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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota



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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 15 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The committee is now sitting in hybrid format, meaning that members can participate either in person or by video conference. Witnesses must participate by video conference. All members are counted for the purposes of quorum regardless of their method of participation.

Today's proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. I will remind you that the webcast will only show the person speaking rather than the entire committee. To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow for those participating virtually.

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either the floor, English or French. To speak, click on the microphone icon to activate your own mike—something I forgot at the beginning of this meeting already today. We'll always give you a reminder if needed. When you are done speaking, please put your mike on mute to minimize any interference; it's not done automatically.

All comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. Members, should you need to request the floor outside of your designated time for questions, you should activate your mike and state that you have a point of order. If you wish to intervene on a point of order that has been raised by another member, you should use the “raise hand” function. This will signal to me your interest to speak. However, if you are appearing in person, please raise your hand, and the clerk will inform me of the order. We will try to keep a consolidated list.

I also remind you to speak slowly, especially all of the witnesses. Please speak as slowly and clearly as possible. Interpretation services need to be able to follow along.

For everyone participating, it is mandatory to wear a headset with a boom mike. Please let me know if there is any difficulty with regard to your having one right now. If you are on the precinct premises, we could probably arrange for you to get one. Let us know if there are any problems. If any technical issues arise, please try to contact the clerk or the chair as soon as possible via email or phone so that we can look after that technical difficulty and sus-

pend if needed in the meantime so that everyone can participate fully.

With that said, we can begin this meeting. We do have a three-hour meeting planned for today, so this is just a reminder right at the onset that we have two panels of witnesses and then we will consider the draft report in camera. There was also a question raised last time during the discussion of our report, and I will have a ruling on that question. That will be provided during draft report section, the third hour of our meeting today.

Let's begin with our amazing witnesses, who have been to PROC before. We have, from Open Democracy Project, Sabreena Delhon; and from CIVIX, we have Taylor Gunn.

Welcome to today's meeting.

We can start with Ms. Delhon.

• (1105)

Ms. Sabreena Delhon (Open Democracy Fellow, DemocracyXChange, Open Democracy Project): Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. This is my first time at PROC, so it's a real privilege.

The pandemic has re-engaged Canadians. During this extended emergency, 36% are now more confident in Canada's institutions. Trust in one another and the government has also gone up. This positivity during a tremendously difficult time indicates that Canadians can be asked to take on a challenge, and should be given a more central role in designing the post-pandemic society. To do so, they will need more mechanisms to contribute. Strengthened community ties, clear messaging and flexibility with election administration can make the difference.

My name is Sabreena Delhon, I am the open democracy fellow with the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, Open Democracy Project and Massey College. I'm here on behalf of DemocracyXChange, which is Canada's annual democracy summit.

The following recommendations have been informed by the DemocracyXChange community, current research about democratic engagement and the understanding that the health and safety of Canadians exercising their right to vote is paramount to a strong democracy. This material has also been shaped by the fact that the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on low-income and racialized communities, long-term care home residents, front-line workers and incarcerated individuals. Across these categories, women are bearing the brunt of adverse outcomes. These groups are also most likely to face barriers to casting a ballot.

I'd like to acknowledge the recent "Special Report of the Chief Electoral Officer". It presents a range of measures to effectively administer an election during a pandemic. These include increasing the number of voting days, holding the election over a weekend and preparing for a major increase in mail-in ballots. We enthusiastically support approaches that will provide a safe and efficient experience for voters.

Now, our recommendations. First, work with a range of community-based organizations that focus on engaging voters over specific issues or demographic variables. The work of groups like Future Majority and The Canadian Muslim Vote are of note here. These groups can help to prepare people for the experience of voting and the process of obtaining and submitting a mail-in ballot and can also help to manage expectations related to the counting process. These groups can also reinforce messaging related to physical distancing and other precautions.

We know that the pandemic has affected different groups in different ways. For instance, students may not be able to vote on campus, so they will require targeted outreach to clarify where to vote and how. Coordinating with community groups, non-profits and other entities will be key to disseminating crucial information about process and precaution to distinct populations.

Throughout the pandemic, community organizers have demonstrated incredible ingenuity. Their knowledge and relationships are key to connecting people in a manner that makes voting relevant and appealing. Organizations like Apathy is Boring and Democratic Engagement Exchange can serve as a bridge between innovative community groups and the electoral process.

We understand that Elections Canada hires community relations officers for this outreach function. We advise that officers be hired well in advance of the writ period so that outreach to stakeholders can be actioned quickly. We feel this is foundational to ensuring engagement and that it would be worth making legislative adjustments to accommodate.

Second, ensure that key messages acknowledge realistic fears and emphasize that voting is easy and safe. It is critical to counter the American narrative that registering to vote and voting are onerous. Research shows that first-time and frequent voters overestimate how difficult and time consuming the voting process is. The fact is, for the vast majority of eligible voters, it is very easy. This needs to be conveyed clearly, along with the fact that there are different ways to vote to suit your needs and circumstances. Another point is to emphasize the identity of being a voter above the act of voting. Research has shown that this has a positive effect on en-

agement. This can be built upon by calling or texting individuals to support the creation of a voting plan.

Third, consider lowering the voting age from 18 to 16, and making voting part of the secondary school curriculum. This demographic is highly engaged in social issues but feels disconnected from traditional forms of democratic engagement. As the pandemic will have a considerable impact on future generations, their input going forward should be harnessed.

We are willing to partner to help support a safe, effective and inclusive election should the committee see a role for us.

Thank you very much for your attention, and I'm pleased to answer any questions you might have.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Sabreena.

Taylor Gunn, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Taylor Gunn (President and Chief Election Officer, CIVIX): Hey, everyone. Thank you so much for letting me be here today.

Could you please refer to the email that was distributed by Justin this morning? It would be beneficial to you in this conversation if you had it on screen.

While you dig it up, I might just say that I was walking to school today with a five-year-old and a seven-year old. I informed them that I would have the ears of parliamentarians this morning, and asked them what they might share. The five-year old was hoping you could create a safe Canada. The seven-year-old was hoping you could do a price freeze on Pokémon cards, to one dollar.

The Chair: I have a seven-year-old who collects Pokémon as well, and he would appreciate that. I never thought that was within my power, but now that you indicate that, I'm definitely going to try.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: I've heard it's a global pandemic, so you never know what power you have in your hands right now.

I will be flying through these slides. I've apologized in advance to the translators.

CIVIX is a national non-partisan, charitable organization working to develop the habits and skills of citizenship within students under the voting age. As it is probably most relevant today, I'll really focus on Student Vote. You'll see in the slides why I think that program is relevant for our discussions.

Turning to the second slide, just as quick background, Student Vote is a parallel election for students under the voting age that parallels official election periods. We've conducted that now for 18 years, for somewhere in the range of 50 levels of elections across Canada—municipal, provincial, territorial and federal. In the recent federal election, we had, I think it's fair to round, just under 10,000 schools register across Canada, with about 30 votes shy of 1.2 million student ballots cast. We use the currency of direct participation, not reach, because if I used reach, I could inform you, with tallied media hits and all that stuff, that we supposedly reached 350 million Canadians in the last election—of which there aren't—so let's go with direct participants.

In the third slide you'll see our geographic spread. I point this out because it's interesting to note that if we include all provinces and territories, we were in 63% of all schools across Canada. If we exclude our lowest jurisdiction, which is Quebec—I can talk about that later, if someone is interested—our average would increase to 70% of all schools in the country. I believe we are on par with matching or surpassing the number of schools that take part in the Terry Fox Run across Canada. I don't know of anyone else who's in more schools. That's fantastic for our democracy.

If you look at the map, you will see a visual display of the lovely democratic pressure we're putting from the north on the United States. Then there's something that anyone who's into politics likes—the results of our federal election in 2019. In terms of the turnout results, it's interesting to note the similarities and the differences on a national level. I'm happy to take questions on that.

In the next slide, you'll see something that you might very interesting—that is, how you fared in Student Vote in 2019. The member of the committee with the most number of schools registered in their jurisdiction is Mr. Lukiwski, who had 47 schools register. I don't know if he's here today.

Actually, you know what? I'm sorry; it was Mr. Doherty. I don't think he's here today either. He had 55 schools registered.

You'll see that in some of your jurisdictions, you'll have as many as just under 8,000 kids participate.

In the next slide you can see the national voting trends of the Student Vote participants over the last number of years. I put this out as valuable just because a lot of groups that are working on what you may call “youth civic engagement” are generalized as being on either the centre or the left. What's interesting to point out here is that other than one election of the last six federal elections, the Conservative Party of Canada obtains the most student votes in the raw ballot count across the country. It's just an interesting thing to point out. We're a non-partisan organization, and I don't like us to be generalized as centre or left or anywhere on the political spectrum.

If you were in our position, and you could reach 1.2 million students under the voting age from nearly 10,000 schools across Canada in the last federal election, I think you'd want to have an understanding of what you were actually aiming for, right? A couple of clues were given to us from previous reports put out by Elections Canada—at least, in this case, the 2011 and 2015 federal elections—from the national youth survey. What it did was draw a picture of what characteristics a young voter has. They have characteristics of being interested in the democratic or political process; being knowledgeable; thinking that voting and participating is a civic duty; talking with their family and friends, or being influenced by their family and friends, or having friends that could even influence them in the political process....

