MPA Major Research Papers   Local Government Program

7-1-2021

Maximizing Electoral Participation: How Accessibility and Outreach Factors Impact Electoral Participation in Online Elections

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Maximizing Electoral Participation:

How Accessibility and Outreach Factors Impact Electoral

Participation in Online Elections

Subject keywords: Public Administration, Elections, Policymaking, Information Technology (IT)

Geographical Keywords: Pickering, St. Thomas, Kawartha Lakes, Sarnia, Bradford West Gwillimbury, Thunder Bay

Submitted to
The Local Government Program
Department of Political Science
The University of Western Ontario

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July 2021

Abstract

Online voting in Canadian municipalities has proven to result in at least some moderate increase in the number of individuals participating in a given election. What is less apparent is how the implementation of these voting solutions affects voter turnout. This paper seeks to answer the question, what accessibility and outreach factors maximize voter turnout in online elections. This text will analyze six Ontario municipalities who have implemented internet voting for the first time in 2018. Assessing the effectiveness of their voter engagement strategies for that election period.

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Introduction

Elections are a prime example of democracy in action. They allow the average citizen to participate in the civic process by selecting an official to represent their interests in government. For many who live in countries under authoritarian regimes, such a system may seem romanticized. The freedom to elect your leader is indeed a desirable right to have, considering the long and continued history of governments around the world prohibiting this choice. Western democracies, as institutions, are touted as being the benchmark for freedom and citizen engagement. While these are praiseworthy elements of our electoral systems, they are not entirely true. Many here in Canada are not as actively involved in the democratic process as some would believe.

Part of why this occurs is voter apathy, which causes decreased engagement at all levels of government. A lack of voter participation is problematic as it can erode the public's trust in the representativeness of elected officials. No more apparent is this lack of participation than at the municipal level (Moore, 2017). Canadian municipalities have been struggling to encourage voter participation as politicians and public administrators have been unable to prevent low turnout numbers in recent years. How can they increase voter engagement? This is a complicated question and depending on the demographic makeup of a given community may elicit different responses. One proposed solution to declining voter turnout has been internet voting (Sancton, 2012). While a relatively modern concept, in the 20 or so years since its first use, the idea has received a significant amount of attention from both scholars and public administrators in Canada. Defined by the Canadian government, internet voting is a "system where obtaining ballots, casting votes or counting votes in political elections

and referendums uses an internet connection" (Online Voting: A Path Forward for Federal Elections, 2017). For the purpose of this Major Research Paper I will use, internet voting, e-voting, and online voting interchangeably to all refer to the definition above.

Research Question

While it is generally accepted that online voting can result in moderate increases in electoral participation (Goodman and Stokes, 2018), it remains to be seen if there are other factors to consider in its implementation that could further its effect. This Major Research Paper will ask the question:

What accessibility and outreach factors maximize voter participation in online elections?

Operationalization of Concepts and Synopsis of Findings

In this context, accessibility factors refer to what step's municipalities have taken to accommodate individuals for better participation in an online election. For example, how can a municipality increase voter participation in citizens with digital literacy issues? Outreach factors refer to the communication strategies municipalities have utilized to inform voters of the new online voting system.

To create this framework, my Major Research Paper will cover six topics. The first will justify the research question posed above and its significance. The second will discuss the pre-existing academic discussion surrounding online voting and the gap that my research might fill. The third will discuss my research design and the units of analysis I intend to use. The fourth will identify how I will systematically evaluate the

data I've obtained. The fifth will analyze the individual municipal case studies. The last, will propose policy recommendations and summarize the relevant findings from the research.   Having completed my review of these six areas it will become apparent how municipalities can maximize electoral participation in electronic elections.

Significance

The importance of my research question centres on its ability to address a significant problem in the broader academic literature and in professional practice. The literature review and analysis of the six municipalities highlight a significant gap in knowledge regarding internet voting implementation. There are studies regarding its impacts, but there is little known about what implementation strategies are most effective. Many seem to treat this kind of solution as a monolith and expect its positive results to appear with little extra effort. In practice there are various types of voting software being used, across many different diverse communities. How administrators can most effectively navigate their specific demographic group is not always a consideration made when advertising elections. Therein lies the utility of my research, as it seeks to highlight the necessity of creating meaningful engagement within communities to realize the full benefits of internet voting. What my findings will demonstrate is that substantive and targeted engagement within a municipality is necessary to maximize voter turnout in an online election. Communication plans must be well thought out and directly relate to the type of population a municipality is attempting to reach.

