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# Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 007**

Tuesday, November 3, 2020

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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota





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Tuesday, November 3, 2020

• (1100)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number seven of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

I'd like to start the meeting by providing you with some information following the motion that was adopted in the House on Wednesday, September 23, 2020, on hybrid format sittings.

The committee is now sitting in a hybrid format, meaning that members can participate either in person or by video conference. Witnesses must appear by video conference. All members, regardless of their method of participation, will be counted for the purpose of quorum. The committee's power to sit is, however, limited by the priority use of the House of Commons resources, which is determined by the party whips. All questions must be decided by a recorded vote, unless the committee disposes of them with unanimous consent or on division. Finally, the committee may deliberate in camera, provided that it takes into account the potential risks to confidentiality inherent to such deliberations with remote participants.

Today's proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. As a reminder, I will say that the webcast will always show the person speaking, rather than the entirety of the committee.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I'd like to outline a few rules.

Most of you are familiar with these rules, but they are also for the benefit of the witnesses who appear. I know you might be wondering why I go through this each time, but it's important when we have new witnesses.

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 "Floor", "English" or "French". Please make sure you select the appropriate language at this time.

Before speaking, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. Even with lots of experience, we all forget to do this sometimes. Please also mute yourself after you're done speaking so that there are no interruptions.

I will remind everyone that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. Should members

need to request the floor outside of their designated time for questions, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. If a member wishes to intervene on a point of order, they can raise their hand by clicking on it in the "Participants" section. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly.

Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the use of headsets with a boom mike is mandatory. Should any technical challenges arise, please notify the chair. We'll try to rectify the issue, but we may have to suspend for a few minutes while doing so.

For those participating in person, proceed as you usually would at a committee meeting. In order to get my attention, physically raise your hand, or you can give me a gesture or call out my name. If you have a point of order, wait for an appropriate time. The clerk and I will try to keep a consolidated list of those in the room and those raising their hand virtually.

To start with the formal part of our meeting today, I'd like to welcome Mr. Anton Boegman, the chief electoral officer from Elections British Columbia, and Dr. Michael Boda, the chief electoral officer from Elections Saskatchewan.

Welcome to our committee, and thank you for being here.

You each will have five minutes for opening remarks. Thank you for sending your opening remarks to us. They were circulated this morning to all the committee members, who can follow along if they wish to do so.

We will then proceed with formal questioning rounds. We generally go through two to three rounds of questions among the various parties. I'll let you know beforehand how many minutes you have so that there is no confusion.

Please go ahead, Mr. Boegman.

**Mr. Anton Boegman (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections BC):** Good morning. Thank you very much for the invitation to address the committee today.

As you know, my name is Anton Boegman. I am B.C.'s chief electoral officer, a position that I have held since 2018. Prior to this appointment, I was Elections BC's deputy chief electoral officer for operations for eight years. I have also served in a senior management capacity at Elections BC since 2004, administering five provincial general elections and four provincial referenda. Two of those referenda were held entirely by mail.

My remarks this morning are in relation to the administration of the 42nd provincial general election in B.C., which is still under way. General voting day was Saturday, October 24. While the campaign period and voting for the election are complete, we are still preparing for the final count of over 600,000 absentee and mail-in ballots, which will begin on November 6. This context will frame my remarks: They will reflect the B.C. electoral legislation and they will reflect the public health situation and rules in place in B.C. preceding and during the campaign period.

My understanding is that this committee intends to study the challenges posed to the normal conduct of federal elections by the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify the measures to be taken to adapt the approach and conduct of a general election to preserve the health and safety of all Canadians. To address this objective, I will provide two broad comments and then speak to the top three challenges that we faced in administering a pandemic election in B.C.

To begin, everything associated with election administration in a pandemic is challenging, from retaining returning officers, finding office space and securing voting places to recruiting and training election officials and implementing voting processes. Each element is more complex and nuanced and requires many unique and targeted mitigation measures. For example, voting places usually include many close-contact interactions, shared spaces and shared materials, all of which create a virus transmission risk. To mitigate this, we had to re-engineer the voting place and voting processes to allow for physical distancing and only one election official per voting station. We placed acrylic barriers on voting tables and provided election officials with personal protective equipment. There was more frequent cleaning. We established sanitation stations at entry and exit points and we allowed voters to bring their own pens or pencils to mark their ballots.

The pandemic also made election planning and preparation significantly more challenging. Developing and implementing a pandemic election model that maintains accessibility and integrity while ensuring safety for voters, election officials and political participants was unheard of pre-COVID. Major elements that were crucial to our success included early and ongoing consultation with public health experts, our ability to vary from legislation in response to an emergency or extraordinary circumstance, and an ongoing access to necessary funding. I don't have time in my opening statement to speak in more detail on this theme, but I would be pleased to do so in response to members' questions.

Within the context of a pandemic election and a rapidly changing environment, three key challenges emerged that I believe are relevant to federal elections: providing safe and accessible voting opportunities to at-risk voters and communities so that they are not administratively disenfranchised; scaling capacity to meet significantly increased demand for voting by mail; and maintaining safety

and business continuity at Elections BC headquarters, in district electoral offices and in voting places.

During our planning for a pandemic election, it became apparent that with effective safety plans and protocols in place and more in-person voting opportunities, as well as enhanced access to remote voting options, the vast majority of British Columbians would be able to vote safely. It was equally apparent, however, that at-risk or self-isolating voters, voters in care homes and voters in specific communities, such as first nations communities, would face significantly greater challenges to participating in the election. The use of tailored voting options and focused and ongoing communications, at times involving a much broader set of stakeholders than usual, was necessary to reduce barriers to voting. The tailored voting options included community-organized voting by mail, the hiring and training of community members to administer voting within their community, the use of mobile teams with full protective equipment and the expansion of operator-assisted telephone voting.

- (1110)

Administrative flexibility was also critical to effectively respond to changing circumstances and new outbreaks.

Scaling capacity to support major increases in voting by mail was identified early as a critical issue. We conducted voter surveys through the summer that indicated that 35% of British Columbians would prefer to vote by mail if an election were held during a pandemic. Greater use of this option was also an essential element in our strategy to spread voters across multiple voting options to reduce lineups and congestion at voting places and to allow for effective physical distancing at in-person voting opportunities.

We were able to leverage existing processes, systems and partnerships that had been in place previously for provincial referenda that were conducted entirely by mail. Further, legislation was adapted, vote-by-mail packages were modified to support automated production, and inbound voting request channels were streamlined to support high-volume efficiency. During the campaign period, we received and fulfilled over 720,000 requests for vote-by-mail packages, which was an increase of more than 7,200% over the last provincial election in British Columbia in 2017.

Last, the issue of maintaining safe spaces and business continuity across all work locations was a key challenge, particularly within the tight timelines established in law. We had to mitigate the risks to staff and voter safety and the risk of potentially having to close a district electoral office or voting place because of an outbreak. We worked with the provincial health officer, WorkSafeBC and regional health authorities to develop safe electoral offices and voting place plans and to emphasize their implementation and monitoring. Each office and voting place had a customized safety plan. The effort to address this challenge was significant and should not be underestimated.

