2016 Prince Edward Island Plebiscite on Democratic Renewal

In this article, the author outlines some of the ways Prince Edward Islanders were able to participate in the 2016 plebiscite including electronic voting. The structure of the preferential ballot and how the ballots were tabulated are also discussed. Finally, the results of each round of voting are listed.

Paul Alan

Eligible voters on Prince Edward Island were given a unique opportunity to vote on Democratic Renewal or as some people refer to as Electoral Reform. Legislation was passed in the PEI Legislative Assembly, allowing Elections PEI to register voters as young as 16 years of age on or by November 7, 2016 to vote in the plebiscite. This was an historic event as voters this young have never been counted before in a provincial vote anywhere in Canada.

Electors had their choice of three ways to cast their vote for Electoral Reform. The voting period was 10 days October 29 until November 7. In yet another first for Canada, Internet Voting and Telephone Voting were used on a provincial scale. Voters who preferred the traditional paper ballot method of voting were allotted two days within the voting period; November 4 and November 5.

To be eligible to vote, an elector had to be registered with Elections PEI, a Canadian Citizen and a resident of PEI from at least May 7, 2016. Once verified, each eligible voter received a Voter Information Card (VIC) either in the mail at their residence or they could opt to receive it via email.

Electronic Voting

Every VIC contained a Personal Identification Number (PIN) the voter needed to be able to vote online or by phone. Elections PEI used the services of Simply Voting for the electronic voting procedure. Whether a voter used the internet or the telephone, their confirmation of identity was their birthdates with matching PIN.

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Paper Voting

Twenty-two polling stations were established across Prince Edward Island for the in-person paper ballot vote. An elector simply had to arrive at a polling station, produce identification with their VIC and in return would receive a paper ballot for voting on the plebiscite. One change in the polling station procedure allowed voters to vote at any of the 22 polls. They weren't tied to their own particular district poll which allowed for more convenience in the event people were travelling or voting away from their residential area.

The Ballot

A preferential voting system was used to rank the five electoral systems on the plebiscite ballot. Voters could rank as few or as many options as they desired, selecting their most preferred to least preferred.

The ballot for the internet voters consisted of a drop down menu beside each option where a voter assigned a corresponding number of preferences to the systems. The number one for most preferred, the number two for second most preferred and so on. The telephone voting option prompted users to select an electoral system of choice by pushing a corresponding number on the telephone. For both electronic voting methods, electors were issued a confirmation code ID that confirmed their vote was recorded successfully and placed in the electronic voting ballot box.

The paper ballot listed all five options horizontally in alphabetical order, with corresponding vertical lines for their choices. A voter was to select their most preferred option, and then mark in the designated circle in the first choice column. If they chose to rank more than one, they would make a mark in their second most preferred option vertical column.

This was the first time three voting methods were being utilized at the same time for a vote on Prince Edward Island. A "Dashboard" program allowed Elections PEI officials to monitor to vote and witness how the three voting methods recorded votes simultaneously and gave real time results.