Low voter turnout is something that many communities are facing. Large cities such as Toronto are seeing challenges in encouraging their constituents to participate in the electoral process (City of Toronto website, retrieved 2020). My research question seeks to address this problem and identify the methods that have been implemented effectively in Ontario municipalities that use internet voting. The conclusions drawn will be of importance to those communities using internet voting, as it can better inform public administrators on which strategies are most effective at getting people involved in the democratic process. It will also inform administrators of the difficulties certain demographic groups may face in accessing online voting. Thus, improving how they respond to people like seniors, or those with little technological literacy skills.

More broadly, the relevancy of this topic is of especial importance due to the current political environment. Alternate voting methods will need to be made available to mitigate any potential spread of COVID-19. Internet voting could prove to be one method of effectively administering an election without having large groups of people congregate inside a voting station. Thus, despite an ongoing pandemic, administrators and officials will have concrete ways of promoting online voting to ensure all residents can access it safely. Although the implementation of online voting may not be enough in and of itself to increase voter turnout substantially, other accessibility and outreach issues may contribute to maximizing its impacts.

A final aspect to consider is that the discussion around voting methods is important to a younger generation. Today's youth are using the internet and computers for just about every aspect of their life. Paying bills, filing taxes and, online

shopping are all very common. The ability of elected officials to engage with younger generations and effectively promote online voting could redefine how youth engage in politics. In summary, this section demonstrates the importance of my research question as it seeks to explain how municipalities can maximize voter turnout. The proposed evaluation seeks to address how online elections can be effectively marketed and be useful in administering elections during the pandemic.

Preliminary Literature Review

In reviewing the literature surrounding internet voting a particularly important author that has acted as a foundation for my research is Nicole Goodman. Goodman is a professor at Brock University who has done several studies on the impacts of online voting as it pertains to turnout. In this Major Research Paper, I will be analyzing several of her articles which will aid in identifying what is already known about online voting.

Cost of Voting

The first article is titled *Reducing the Cost of Voting: An Evaluation of Internet Voting's Effect on Turnout.* Goodman's and Stokes' piece focus on the cost of voting. In their view, cost is defined as the amount of time or effort any one person needs to engage in to be able to vote (Goodman and Stokes, 2018). This article compares online voting to other methods of increasing voter turnout. Ideas such as compulsory voting or universal voter registration. This article contends that these electoral reforms are less impactful than online voting, which could elicit a potential increase of 3.5 percentage points in voter turnout (Goodman and Stokes, 2018). The reason being is that it reduces the effort required to cast a ballot. This is accomplished, as the authors

describe, by increasing polling hours and reducing the actual amount of time one needs to spend to cast a ballot (Goodman Stokes, 2018).

Here in Ontario, the technology has been used since the early 2000s with over 173 elections having been conducted (Goodman Stokes, 2018). In discussing this fact, the writers make a claim which I think helps shed light on why my study is of importance. There is no one place to evaluate internet voting because these electoral reforms were all implemented with varying rules. It is in this gap that my research may be able to identify in what circumstances internet voting is at its most effective. The main purpose of their writing was however to determine if there has been a significant change in turnout because of internet voting, not other contributing factors. In developing their quantitative data Goodman and Stokes describe their research design by stating "This article uses an original panel dataset of six waves of municipal elections, held between 2000 and 2014, to examine whether internet voting adoption changed turnout" (Goodman and Stokes, 2018). The authors use this methodology while identifying key variables such as voter turnout, internet voting status, and electoral competitiveness (Goodman and Stokes, 2018). The results of their study demonstrate an increased turnout effect of 3.5 percent.

Lastly, and most important for my research, the article speculates that where other more convenient methods of voting have been established, it is reasonable to assume you will see less of an increase after the adoption of internet voting (Goodman and Stokes, 2018). Meaning if mail-in ballots or telephone voting are already in place, the impact of internet voting will be less noticeable because the cost of voting has already been diminished in these communities. To conclude, this article is significant

for my research as it is a baseline of reference when studying Ontario municipalities and the demonstrated effects online voting has already had on them.

Internet Voting Rules

The second article my Major Research Paper will discuss is another by Nicole Goodman and Zachary Spicer, titled *Administering elections in a digital age Online voting in Ontario Municipalities.* The purpose of this piece was an exploratory study into how internet voting is perceived after its implementation by administrators and the voting public. This article begins by creating a brief narrative surrounding what effects internet voting has already had, summarizing it by stating "To date literature examining online voting has mostly focused on the effects on voters and the security of the technology" (Goodman and Spicer, 2019). There is also discussion regarding the potential cost savings associated with reduced administration fees for election. Furthermore, the study provides historical context into why internet voting was first adopted in local municipalities around Ontario. Stating that "The decision to trial new voting methods in Ontario was motivated by a desire to increase voter turnout, accessibility and convenience" (Goodman and Spicer, 2019).