I'm very gratified to be able to say that during the campaign period, we passed a number of WorkSafeBC pandemic safety audits and there were no COVID-19 exposure events at voting places, offices, or at our headquarters in Victoria.

Madam Chair, that concludes my opening statement. I'm now happy to respond to any questions that committee members may have. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Dr. Boda, we would like to hear from you, please.

**Mr. Michael Boda (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Saskatchewan):** Madam Chair, honourable members, thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today.

My name is Michael Boda. I'm the chief electoral officer for the Province of Saskatchewan. I've been back here in Saskatchewan since 2012, but for the last two and a half decades I've worked on election administration around the world in places like the U.S., the U.K. and a lot of developing countries.

Last Monday at 8 p.m., voting closed for Saskatchewan's provincial election, with approximately 434,000 voters having cast their ballots. The initial participation rate looks to be about 52% of eligible voters. In 2016 it was about 54%.

Almost every aspect of administration of our provincial election has been impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic, except perhaps that turnout, which looks to be very close to our 2016 numbers. I do hope that some of those turnout numbers can be traced back to the significant effort we put into ensuring that voters knew that voting would be no more risky than a trip to the local grocery store.

While there hasn't been much time to assess the conduct of the election—we're actually completing our final count this weekend—I want to describe for you three key steps that I believe have contributed to what has unfolded so far.

Our first step focused very much on our adapting Saskatchewan's election system to lower the risk of spreading the coronavirus. In fact, we pursued many methods to achieve this, but our overarching approach was focused on building capacity in our now three principal areas of voting by reinventing our absentee or vote-by-mail function—in 2016, just 1% of voters participated in this way—and doing everything we could to make both advance and election day voting safer.

Not knowing how many voters would take advantage of each of these opportunities, we had to quickly build capacity for vote-by-

mail so that we could allow for applications starting more than two months before the election day for voters who felt that attending a poll could be a health hazard for them.

Early on we also determined that to make things safer, voting-in-person opportunities would need to be spread out in a very different way, meaning that where we might have had five or six polls at a location in 2016, instead we would have just two or three polls. In the end, our number of polling locations grew from just 1,100 in 2016 to nearly 1,900 in 2020.

In a second step, we understood, as an election management body, that not only would we need to ensure that our physical polls met the safety standards of public health officials but also that our voters and workers would have to be convinced that in-person voting would be safe even with elevated levels of COVID-19.

Working closely with our chief medical health officer, we adapted our physical polls in order to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19. Our 2020 polls look very different from those from 2016, with protocols including physical distancing, hand sanitizing, barriers between voters and workers, masks being required for all workers and scrutineers and a strong recommendation that all voters wear a mask.

While I believe we took every reasonable step to make our polls safer, this really wasn't enough. We also had to ensure that voters knew that the polls would be safe. In the weeks leading to the election, we worked very hard to educate stakeholders, voters, scrutineers and election workers so that if perceptions of the risk of COVID-19 changed in the province, stakeholders would remain convinced that visiting the polls in person would be safe.

A third and final step that was essential to the effective conduct of our election related to the importance of relationships between election administrators and our stakeholders. As chief electoral officer, I could not have conducted this election without a strong recognition among voters, government, the legislative assembly, parties, candidates, school boards, first nation communities, personal care facilities and so on that to be successful in 2020, the process would have to unfold very differently from the way it did in 2016. Perhaps most important has been our relationship, my relationship, with the Office of the Chief Medical Health Officer.

As an election administrator, I have always believed that an election is not merely a technical exercise but also that strong relationships with stakeholders are essential to the success of the conduct of an event. Our 2020 election in Saskatchewan only reinforced that for me. Working with all stakeholders, we had to adapt to ensure that the process was safer for everyone participating.

• (1115)

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate.

I also would be pleased to answer any questions, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you to both of our witnesses.

Just so everybody is aware and can plan accordingly, I want to remind you that we will be going until approximately 12:30 p.m. with the formal meeting with witnesses. If there is an appropriate time to break, we might stop sooner because we have to transition into the subcommittee meeting.

The subcommittee meeting is only for the members of the subcommittee, obviously, so the main members can leave the meeting at that point. We will carry on in camera with a different link and a different password to sign in to the subcommittee meeting. Be prepared for that at around 12:30 p.m.

We will start our six-minute round with Mr. Doherty, please.

**Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our guests.

Mr. Boegman, as the only member of Parliament here from British Columbia, I will centre my questions on our election. We just went through our provincial election and we held it on a Saturday. It's the first time a weekend provincial election has been held since the early 1900s. Am I correct?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** You are correct.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** When was the last time it was held on a weekend?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** I don't have the exact date it was held, historically. I know that the past four elections were always held on a Tuesday in May.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Did holding the election on a weekend present any unique challenges, or was it more beneficial?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** It was more beneficial from a number of perspectives. One was in terms of access to election workers, especially in a pandemic, when many older workers who typically are the election workers are in an at-risk category. It allowed us to recruit younger workers and workers who were able to work on a Saturday because it was a weekend for them.

It also allowed us access to other locations that were not necessarily available during a weekday. Particularly in relation to the pandemic, it enabled us to use schools as voting places on the Saturday and Sunday of the advance voting period, as well as on voting day, in a way that enabled us to integrate our safe voting place plans with the safe schools plans and keep the school communities closed when students were in place. By having voting on weekends, we were able to use those facilities.

• (1120)

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Did Premier Horgan consult with you before calling the snap election?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Premier Horgan did not consult with me before calling the snap election.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Would you say you were fairly prepared for this, or would you have required a little bit of extra time? It seemed like everything went smoothly on election day.

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** British Columbia, like the federal situation, was in a minority government situation. My mandate requires that we be ready. We started working immediately at the onset of the pandemic on our plans to administer an election during a pandemic. Following the political signs in British Columbia and media speculation, we advanced our planning over the summer. Although it was certainly a scramble to the start-up, I believe we were well prepared for the election.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** I've read your "Safe Voting Places—COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan" and how to campaign safely during COVID-19. For the most part, did political parties adhere to your plan on how to campaign in a COVID environment?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Yes. It's my understanding that there were no issues in relation to the campaigning side of things.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Did Elections BC promote the measures being taken to ensure voter confidence in the process and also in the safety of the polling stations?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Yes, we did. We had a press conference the day after the call of the election. It focused heavily on safe voting and the processes in place. Our advertising campaigns were reworked during the early stages of the pandemic to emphasize safe voting and the alternative voting options we had in place, and it was our continual focus through our media interviews and the presentations we made during the campaign period.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** How are you handling the sheer volume of the mail-in ballots? We know that we're not going to have the final results until November 16, but did you anticipate the sheer volume that we received?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** We did anticipate it. As I mentioned, we did surveys over the summer that indicated on a consistent basis that approximately 35% of British Columbians would choose to vote by mail in a pandemic. That informed our planning and our reorienting of our systems and infrastructure around voting by mail to support that kind of volume.

