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Opinion / Commentary

Harper government's Fair Elections Act: bad news for voters

Defenders of the proposed Fair Elections Act are, deliberately or otherwise, misleading the Canadian public about our voting realities.

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CHRIS YOUNG / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Aman casts his vote for the May 2011 federal election in Toronto.

By: Marjaleena Repo Published on Fri Mar 14 2014

Defenders of the proposed [Fair Elections Act](#) are, deliberately or otherwise, misleading the Canadian public about our voting realities.

Democratic Reform Minister Pierre Poilievre, for instance, repeatedly claims that one can use a treaty or student card to vote, but this is false as such ID would be rejected for lacking a street address.

The stringent ID rules of 2008 require a street address, a driver's license with photo and address being the gold standard. However, many rural residents do not have street addresses; they have either a box number, R(ural)R(oute), or general delivery, none of which are acceptable for voting purposes. Moreover, roughly 30 per cent of potential voters – a large proportion of them seniors – do not have driver's licenses.

A non-driver must, therefore, rely on other voter IDs. Elections Canada rules suggest a list of 25 identity cards, but most do not contain an address (street or otherwise). (I have a wallet full of these cards, but none has my street address.)

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Then there are 13 "original documents" with a street address that can be combined with the above "identity cards" for acceptable identification, but they are not necessarily easily available. As a senior with house bills in my name, I have several available, and together with my passport, I can vote, but I know many others who cannot provide

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even one from this second group.

A few examples suffice: A utility bill is usually in one person's name, so others of the household cannot use that. People with pre-paid cell phones have no phone bills. Bank/credit card statements are available for those who have them; many Canadians don't have either. Correspondence issued by a school, college and university might not exist, and might not have a current address on it. Statement of government benefits applies only to those who have them. Attestation of Residence to be issued by First Nations to band members are not necessarily available, and on it goes, with the rest.

With no guarantee that a person could easily find a document to produce a "complete" ID, the famous "39 documents" that the minister talks about with such confidence, vanish into thin air, leaving hundreds of thousands of Canadians disenfranchised. Elections Canada's own post-election survey showed that almost 5 per cent of registered voters in 2008, about 500,000 people, said "they did not vote because they lacked proper documentation." What a difference these people could have made in the last election!

Because the correct voter ID is so iffy, vouching and voter information cards are significant safety valves, enabling the document-deficient voter to cast a ballot. Both are being abolished, supposedly because of "wide-spread fraud." Yet, since 2008 it has been possible for a person to vouch for only one other person; the voucher also had to have complete ID and the person vouched for some ID, and both were duly registered. Minister Poilievre needs to explain the scenario of this turning into 50,000 or more suspected frauds, as he claims, blatantly misinterpreting research revealing mainly harmless clerical errors.

The voter information card indicating where to vote is another bogeyman for the minister. It is a handy document with your street address, but it is not accepted as the sole voter ID and must be supplemented with another official document. This card is essential to those whose personal ID does not have their residential address (such as a university student or a recently moved person), and yet it is to be discarded on the basis of more false claims of fraud. (Conservative backbencher Brad Butt stated in the House that he had personally witnessed the illegal use of voter information cards. [Two weeks later he admitted that he hadn't witnessed anything of that nature.](#))

The dog's breakfast type of voter ID requirements and the problems they create would not exist if we still had voter enumeration that prevailed until 1997. Then the only document needed was some personal ID to show that you were the person on the voters' list. The list already had voters' addresses on it and no address proof was necessary.

With the loss of our world-class voter registration producing both very accurate voters' lists and high turnouts, our participation has dropped steadily, largely because voting has been made into a survival-of-the-fittest exercise, where obstacles galore restrict our ability to vote. The loss of enumeration and now the increasing obstruction of voting by requiring difficult-to-obtain ID are "accomplishing" a heightened level of voter inequality, the cure for which is the return to nation-wide voter enumeration.

This bill, C-23, is a monstrosity that perpetuates the worst flaws of the system the Conservatives introduced in 2008, and makes the situation worse by removing the safety valves. What is at stake is nothing less than our right to vote, clearly guaranteed by our Charter of Rights.

Marjaleena Repo has been a campaign manager in two federal elections, 2000 and 2008, and has dealt with voter registration and ID problems in both. She lives in Saskatoon. mrepo@sasktel.net.

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PLEIDESBOY

Ms Repo's concerns are valid. Having been previously worked as a Returning Officer, and also for the last genuine door-to-door enumeration (<1997) I am alarmed at plans by Minister of Democratic Reform to wreck our voters' rights.

For the Minister to declare the 'voter information card' as inadequate for voting ID only invites stress and tensions to erupt at polling stations. I can imagine pressure building inside polls for officers to bend rules for the sake of common sense, and so as to... > more

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DavidM

One thing I have noticed when voting, is that although Citizenship is a pre-requisite for voting, never have I been asked for proof of citizenship.
When requesting on the tax forms that my name be added to the voter's list, all one has to do is check a box saying you are a Canadian citizen.

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repowoman

@DavidM When enumeration still took place from door to door, people were asked to list the people who were citizens, and that was that. I have been asked for proof of citizenship from time to time, because of my accent, and I have no problem with that. Your question would be a good one to raise with Elections Canada, because right now no proof is requested of citizenship (except for those of us with accents, maybe :-))

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