Ruby, I see your hand up. I might as well try to respond there.

• (1115)

The Chair: I was just asking you to please wrap up. The time is up and we'd like to get to the questions. I know the members are eager.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: If you're comfortable, I'll just take 30 seconds. Is that okay?

The Chair: That's perfect. Thank you.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: Thank you.

What you also find that those who participate are more likely to have learned about democracy in school and to have participated in a parallel or mock election. You'll see in the following slides those characteristics of young voters; we cause those among our student participants during federal elections and, we presume, at the other levels of elections as well.

Then, very interestingly, from the third evaluation that was conducted on Student Vote by Elections Canada, we found that 28% of parents reported that their children's participation in Student Vote positively impacted their decision to vote in the election.

Finally, just out of interest, because I hope that all or most of us are proud Canadians, we have now expanded this outside of Canada to Colombia, where in last year's municipal elections in five different regions, we had 76,000 kids participate.

I put all this information out because that sets the stage for me to be able respond to questions that I hope can make us useful at today's appearance.

Thank you very much, everybody.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gunn and Ms. Delhon.

I think everyone here is a proud Canadian. I can bet on that.

Thank you for your testimony today.

We'll start our six-minute rounds with Ms. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you very much, and thank you, Ruby.

I really want to focus on civics. Thank you very much for coming here, Taylor. I really appreciate your goals and what you're trying to do within the communities and their high schools.

I am a proud mother of five. I remember my son coming home last year after Student Vote, which they did for the 2019 election at his high school, so I know that it was done there as well.

I'm just wondering about this. What are some of the techniques you use to get into the high schools? Also, on the information that is received, when it comes to the curriculum and things, who do you work with and where does that get approved? Can you give me a bit more background on that?

• (1120)

Mr. Taylor Gunn: Sure. I can. Also, I might, through some of these answers, bring it back to some of the things that I think might be useful for the purposes of this committee.

There are probably a few things that are most relative to our success in growing our school numbers across Canada. Fixed election dates really help. I know that's not under the control of the committee, but that's very useful for us.

Working in schools over the last 18 years with our level of service to educators has been the best way to develop our credibility. I don't know how you might treat this if you want to, but we've never actually gone and asked anyone for their permission. We didn't do that on purpose, because we were worried that if we did it in the early days, we might have someone say no. Now what we do is congratulate school boards and schools across the country for their participation. We've found that many boards or districts are very happy with that—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Taylor, thank you very much. I just want to look at the curriculum, though, because this is one thing I'm very concerned with. I have been fortunate to work with our former member of Parliament. I'll be honest. I'm the only non-educator in my family. I'm related to a heck of a lot of them.

I'm just wondering. I'm looking at the curriculum and I'm trying to figure it out, because I have gone into schools where I just sit there and go, "This is what you're teaching them?" There was one time more recently when they were teaching that there are 308 members of Parliament. Well, we know that it hasn't been at that number for some time. There are just small things like that.

I'm looking at the curriculum specifically and at what type of information the children are receiving and making sure that it's actually accurate.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: Yes. I can table that. You can also, I believe, go to some of our most recent curricula, which are posted on the studentvote.ca website. I don't believe we've ever had any criticisms about the accuracy of our curriculum.

We remake that in concert with teachers in advance of every election. In the case of federal elections, that is done with the co-

operation and support of Elections Canada. I believe that everything in our curriculum is factual.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Excellent.

On the information that's provided, when students are making their choices on the votes, what are some of the mechanisms you use to teach the children about what are the policies and platforms? What do you look at so that it is part of the curriculum when you're sharing this?

Mr. Taylor Gunn: What we do is provide a set of suggested activities and lessons whereby students can find, determine and explore the policies and platforms on their own. What we don't do is teach the policies and platforms. We feel that as a non-partisan organization you can get yourself into some tricky waters doing that, and that's one of the things we have stood by for the last 18 years.

Another big thing we do, much more outwardly now than we did in the beginning, is attempt to facilitate conversations between students and their parents. What we have found over the years is that parents then can feel that they can have an influence on the development of their own children's political perspectives.

I can table a document, and either you could go through it in detail or I'd be happy to follow up in detail—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: That would be awesome.

I just think that when we have their eyes and ears, it's really important that they're getting the most accurate information possible. I know that some school boards have policies that do not allow politicians to go to speak to classrooms of students. What are your feelings on that? That's something that I don't think anyone understands—a parliamentarian's life—until they are actually walking in those shoes or are, perhaps, maybe a family member. I'm just wondering what your thoughts are on that.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: I think that... Remember, I would like us to be friends and allies of the school boards, so I'm not going to criticize anyone in the education system today. We're aware of that, and there are certain jurisdictions that are stricter or direct on not having politicians come into schools than they have been in the past.

One of the things that we created a few years ago was a program called Rep Day. What we try to do is help members of Parliament get into schools that we're aware of having expressed interest to us to meet and have a discussion with their member of Parliament. What we found is really interesting and kind of sad, but we're working on fixing that disconnect between.... Teachers wanted parliamentarians to come into schools to explain their role first-hand, and even for their kids to ask difficult questions on current issues. Remember, our whole rationale here is that you're learning real issues in real time. I mean, hearing directly from parliamentarians is exactly that, and in school is the perfect place for this. There are some parliamentarians—and I think they're learning—who go in with a very partisan angle. We try to suggest to them that this might not get them invited back and that it may not be the way to approach something like this. On the other side, what we found is that members of Parliament want to be in schools, but they're not getting invitations from teachers.

• (1125)

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Taylor, thanks very much. I know my time is up, but I just want to say thank you very much.

I'm really fortunate where I live—maybe it's because I'm related to them all. I have had no difficulties, but I do know that many people have, and that's a concern.

Thank you.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: Sure.

The Chair: Absolutely, I can relate to this conversation. I do get invited in. I find it's the teachers who want us in, but the board has a lot of barriers and makes it quite difficult.

I can see from the numbers.... Mr. Alhabra and I, being from the Peel region, have the same board, and we do have fewer schools participating, it seems, in the program. However, I did find that, during election periods in the past, those students who had participated in your student vote program were really interested in the election process and couldn't wait to vote when they got older. It's very motivating for them.

Mr. Turnbull, you have six minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thanks, Madam Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses. I really just want to say thank you for the work you do. I think it's essential to a thriving democracy, and I really appreciate both of your organizations and the incredible work that you're doing to engage all types of voters.

Ms. Delhon, I'm going to start with you. I'm really going to try to focus the discussion on a pandemic election, which, of course, we hope doesn't actually become a reality but is always a possibility in a minority setting.

I know that your organization is doing incredible work, and you made some recommendations in your opening remarks that I thought were quite good. I really appreciate the point you made at the very beginning about voters or members of the public being more engaged in designing the post-pandemic society. I really appreciate that point.

In terms of community-based organizations like yourself—and you listed quite a few others—how can they help? You listed a few ways in which they can help. Maybe you could go a little bit more in depth there, but I'm more interested in a pandemic setting. How do we essentially coordinate with organizations like yourself, like The Canadian Muslim Vote? I think you mentioned Apathy is Boring, which is a great organization as well. Can you tell us about what that would ideally look like in a pandemic setting? Obviously, that creates some challenges.

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: What I would recommend is looking at other regions, and I understand the committee is doing this for case studies. I spoke with Elections BC in preparing for this meeting, and they noted that stakeholder outreach in preparing for the huge volume of mail-in ballots was a critical part of their pandemic election strategy. Fortunately, there are some case studies to draw key lessons from.

In terms of operationalizing this highly coordinated approach with community groups and non-profits, I mentioned Apathy is

Boring and the Democratic Engagement Exchange as bridge organizations. At DemocracyXChange, we are a coalition of different groups, academic, non-profit and community groups, including the Toronto Public Library, which is part of our group as well. We are all well positioned to help connect with these bridge organizations and then also to help to raise or amplify the connection that is available through groups like libraries and community organizations in particular.

I just want to note that at DemocracyXChange, we held our third annual summit in October. Normally we meet in person, but just like everybody else, we had to shift to an all-virtual undertaking this year during the pandemic. We had over 700 people participate in our three-day, virtual summit, and I don't think we could have imagined anybody doing that a year ago or eight months ago, so I understand your point about that coordination and connection piece being a really critical one and needing to operationalize that.

I just want to highlight the interest and appetite for that democratic engagement and also to highlight that, among those 700 participants, we had people who simply identified as citizens, so it wasn't necessarily people who do democracy for a living, but that we were open to the general public.

Among our registrants we also had academics, community organizers, students and members of the corporate, government and non-profit sectors. It's across those arenas that this outreach function needs to be mobilized. I mentioned the point that outreach officers are also available, but these non-profit groups and community groups such as The Canadian Muslim Vote, for instance, have mobilized during the pandemic to support their communities in different ways. That infrastructure is already in place to disseminate messages about how to effectively participate in a pandemic election. Again, we'll note that we're happy to assist with that stakeholder planning piece too.

• (1130)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: That's great. I noticed that you mentioned community relations officers. Do you think that more capacity is needed there in a pandemic context? Should the outreach efforts of Elections Canada be heightened or increased by having more community relations officers?

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: Yes, definitely. During the pandemic, we've seen a huge shift to digital engagement, but we know that the digital divide is still a significant issue for voters in Canada, so having that pandemic-proof way of having in-person engagement with social distancing and all the relevant precautions is still relevant.