As you know, we've had a number of purely vote-by-mail referenda in the province, and we were able to use the infrastructure systems and processes that had been developed for those events during the election.

In terms of the count of the ballots, of course we're distributing that across all 87 electoral districts, so the number within each district is manageable within the three days we have assigned for the final count.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Did you find it challenging to source personal protective gear for all of your polling stations?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** It was challenging, but that was identified early as a long lead time item, so it was our focus at the end of July and throughout August to make sure that we could access supplies. We also tapped into the province's portal for some of the supplies.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Okay.

Was your workforce predominantly older or younger this time, or was there an average? Obviously, the age of the workforce went down, but was it still predominantly the same volunteers, the same employees, you had previously?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** I don't have statistics on our workforce composition, but I could get that if necessary. Anecdotally, I've heard that the workforce was younger than it was previously.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** I just have to say that as a British Columbian, I felt very safe, and so did our family and our neighbours. I talked with your employees at the polling stations, and they all felt very safe. There were no complaints.

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Thank you.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** I think those are my questions, so thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Dr. Duncan, you have six minutes.

• (1125)

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today. We appreciate your time, your experience and your expertise.

I have many questions, so I am looking for short answers, most often a yes or no.

I'll start with Mr. Boegman, please.

Can you table with the committee how many safety audits you passed, please?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** We have three that I'm aware of that we passed.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

Can you table with the committee what that safety audit looked like, or just the categories, please?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** I don't have the reports in front of me, but they—

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Could you table them?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** I could, yes.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you. That's fine.

We understand that there were provincial health guidelines for the election to keep each community's candidate, staff and volunteers safe during the election. Would you be willing to table that guidance with the committee, please—yes or no?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Yes.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much.

Did local health units provide any additional guidance? Again, I'm looking for a yes-or-no answer, please.

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Yes.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

Could you table with the committee the circumstances, please?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** The circumstances were in relation to voting in acute care hospitals and health care-run care homes.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you. That leads right into my next question. I appreciate that.

Could you table with the committee the recommendations you made to ensure the health and safety of B.C. residents and staff of long-term care homes while ensuring their right to vote, please?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Yes, I'd be pleased to do so.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so very much.

Was there public health guidance for other congregate settings beyond long-term care?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Not specifically, no.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Okay. Thank you so much.

Could you table a comparison of the guidance for a usual election side by side with the guidance for this election? Answer yes or no, please.

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Yes.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much. This is so helpful.

Could you table what health and safety measures were put in place at the polling stations for election day? Answer yes or no, please.

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Yes.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Did you have the same number of polling stations as usual?

Answer yes or no, please.

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** We had more.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

Did you have the same number of workers as usual?

Yes or no, please.

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** We had fewer.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

Were your costs the same as usual, yes or no?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** No, they were more.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Would you be willing to table the percentage change in those last three questions with the committee, please?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Certainly...for the first two we can table the reports once my CEO report on the administration of the event is complete.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Lovely. Thank you for your generosity, Mr. Boegman.

Now I'll go over to Dr. Boda, please.

Was there provincial health guidance for the election to keep each of committees, candidates, staff and volunteers safe during the election? Answer yes or no, please.

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Yes. The chief medical health officer issued some guidance.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

Would you be willing to table that guidance with the committee, please?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** I think you'll have to talk to the chief medical health officer about that.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much.

Did local health units provide additional guidance, yes or no?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** No, not the local—

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

**Mr. Michael Boda:** The chief medical health officer did.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

Could you table with the committee what recommendations you made to ensure the health and safety of Saskatchewan residents and staff in long-term care while ensuring their right to vote, please?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** You're asking for quite a bit of tabling, and we're in the middle of an election right now, as you can appreciate. I will certainly try to help you out as much as I possibly can.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you. I appreciate that very much. We're grateful. We want to learn from you.

Are you able to table a comparison of the guidance for a usual election with the guidance for this election, to the best of your ability?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** I'll do that.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you very much.

Could you table what health and safety measures were put in place at the polling stations for election day, please?

• (1130)

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Yes. We can provide some information on that.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much.

You told us how many polling stations were used this time. How many workers were used this time, please?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** We don't have an exact number yet, but it was in the range of 15,000, as compared with about 13,000 the last time.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Could you table with the committee what percentage increase you had in mail-in ballots and the comparison in costs for the election, please?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** I can provide for you the increase in vote-by-mail ballots. The cost figures will not be available until I have released my statutory report on the expense of the elections. After that, we can certainly table it.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** I'd like to say thank you to both of you for your time, for your expertise and for being so gracious.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Madame Normandin, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ):** Thank you.

I want to thank the two witnesses who took the time to share their experiences with us.

My questions are for both of you. I invite you to respond at your convenience.

Is there a system in place so that if an infectious person went to vote, people who voted at about the same time are informed that they may have been in contact with an infectious person? It would work a bit like the COVID-19 Alert app.

Has a similar system been put in place and has voter contact information been recorded?

[*English*]

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Maybe I'll start.

British Columbia doesn't use the COVID Alert application. The responsibility for notification and for tracing is with our medical system. We would have taken guidance from them if there had been a positive exposure case at a voting place.

Our safety plans indicated the necessary cleaning that we needed to have in place and detailed the distancing and the use of protective equipment to mitigate the potential for an outbreak to occur. As I mentioned, I'm very gratified that we did not have any, but the notification and the other steps would have been the responsibility of the medical authorities in British Columbia.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** If possible, I would also like to hear Mr. Boda's response.



[English]

**Mr. Michael Boda:** During the day, we were fortunate that COVID-19 had a very minimal impact on the process. We did identify four individuals who were close contacts of cases of COVID. In those instances, those individuals were removed as workers and a cleaning process unfolded. All of this came through guidance from the chief medical health officer as to how to proceed. We were in constant touch with the chief medical health officer throughout the day in order to receive guidance on how to proceed.

We did have a couple of cases of COVID in advance during the training process. At that time we again worked with the chief medical health officer to determine how to move forward.

[Translation]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** Thank you.

Please answer with yes or no. As I understand it, Mr. Boegman, there was therefore no way to trace voters who may have been in contact with a voter who tested positive. Is this correct?

[English]

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Perhaps the statement I made to you was in relation to the actual contact tracing and orders from the medical authorities to self-isolate or do what was necessary.

Of course we knew who was working in our voting places. We could notify individuals in our voting places if anything was to happen. There were some instances of individuals who were ill and went for COVID tests that turned out to be negative. In those instances, when they indicated that they were ill, we did notify the other individuals who were in that workspace to make them aware that this was happening. As per our plans, they were then to be told to self-monitor until the results came back.

• (1135)

[Translation]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** Thank you.

Mr. Boda, I'm asking you the same question.

[English]

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Throughout the day, we knew who was in the polling location at all times. At that point, if an individual was identified as a case, it would have been referred directly to the local medical health officer, and contact tracing would have been pursued.

All of that was completed through the Office of the Chief Medical Health Officer.

[Translation]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** Thank you.

