting method.
- **Cost-Effectiveness:** Proxy voting does not incur additional costs for the municipality. It offers a simple and cost-free alternative to other voting methods.
- **Perceived Trustworthiness:** Ideally, electors will appoint a trusted individual as their proxy, ensuring their vote is cast as intended.

Disadvantages

- **Accuracy:** There is a risk that the designated proxy may vote according to their own preferences rather than following the elector's instructions, potentially compromising the accuracy of the elector's intended vote.
- **Dependence on Proxy Voters:** Electors rely on their chosen proxy to vote on their behalf, which can be problematic if the proxy is unavailable or unreliable. Additionally, some electors may not have a trusted person to act as their proxy.

- **Shared Disadvantages with In-Person Voting:** All the disadvantages associated with in-person voting, such as the need to travel to the polling station and potential wait times, also apply to the proxy voter.

Prior to the 2020 by-election the Town of Pelham held all elections with paper ballots and the ability to use proxy voting. If Council approves by by-law an alternative voting method, proxy voting is not allowed.

No electors contacted the Clerk's Department for proxy voting in the 2022 election, rather all requestors were happy with the special ballot-on-demand application and process.

Hybrid Approach Options

The Council for the Town of Pelham may approve a hybrid approach whereby two voting methods are used together.

In-Person Voting and Online Voting (Internet Voting)

The Town of Pelham could hold all advance voting through online voting (internet voting) with traditional paper ballots used on voting day. This would allow for greater advance voting days. This method was utilized in the City of Thorold for the 2022 election.

If Council desired to use this hybrid approach the Clerk's Department would recommend 10 days of advance online voting closing, at minimum, two days before voting day. A robust awareness campaign would be required. Additionally, the Clerk's Department would recommend setting up 'help stations' throughout the Town where individuals could vote using the Town's computer and internet with the support of a staff person if desired.

The Clerk's Department would have no way of knowing how successful this hybrid option would be and therefore would have to order 100% ballots for voting day and plan for potentially large lines and delays at the the polling station(s).

In-Person Voting and Special Ballots on Demand Vote by Mail

The Town of Pelham adopted a hybrid approach in the 2020 bi-election and 2022 regular election, whereby special ballots on demand were utilized in conjunction with in-person voting. Eligible electors were able to pre-register for the vote-by-mail option. This alternative voting method was administered internally.

In 2022 the Clerk's Department received 57 vote-by-mail applications and delivered 57 vote-by-mail ballot kits to eligible electors. 52 vote-by-mail ballots were correctly received and processed. A total of 5 ballot kits were either: not returned,

returned late or were returned with no declaration and therefore were not processed.

Administering this alternative voting option was laboursome and should the option grow in popularity may be too much to administer in-house. Having said that, if Council wishes to move forward with this option a part-time elections coordinator would be required to help manage the program.

Engaging the Community to Determine the Preferred Voting Option

The Clerk's Department working alongside the Communication Specialist will launch a community engagement strategy to educate the electorate on alternative voting methods and determine the voter preference.

The engagement plan will include the use of: print media being mailed to each pelham resident, online engagement platforms, and information boards located at the MCC and Town Hall.

Vote Counting Equipment

Since 2001, the Town has owned the AccuVote tabulator equipment. However, these machines have now surpassed their intended lifespan and are no longer capable of delivering accurate results.

The Town's finance department conducted a purchase vs lease cost analysis to determine the best financial path forward and concluded leasing would be the best option. The Clerk's Department supports this conclusion as technology is consistently changing and purchasing machines could leave the Town technologically behind.

The Town has been quoted \$149,325.00 for a full fleet replacement (15 machines) whereas leasing 15 machines would be \$25,455.00. Additional cost savings can be realized if the Town uses an alternative voting method, such as postal voting (vote by mail) where only 5 machines would be required to be leased, being \$6,485.00. Furthermore, if the Town conducted its election completely online, no machines would be required. Currently the Town's election reserve fund is projected to have enough money to lease the equipment. Purchasing would require a significant increase to the reserve transfer.

Financial Considerations:

Online / Internet Voting (Vendor: Simply Voting)	
*Estimate subject to change	
Internet & Telephone Voting Fee	\$27,650.00

Managed Voter Information Letter	\$4,740.00
Security Audit	\$3,000.00
Total Base Cost (estimate)	\$35,390.00

Vote By Mail (Vendor: VoterView and ES&S)	
*Estimate subject to change	
Vendor Set-Up Fee	\$800.00
Vote By Mail Kits (\$2.50 per kit x 15,765) *includes ballot printing costs*	\$39,405.00
Postage Estimate and Canada Post Administrative Fee	\$29,552.06
Lease 5 vote tabulators and professional election services estimate (ES&S)	\$15,175.00
Total Base Cost (estimate)	\$84,932.06

In-person Voting and Proxy Voting	
*Estimate subject to change	
Part-time Election Coordinator Salary	\$25,000.00
Election Workers (community members) *based on 2022 election cost*	\$27,880.50
Voter Notification Packages *based on 2022 costs plus 5%*	\$9,250.00
Postage Estimate and Canada Post Administrative Fee (Voter Notification Card Mailout)	\$15,500.00
Ballot Printing (ES&S) *based on 2022 costs plus 5%*	\$9,000.00
Computer and Scanner Rentals	\$2,600.00
Lease 15 vote tabulators and professional election services estimate (ES&S)	\$34,145.00
Polling Station Rental Fees, Supplies and other miscellaneous costs	\$2,500.00
Total Base Cost (estimate)	\$125,875.50

Alternatives Reviewed:

Common alternative voting methods have been explored within the report. No other alternatives have been reviewed.

Strategic Plan Relationship: Enhancing Capacity and Future Readiness

Reviewing current and up-and-coming voting methods for each municipal election enables the municipality to modernize its voting processes, ensuring greater accessibility, efficiency, and reliability. By analyzing various voting methods, their advantages, and disadvantages, and considering new technologies and hybrid approaches, we align with the goal of being prepared for future challenges, future voting demands of the community and improving operational capabilities.

Consultation:

Research on advantages and disadvantages of voting methods provided by Ahmad Bugshan, Brock University Political Science Program

Other Pertinent Reports/Attachments:

None.

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