I just want to highlight a piece of research from a few years ago that I did with public libraries. It found that when people have a legal problem and they receive some form of official documentation in the mail, they take it to their librarian because they don't quite know where to start, and they are looking for a local connection, someone in their community who can help point them to the right official channel. Also, it doesn't cost any money.

Libraries are physical spaces that aren't as accessible as they normally would be during a pandemic, but they are still highly relevant to engaging communities in the way we're talking about. It's definitely worth the investment in those outreach officers to boost the digital engagement, but also that in-person outreach function as well.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you for that.

Madam Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: You are at the time, so thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Therrien.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to acknowledge the witnesses who are joining us today.

We're pleased to have you here.

Ms. Delhon, I read the following in your notes: "Another point is to emphasize the identity of being a voter above the act of voting."

I find this approach worthwhile. I want you to explain the difference between "being a voter" and "voting".

[English]

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: I'd be happy to expand on that.

Identity is that inner sense, that sense of responsibility, that duty. Manifesting that and emphasizing that in the messaging around the election is key to boosting engagement.

Going to vote is a thing you do; it's an action. That should be significant as well, but the sense of internalized duty, that I must do this, it's my identity, I am a voter, is more compelling psychologically for individuals to act on than something on the list that says I have to go vote today.

I can't explain the psychological part of that. I know there's some research on that and the paper that I cited in my statement is from the Mowat Centre, so we can dig a little deeper into that. However, it is significant, and that's the type of strategy that is very successful in the private sector for getting people to buy things, that you're selling a certain identity. It's drawing on that.

• (1135)

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: If I told you that being a voter is a four-year job that requires you to be informed and curious, that people should learn how to do this job, and that they should be informed about the political world around them, would you agree?

[English]

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: Yes. It's about making the responsibility more immediate and it's about making it more specific, where it's specific to you and you are the voter, rather than voting being something that needs to get done, something that other people do. It's really focusing on the individual act and then positioning it within this collective responsibility.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: I find this very worthwhile. Can you tell me, in 30 seconds, how we can do this? I want to talk to the other witness who came to see us.

[English]

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: We can draw parallels to the pandemic. For the most part, we have everybody wearing a mask. Canadians are and voters are willing and able. We just need to engage them.

At the top of my statement, I cited research from The Samara Centre for Democracy, where they measured attitudes in connection to public institutions and civic engagement at this time, and it's really high.

The pandemic is giving us a really important opportunity. Canadians are ready to be engaged and we just have to tell them what we need. They're ready to do it.

If we can get people wearing a mask during a pandemic, we can definitely harness this moment to get them to be more engaged as a citizen, as a voter.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: The parallel is very useful. Thank you.

I'll turn to Mr. Gunn.

I have four children. My 11-year-old son is very politically aware for his age because he's immersed in politics. When he comes home from school, he tells me about his current teacher. I've spoken with many teachers. The issue, I think, is that in order to educate young people, we must make sure that teachers can provide a stimulating environment so that the young people are encouraged to take an interest in politics.

What do you think about this?

[English]

Mr. Taylor Gunn: I'll comment in relation to what we've done rather than just a general commentary.

We agree with you. One of the philosophies of our approach is that an engaged teacher can engage their students.

Last year, we had the capacity, which is rare, which means money, to gather and physically train, typically over an afternoon and an evening and then a full day, somewhere in the range of 1,850 teachers through 17 different events across Canada. What we see in evidence there is an improvement in their ability and engagement to instruct the student vote program in their schools. Also what they do is seed the system with enthusiastic teachers.

Just so that everyone knows, if we don't have representatives from all political parties as candidates, we then have representatives who are political pundits or commentators, and teachers generally find this fairly surprising. Therefore, we agree with you wholeheartedly.

The other thing we would say is that it's not just about having this type of stuff in the curriculum. In Ontario, we have a half course that's civics, and it is either very loved by students, rarely, or generally hated and written off as a Bird course that you take in the summer. The difference is who's teaching it and how they're teaching it.

I will never be able to underline enough the power, not the political power, but the power of engagement that teachers have and how important they are for the health of our democracy.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gunn.

We have Mr. Blaikie for six minutes.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Thank you.

Ms. Delhon, I want to start with you and go back to the comment you made about on-campus voting. We've heard from some previous witnesses that there are still students living on campus and still professors and support staff working on campus. You talked about some ways to mitigate the situation of not having on-campus voting. Do you think it would be wise to continue to have on-campus voting in the event of a pandemic election?

• (1140)

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: I would defer to public health officials for their best advice about whether elections should be conducted physically on a campus; it depends on how that can all be set up. In my statement, I presented the student experience as an example, as a case study, because there are lots of people right now who would normally be living in one location during this time, but are now living somewhere else because of the pandemic, which creates some confusion around where to vote, how to vote and how to indicate your official address. That's something that would need to be ironed out.

On the student side, I also want to mention, again, Apathy is Boring and the Democratic Engagement Exchange, because they recently conducted a student vote campaign that partnered with 700 different community organizations. That gives us a blueprint to make sure that certain populations, like students, can have the messaging and receive the information they need to vote and understand how to do it and where to go.

I think because campuses don't have as much activity and busyness right now, they might be able to be used for other people to come to vote in those spaces as well. The pandemic is giving us an opportunity to think in really creative ways and to try some new things. I know that in the lead-up to September with back to school, there was some exploration of classes being held in community centres that were otherwise closed, or using malls that could not be open in the normal kind of way. I would just note that campuses are huge; there's a lot of social-distancing opportunity on them, so maybe that's significant for this moment and that environment can be harnessed to increase voter engagement for the student community, but also potentially beyond as well.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: We've heard from a couple of witnesses that the best way to avoid the risks of a low turnout or disenfranchisement during a pandemic election is for parliamentarians to work to ensure that there isn't an election during the pandemic. I wonder, starting with Ms. Delhon, briefly, and then over to Mr. Gunn, if either of you would like to add to the testimony on that question.

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: Oh, oh!

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I can take that as a no.

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: What do you think, Mr. Gunn? You go ahead.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: It doesn't really matter, because it's not up to anyone here. I think public health officials will play a role. We've seen three elections over the last couple of months and people still turned out. I think as you saw with Mr. Boda, they estimate that turnout only went down 2%, so maybe that's my quick response.

I've helped you get out of having to make any iffy comments there, Sabreena.

Mr. Blaikie and anyone else, if I could get a chance at some point to talk a little bit about some of the recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer, CEO, and how there could be some other things that could contribute to a successful pandemic election, I'd love to do that at some point.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I would love to hear that. I'm going to maybe leave it to colleagues from other parties with a little more time.

I am interested to know, in terms of the student election, two things. How do you think the pandemic would affect the rollout of a student election, particularly, because you've talked about the effect on participation of parents in the general election via your student election? How does the pandemic student election roll out and what do you think that means for the salutary effect that you've traditionally had on voter turnout with parents?

Mr. Taylor Gunn: Thanks.

Ms Sahota, how much time do I have for that?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: We just conducted parallel elections in the three elections that took place—in B.C., Saskatchewan, and the municipal elections in Nova Scotia. We missed New Brunswick because it was the first Friday and the return to school.

Here's an interesting comparison. In British Columbia—which, in the last federal election had over 200,000 kids participate and over 80% of all schools registered to participate—we had a smaller percentage of schools register. Remember, this was also a snap election. We ended up with just under 90,000 students participating. What's interesting is that in Saskatchewan we had 24,000 students participate in the municipal elections. That was higher than in our previous provincial election.

Probably one of the biggest things for us that will impact our turnout is whether the election falls within the school year calendar. There are some implications around that, with the length of the campaign and things like this. Beyond that, it is what is going on in the education system. All of us from different parts of the country would realize this is being affected differently by the pandemic.

• (1145)

The Chair: The time is up, but Ms. Delhon seems to want to say something, as well.

You can take 10 seconds or so to chime in.

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: I just wanted to note a recent study from Elections Canada that indicated that voters would turn out. Although they're highly concerned about the pandemic circumstances, the turnout is still there. We know from other regions that mail-in ballots have been used with tremendous effect and with high engagement.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Delhon.

Next is Mr. Tochor, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I want to get a little sense of the organizations that you represent. I have some experience with the CIVIX program. It's done very well, by the way. I like the packages that get sent out.

Top line—what's your budget? How many people are working with you? Have you seen an increase in the last 10 years in the budget for your organization?

Mr. Taylor Gunn: Sabreena, do you want to go ahead?

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: Sure.

DemocracyXChange is co-founded by the Open Democracy Project and the Ryerson Leadership Lab. The co-presenting partners with us are The Samara Centre for Democracy, Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, Toronto Public Library, OCAD University, and Ryerson University's Faculty of Arts. This was our third annual summit that we held in October.

Generally, our tickets are available for around \$149. We have a special rate that's half that price as an early bird feature for students, seniors or lower-waged individuals. This year, because of the pandemic, we shifted to a "pay what you can" model in the interest of keeping the conversation as accessible as possible. The driving item for the program was how to strengthen democracy in the recovery from the pandemic.

We are definitely a lean organization, as most are that are operating in the democracy sector. We rely heavily on the networks of all the partners that I just noted. Also, we were able to harness a really important moment for our conversations about democracy this year, which is why we had a record turnout. Being virtual also meant that people from across the country could tune in in ways that otherwise would have required travel.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: Are you going to have time for me to respond to that, as well?