I would now like to ask questions about the difficulty, for candidates and parties, of taking part in an election campaign during a pandemic.

Mr. Boegman, are you aware of some of the difficulties encountered by smaller parties? Will there be any kind of report on this subject?

[English]

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Yes, once the election is complete, we will do an extensive series of post-mortems with our own district staff, the political parties and the candidates. We will survey them to understand what their experiences were.

I'm not aware of any specific or unique challenges that were raised. Of course, the entire process was very different. There was no door knocking. There was more remote contact. There was use of mail. There was use of phone. There was distancing, and there were people wearing masks standing on street corners with signs, which you usually see. The way that political parties and candidates campaigned was entirely different in COVID.

[Translation]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** Thank you.

Mr. Boda, I'd like to hear what you have to say on this, please.

[English]

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Perhaps in Saskatchewan it was a little bit different from in British Columbia. Door knocking was allowed.

My mandate is not to oversee campaigning. However, I was in close contact with the chief medical health officer. He asked for guidance with respect to how to proceed. In the end, we determined that Ministry of Health guidance would supersede anything that I would put forward.

Some general principles were there. We didn't have any general problems. Certainly there weren't large gatherings of any sort, but door knocking was allowed to proceed in the same way that other similar activities were allowed to proceed, such as door-to-door sales.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Boda. Thank you, Madame Normandin.

Mr. Blaikie, you have six minutes.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP):** Thank you, and thank you to both our witnesses. I know elections don't end on election day and that you're both very busy, so we appreciate your time here.

On the theme of political parties, do you think it would be useful for there to be some kind of advisory committee consisting of a member or representative from the registered parties, someone from the elections authority and someone from the public health authority, in order to be able to discuss campaigning methods and the public health risks that can arise?

I believe that they have a body like that in British Columbia. We heard from the chief medical officer in British Columbia that it was a useful body. I'd like to get your own respective opinions about that.

Let's start with Mr. Boda and then go to Mr. Boegman.

**Mr. Michael Boda:** There were a variety of mechanisms by which I sought input with respect to the political actors. I do work closely with our six registered political parties and receive input from them.

Leading up to the election, however, we established what was called the electoral advisory group, which was constituted of myself as chair, the chief medical health officer, and the two House leaders from the Legislative Assembly. We met once a month in order to discuss the current situation with COVID-19 and some of the challenges related to campaigning, for example. In the end, the decisions that were made were mine, but I was seeking advice, particularly from the chief medical health officer and from the two House leaders as well. That was the process.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Mr. Boegman, would you comment?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Yes, you're correct. There is established in our legislation an election advisory committee that is represented by two members from each political party that has members in the House or has campaigned in 50% or more of the seats in the province. There is a legislative requirement to formally consult with this committee on certain things—for example, for recommendations for legislative change—but I also use the body as a forum to discuss other aspects of electoral administration and to share best practices.

During the summer prior to our election call, as part of our readiness activities, I facilitated a meeting of this committee with the provincial and deputy provincial health officers, specifically to talk about campaigning. As Dr. Boda mentioned, I don't have a mandate to oversee the campaign activities, but I felt it important to bring together the parties as well as the medical health experts to talk about the issues and the challenges and how typical campaign activities should be modified to meet the public health requirements. The parties then submitted to the medical health officer their safety plans for commentary.

We also took the information that we had discussed and disseminated it on a broader base to all of the smaller political parties in British Columbia so that everyone was up to speed on what the changes were.

To summarize, I found it very effective and very helpful in discussing the issues and making sure that the information was being shared.

• (1140)

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you.

In your opening comments, I think you both alluded to working with specific communities such as first nations communities, but I'm also thinking of other populations that might have challenges when it comes to voting, particularly in a pandemic context, such as people living with disabilities, seniors and students, who may not have all the campus voting options that they're used to.

I'm wondering if you can help explain any risks that you saw that may not have come to fruition in terms of certain populations being disenfranchised during a pandemic election. What are some of those risks, and what were some of the best practices that you found could mitigate those risks?

Maybe we'll start with Mr. Boegman this time, and then go to Mr. Boda.

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** This will build from my comments during my opening statement, because I did see that as a particular chal-

lenge in providing safe and accessible opportunities to at-risk voters and unique communities.

Many of our first nations communities, as an example, were isolating and continue to isolate, so trying to make contact with them to establish the best way to provide voting and to have a range of accessible options that could meet their needs was essential to be able to provide voting.

It was certainly a challenge, additionally because of the nature of the election in British Columbia. It was a snap election. It was not held on a fixed date, and as a result, it was challenging to get the attention of people in some communities in relation to election plans when it wasn't necessarily the first thing on their horizon. We put a lot of effort into how we were going to administer voting for remote communities.

We were also thinking about situations such as deployed military personnel. There was a warship—I believe it was HMCS *Winnipeg*—that was at sea when the election was called and was not going to be coming into port before voting day. We were able to use operator-assisted telephone voting, which is in place under the special voting rules in British Columbia, to provide an opportunity for the deployed sailors to cast their ballots.

In summary, it takes a lot of communication and planning, and you need to have a flexible tool kit to be able to meet the unique circumstances of communities and be able to adapt if their situation should change.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Boegman.

That's all we have for this round. Next we have—

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** I have a quick point of order, Madam Chair.

Before we continue, I'd like to ask that, if possible, Mr. Blaikie stop the crackling of his listening device. Interpreters cannot translate what is being said.

[*English*]

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** I did just try unplugging and plugging it in again, so I hope I'm coming through more clearly now.

**The Chair:** No. You're not coming through clearly yet.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** I don't know if that's something we want to resolve right now, or if we want to continue on questioning.

• (1145)

**The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Justin Vaive):** Madam Chair—

**The Chair:** We will continue on. We will have the clerk—

Yes, go ahead.

**The Clerk:** I'm sorry about that.

Apparently they are getting a good-quality sound right now. I have received a thumbs-up. I think we are probably good.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you for bringing that up.

Mr. Tochor, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC):** Thank you to our witnesses today.

I'm going to be focusing mostly with Mr. Boda on my province and the election they just held.

As a little bit of context for my questions, the American election going on right now. I'm sure we're all anxious to see the results from down south. I have confidence in our electoral system here in Canada versus some of the problems that might come out of having a decentralized, state-run election. It will be very interesting tonight to see how that unfolds.

I have a couple of technical questions for Michael Boda, as we're all political geeks here. We all get elected, especially the members on the call here.

A ballot usually has a counterfoil. Maybe some of the members don't remember working past elections as scrutineers, not as candidates. We have an issue in Saskatchewan with the counterfoil, which is part of the ballot. The counterfoil is made out of the same material and looks the same. It's used so that we can reference how many ballots are in the ballot box versus how many are voted. You separate the counterfoil, and then you can count them afterwards.

The problem we experienced in Saskatchewan is that the counterfoil was also put in the ballot box, or was encouraged to be. That's where it ended up. Then when they opened the ballot box to count, I have heard numerous stories of issues with that.

