

Law Amendments Committee Statement - Students Nova Scotia

Re: Bill 1: An Act to Amend Chapter 5 of the Acts of 2011, the Elections Act - October 18, 2021

Good afternoon Mr. Chair, committee members, and witnesses.

I would like to begin my statement by acknowledging that we are situated in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People.

My name is Lydia Houck and I am the Executive Director of Students Nova Scotia, a non-partisan alliance of student associations from colleges and universities across the province.

We appreciate the opportunity to speak to the committee today regarding Bill 1. Students were pleased to see this bill brought forth by government, as the implementation of fixed dates would drastically increase the predictability of our election cycle. However, I am here today to present student concerns regarding the proposed timing of this date, and how it may **inadvertently act to disenfranchise many of the student voters who call Nova Scotia home.**

Nearly 1 in 10 Nova Scotians are between the ages of 18-24, with over 55,000 students attending university or community college here. These statistics position students and youth as key contributors to the province in terms of economy, culture, research and innovation. Additionally, we rely heavily on students when it comes to maintaining and growing the population, particularly given our aging demographic and high interprovincial migration rate; 55% of university students and a growing number of college students come from outside of the province to study here. Students Nova Scotia has consistently seen that recruitment and retention of youth is a priority of the province, further highlighted by the current government's emphasis upon population growth. Retention efforts must begin by engaging students and youth within all aspects of society, which includes at the ballot box.

As we are no doubt all aware, voter turnout rates have steadily decreased in our province in the past few decades, with this summer's election returning turnout levels only slightly higher than the all-time low. When data on voter turnout is broken down by age group, it is typically lowest among youth, leading many to the false assumption that this is solely a reflection of voter apathy. Students Nova Scotia's membership have consistently observed that this is simply not the reality. During this summer's election, our membership led a non-partisan student voter mobilization campaign, and a consistent refrain from potential student voters was that **informational and accessibility barriers were the primary deterrents to casting their ballot.** Low voter turnout among certain segments of the population tell us that more work needs to be done in understanding the unique voting barriers those demographics face, and more importantly, how they can be addressed.

This responsibility is referenced within the Elections Act itself - that "The Chief Electoral Officer may implement public communication, education and information programs, including information for new electors, to make the electoral process better known to the public, **particularly to those persons and groups most likely to experience difficulties in exercising their democratic rights.**" Given that



students are one such group, it is logical that additional support and accommodations must be made available to aid them in navigating these processes.

Indeed, students face a number of unique barriers in getting out to the polls not experienced by the general population. Many postsecondary students are likely to be first-time voters, and while voting may be complicated or intimidating for anyone, it is particularly so for those with no prior voting experience or limited interaction with civics education. In order to encourage habitual voting, it is paramount to engage youth from the first time they are eligible to vote, a priority reflected within the Elections Act, through the option for the Chief Electoral Officer to "(make) materials available to education entities for students who have reached voting age or will soon do so."

Indeed, one strategy utilized by Elections Nova Scotia to engage youth voters in 2017 was direct outreach to Nova Scotians who had recently turned 18, asking for their consent to be added to the list of electors. Using this strategy, 22% of those contacted chose to be added to the list, and 70% of those added ultimately voted. These findings confirm a few key realities:

- That engaging voters from when they are first eligible to vote is critical to participation.
- That youth are interested in engaging with elections provided they are given the support and the opportunity to do so.

Given this, combined with the reality that first-time voters are overrepresented within the postsecondary sphere, Nova Scotia has a responsibility to provide additional support to students in order to increase voter turnout among our youth population, and that these individuals should be considered when determining ideal timing for election dates.

Much of this information is conveyed to students through programming on campuses, which is vital in minimizing barriers for first-time voters. During the most recent provincial election, which took place outside of the school year, student leaders worked to engage virtually, providing information on eligibility, registration and voting options, as well as opportunities to connect with candidates and platforms. Though students who we did engage reported these resources greatly demystified the voting process, the simple reality is the vast majority did not become engaged, in huge part due to the timing of the election. **Permanently transitioning to summer elections would eliminate or greatly diminish these critical supports for students in perpetuity.**

A final validation for the role of on-campus programming in voter turnout can be found by contrasting youth voter rates in the 2011 and 2015 federal elections. Elections Canada's Vote On Campus program, introduced in 2015, allowed students to vote directly on campus within their current or home riding, vastly simplifying the voting process. This introduction co-occurred with a significant increase in youth voter turnout. In 2011, 55% of 18-24 year olds voted; in 2015 (the first time the program was made available) the turnout rate increased to 67%. This increase speaks at least in part to the desire of youth to get out to vote provided it is accessible and they have clear information; it further contradicts the belief that low youth voter turnout is driven by voter apathy. Again, such initiatives would no longer be possible if election dates were permanently set in the summer months.