Mr. Corey Tochor: Yes.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: To explain the relationship with Elections Canada—which we're grateful for—last year Elections Canada contributed around \$2 million to the student vote program. That would put us somewhere in the range of under \$2 per student. This is more than just active voting; in some cases this is a month-long learning experience.

Additional funds were raised to cover the cost of teacher training across Canada, other provincial elections and their work in Colombia. Last year was a terrific year, being somewhere in the range of \$5.5 million. This year I think will be somewhere in the range of around \$2 million. We're a project to project-based organization and very entrepreneurial. I'll just emphasize this: we don't receive funding, as in money to exist, from either Elections Canada or any election agencies or any government body. It's a mix of individual donors, community foundations, and on occasion election agencies and different levels of government.

I will also emphasize what Sabreena said, which is worth putting out there, especially to this committee. For the groups of organizations in this space, which are few—you could count them with the fingers of both hands, and a couple of them are affiliated with universities—there is no pot of money for them to excel at their work.

You can go back and figure out who said this, but a couple of different speakers, some of them election officers, were asked about turnout. What they say about turnout is that worrying about turnout isn't something they want to be tasked with. They're comfortable being tasked with making voting and elections accessible. That's great, but here's the problem with that. If election agencies aren't the ones tasked with worrying about voter turnout, nobody else has the capacity to concern themselves with that.

I'm comfortable taking the massive risk if we have the capacity to focus on voter turnout. I imagine Sabreena's organizations and a few others would love to team up with us on that. But I worry that if we leave it in the hands of election agencies who are not taking on that responsibility, they won't be as creative, ambitious, as forward-looking or risk-taking as groups like us have been for the last number of years—but on nickels and dimes, it's important to point out.

• (1150)

Mr. Corey Tochor: Chair, how much time do I have for a quick one?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Mr. Corey Tochor: I have yes or no questions, then, for both witnesses.

Have your organizations ever partnered with the WE Charity? Yes or no.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: No.

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: No.

Mr. Corey Tochor: I'll cede the floor.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): I'd like to ask if the Conservative Party ever did any work with the WE Charity. I think that would be a good one to get an answer to.

Ms. Delhon, you mentioned at the beginning of your introductory comments that you had concerns that we not go down the same road as in the United States, where people have to register to vote, because it should be more open and accessible. Can you expand on that comment a little?

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: It wasn't a concern that we would go down that road, but rather countering the dominant images that we saw during the American election of people in long lineups and news reports from American outlets about how long they were waiting in line—taking hours to get to vote—and the onerous process of registering to vote.

It's very different in Canada. There is also a very different history in Canada, so it's important to have our own distinct narrative, because those images from the United States were just so rampant in our heads, especially during the pandemic. Between social media and news coverage, we mix up stories about what's happening in the States and what's happening in Canada.

So, clearly bounding the narrative of the election here in Canada in a pandemic, should that happen, is very important, to make sure that messaging is very clear. It doesn't have to be an obvious countering of the American images, but we know that is what's in minds right now.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: One of the benefits we have is that our elections are run by the federal government, as opposed to individual states, which can make things messy.

How important do you think it is that people are registered to vote by default?

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: It would be important for us to look at research on that and to examine how that makes a difference. I don't have that research top of mind right now, but I understand that scholars like Semra Sevi, someone I've cited in my statement, would have important insights to share. She shared those at our DemocracyXChange summit. I'd be happy to put that together.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Do you think, first of all, that it would be beneficial, in an effort to encourage people to be participating, to make sure we've done everything we can to allow people to engage in the various different processes? Our system now is heavily based on showing up at a poll to vote, either at an advance poll or on polling day. In particular, as we're studying an election in a pandemic, do you think it's important to make sure that other and all avenues are available so that everybody can participate, such as, for example, voting by mail?

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: Yes. To go back to the American election for a moment, although it was very arduous, we saw record turnout rates, and it was because of the easing of voter restrictions.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: One of the issues we have in Canada is that our voting by mail is not very simple. Actually, in a number of

states, it's a lot simpler to vote by mail because, by default, people are mailed ballots in advance. Do you think we should be changing the vote-by-mail process we have to make it easier for people to be automatically registered to vote by mail, for example, and to have a simplified process that allows it to happen very easily, as opposed to the work that goes into it now, where you have to do almost everything but provide DNA?

• (1155)

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: I think all avenues that would ensure a safe, effective and easy voting experience should be explored. The pandemic is giving us licence to try things in different ways, and that should be harnessed.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Do you have any reason to be concerned that allowing voting by other methods, including voting by mail, would increase fraudulent activity?

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: I don't have any specific knowledge about that, but I would look at what happened in B.C. recently, because they've used mail-in ballots for a few different elections in recent memory, one during the pandemic. They saw a high turnout in their last election—I think it was over 30%—and they didn't have any issues in terms of anything being fraudulent or any other kinds of concerns.

They did focus a lot on clearly conveying the process to get a mail-in ballot, use it and then submit it. They put a lot of energy into making that crystal clear, and then people were able to do it, so we shouldn't underestimate Canadians.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Are you suggesting that we should be doing that federally as well?

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: I think it's worth exploring. There are a lot of case studies to draw on and lots of research available to see whether that is worth doing.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you.

Mr. Gunn, did you want to chime in there? I think you're trying to raise your hand.

The Chair: In 10 seconds, if you can, please.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You're on mute.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: I'm sorry about that. Maybe you'll throw me in a couple seconds.

What I wanted to comment on, because I'm watching the time fly by—and I'm just going to put it out there, because I don't know if I'll be given the time following this—is that the recommendations of the CEO were framed around a lot of the weekend voting and on how we could better access poll workers.

One of the things that I wanted to emphasize and even offer to you as a potential suggestion within your interim report is the ability for a group like CIVIX and Student Vote to potentially capture the interest of 16- and 17-year-olds across the country to assist in weekend voting. We have access to literally hundreds of thousands of students, and we've never been empowered to do so—

The Chair: Your time is up.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You can do that. I remember that as a 16-year-old I worked in a returning office—

The Chair: That's all the time we have. I'm sorry.

Next up we have Mr. Therrien for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Gunn, I want you to tell us more about employing young people.

During the pandemic, we spoke about the possibility of having weekend voting days, which could enable young people to work.

I want you to talk about this. I think that it's a good idea to employ 15- or 16-year-olds. At the same time, it teaches them how democracy works.

[*English*]

Mr. Taylor Gunn: It's one of the recommendations, I guess, that Elections Canada would like to see to help them access voting stations.

I know Mr. Alghabra had some concerns initially about whether or not it should be on Monday or something like that. I think Canadians have no problem switching to Saturday and Sunday.

Elections Canada is allowed to employ poll workers who are 16 years old on election day. What I just wanted to offer is what we can do as an organization. We can contribute to public education and engagement at a geographic level and potentially by engaging younger poll workers to work on election day, I think, in an unparalleled manner. You could look at Sabreena's organizations as similar in those community networks.

Our organization has definitely found your interim reports very useful in the past for us to continue our work. One thing I would just suggest, potentially, in these reports is that Elections Canada be encouraged to look at groups such as CIVIX or the student vote program as ways to cultivate the poll workers who would be necessary on a potential week.

The other thing is that for 16- and 17-year olds, it's a good amount of money. They may feel less threatened by the pandemic and it's great for our democracy if we have younger poll workers who could continue to be poll workers as they age.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: I find this very worthwhile.

Do I have time to ask another question, Madam Chair?

[*English*]

The Chair: You can take 30 seconds.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay.

Ms. Delhon, are there other countries in the world where it's possible to vote at the age of 16?

[*English*]

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: That's a really good question, actually. I'm going to defer to Taylor on that because he probably knows more from the Colombia experience.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Gunn, quickly.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: Just quickly, I would say that we should save that and get into that as a whole separate meeting. There is so much to talk about on that.

The Chair: Are there other jurisdictions?

You could just say yes or no, for now anyway and we can—

Mr. Taylor Gunn: Yes, there are.

The Chair: Okay, there we go.

Mr. Blaikie, would you like to take a minute and get a question in? We're at the end of our time, pretty much, but I could allow it.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Sure, thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

I think that Scotland just lowered the voting age to 16. I may be wrong, but I think that's the case.

[*English*]

I am just interested if our witnesses have any quick thoughts or strong feelings about the idea of telephone voting. It's something that's come up in testimony here. We don't have any federal experience with it, but there is some experience in B.C., so I'll go really quickly to Ms. Delhon first and then Mr. Gunn.

Ms. Sabreena Delhon: I understand that it was used effectively in B.C. particularly for those who had to be in quarantine because of the pandemic or those who were living in rural and remote communities, particularly first nations communities. It definitely should be considered.

Mr. Taylor Gunn: Mr. Blaikie, I would just suggest, and this is the attitude and behaviour of election agencies across the country, to make voting as successful as possible. This also comes from the last few years, and did come up in the debate around the Fair Elections Act. I wouldn't say that electoral fraud is non-existent, but it is extremely limited, so looking at anything for how to make voting more accessible is worthwhile, and potentially experimenting with.

I would say that I don't believe we should begin to vote online. We're not ready for it because of its security, and I do not think it will increase people's motivation.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gunn and Ms. Delhon. That's the end of our time today.