Mr. Boda, would you encourage other elections not to put the counterfoil in the ballot box?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** I would have to assess it first. I had not heard that this was a problem.

One of the challenges is that the counterfoils are put into the ballot box after the fact. They remain in there so that we can evaluate after the fact.

I haven't heard this to be a problem, Mr. Tochor, but I would certainly be willing to look into it further.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I heard it anecdotally. We just had the debriefing last Monday, and I totally understand that it might take some time to digest all the findings from an election.

It was more on the counting. There were ballots that potentially could be viewed as a foil and thrown into one pile and/or not counted in any of the precautions.

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Okay.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I will move on. It's just FYI. We can look into that for Saskatchewan and then for our federal election, whenever that occurs. I would strongly recommend that we separate the two.

On the mail-in ballot—

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Just to be clear on the counterfoil, Mr. Tochor, the counterfoil is not put into the ballot box when the ballot is cast. That's normally the way it works. The counterfoil remains outside the box. It may be that after the fact they were placed into the ballot box. I'm certainly willing to look into it further.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I appreciate that.

When I voted in person, you had to force it into the ballot box. It is awesome that we had that much turnout in my poll. The worker said that I had to put it in the ballot box, which made it a little challenging.

I digress. I'm sure we will figure out if that was widespread. Maybe it was just locally in Saskatoon, with the instructions about a ballot box.

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Right.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** The other concern I had was with the mail-in ballots. They listed all the registered parties, and you could just write in the name of the party versus the name of the candidates.

What is your experience, or have you heard back on how many spoiled ballots there were for people who wrote the name of a party that they wanted to vote for on the mail-in ballots, but ultimately there was no candidate for that party, so that ballot would have been spoiled?

Do we know how many, roughly?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Well, we're still in the midst of the count. We had what was called our second preliminary count this past week. During that time, we began to count the vote-by-mail ballots. Now, this coming Saturday, we will count the rest of those ballots. These are form B ballots, as you mentioned, on which you write down either the candidate or the political party, and so that is how it is counted.

With respect to your question, I don't have the numbers of rejected ballots yet, but I will have those relatively soon. We have to get through the process first.

● (1150)

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I appreciate that. I appreciate the fact that we actually invited you to come to the committee a day afterward, on Tuesday, and how ridiculous a request it may have been on our part as a committee. I know how busy you are right now, and the election isn't over.

My time's going to run out here, but I just want to say thank you for the election you ran. I believe it was fair. Under the circumstances, everyone did the best they could.

One question I had was in the context—

**The Chair:** That's all the time we have. The five minutes are up.

Anyway, we do appreciate your being here, Dr. Boda. I'm sorry if we were too eager to get you here as soon as possible, but we're eager to undertake this study and figure out how to run an election from coast to coast to coast. It's a big undertaking.

Next we have Mr. Turnbull for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.):** Thanks, Madam Chair. Thanks to both the witnesses today. It's really great to have you here. I'm really impressed by your testimony and have learned a lot from you already.

Mr. Boegman, maybe I'll start with you. My questions will probably be relevant for both of you. I'm interested in the mail-in ballots and the sheer increase in the number. I know you said that the survey you did prior to the B.C. election suggested that about 35% of voters said that they would prefer a mail-in ballot. Is that consistent with what you saw? Sometimes people say in surveys that they'll act a certain way, and then later they don't behave the way they said they would. Is it pretty consistent?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Our experience was that it was very consistent, and we're certainly within the 30% to 35% range in requests for packages to be issued.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Okay, great. Thank you very much for that. You said it was an increase of 7,200%. Anybody out there can recognize that's just a huge, massive increase in the demand for those mail-in ballots.

You also mentioned that you had done quite a bit of work in the past to revamp. I wonder about the extent to which that previous work set the foundation to be able to have a successful election with such an increase. Could you speak to whether you streamlined the user experience for individual electors? Mail-in ballots can be a bit complex, I think, for people, or a bit scary even, if you haven't done it before. Did you streamline the experience to make it simple for people?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** I guess there are two points I want to make.

One is in response to your first comment about how well prepared we were, based on our previous experience. I would say that without the previous work that we had done, it would have been extremely challenging to provide a similar level of service in terms of being able to fulfill the requests that we received. The work we had done previously was essential to our ability to provide voting by mail on that scale.

I also think that the familiarity of most British Columbians with the vote-by-mail process was directly related to their experience in previous vote-by-mail events. In 2011 a full provincial referendum on a tax issue was held by voting by mail. In 2015 metro Vancouver, 1.6 million voters, had a mail-based plebiscite on another transportation and tax issue. Then we had a province-wide referendum on electoral reform in 2018. Our lessons learned from those events around the design of the voting package, the design of the instructions and how to minimize error through design were critical.

One example is that the voters were required to provide a shared secret on their certification envelope, which was their date of birth. We'd found previously that if you'd just leave that as a blank field, a voter would often put in the date that they signed their certification envelope. They're used to signing a cheque or anything else, so we pre-populated that based on the first two digits of their year of birth. That made it very evident to them that we were looking for the date of birth there, as opposed to having a free-form field.

You had another question. I'm sorry, I've....

• (1155)

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** No, that's great. I'm really interested in that information, because it sounds like you've done quite a bit of work to streamline the process. I know you talked about developing the capacity and the fact that you had infrastructure systems and processes already in place.

Could you table with this committee any documentation that you have? I think it would be extremely helpful for us to look at that.

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** I'll certainly have a word with the part of my team that was responsible for that aspect, and if there are operational documents that we're able to table, I will look to do that.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** I appreciate that very much.

Dr. Boda, do you have anything to say on this? You also had a significant increase, I would imagine, for mail-in ballots. Have you had to streamline the process? Is there any insight you can give us as well?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** We in Saskatchewan have not had the experience with voting by mail that British Columbia has had in the past. They have had four events, kind of practising for this event.

Our numbers have gone from 1% of individuals participating to about 12.5%, so there was a significant increase. We had to change our model because we did not feel we would be able to manage or would have the capacity to run the vote-by-mail operation. We had done significant survey research in advance, looking at what was going on in British Columbia, looking at our survey and looking at the Canadian survey as well.

In our instance, actually, the turnout for vote-by-mail was lower than we had anticipated. That was good, because we had to build centralized capacity for voting by mail, so that was very important.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Boda.

Madame Normandin, you have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** My question is for both witnesses.

You both mentioned that employees were younger this year. Did you have to set criteria yourself to avoid employing people who were more at risk, or did it just happen on its own, naturally?

I'd like you to start, Mr. Boda.

[English]

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Yes, I did spend a lot of time messaging in advance that it was quite likely that some of our older workers who had traditionally worked for us would not be able to work for us because of COVID-19 and the concerns over a health hazard.

As a result, I focused very much on messaging to the public that we needed workers, so that new individuals who hadn't thought about participating and giving back to their democracy would become involved. We did see, anecdotally, a lower age come forward.

One of the things that we did in advance of the outbreak of COVID-19 was change the legislation so that 16- to 18-year-olds could participate as workers. As a result, we initiated what was called the Youth to the Booth program, and we saw a significant increase in the number of 16- to 18-year-olds who participated.