Having established the challenges that exist even for those who reside in Nova Scotia year-round, we must acknowledge that a summer election date has even more serious implications for those coming from outside of the province to study. As previously mentioned, our aging demographic and high interprovincial mobility increase our reliance on students as a source of long-term population growth. 30% of those attending university in Nova Scotia - tallying over 13,000 students - reside here for the majority of the calendar year, yet in the case of a fixed July election, would be ineligible to vote should they choose to return to their home for a portion of the summer months. Thus, a summer election acts to permanently disenfranchise the very students we recruit to study - and, hopefully to stay.

Even among those who may have local addresses, allowing them to vote from out-of-province, the only voting method available is a write-in ballot, which as a means of voting, has the highest barriers to access. This inaccessibility is further exacerbated by the transience of the student population; the majority change their place of residence year-to-year, which increases the challenges of accessing and providing documentation to confirm one's local address.

In contrast, an election date throughout the academic year maximizes participation among Nova Scotia students, as well as those coming from out-of-province to study here. It diminishes accessibility and informational barriers to voting, allowing for electoral information and support to be made available through student leadership and administration in a centralized location, quite literally meeting them "where they are at". These considerations are integral in determining the ideal timing for a fixed election date in the province.

We recognize that there are numerous justifications presented for a summer election date, including ease of identifying polling locations and staffing capacity. Although valid consideration, **we must ask ourselves whether operational concerns trump the importance of accessible voting options** for all Nova Scotians. In the case of the former concern, fixed election dates would greatly increase the capacity to plan in advance for polling locations. Additionally, many offices look to students when recruiting poll workers, which may in fact make achieving staffing levels easier during the school year.

It should be noted that of the 12 Canadian provinces and territories, all of which have fixed election dates, 10 have set those dates in fall, with the remaining opting for spring dates (between March and May). This convergence is no doubt the result of a range of considerations, but the fact remains that when selecting election dates, **every other province and territory across Canada has deliberately selected an date outside of the summer months and by extension, during the academic year.**

In 2017, a report was released by the New Brunswick Commission on Electoral Reform, which made recommendations on how to improve the electoral system in the province. The report included several recommendations relating to engagement of students and youth:

- That additional investments will be made to increase turnout of younger voters
- That Elections New Brunswick explores scenarios and initiatives to help increase registrations and voter turnouts by students on university, college campuses and high schools.



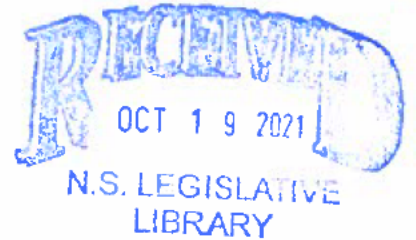
Following the Commission report, fixed election dates were shifted further into the fall in the province, in part to maximize opportunities for postsecondary participation. We are hopeful that a similar emphasis can be placed on ensuring election timing is as accessible for students here in Nova Scotia, further encouraging the next generation of leaders within our province to become engaged with our democratic processes from the very first time they are eligible to cast their ballot.

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate our appreciation that the discussion of fixed election dates is taking place, as such a measure is critical to ensuring a strong and functioning democracy. Democracy relies upon participation, and if certain groups are significantly less represented within our political system, we have a collective responsibility to examine the factors diminishing that engagement and to work to address them.

Ultimately, it is our belief that **the greatest consideration in setting a fixed election date should be ensuring it is one that will maximize participation across all segments of the population**, and it is our sincere hope that the date selected will reflect these shared priorities. We appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today, and look forward to answering any questions that you may have.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Students Nova Scotia is a not-for-profit and non-partisan advocacy group that represents Nova Scotia post-secondary students. Our members study at Acadia, Saint Mary's, and St. Francis Xavier Universities, as well as select campuses of the Nova Scotia Community College.



Law Amendments Committee Follow-up Submission - Students Nova Scotia

Good evening,

Thank you for the time and opportunity to speak in front of the committee today regarding the proposed implementation of fixed election dates across Nova Scotia; as mentioned, StudentsNS is strongly in favour of an election date throughout the academic year.

I wanted to further follow up in relation to the ideal timing of that date, to provide a few pieces of information that may be valuable for the committee to investigate further. During today's presentation, we acknowledged that the vast majority of Canadian provinces and territories have implemented a fall election date, with most of those falling in October. Following this precedent would allow for outreach to students throughout the entirety or majority of the campaign period, and would further allow for the inclusion of election related programming throughout orientation week and back-to-school programming. As such, StudentsNS believes that a fall election date would be ideal for many student voters.

However, we do acknowledge the concerns that there may be potential overlap with federal and municipal elections should the election be set in this time period, although the Act would give the Chief Electoral Officer the ability to select a different date if such an overlap exists. One model that addresses this challenge well is that of Saskatchewan, wherein the election date is fixed as the last Monday in October, **except** in the case where the election period would overlap with a federal election period; in this instance, the provincial election would be postponed until the **first Monday of the following April**.

A similar such measure in Nova Scotia could allow the province to follow the lead of the vast majority of other provinces in the implementation of a fall date, with the knowledge that a spring election could take place should such an overlap occur.

I thank you again for your time and consideration, and am happy to follow up with any additional materials or information that may be of interest.

Sincerely,

Lydia Houck