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# A Permanent Voters' List for Elections

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by Louis Lavoie

*The importance of reducing expenditures and improving programs, systems and procedures concerning voter registration in Canada is again on the public agenda. This article argues that in order to find ways for saving substantial amounts of money it is necessary to do away with the repetitive and antiquated enumeration systems at all levels of government and in the process reduce the election period by up to fifteen days. Times have changed and so have the life styles and our systems must reflect that.*

Voter registration is the basis of the democratic process. Without it, citizens could not legitimately cast the ballot to which they are entitled. If a voter registration system is to be judged appropriate to a free and democratic society like Canada it must be designed according to the following principles:

- it must enable all qualified citizens to be included on the list of electors.
- it must be designed so as to prevent fraud.
- it must be widely accepted as an authoritative and legitimate means of orderly listing the electoral population.
- it must provide universal accessibility, be widely perceived as fair and reasonable, and work effectively in terms of cost.

Canada is the only major democracy in the world that waits until an election is called to register electors to vote. Since the exact date is always unknown, the federal and provincial governments assume much more responsibility for voter registration than do governments in other democracies.

Few of the basic details of the registration system in Canada have changed since 1938. The fundamentals that

were put in place at that time largely define the system today which is lengthy, complicated and cumbersome. Registration is also the most costly part of the election and is certainly a less practical system than the ones in force in other countries which do not enumerate at each election. The United States, Mexico, United Kingdom and France all have some form of permanent lists.

At the federal level in Canada, by far the most expensive portion of the election is the enumeration organized by Returning Officers in each of the 295 electoral districts with an average of 70,000 electors each. The cost of the 1988 federal enumeration was about \$24,655,000 for payments to enumerators. In addition, an amount of \$3,145,000 was paid for Revision which follows enumeration. There was also an amount of over \$8,500,000 for the printing and mailing of "vote at cards". Hence the total cost of voter registration for the 1988 federal election was just over \$36,000,000. When indexed to 1995 costs this amount comes to nearly \$50,000,000.

Available provincial data would indicate that a comparable amount was spent to register voters for recent provincial and territorial elections. At this time only British Columbia maintains a permanent list. At the municipal level, lists are sometimes prepared from available local records and often computerized.

The Minister responsible for electoral reform in the province of Quebec, tabled Bill 40 in the National Assembly introducing a computerized permanent list system for the Registration of Electors which would be used at provincial, municipal and school electoral events. These lists would be updated from the Quebec Register of Health Insurance. It is estimated that the new

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procedure would allow a reduction from 47 to 33 days for the electoral period and would save millions of dollars over the next few years.

The Quebec plan calls for a complete enumeration in September of this year in preparation for the municipal elections followed by a Referendum to be held some time in the fall. This enumeration would create the database for the revised Registration system to be used at provincial, municipal and school board elections.

### **Types of Permanent Lists**

There are generally two types of permanent lists. The difference between them is the length of time during which additions, corrections or deletions may be made. Both types are continuous in that the information once gathered is retained indefinitely. The two basic types are as follows:

1) where there is a stipulated time for registration or changes in the registration, and the subsequent lists are in force for all elections ordered during a period of as long as one year beyond a given date, such lists are called "closed lists" or simply "permanent lists". As these lists are based on information that is already a few months old at the time they are "closed", they get out of date rather quickly, particularly where the mobility of the population is rather high. This is the type of lists that are in use in many West European countries including the United Kingdom.

2) Where additions, corrections and deletions are allowed to be made at any time up to a fixed date before election day, such lists are called "continuous electoral rolls". In Australia where this type of lists is in use, changes in the register may be made at any time up to and including the day of the issue of the writs of election.

The main difference, however is that the second type normally provides for more up-to-date lists. In both cases the onus is on the individual elector to register as opposed to the Canadian system of enumeration where this responsibility rests with the State.

### **The Introduction of Permanent Lists in Canada**

The question of permanent lists has been researched and studied a number of times in Canada, namely:

- 1968 - Report of the Representation Commissioner on Methods of Registration of Electors and Absentee Voting (N. Castonguay)
- 1975 - An Examination of Possible ways of Reducing the Election Period (Jean Marc Hamel)
- 1986 - White Paper on Election Reform (Government)
- 1992 - The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Government)

The Royal Commission made several important recommendations related to registration. Their recommendations were considered by the Special Committee of the House of Commons on Electoral Reform and as a result of Bill C-114 most of them are now part of the *Canadian Election Act*. These changes had the effect of modernizing to some extent the process of enumeration and making it more efficient and voter friendly. The Commission did not recommend the installation of a permanent lists at this time mainly because of the mobility of the Canadian population and the complexity of establishing a system which could be used by the federal, provincial and municipal jurisdictions.

In 1992, for the first time in Canada, all federal lists of electors were computerized by inputting the data gathered by enumerators using a standardized software: the Elections Canada Automated Production of Lists of Electors system (ECAPLE). The system was nationwide, organized and implemented by electoral district. It was thus possible to use the district lists for the Constitutional Referendum on the Charlottetown Accord in October 26, 1992. The system offers a number of advantages, not the least of which is improving the efficiency, and accessibility of the enumeration records. All of the information can be stored on a compact disc. The system is ongoing, and benefits should continue to accrue, not only at the federal level but hopefully through eventual sharing of information with municipal and provincial election officials. Representatives of Elections Canada in Ottawa have met on a number of occasions with representatives of Provincial Electoral Authorities to discuss various operational systems aiming at the development of a generic model which would permit the use of continuous electoral rolls at all levels of government in Canada. The reaction from the provinces has been positive to this date but more consultation is needed.