I had asked for school not to be held on election day, and that was the case across the province. As a result, students were able to participate in this way.

[Translation]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** Thank you very much.

I'd like to hear Mr. Boegman's answer, please.

[English]

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** We also had a youth at the booth program that we piloted first in 2017 and reused for this election. It focused on using high school students and university students as election workers.

We didn't do any specific outreach of the kind Dr. Boda mentioned. In fact, our experience was that once the election was called, there were many expressions of interest coming in via our website to our central human resources department and into district offices, once they were open, from people who wanted to work as election workers or as office staff during the pandemic, so we did not have challenges in terms of numbers.

Anecdotally, as I mentioned, I believe the numbers skewed younger in terms of percentages. The challenge was more in trying to hire and train all those staff, especially considering our processes and the timeline. We were training them in smaller groups because they had to be distanced and our proper safety protocols had to be followed in organizing the training of election workers.

• (1200)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Boegman.

Next we have Mr. Blaikie for two and a half minutes.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

I want to come back to the question of groups that had particular challenges in voting and provide Mr. Boda with an opportunity to share his experience.

If you need me to elaborate on that question a little bit, I'm happy to do that, but if not, I'd rather just give you the extra time.

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Thank you.

As you know, under normal circumstances, an election management body's job is not necessarily to get the vote out—at least, not

in Saskatchewan. It is to reduce barriers for all voters so that they have access to the ballot. That's something we've worked on for many years in the province.

With COVID-19, however, public health became the primary issue. Our slogan was "Voting safely is our priority". We were very focused on this point.

Then we had concerns about some groups who might not have been able to participate in the same way because we had to focus so much on making sure the polls were safe. We obviously do a lot of work with first nations. We have 72 first nations across our province. We also worked with accessibility groups, students and seniors, and in that context we were doing everything we could to give them access while still maintaining the priorities of the public health authorities. I can tell you that it was challenging.

The first thing I would think about is our first nations. There were a number of lockdowns, and I was working very closely with the chiefs and their councils in order to determine how we would get the ballots to them if we couldn't have a poll on the first nation. A lot of effort went into that. There's no question that it's difficult in a COVID-19 context.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Were there any particular things you learned in the process of working with first nations that you found helpful, that you would want Elections Canada and the members of this committee to be aware of, that we might be able to recommend that Elections Canada get started on now in order to be able to have as smooth a process as possible for the federal election, whenever it may occur?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** I have read Mr. Perrault's report, and one of the things being asked for is that he be able to adapt the process. That was something I was provided with through regulatory changes. I would be allowed to adapt the process. I wasn't allowed to change the process. I think that was the line where it proved to be difficult to serve first nations in some cases. Because I could not change the process, I had to consistently look at how I could adapt the process in order to serve them better.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Boda.

Next we have Mr. Lukiwski for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC):** Thank you very much.

Thank you to both of our witnesses for being here today, and thank you for your service to Canada.

Since I'm a Saskatchewan boy, I'm going to concentrate all my remarks on Mr. Boda.

Specifically, in your opening comments you mentioned that the voter turnout in Saskatchewan in the most recent election was 52%, which compares favourably to the previous election in 2016, when the voter turnout was 54%. Due to the fact that we were voting in the midst of a pandemic, I suppose that 2% decline in voter turnout was actually a good thing.

However, frankly, I'm extremely concerned, and have been for many years, about the steady decline in voter turnout across Canada. Perhaps I have the benefit of the wisdom of my years in that I can remember back to elections 30, 40 or perhaps even 50 years ago, when it was not uncommon to see election turnout, whether provincially or federally, at 70% or higher.

Particularly in light of the unprecedented number of voters apparently turning out for the U.S. election, what steps do you think could be taken to increase voter turnout, generally speaking? I recognize that it's not the primary mandate of your office to be concerned about voter turnout, but certainly you would have a role to play.

What do you think could be and perhaps should be done in the future to try to increase the level of voter turnout in our province?

• (1205)

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Being from Saskatchewan, you will know that while my office's mandate is really focused on barriers to voting and on how we can lower those barriers for everyone, I have also done a fair amount of writing on this topic, in op-eds and elsewhere, to voice my concern about that diminished turnout rate. My answer is that while I'm focused on barriers, I also want to work together with other stakeholders, including political parties, civil society, academics and thought leaders to increase voter turnout.

I as well remember those days. There were higher turnout rates in Saskatchewan. That rate has been consistently dropping. However, for the last two elections, we've been over the 50% mark, so I think we might have slowed it down, but we need to work together, and not just the election management body. It's not its role to get the turnout rate up; it's to work together in order to move forward. That's how I've been approaching it here in Saskatchewan, and my hope, moving forward, is that we will be able to increase that turnout rate.

**Mr. Tom Lukiwski:** Frankly, as I mentioned in my comments, I've seen that steady decline over the years. I've always thought it would be a tragedy—and I'm choosing my words carefully here—to, in the future, have as low as 30% or 40% of Canadians electing their national government or provincial government. To me that's just unacceptable.

I think we need to have a concentrated push. I agree with your assessment that we need other stakeholders to become involved, but I would also suggest, Dr. Boda, that it should be, in my opinion at least, a primary function of your office to take a lead role in working cohesively with other stakeholders—other political parties, for example, or civil liberty groups—to increase voter turnout.

Could you give me some more specificity about some of the things that you've done in the past or would like to do in the future to make sure all Canadians and all people within each province of this great country of ours are committed to voting and to recognizing

that voting is a fundamental right and privilege that we should observe, and that we should get out to the polls every time and any time an election is called? What would you do specifically?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** What I would suggest is that we be very careful not to place the responsibility on the election management body for increasing the level of turnout. I think academics and thought leaders across the country will tell you that it would be a losing effort.

However, here in Saskatchewan, my goal and my approach has been to bring in those other stakeholders within civil society. I think we do need to get serious about this, given the level of turnout. I would bring them in and formalize the process, but while the election management body is taking leadership, I would not suggest that it be the only actor in the space. Really, political parties are significant actors in this role, but it goes beyond this; it goes to the academy and it goes to other civil society organizations.

Perhaps a formalization of the process with the goal of increasing turnout would be important, but I would repeat that an election management body just doesn't have the capacity to increase that turnout. It can work on its main mandate, and that is to reduce barriers for all voters.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Boda.

Ms. Petitpas Taylor is next, please, for five minutes.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.):** Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

As well, thank you to both of you for being here and for your service to our country.

Your testimony today has been very helpful. It will certainly help us during the process of putting together a report.

Mr. Boegman, in your opening statement I believe that you indicated that it was critical to make sure we educate our voters, our scrutineers and our stakeholders to ensure they have confidence and trust in our electoral process. I'm wondering about your education campaign, your advertising campaign. What did it consist of to make sure we could instill that trust within those individuals?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** I think it was Dr. Boda who had that statement in his opening comments, but I'd be very happy to just speak at a very high level about our processes.