I really appreciate the interesting conversation, and I'm sure all of the members do as well. Perhaps, because it seemed like there was quite a lot of interest, if the members feel there are some follow-up questions they may have, could they submit those in writing and maybe get responses?

An hon. member: Absolutely.

The Chair: All right. To all the members, if there is anything you feel that you want to ask, just please send it along to me and we can try to get a response for our final report.

Thank you so much.

We will switch into our second panel now.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Justin Vaive): Madam Chair, we will do very quick sound checks for our next two witnesses.

The Chair: Okay, we'll suspend for a couple of minutes.

• (1200) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1200)

The Chair: Welcome back. We're going to get started.

Can everyone please click on the right-hand side of their screens to ensure that they are in gallery view? With this view you should be able to see all of the participants in your grid view.

I'd like to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. As a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

Also, interpretation in this video conference will work much like it does in a regular committee setting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of the floor, or French or English.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking your mike should be on mute. The use of headsets is strongly encouraged. Thank you for using those headsets.

I'd like to now welcome our witnesses. From Canada Post, we have Louise Chayer. From the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, we have Mr. Raymond Orb, the president.

Welcome to both of you.

• (1205)

I've mentioned that we're looking at the possibility of how to run a safe election within the context of this pandemic.

Both of you have five minutes for an opening statement.

We will start with Ms. Chayer.

Ms. Louise Chayer (General Manager, Customer Experience, Canada Post Corporation): Thank you to the chair and to the committee members for inviting me to join you today.

My name is Louise Chayer, and I'm the general manager of customer experience at Canada Post.

I'd like to start by outlining our long-standing commitment to delivering major mailings and the consultative approach that we take to ensure successful delivery. At Canada Post we're proud to serve every corner of the country, and we understand the importance of connecting Canadians in urban centres, rural towns, remote communities and the Far North.

We deliver on our mandate each day with a large, sophisticated, national network and a team of incredible people who are dedicated to serving Canadians. When it comes to securely delivering large, national and regional mailings, we have extensive experience. It means that we can support important public initiatives such as the census, national and provincial elections and, most recently, Health Canada's COVID-19 awareness efforts.

In each instance we work closely with officials at all levels to conduct extensive advance planning. With a dedicated project team, we work with the shared goal of effectively and thoughtfully executing all the mailing requirements. We meet regularly with organizers to provide logistical support and advice, proactively monitor mailings from receipt to delivery and develop mechanisms to quickly address any potential issues. This approach has helped us to successfully support elections of all kinds for years while building great working relationships with election officials across the country.

This year alone we have supported provincial elections in New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and British Columbia, as well as numerous by-elections at the municipal, provincial, and federal level.

After the federal election that was held last fall, we received a letter from Stéphane Perrault, the Chief Electoral Officer. In it he recognized Canada Post's efforts in delivering 4,300 monotoners of election material and thousands of special ballot bags to run the election while at the same time ensuring that 27 million voter information cards and 15.4 million federal election guides were distributed to Canadians in a timely manner.

During every writ period, we're also proud to deliver a surge of personal mail and direct mail from candidates who are looking to quickly and effectively get their messages into the hands of the voters.

While there is often a surge of mail during any election period, I want to reassure the committee members that we are built to meet our responsibilities. With over 53,000 employees, Canada Post delivers close to eight billion pieces of mail and parcels to 16.5 million addresses across the country every year. Our network consists of 21 processing plants and 477 letter-carrier depots serving more than 22,000 urban, rural and mail service carrier routes. We have one of the largest fleets in Canada with over 13,000 vehicles. While much of the attention has shifted recently to the number of parcels that we process and deliver, we are also built to process and deliver a lot of mail.

Mail is processed on machines called multi-line optical character readers, or MLOCs, as we call them. They're dedicated to sorting mail, and they do so at a very high rate of speed. We currently operate 150 MLOCs located in 15 mail processing plants across the country that can each process on average 22,000 pieces of mail an hour. As you can see, we are able to support large mailings, and we're proud to do so.

I would like to close by saying that this year has been like no other. With COVID-19, our top priority from the beginning has been to ensure that we are putting the safety of our people first. To do so, we have closely followed the advice and guidance of the Public Health Agency of Canada throughout this period. We quickly and dramatically changed the way we work, the way we deliver, the way we operate our post offices and the way we clean our facilities right across the country.

We implemented physical distancing measures, and we ramped up the distribution of safety equipment and personal protective equipment to our people. Masks and face coverings are mandatory in all our facilities, including for customers visiting the post office. We've also implemented processes and contingencies to respond in the event of a positive or presumptive employee case.

• (1210)

These are just a few of the many measures we've put in place to keep employees and the people who we serve safe. Throughout it all, we have worked closely with our unions and bargaining agents at the national and local levels. By putting safety measures in place early and working regularly to improve them, we've been able to provide an essential service to Canadians throughout a very challenging year.

In summary, we have a long and established history of serving Canadians and supporting our democracy when called upon.

We're not just a delivery company. We are part of the national fabric, with a network built to serve all and a team of people proud to serve the many communities they call home.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to answering your questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Orb, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Raymond Orb (President, Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My name is Ray Orb. I am the president of SARM. I was born and raised and live in a small community northeast of Regina with a population of 625 people.

I'd like to thank the standing committee today.

SARM represents all the 296 rural municipalities in the province and has been the voice of rural municipal government for over 100 years. Today, I'll share some perspectives with you.

First, I would like to say that it would be essential to communicate the reasons why a federal election is needed now, during a pandemic. To encourage rural voters to start to participate in the federal election during a pandemic, those in government must ensure the voting public understands why it has to happen now and why it is not better to wait until after a vaccine is available for COVID-19. Rural voters will be weighing the risks to their health and safety against the reason for a federal election when they are deciding whether to participate or not.

Holding an election at the right time in the calendar year is also key to attracting rural-based voters to cast their ballots. Canadian

agriculture is at the very heart of rural Canada and plays a significant role in our daily lives, from employing family and neighbours to feeding the globe. This means avoiding an election date that coincides with key agriculture activities such as seeding and harvest. It's imperative to ensure rural voter turnout. Farmers are not thinking about elections when they are taking off their year's income in a month-long period.

In Saskatchewan, we just came through fall municipal and provincial elections amidst the pandemic and recognized some trends we thought would be helpful to share. Municipal elections also took place in other provinces this fall, making them good points of reference.

Advance voting for Saskatchewan's provincial election recognized historic increases. In 2016, over 110,000 people voted at advance polls. This year, it increased to 185,000, which is 67%. Ensuring that opportunities for advance polls are easily accessible and well-promoted is imperative. Offering voters advance polling stations in their immediate area with extended operating hours would likely prove beneficial to voter participation.

In the New Brunswick municipal election, advance polling was stretched over three days. This spread out the in-person voter population over the span of days. Promoting these alternative methods of voting more widely, well in advance of election day, along with reminders of how using these alternative methods can help reduce potential exposures to COVID-19 would be encouraging.

There was also an increase in the uptake of those mail-in ballots to vote in Saskatchewan's provincial election. A record 56,000 mail-in ballots were returned and counted this year. This is in comparison to the mere 4,000 mail-in ballots that were counted in 2016. Ensuring the method for distributing and receiving back mail-in ballots is fine-tuned and promoting this mail-in option to voters well in advance of election day would also encourage participation. Consideration should be given to allow adequate time for mail-in ballots to arrive and be counted prior to election day. The time it takes for ballots to arrive via regular mail slowed the ability for election officials to be officially announced, in some situations, until days after the general election.

To ensure the health and safety of voters, ensuring that polling stations are equipped with adequate hand sanitizer, masks, disposable pencils for marking ballots, proper barriers and easily identifiable marks on the floor or signs to indicate proper social distancing, etc., are important. It would also be important to ensure that these protective measures are well-communicated before advance polls and election day, so voters know they can feel safe when they choose to cast their vote in person.

• (1215)

In the Nova Scotia fall general elections, the province encouraged all municipalities to use telephone or Internet voting. Some municipalities decided to use solely electronic voting, while others made use of a combination of paper and electronic voting options. Opting for in-person voting meant renting more polling stations, hiring more election staff and spending more on adequate cleaning. For voters concerned about attending a polling station in person, they allowed voters to cast a ballot via proxy.

In closing, on behalf of the Saskatchewan's rural municipalities and agricultural producers, we thank the standing committee for the opportunity to lend our voice to this important conversation. We look forward to continued dialogue as we all work together to protect the interests and the health and safety of Canadians.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Orb.

To both of you, we appreciate your remarks.

We'll start our six-minute round of questioning with Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Thanks very much, and thanks for allowing me to fill in today.

Ms. Chayer, I normally sit on the government operations committee where we have a lot of dealings with Canada Post, so it's nice to see you.

I wonder if you could give some of Canada Post's experiences in dealing with the B.C., Saskatchewan and New Brunswick elections with the mail-in process.

Ms. Louise Chayer: Certainly. That's a good question.

As you mentioned, we supported the New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and British Columbia elections.

On the New Brunswick side, it was smaller in scope, and things were handled without any issues in terms of the mail-in ballots.

Saskatchewan was a little larger in scope and we were able to support there without any issues as well.

In the B.C. election as well, there is a larger population, and for sure, a larger number of voter mail-in ballots. Again there were no issues in terms of return, getting the kits out and getting people to vote by mail and getting those votes back in time for the election.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Great.