Tabulation and Preferential Voting

The paper ballots were collected and electronically tabulated using a tabulation machine from ES&S Canada. Ballots were fed into the tabulator; capable of reading up to 300 sheets of paper per minute, and the votes were electronically recorded as the machine would take a picture or image of each ballot being fed through. Following the tabulation of all paper ballots, the electronic file was secured and then paired with the data from the electronic voting. When all the plebiscite votes were recorded and stored in one electronic file, the preferential voting analysis was applied to count votes for each individual electoral system on the ballot. For Preferential Voting, majority support an electoral system must receive more than 50 per cent plus 1 of valid votes.
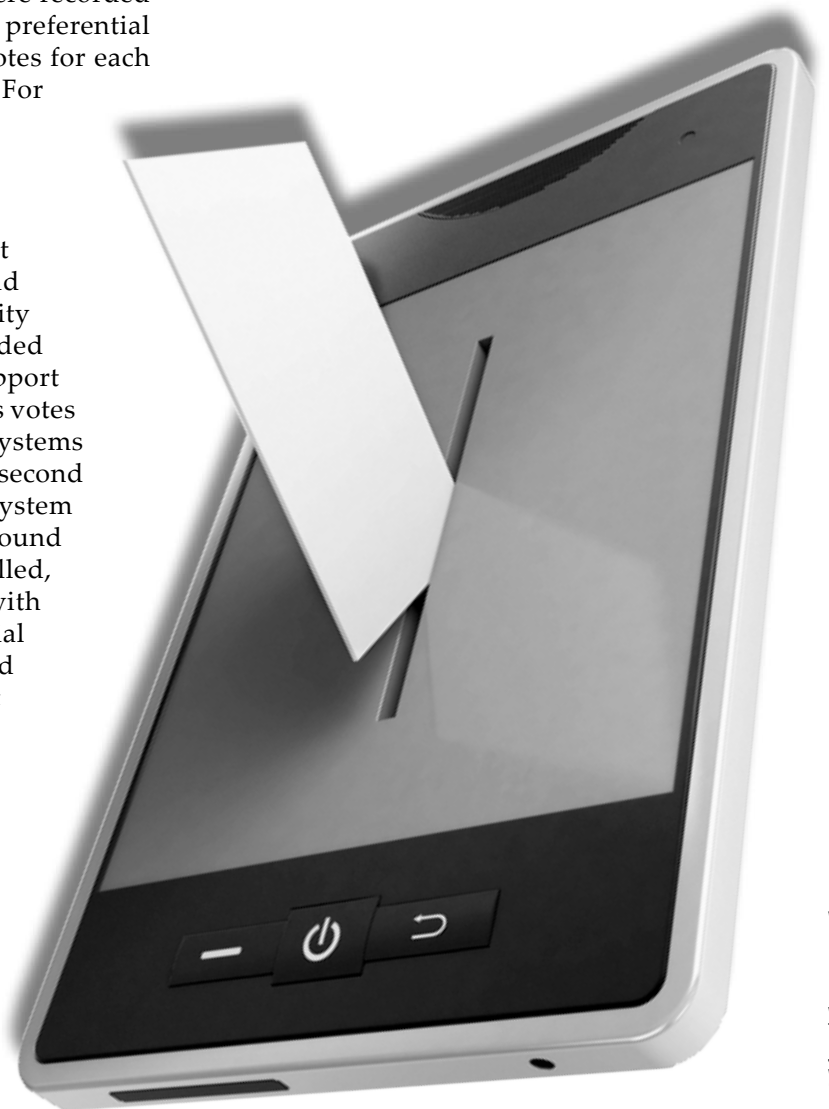
There was no clear winner after the first round, as no system earned the threshold of 50 per cent plus 1 to earn majority support. Round two of counting excluded the system with the least amount of support (First Past The Post plus Leaders) and its votes were redistributed to the remaining systems on the ballot according to the electors' second choice on the ballot. Round two had no system earning 50 per cent plus 1 so a third round of redistribution and counting was called, this time excluding the next system with the least amount of support, Preferential Voting. Those votes were redistributed to the remaining systems on the ballot according to the electors' next choice on the ballot. Again, no majority support so a fourth round saw the exclusion of Dual Member Proportional as it had the least amount of support of the remaining systems, and those votes redistributed to the two remaining electoral Systems. Following the fourth round of counting, majority support went to Mixed Member Proportional gaining 52.42 per cent of the votes.

Internet voting was the most widely used method with 81 per cent of all votes recorded by way of online. Nine per cent of voting was completed by telephone and 10 per cent by the paper ballot.

Results

In preferential voting, a vote or ballot is "exhausted" if the voter's choice has been "excluded" and there were no further preferences ranked on the voter's ballot or if their next preferred option has already been excluded.

There were 102,464 eligible electors who cast a total of 37,040 valid ballots for a voter turnout of 36.46 per cent. The total number of votes required for an electoral system to achieve the threshold for majority support was 18,521.

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First Round of Counting

Electoral System	# of Votes
First-Past-The-Post (the current system)	11567
Mixed Member Proportional Representation	10757
Dual Member Proportional Representation	7951
Preferential Voting	3944
First-Past-The-Post Plus Leaders*	2821

*system excluded in next round
# of votes to be redistributed next round= 2821

Second Round of Counting

Electoral System	Original # of Votes	+Redistributed	New Total Votes
First-Past-The-Post (the current system)	11567	1541	13108
Mixed Member Proportional Representation	10757	396	11153
Dual Member Proportional Representation	7951	273	8224
Preferential Voting -*excluded in next round	3944	272	4216

# of votes redistributed = 2482
# of exhausted ballots = 339
*system excluded in next round
# of votes to be redistributed next round= 4216

Third Round of Counting

Electoral System	Second Round Totals	+Redistributed	New Total Votes
First-Past-The-Post (the current system)	13108	1358	14466
Mixed Member Proportional Representation	11153	1627	12780
Dual Member Proportional Representation -*excluded from next round of voting	8224	724	8948

# of votes redistributed = 3709
# of exhausted ballots = 507
*system excluded in next round
# of votes to be redistributed next round = 8948

Fourth Round of Counting

Electoral System	Third Round Totals	+Redistributed	New Total Votes
Mixed Member Proportional Representation	12780	6638	19418
First-Past-The-Post (the current system)	14466	1403	15869

\# of votes redistributed = 8041
\# of exhausted ballots = 907

Final

Electoral System	Fourth Round Totals	% of Votes
Mixed Member Proportional Representation	19418	52.42
First-Past-The-Post (the current system)	15869	42.84

\# of exhausted ballots = 1753 (4.74%)