As I mentioned before, it was a snap election in British Columbia. We did not have the usual opportunity to do outreach and education with the various stakeholder groups during the lead-up.

Right after the election was called, I held a joint press conference with our provincial health officer. Obviously, she was speaking to the safety aspects and the public health aspects, but I was speaking about the process. I was speaking about trying to be as transparent as possible, about what options voters would have and about our safety plans, emphasizing strongly that while voting would be similar, it would also be different, but that the differences would be what people had already come to expect when going to a grocery store or picking up a cup of takeout coffee or that sort of thing.

We really focused initially and then, through our advertising campaign and through our media outreach during the campaign period, on safe voting, as well as being very transparent about communication. It was very different in terms of the large numbers voting by mail, so we made sure that we published the requests we had received and the numbers of packages that had been issued across electoral districts throughout the campaign period.

It was the same thing the day before election day. We held another press conference to describe what the process would be going forward through the final count so that voters, media and political participants were very aware about how the process would unfold and about what information would be available, and when, to make sure they understood the process and therefore had trust in the process.

• (1210)

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Thank you so much.

Dr. Boda, would you comment as well on your comments that you had made earlier? My apologies for that.

**Mr. Michael Boda:** It's not a problem.

As I mentioned, "Voting safely is our priority" was part of our advertising campaign from the very beginning. We had the advantage of having an election date set in legislation, unlike in B.C. We began that campaign on August, 15 and it was integrated into everything that we advertised.

That was the formal approach. We also had an informal approach, in that each time I was speaking to stakeholders or to the media, I emphasized the fact that the polls were safe. We did this intentionally, because we had to balance the system to make sure that it wouldn't be undermined. For example, if people were not confident in the polls being safe, they might move over to voting by mail and overwhelm the system to the point that it would shut down. We had done a lot of research in the United States, Australia and South Korea in order to determine how we would most effectively move forward with respect to balancing that system and making sure that people knew they would be safe at the polls.

We also had to make sure it was safe at the polls. We did a lot of heavy lifting in that regard to make sure that we were meeting the standards of the chief medical health officer.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** I'll ask very quickly, because my time is limited. Canada is such a huge country, and we certainly recognize that the reality of COVID-19 is different from coast to coast. I come from Atlantic Canada. The matter is quite contained at this point, so it wouldn't be considered a hot spot, while perhaps Winnipeg would be considered a hot spot.

Did your communication strategy change within your province to address specific messaging for specific hot spot areas?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Saskatchewan is perhaps a microcosm of Canada in that it is very diverse as well. Overall, we did have one single message that was going out to voters across the province. As time moved on, we had to adapt.

For example, with the Peter Ballantyne first nation, we had to direct our campaign specifically at that geographical area. We did that in different ways. We used local media, but we also used the SaskAlert texting system when things changed very quickly. Being nimble was very important with respect to our election management body.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Boda.

Mrs. Vecchio, you have five minutes.

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

Going off of what Ginette was saying, the fact is that Canada is so vast. Across this country, we're seeing a variety of different things.

I'll start off with Mr. Boegman. I'm from a smaller community. In my riding, I have a community called Aylmer. Right now we've seen a huge number of cases in that area. When we're looking at it, a lot of times we'll talk about places like Toronto, but even smaller communities have seen larger numbers. We know that may cause fear for others to go out.

Did you have any plans on how you would deal with small community outbreaks where there may not be two or three larger centres, so that people could vote? If anything unexpected happened in those last couple of weeks and all of a sudden something changed, how you would respond? Did you have quick action plan for those types of things?

• (1215)

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Thank you for that question.

We did. As I mentioned in my opening comments, having administrative flexibility as an election body was critical to enabling us to effectively respond to changing circumstances and new outbreaks.

We had three models for voting or for serving isolated communities. One was vote-by-mail, which was available, and no excuses. Anyone could use vote-by-mail. We also targeted certain communities where that entire group could all order vote-by-mail packages collectively, rather than individually, through the website or through our 1-800 number, and we would then send them to those communities.

Having the ability to use operator-assisted telephone voting was extremely valuable in those late-breaking situations. A first nations community went into isolation for an outbreak within the last three days of the campaign period. We were going to be sending a team in there with full protective gear, but with those changing circumstances, we were able to pivot. We used operator-assisted telephone voting to provide those voters with an opportunity to cast their ballot.

Having that administrative flexibility is critical, because there's no time in a fixed election campaign to try to put in place something that is not ready to go.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** I want to continue on that point, Mr. Boegman, because I'm looking at those smaller communities where there wouldn't be another centre that you could send voters to, or there would be different concerns.

How did you communicate to those types of areas so that within three days, voters knew all of a sudden that there were going to be other options? What was your communication strategy for that?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Our communication strategy was directed right at community leaders. In the case of the first nations community, it was with band administrators and the chief, and they were able to use their internal networks to make that available. Also, in the case of an acute-care hospital or hospitals that would go into a lockdown because of outbreaks, we had preplanned communication tools that could be distributed at the patient level to enable them to use operator-assisted telephone voting.

Preplanning and making sure that we had thought of as many potential instances as possible that would require us to pivot was very critical in ensuring that we could do so when necessary.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Thank you very much.

For myself, I always think of how this epidemic is happening in Toronto, where there are lots of different areas and sites where people may be able to go, but in our smaller and rural communities, they may only have one or two options.

Mr. Boda, what did you find in your province? Do you have any quick tips when it comes to communicating or to pivotal changes that we would have to make?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** I mentioned the ability to adapt being in our legislation, but not the ability to change. I think that was one of our real challenges, unlike in B.C., where they did allow for telephone voting. I could not introduce telephone voting or any other kind, so there has to be a recognition that there are limitations with respect to how far you can go.

We pushed our system by introducing extraordinary voting, and that was beyond voting by mail, which was the primary source of providing options for people who couldn't go to the polls. We went beyond that with extraordinary voting, which involves using messengers and couriers in order to provide ballots to individuals who couldn't get to the poll, but even that had its limitations, sadly, in a COVID-19 context. That's one thing to think about.

The other thing is that I was working under the premise, with the chief medical health officer, that there would be very few communities that would actually shut down and would be in lockdown.

With first nations, that was the situation, but in other communities, that wasn't the context. If people could go to their local grocery store, we, as a critical service—election administration—would be able to continue to deliver the polling location as long as we were following the protocols of the chief medical health officer. This didn't involve a big gathering of people, because we had been spreading out the voting significantly over the course of the electoral process, beginning on August 15 and moving all the way to October 26. As a result, we had prepared in advance and had capacity for an increased number of COVID-19 cases. The number was much higher than it had been at the beginning of the writ period, but we were able to manage that process.

• (1220)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Boda.

Mr. Gerretsen, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to both of our witnesses for being here today.

We certainly have had the luxury of seeing many provinces go through elections that help us to inform our decisions. Your participation today is extremely valued, in that you are making the job from the federal perspective so much easier, given that you're able to share your experiences.

Mr. Boda, I'll start with you. In a CBC article dated October 24, you said, "In 2016, we had about one per cent of voters who took advantage of the vote by mail process." "One per cent is around 4,000. In this case, as of [Tuesday], over 40,000 ballot applications had been received."