My colleague Mr. Blaikie commented about a fixed election versus a snap election. Saskatchewan's is more fixed, but B.C.'s was a snap election.

What would happen with Canada Post should something be called unexpectedly, perhaps in spring, as a lot of people are talking about? Is Canada Post ready to go, already ramped up for a much larger potential mail-out?

Ms. Louise Chayer: Sure. The election date remains unknown at this time and we work very closely with Elections Canada in order to be prepared. After the last federal election, which resulted in

a minority government, there are certain things we have to make sure are prepared with Elections Canada, the main thing being the equipment.

Normally, if it's a majority government, our containerization equipment would be returned to us, but when it's a minority government, that's something they keep so they can ensure that they are ready on their side and then we work with them. Once a date is known and they communicate to us, we get ready. We have a plan that we use for all federal elections, which has very concrete milestones. The deliverables are very clear. We have a memorandum of understanding already in place with Elections Canada, so we are certainly ready to support an election when one is called.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Are there any specific lessons learned, perhaps from the B.C. or Saskatchewan elections, that Canada Post hadn't thought of and would then think about for a federal election?

Ms. Louise Chayer: Things went very well. We got very good feedback from elections officials in both of those provinces. There were no major issues that I'm aware of. We have very open communications with elections officials and we look forward to any feedback they would have for us and to learn from that. Both of those elections used a business reply mail and both of those elections had a centralized return, meaning that the votes by mail were going to one location, which is not the case with a federal election.

Those are some of the things that will be different with a federal election. At this time, I'm not aware of any major lessons learned, but we do continue to work closely with the elections officials.

• (1220)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: On the issue of getting mail-in ballots to people, we hear stories, of course, of mail just getting dropped at the front door of an apartment. Is there a concern about that? Is there any proof of such things, or is that more just anecdotal talk?

Ms. Louise Chayer: Every mode of delivery should be secure. Whether it's a rural mailbox, a community mailbox or at-the-door delivery, mail should be secured. There could be some isolated issues and when those are brought to our attention we certainly investigate, but overall, we feel confident that the modes of delivery we have in place are secure.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: At the government operations committee, I had to give points to Canada Post on the PPE and the safety it provided to its members. At the time, I think, out of 57,000 employees, there was not a single case of internal transmission of COVID. Is that still the case?

Ms. Louise Chayer: We have had several cases. Some isolated cases were believed to be from workplace transmission—very, very small in number—and we worked with the local health officials in those cases. The majority of the cases have been community transmission.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Wonderful. You've answered my questions. Thanks very much. I appreciate your time.

Ms. Louise Chayer: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Alhabra.

Hon. Omar Alhabra (Mississauga Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon to our witnesses. Thank you for being here.

I have some questions for you, Ms. Chayer, but first let me take a second to salute Canada Post and all its employees. At a time when we have witnessed a lot of disruptions throughout our economy and our society, I have yet to hear of a massive complaint about interruptions in the delivery of mail or parcels. Congratulations to you and the entire team at Canada Post.

I think the questions we all have about mail-in ballots are not because we have questions about the capacity of Canada Post to deliver what is predicted to be four million to five million ballots, because we know that the capacity exists. We just want to make sure that the process itself is secure and that the coordination between you and Elections Canada is at an optimum level.

Do you have any suggestions for us on what we should require or recommend to Elections Canada when it comes to the relationship with Canada Post about coordination for mail-in ballots?

Ms. Louise Chayer: Thank you very much for the kind words. Our people have been working very, very hard. I will pass on your comments to them, for sure. Thank you for that.

Yes, when it comes to mail-in ballots, I don't think we have any concerns with the capacity. Five million votes, when we have mechanized equipment to deal with that, will not be an issue. We continue to work daily with Elections Canada to work out some of the finer details.

One thing we all have to kind of understand is the way that Canada Post is built. We collect and deliver mail. When we collect mail, that collection is based on over 200,000 induction points. Every red mailbox, every post office, every Shoppers Drug Mart with a dealer in the back—all of those are the more than 200,000 induction points within our system. Those induction points are cleared Monday to Friday. They are cleared at different times of the day. We overlay on top of that our transportation network, which is built to deliver mail on a two-day standard for local to local mail, a three-day standard for regional mail, and a four-day standard for national mail.

We have to understand what that would look like to the voter who has a ballot they wish to cast. We need to understand what language we are talking about when we say "mail by" a certain date. If we say "mail by the close of the polls," does that mean people will feel confident that they can drop off their ballot at 5 o'clock in the afternoon in the little red box by the corner of their street on their way home after work, when that box was perhaps cleared at 3 o'clock in the afternoon?

We have to understand what that means so that Elections Canada can take that advice and understand how best to communicate that

to the voters and to give voters a very clear understanding of when they need to deposit their votes so that they can be collected on time and delivered on time to elections officials.

Those are all the details we are in constant communication with Elections Canada about to understand and to work out. Those are the things we need to clarify over the coming weeks as we go through this.

• (1225)

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Did I understand you correctly that some of the provincial elections use a different class of mail than the federal election? Can you elaborate on that, please?

Ms. Louise Chayer: For sure. Saskatchewan and British Columbia used what we call "business reply" mail. It was one centralized address that it was going to, so that was a product that it was easy to do that with.

With a federal election, we are looking at 338 different addresses that these votes would be going to. Putting in place a BRM for all those 338 becomes very complicated, and logistically very difficult to manage. They opted for a "postage paid" envelope. We are actually working with Elections Canada to make sure that we can test at least 200 envelopes from each of those 338 prior to that, in order to make sure that we understand the mechanization of that and that there are no issues with how they will be printed and how they will affix the return address to it.

We want to make sure that everything is good, so we will be testing that. We're working with Elections Canada to test that so that we can have very good acceptance rates on our mechanized equipment.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: You are doing the testing before any election is declared.

Ms. Louise Chayer: Absolutely, yes.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Okay.

I have another question. There is an idea of the ability of voters, once they mail in their ballots, to.... Are we able or is Canada Post able to track that ballot and inform the voter who sent that mail-in ballot that the envelope was received by Elections Canada?

Ms. Louise Chayer: We are using regular Lettermail, so there is no ability to track that particular piece within our system to say that we have received this particular piece from this particular person. We do not have that ability.

We do have that ability for parcels, which you can track and see where it's going, but for Lettermail, that's not a product that we have available at this time.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Maybe that is a question that should be directed to Elections Canada. Does Elections Canada keep track of the envelope? Is that doable?

I should ask that question to Elections Canada and not to you.

Ms. Louise Chayer: Yes, that would be a question for Elections Canada; I agree.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's all the time we have for that interaction.

Next we have Mr. Therrien for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to acknowledge our two witnesses who have come to provide information today.

I'll start by asking Ms. Chayer some questions.

Ms. Chayer, you've experienced elections in Saskatchewan and British Columbia. It's fair to say that, if you could fulfill those mandates, you could fulfill the mandate of a federal election.

In your view, aside from the fact that the federal election is larger than the provincial elections, what other issues, which we don't know about, could make the federal election more challenging?

Are there any problems inherent to the federal election that could affect your work and make it more challenging?

[*English*]

Ms. Louise Chayer: In terms of problems, I wouldn't necessarily call them problems per se. There are challenges in delivering an election, challenges that we've been able to meet each and every time we deliver a provincial election or a federal election. We've been very successful in delivering them.

This particular election, we do have the added complexity of the increased vote by mail and understanding how that will work. We are working closely with Elections Canada to iron out those fine details so that things go smoothly on that side.

Other challenges that this particular election could have, because we are in a COVID environment, are with how Elections Canada will identify and confirm the RO offices and polling stations. I don't know if they will have more challenges in doing that or not. We need that information in order to start our processes of delivering equipment to the RO offices, for the printers to start printing the VICs and the ballots and all of that kind of stuff. All of that information is required to coordinate that.

From Elections Canada's point of view, that would perhaps be a challenge meeting some of those requirements, and any delays then transfer to us.

We've been doing elections for a while. We do have a standard agreement with them, a memorandum of understanding. We have some set milestones and some set objectives that we are geared towards, and we manage to those objectives.

● (1230)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Aside from the holiday season, at what time of year do you have the most work, which would make it more challenging to fulfill an election mandate?

[*English*]

Ms. Louise Chayer: The peak season, which is what we are in right now, is certainly a high-volume season for us.

In 2021, something that we do need to take into account is that it is a census year. In May, we will have added volumes there related to the census, so that is something we need to keep in mind as well.

If they happen at the same time, it can be done. It will certainly be challenging for us but not something that we cannot overcome.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: This is exactly the type of situation that I was thinking about.

Mr. Orb, when you speak to your members or to the people whom you represent and tell them that there may be a federal election, how do they react?

Do they say that it isn't a big deal, that they've been through an election in their province or in some cities and that it will be fine, or do they say that it would be better not to have one?

What's the reaction of people who have experienced this situation in other areas?

[*English*]

Mr. Raymond Orb: Well, of course, we haven't been through a federal election yet, but as I mentioned, we've been through municipal elections and provincial elections. The mail-in ballots, I think, are the key to successful elections now, because people of course are concerned about COVID.

One thing I wanted to mention is that our rural post offices are very important to us, especially at a time like this, and a number of years ago, organizations like SARM lobbied to put a moratorium on rural post office closures. We see them as a valuable asset, a way of being able to vote using mail-in ballots. It's very important now.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: If you speak to them about a possible election, the people whom you represent are ready, they say that they can handle it and they don't see any issues. Is that right?