A study by the Bureau of Management Consulting considered feasible, in principle, a system of voter registration which would encompass:

- an initial enumeration to establish accurate lists;
- updating the lists through the use of existing governmental information sources such as postal change-of-address cards, citizenship records, provincial vital statistics records, etc.,
- a mailing to households after the writs are issued for a general election;

- a period of a few days following the issue of the writs for correction of the lists.

### Arguments "For" and "Against" a Permanent List

In the White Paper on Election Law Reform, published, by the President of the Privy Council in 1986, there is a chapter on permanent voters' lists, in which are listed a number of arguments for and against such a system are presented.

The arguments for include:

- A significant shortening of the election period.
- Duplication of effort at the three levels of government could be eliminated.
- One list for all levels of government would be less confusing and annoying.
- The cost of such a system could be estimated with reasonable accuracy following a detailed operational study; while it may be costly in terms of system development in the long run it should result in substantial savings.

Some of the arguments against were as follows:

- A permanent list would not necessarily be more accurate, more complete or up-to-date than a list compiled by the present enumeration followed by revision.
- A permanent list system places more responsibility for registration on the individual than does our current system. In the United States where voter registration is purely voluntary on 50 to 60% of the potential electorate registers. Canadians' registration on the other hand is estimated to be 90%.
- The major problem with permanent lists is how to keep the information current. This is a particular problem in Canada where there are no fixed dates for elections, and there exists a high level of population mobility.
- Another argument is that electors may object to the practical implications of a computerized Voters' list. For example, people might object to providing Canada Post with changes of address if that information were to be used for other purposes. People may distrust the existence of such a large integrated data bank.

### Implementation of a Reliable System

The greatest challenge in implementing a permanent list could be determining how to update the lists in a manner

which is efficient, cost effective and acceptable to the Canadian public.

One method for gathering the necessary data for updating the lists could be using the information provided by Citizenship and the Post Office.

To vote in Canada an elector must be a Canadian Citizen and be eighteen years of age. Citizenship registration could be made compulsory for all Canadians with the issuing of a Citizenship Identification Card including name, possibly address, photo, and year of birth. Such a card exists at the moment, but its existence is not compulsory or well known and there is a charge of \$35.00 to obtain the card.

It is suggested that this type of identification card might be preferable to using Health Insurance data which is not related to Citizenship. The Post Office could supply information on changes of address on a monthly basis. Of course, the final responsibility for insuring that the information is accurate would rest with the voter.

For a computerized permanent electoral list to be accurate and effective there would be a need for a great degree of collaboration between the federal level and each of the provinces and territories. Duplication must be avoided and the various elements of the system need to be standardized. The installation of permanent lists could present difficulties at the outset but there are surely benefits in the long run in the shortening of the election period by about 15 days and lowering costs as in other countries.

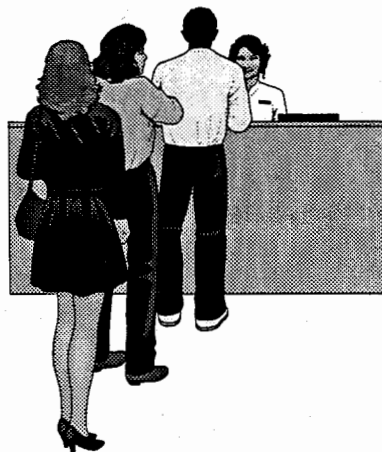
***Ultimately the necessary changes would be the responsibility of our members of Parliament since the Canada Elections Act would need to be modified again to permit the development of a system of continuous electoral roll or permanent lists suited to the Canadian situation.***

### Effects of Implementation

Doing away with enumeration would mean the elimination of house-to-house visitations by enumerators who often did extremely competent work in difficult situations. For a federal election approximately 85,000 enumerators are hired for a period of about one week at a salary of about \$275.00 or a total of over 23 million dollars. If we add the figure for the provincial and municipal elections, this amount is more than doubled.

Furthermore, it has become much more difficult to recruit good enumerators for reasons of availability and remuneration. This problem is more acute in Western Canada. Another factor which complicates enumeration is the fact that people are away from their home more often than they use to be, and/or people simply refuse to open the door to strangers. This was particularly the case in the most recent provincial election in Ontario, which took place on June 8, 1995.

The cost of the 1993 federal election was estimated at 187 million dollars as reported to the Standing Committee of Procedure and House of Affairs of the House of Commons at its meeting of April 21, 1994. The costs may be higher when all expenses are accounted for but a revised total amount was not readily available. This was the most costly election in history. Except for the Province of Quebec, there was no enumeration at that election which resulted in a significant saving but this was compensated to a large extent by a more elaborate revision system. There were also significant increases resulting from the implementation of Bill C-114 which facilitated the exercise of the right to vote for certain categories of electors. There were also many improvements in Communications, in the development



of strategic planning, and in the use of more advanced technology.

I suggest that it is important to continue adapting the area of Voter Registration to insure that the system is responsive to taxpayers' concerns; however, we must also ensure any changes to the system do not tamper with our basic democratic principles.