Were you referring to mail-in ballot applications there?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** That's correct. We sent out ballots, and they were received. We're now at 55,000.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Great. It's 55,000. With 4,000 being one per cent, 55,000 is then.... What is it?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** It is 12.6%.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Pardon me; could you repeat that?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** It is 12.6%.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Would you say that this process has helped increase the voter turnout?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** I would say that the strategy that we pursued.... Again, we had a legislative election date, so we were able to begin planning—not well in advance, but we were able to sustain the turnout rate.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** You were able to sustain it, which is considered an accomplishment, given the current circumstances. Is that correct?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** I would agree.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Is there any indication or any reason for you to believe that there were increased fraudulent activities as a result of mail-in ballots?



**Mr. Michael Boda:** No. We've introduced processes to ensure that there isn't double voting, and if there were, we would know about it.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Then you're very confident in the system that you used.

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Yes, I'm confident in the system that we were able to create.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Thank you.

Mr. Boegman, I'll go over to you for a second.

You were talking about both mail-in balloting and telephone balloting. We had your public officer of health on, and I felt awkward asking her the question because it really falls more under your purview, so I'll ask it more directly of you.

Do you have any evidence or any concern with respect to voter fraud as a result of mail-in balloting?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** No, I have no concerns with relation to voter fraud. A vote by mail is a proven process in B.C. It's been used successfully in provincial elections and referenda for many years. As we indicated, there have been four vote-by-mail events in British Columbia since 2002, with the most recent in 2018.

As Dr. Boda mentioned, we have many processes in place to ensure that only eligible voters can vote by mail and that they can only vote once.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Tell me about voting by telephone. Are you equally satisfied with the security of that system?

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** I am.

It's not an automated system. It's not a system that sends someone a PIN and they then use their touch-tone phone to vote. It's operator-assisted. The voter is registered previously. The voter has to call in. They have to authenticate themselves based on information that only they know and we know about their voter record. They are then passed on anonymously at that point to the team that administers the vote. There are two people. One of them records the vote and the other person verifies the vote back to the individual over the phone. In that way the secrecy of that ballot is maintained.

The other thing about voting by mail and other absentee ballots, for which assisted telephone voting is an option, is that they don't go directly into a ballot box to be counted on election night. Rather, they are enclosed in the envelopes—the secrecy envelope and the certification envelope—and they then go through an intensive screening process following election day to make sure that they can be counted at the final count. That includes making sure they are properly registered and that they didn't vote more than once.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** I only have about 30 seconds left. Very quickly, given the experience each of you had, would you recommend that the federal government consider a vote by mail option, in particular during a pandemic—yes or no?

• (1225)

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Yes.

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** Yes.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** All we have time for, I guess, are the Bloc and NDP questions. I'll allow for those, and then we will say goodbye to our witnesses and carry on into the subcommittee meeting.

Madame Normandin, you have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** Thank you very much.

I would like you to give us an order of magnitude for the wait time for the in-person vote. Could you tell us what the average wait time is, or, within the shortest and longest range, how many minutes it can be for each voter?

I'd also like to know if, in order to better distribute the vote during the election, you have considered doing something similar to the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit procedure, that is inviting people born between January and April to register for one day and people born between May and August to register for another day, for example. Has this formula been considered?

Perhaps Mr. Boegman could answer first.

[English]

**Mr. Michael Boda:** I would say, first of all, that we did not experience long lineups. That was by intention and design in the system, beginning August 15 with voting by mail, and that was quite a success, I believe, in Saskatchewan.

Your other question was...?

[Translation]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** Did you try to divide the vote by inviting voters to vote on a particular day based on some criteria?

[English]

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Well, unlike what is being requested federally for Saturday and Sunday, we requested advance voting over a five-day period, with a significant number of hours available. Then on election day we allowed for a regular time, but we had the schools closed so that students weren't in attendance. We also had an outlet with the vote-by-mail option which, again, spread out the process. Physically we maintained about the same numbers, only with increased numbers of polling locations, but we had a very long period in which you could apply for a ballot by mail.

[Translation]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** Could you also answer, Mr. Boegman?

[English]

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** We also planned our election to spread the vote out over all opportunities, including voting by mail, advance voting and voting on election day.

Our legislation calls for six days of advance voting, including a Saturday and Sunday, from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. each day. Using my powers to adapt the legislation, I added an additional day so that we had seven days, running from the Thursday through the Wednesday preceding voting day, when advance voting was available.

We don't have a formal way of tracking wait times, but anecdotally there were no waits during voting day. We achieved our goal of spreading out voters, especially on that day.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Normandin.

Mr. Blaikie is next.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** I want to ask quickly about the length of the writ period. This is something the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada has mentioned in his recommendations. Can you speak to the advantages or disadvantages of having a longer writ period in the pandemic context?

I'll start with Mr. Boegman.

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** In British Columbia, by law there are two different models for the length of the campaign period. In a fixed-date election, the voting day is the 28th day after the election is called. For an "on demand" election, it varies between an additional four to 10 days that are added to that period. The idea is that it will, depending upon the day the election is called, ensure that voting takes place on a Saturday.

In the context of a snap election in a pandemic, having more time was critical for Elections BC to be able to establish our offices, to be able to send supplies and to be able to establish the telecommunications network that enabled us to communicate with our offices.

My bottom line would be that more time obviously is better from an election administration perspective, especially when it's an "on demand" election.

**Mr. Michael Boda:** Our writ period is from 27 to 35 days. The writ period was the shortest possible for our election. However, be-

cause we had a set election date in legislation, we were aware in April that we were getting ready for an election for October.

I'll agree with Mr. Boegman that stability and preparation are extremely important in election administration, particularly in a COVID context in which you are preparing to make the voting safer for everyone. A longer period would thus be better.

• (1230)

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** In a minority Parliament context, would giving some clarity about the confidence convention be helpful, from the point of view of electoral administration, so as to have a little more lead time or a sense of how a snap election might be triggered?

**Mr. Michael Boda:** I would speak to the overall approach of offering a longer period of time for preparation. How it is achieved, I'll leave to the legislators.

**Mr. Anton Boegman:** I'll certainly agree with the comment that Dr. Boda made.

From our perspective as election administrators, in a minority government it's our mandate to be ready. We were ready, in a non-pandemic environment, in February 2020, and we pivoted. We immediately embarked on learning about the pandemic, learning how it would impact voting processes and what adaptations we needed to make to our processes to have a safe election. This was our focus through the summer, and as it turned out, it was good that we did so.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Thank you to all of the participants.

We especially thank our witnesses, Mr. Boegman and Dr. Boda. We really appreciate it. I know that your testimony today will help us in formulating a good report. Hopefully, good recommendations will come out of it. Thank you so much for being here.

To all of the members on the subcommittee, a separate email was sent out with the log-in details. Please log in as soon as possible after logging out of this meeting. I'll see you in the subcommittee.

Thank you. The meeting is adjourned.







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