[*English*]

Mr. Raymond Orb: Yes, I think that's a fair statement. I think people are preparing. We're hearing a lot about a spring election, and I think our members would not be averse to that. I don't think it would deter people from voting if they had the option of mail-in ballots and, as I mentioned previously, there is the idea of having enough advance polls so that there aren't as many people going to vote in person at one time. I think it could be doable.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Orb. Unfortunately, that's all the time we have for this round.

Mr. Blaikie, you have six minutes.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

Mr. Orb, I'm very glad to have you here. I was concerned to get you here so we could get the perspective of rural communities that have already gone through an election.

There's a particular question that I wanted to ask you. We've heard that in order to procure a mail-in ballot with Elections Canada, that's largely an online process. I just wonder if you have any concerns about that, and any larger concerns about Internet availability in rural and remote communities.

• (1235)

Mr. Raymond Orb: Yes. Of course, that would be one of our major concerns: having to apply for them online. We don't have good connectivity out in the rural areas. It's not reliable. I think you're familiar with that story. This is not only in rural Saskatchewan. This is in rural Canada, period. That's something that we've been pushing the federal government on, that's for sure.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Ms. Chayer, if Elections Canada were so disposed to call on Canada Post to ask if people could register in person at Canada Post outlets for mail-in ballots—not to replace an online application but as an alternative—is that a service that you think Canada Post could deliver?

Ms. Louise Chayer: If Elections Canada approached us with such an option, we would certainly take a look at that and discuss it. We can certainly discuss it with Elections Canada and see how that would work.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Mr. Orb, do you think that if people were able to register in person at Canada Post outlets for a mail-in ballot it would be helpful to people living in rural and remote communities who may not have adequate Internet access in order to apply online for a mail-in ballot?

Mr. Raymond Orb: Yes, I think it would definitely help. We would welcome seeing that.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Is that a recommendation that you would like to see this committee make?

Mr. Raymond Orb: You know what? I think it's something that would be a great idea. Yes, I think we would be supportive of that.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: One of the other issues that I was hoping to get your feedback on, Mr. Orb, has to do with telephone voting. It's something that we don't have a lot of experience with federally, but we've heard some testimony about the use of telephone voting in British Columbia. I was just wondering if you have some thoughts about what that would mean for people living in rural and remote communities if that were an option in a federal election.

Mr. Raymond Orb: I think it could be considered as an option. For people who have landlines, I think it's something that would be a good option. However, for people who use cellphones—and there are many people who live in rural areas who don't have landlines and rely on cellphones—the coverage isn't as good, so it could be more of an issue. I'm not sure. It might be a security issue, too, but for sure I think it's good to have an option to have both of those.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

Are there other types of barriers that people living in rural and remote communities might face or that they already face that might be exacerbated by an election during a pandemic that you'd care to highlight for the committee?

Mr. Raymond Orb: For some people, of course, it could be travel. A lot of the seniors who live rurally have challenges that way. We don't have great bus service anymore, between provincial

and federal cutbacks, we've lost a lot of our bus lines. It would mean that people would most likely have to hire someone to take them to the poll in some cases. That is a challenge.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: That's something that may have an adverse effect on turnout. Have you seen that at other levels, in either provincial or municipal elections, where you've had reduced turnout due to those kinds of transportation challenges?

Mr. Raymond Orb: We've seen that, and actually, we just went through a bad experience in Saskatchewan with their municipal elections. We had a blizzard, especially in the west side of the province, which affected even the Saskatoon area. That was the worst thing we've ever seen happen. It was almost a disaster. We have to prepare for those things. Sometimes, people aren't able to travel. They need to vote online, or with mail-in ballots ahead of time.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: One of the things that the Chief Electoral Officer of Elections Canada has asked for in his interim report on pandemic elections is a wider power to be able to adapt the elections act to changing circumstances, given the pandemic. Although it's not a health issue, to your point about the blizzard, do you think it's advisable for Parliament to give some more latitude to the CEO in order to be able to accommodate changing circumstances during a pandemic election?

Mr. Raymond Orb: I think that's something that could be considered because of course these are different circumstances. Things that we never thought would happen before are happening now.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Although they're not in his formal recommendations, the Chief Electoral Officer made representations to the committee asking essentially that if an election is to happen during the pandemic, the federal government institute the longest possible writ period to provide Elections Canada that extra time to try to overcome whatever challenges might come up. Is that something you think would be useful to the folks you represent, allowing more time for the election period so that Elections Canada would have a little more time to get organized with some of the challenges that may present them with?

• (1240)

Mr. Raymond Orb: Yes, I think that's something that could be considered. On the other hand, I know from past experiences that a long writ period and all the campaigning that goes with it seems to weigh on people. It seems to weigh on people's minds who live in the public too. They actually get tired of it. You might have heard that before. I think giving a little extra time is a good thing, but within a reasonable timeframe.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: As someone who was first elected in the federal election of 2015, I'm very familiar with the challenges of a long writ period.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have Mr. Tochor next, for five minutes.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Thank you so much, Madam Chair. Thank you to the witnesses.

My question's a little bit on the processes at Canada Post, but first, I'd like to start with Mr. Orb, and I'd like to thank him for the good work he does in representing rural Saskatchewan.

Mr. Orb, is there a common complaint from rural Saskatchewan about Canada Post? I'm sure they've heard already, but what are some of the typical issues that rural Saskatchewan has with Canada Post?

Mr. Raymond Orb: I think it would be in the timeliness, most likely—that things are delivered on time. This year, it seems like Canada Post is extremely busy because of a lot of the online shopping, and unfortunately, some of the small businesses have been closed down. I think the timeliness would be the thing. It's not necessarily about the cost but about the time it takes between the time people order things and the time they gets delivered.

Mr. Corey Tochor: That would spill over into an election, where ballots getting out to rural Saskatchewan would be slower and probably slower to reply to Elections Canada with the completed ballot. I think I would have concerns for Saskatchewan.

Changing to Canada Post and something on the procedural side. I trust Canada Post. I think on mail-in ballots, they're able to conduct themselves in a manner such that Canadians should have confidence in the integrity of that vote. On the priority of elections material versus regular mail, is there a pecking order that would proceed, with the vote having more precedence over, say, commercial flyers?

Ms. Louise Chayer: All mail is important. All mail has certain standards. All mail has its delivery windows. Lettermail would have priority. As we get closer to the deadline, if there are certain deadlines that we have to meet with Elections Canada, as we work out some of those details, we would make sure that they certainly become a priority. All mail is important and if we deliver as we are set to deliver and as we are organized to deliver, we should be able to meet those standards.

Lettermail is a lot different from parcels. It is managed and processed on different equipment, so even if we have some delays on the parcel side, it does not necessarily mean that it would translate into other mail. But all mail has its standards, its targets, in making sure that we deliver on time. That's what we will concentrate on. Lettermail will be letter mail, and flyers will be flyers, to deliver on time, which we try to commit to.

Mr. Corey Tochor: So there's no priority of the ballots in a federal election over a Best Buy flyer?

Ms. Louise Chayer: No. The flyers have their standard delivery dates, and we aim to deliver the different product lines on time, as the product lines are meant to be.

Mr. Corey Tochor: One of the concerns we heard from previous witnesses is international mail. Can you walk me through the timelines for that? How much longer are the international delivery timelines? I'm thinking of Hong Kong. Would you know the difference between typical mail timelines with letters moving from that country?

Ms. Louise Chayer: I'd have to get back to you on that. I don't have that at my disposal.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Okay.

Speaking of the pandemic and what happens in the worst case, there are 21 processing points across Canada, is that correct?

• (1245)

Ms. Louise Chayer: Twenty-one processing plants, yes.

Mr. Corey Tochor: So if half a dozen COVID cases were reported at one of those processing plants on the eve of an election, what would happen?

Ms. Louise Chayer: Those are scenarios we are going to be working out with Elections Canada to understand what those contingencies would be. There have been some cases in our plants, and when those things happen, we do take all of the necessary precautions to make sure that the employee is safe and supported. If there is any contact tracing, the health authorities are all engaged early on. We also involve the local joint health and safety committees in those decisions.

That often translates into our having to sanitize or clean a part of the depot, a part of the plant or a larger segment of the plant, which sometimes does mean that we have to shut down a piece of our plant or a depot to be able to sanitize it properly before we bring employees back. And when that happens, we are quick to recover and understand what the priorities are, based on where we're at with the mail, and we recover as quickly as we can.

Those are scenarios that we need to map out with Elections Canada so that we all understand the expectations and the art of the possible in delivering in those circumstances.

Mr. Corey Tochor: When will the testing you're going to get done wrap up?

Ms. Louise Chayer: We're still waiting for the samples. Once we get the samples, we would run them through quickly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Gerretsen, you have five minutes.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Chayer, are you confident that Canada Post could handle a significant increase in voting by mail?

Ms. Louise Chayer: Yes. I don't have any concerns about the volume of mail. We're talking potentially about five million mail-in ballots. That's what has been estimated by Elections Canada.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: And if it were 10 million, would you still be confident?

Ms. Louise Chayer: Yes.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay,

There has been some discussion, which I think Mr. Blaikie was asking you and Mr. Orb about, about registering for mail-in ballots. In some states in the U.S., for example, you don't even register. By default, you get a ballot sent to you in the mail.

You're already sending voter information cards to every elector, is that correct?

Ms. Louise Chayer: Yes. They are produced by Elections Canada data.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You handle their distribution?

Ms. Louise Chayer: That's correct.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Would you be able to send out a ballot to every person who gets a voter card like that?

Ms. Louise Chayer: If Elections Canada asked for that, we could do that.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Mr. Orb, you were making some comments about the reluctance of people to go to a polling location, and rightfully so. You emphasized that you believe that a mail-in ballot could be something that would significantly assist in alleviating some of those concerns that people would have during a pandemic.

Did I summarize that correctly?

Mr. Raymond Orb: That's right.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Would it be even easier for somebody if the ballot just came to their mailbox, and they were responsible for completing it and sending it back? The registration process is another hurdle that has to be overcome.

Mr. Blaikie asked you whether Canada Post locations would be good places for people to register. I believe you said yes, but that's still asking people to go and expose themselves when potentially they don't have to.

What if the ballot was just by default mailed to everybody? Would that be easier for them and make the process even simpler?

Mr. Raymond Orb: Are you talking about delivering to homes?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Yes, delivering the ballot straight into your mailbox or your community mailbox, wherever that is.

Mr. Raymond Orb: That would have to be done in a different manner, because right now a lot of rural people pick their mail up in the post office, or it would be an assembly outside somewhere, but not home to home.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Right, but I mean they do pick it up at their regular mail location, and then they could—

• (1250)

Mr. Raymond Orb: Yes.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: What I'm getting at is, do you think the registration process of the mail-in ballot is an added step that makes it a little more difficult for people to vote by mail or do you think, if the ballot just by default came to somebody on its own, that would be even easier for them?

Mr. Raymond Orb: I'd have to think about that. I'm not sure. I'm not really an expert on that process. This is something new for us to consider.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Ms. Chayer, are all Canada Post outlets open right now for regular functioning hours?

Ms. Louise Chayer: No. We do still have some that are closed, and it fluctuates from time to time depending on what's going on there, but that does happen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Some of the outlets that Mr. Orb is referring to in rural parts of Canada.... If you needed to go to one of these places to register, there might not be somebody working at one of those right now because of the pandemic. Is that correct?

Ms. Louise Chayer: It could be the case. Again, there are smaller numbers as things are a little bit better, but it can fluctuate and it is a possibility.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: That's all I had, Madam Chair.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Therrien.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Orb, you spoke about advance polling.

From what I've seen, it has increased substantially. For example, in 2019, in my constituency, a huge influx of people voted in advance. If I were to apply your figures to the new pandemic reality, it would be disastrous in my constituency. We would have many public health issues, because people would really be crowded together.

Were there more advance polling days in Saskatchewan?

Would we need more hours and more days to avoid a situation like the one I'm talking about?

[*English*]

Mr. Raymond Orb: Yes, that was the case. That does help because it reduces the concentration [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

The Chair: It seems like there is a connectivity problem.

Mr. Orb, can you try again?

Mr. Raymond Orb: I'm sorry. Can you hear me now?

The Chair: Yes, we can hear you now.

Mr. Raymond Orb: The idea of having more days of advance polls and extended hours is a good one and can be helpful because it does reduce the number of people in a polling station at one time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: You didn't have any issues even though many people ended up there.

By increasing the number of days and hours, the congestion didn't become a public health risk. Is that what you're telling me?

[*English*]

Mr. Raymond Orb: I can only speak from the rural perspective, in that sense. We don't have as many people in the rural area. The population isn't as large, and so there wouldn't be that many people voting.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay, thank you.

My question is for Ms. Chayer.

Do you have any issues with delivering mail across Canada, even though we have very remote regions?

Do you think that this challenge will become very difficult to overcome in a fairly short period?

[English]

Ms. Louise Chayer: I'm sorry, but I'm not sure I understand the question. Was it around the timelines of the mail?

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Given that Canada is a very large country, is it challenging to cover the entire territory in very short periods?

[English]

Ms. Louise Chayer: We deliver across this vast country every day and billions of pieces of mail every year. Yes, there are some challenges for sure. There are things like seasonality, storms and things that we have to react to almost every day as we put mail through.

We do have contingencies that are built. We do our best to deliver everything that we can on time. When there are exceptions, we bring in the contingencies to do the best that we can to recover.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Blaikie, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

Ms. Chayer, when we heard from the CEO of Elections Canada, he said that he was very confident in Canada Post's ability to deliver the mail when it comes to mail-in ballots. He had said that the challenge of increased volume would be more so on the logistical side for Elections Canada in terms of sorting those and making sure they end up in the right place to be counted.

In the situation where somebody applies for their mail-in ballot, receives it and has a prepaid envelope to use to return the completed ballot, do you envision that going to an Elections Canada headquarters and then being mailed to local returning offices? Or is that something that, based on the postal code of the sender, can be sorted and then sent directly through local mail to local returning offices across the country?

Do you have a sense of how the logistics of that mail-in ballot would work and Canada Post's role in that, whether it's delivering to a centralized location, having Elections Canada do the sorting and then mailing again, or whether Canada Post would be involved in sorting in a more direct and immediate way and then deliver locally to the local returning office?

Ms. Louise Chayer: From our our discussions with Elections Canada to date, the logistics would entail people requesting a mail-in ballot, which would be fulfilled by the local RO. Three hundred and thirty-eight of them would fulfill that order for the mail-in ballot, and that return envelope would go back to the returning officer. There are some other votes that will be centralized to go to Ottawa, like the internationals and things like that.

By and large, the local vote will be held locally and will be returned locally. That's why it's important for us to test all of the envelopes that will be pre-produced. How they will be printed and how they will affix the return address.... It's important for us to make sure that everything is done properly, so that we can have a high mechanized rate on our equipment and make sure that we re-

turn things on time. That's part of the testing that we're doing with all 338, because they will be held locally and returned locally.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Are those envelopes printed at the local returning office? Does Canada Post play a role in preparing those envelopes and the address on them or is that happening at each local returning office?

Ms. Louise Chayer: I'd have to confirm where they are actually being printed. I don't have those details. I'd be glad to get back to you in terms of the logistics of the printing.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's all the time for this interaction.

Mr. Lukiwski, would you like a couple of minutes?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Yes, thank you very much, Madam Chair. I know time is tight.

I should probably initially say, in the spirit of full transparency, that I've known Ray Orb for well over 30 years. He has been completely professional and non-partisan in all of our dealings. I have also worked extensively on one or two political campaigns with his wife—just so that's out on the table.

Ray, it's good to see you again. I have one quick question for you and then one for Canada Post, should we have enough time.

Ray, you've talked about the challenges of elections during certain times of the calendar year for rural Canadians and rural Saskatchewanians. We've heard a lot of talk over the course of the last few weeks about the possibility of a spring election. Of course, spring in Saskatchewan means seeding.

What do you think would occur in terms of voter turnout if an election were called in the middle of seeding in Saskatchewan?

Mr. Raymond Orb: I don't think the turnout would be as good. However, the use of mail-in ballots, I think, is something that would alleviate some of that. If you're a farmer, the spring and the fall are the times when you don't want elections. Any other time of the year, I think, is suitable.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you very much.

Quickly, then, to Madam Chayer, could you give me an approximate timeline for the return delivery by mail? The Elections Canada folks have told us that, in all probability for the five million or so ballots that might be mailed in if an election were held in a pandemic, there would have to be a deadline for Elections Canada to receive them. The talk has been that it would be the Monday—if there is a Monday election date—with a 5 p.m. delivery deadline for mail-in ballots to be returned.

How long does it normally take, if a ballot is put in the mail, for it to be received? Also, what advice would you give to Elections Canada about advising or giving a deadline for Canadians to put the ballots in the mail?

• (1300)

Ms. Louise Chayer: That's something we continue to work with Elections Canada on. For the local-to-local, we are looking at two days. That is our service standard around the "local locals". In two days we should be able to turn that around with no problem.

The issue we do have is how voters will be informed of the deadline to drop it into the box. As I mentioned earlier, our collection system is based on a Monday-to-Friday pickup, and it's based on different hours. Not every little red mailbox has the mail picked up from it at 5 o'clock. For some it might be at 11 in the morning and for some it might be at two in the afternoon. Making sure that voters are well informed of when they should be putting that ballot in the mailbox will be key to making sure that the ballots get to where they need to go.

As an example, if somebody put something in a box, as I mentioned, at about five o'clock on a Friday, and that box got cleared at three, it's not going to be picked up on the Friday. It's going to be picked up on the Monday, and it will not be delivered on time to the regional office—to the RO—on the Monday.

Those are things and scenarios we are working through with Elections Canada so that they understand how things work and can take that information under advice to make sure voters are well informed and can make those decisions.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Those were very important questions, and I'm glad we got to them.

Thank you to the witnesses.

Ms. Chayer and Mr. Orb, you've been incredible. Thank you so much for coming out today and spending time with us.

To the rest of the committee members, we are going to suspend the meeting for a little while so that we can all go in camera. You have a separate link that was emailed to you for that, and a separate password that was emailed as well. The email for the link was in the original, the first one. As well, both passwords were in the password emails. I hope everyone has that information. I see nodding heads, so you all have that. Perfect.

We will log out of this meeting and I will see you in camera in a few minutes. Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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