This study also documents how and in what ways municipalities rolled out their proposed e-voting plans. Discussing the different strategies municipalities can use to implement the system. Some opted for online voting before the election date with in-person voting available on election day. Others chose to implement online voting with telephone voting as well for the entire election period.

These varying strategies across Ontario point to an important idea presented by the authors. As Goodman and Spicer note:

> The provincial government provides the structure in which local elections must be conducted, but municipalities have some flexibility in the administration of the election. As such, depending on the legislative provision municipalities can select a variety of alternative methods. The rules in which the election must be conducted are spelled out in the Municipal Elections Act(s), but interpretation and enforcement tends to be a local responsibility. (Goodman and Spicer, 2019)

This shows that there is no one way of using online voting in Ontario, and its structure may be different for each municipality that uses it. If each community can implement online voting in different ways, it will be interesting to learn through my analysis which are more effective at increasing voter turnout, and which are not.

The purpose of this article, however, was not to develop an exhaustive list of these differences, but rather to gauge administrator and voter experience with the system. As Goodman and Spicer point out there are three particularly popular reasons for using online voting. Those being, increased accessibility, improvements in voter turnout, and enhanced convenience (Goodman and Spicer, 2019).

Moreover, this article touches upon what other challenges may be impacting the potential administration of online elections. These problems are of import to my study as they identify areas that have historically proven to be stumbling blocks for those rolling out this new kind of voting system. One such example is effective education of the process to those with a lack of digital literacy skills and addressing problems of

unreliable internet connection (Goodman and Spicer, 2019).   In sum, this text provides a different perspective than the first analyzed. It further informs the research question I've sought to pose, as it establishes what challenges administrators have faced in their implementation of e-voting.

Internet Voting in Canada

The third article I've selected for my review was one commissioned on behalf of Elections Canada. This piece was written in 2013 by Jon Pammett, and Nicole Goodman, titled *Consultation and Evaluation Practices in the Implementation of Internet in Canada and Europe.* This is a broad overarching study that discusses online voting in an international and national context. The study "examines consultation and evaluation practices associated with the consideration or adoption of Internet voting systems in Canada and Europe. Our findings indicate that consultation efforts are modest and often take place after the decision to proceed with Internet voting has been made" (Pammett and Goodman, 2013). It cites European cases of Internet voting and evaluates their effectiveness in regards to preparing adequate consultation before implementation. To inform my research question, however, I will only be discussing this article's review of Canadian municipalities as they are most relevant.

The Canadian analysis focuses on municipalities in Ontario and Atlantic Canada. Halifax is used as an example of a sizable municipality that has implemented internet voting. Part of the outreach strategy used in Halifax, as Pammett and Goodman describe, included engagement over social media (Pammett and Goodman, 2013). However, this engagement was limited, as the region of Halifax acknowledged that these methods of voting were already widely known to individuals in the community.

The region of Halifax believes that once online voting has been incorporated as a viable means of election participation, there is a decreased need to reach out to citizens and engage with them.

In the same year of 2012, another municipality in Nova Scotia was utilizing online voting. Turo is a small town comprising some 12,000 people that took a similar strategy to the region of Halifax. They created social media pages that encouraged citizen engagement, and where officials were able to respond to questions the electorate had (Pammett and Goodman, 2013). Administrators here took a more active role in engaging the public on internet voting. Going so far as to travel to "the local farmers' market for a weekend, where about one-third of the town's population congregates" (Pammett and Goodman, 2013). I think this fact highlights an important aspect of studying what other factors alongside online voting might lead to increased participation.

It is necessary to understand what the demographic makeup is of your electorate to best know how to reach out. Going to a farmer's market, while useful in Turo, may not be the most effective way to reach out to a local populace in other places. The author's evaluation of consultation methods shows that there is a great deal of nuance required when administrators implement the system. The article further details other important methods of community outreach that may prove beneficial in increasing voter turnout. Pammett and Goodman use their analysis of e-voting and recommend that administrators:

> consult with other election stakeholders, notably candidates, the media, and if applicable, advocacy organizations. Techniques may include training sessions for political candidates (and political parties, if applicable), meetings with the

media, or discussion with other groups. An Internet voting option particularly

affects candidates. In communities where candidates have been consulted, they

have been more likely to embrace Internet voting as an alternative voting method

and even promote it in their campaign literature. (Pammett and Goodman, 2013)

Involving all electoral stakeholders is an important part of increasing voter confidence

and accessibility with the new internet system. Politicians are often at the forefront of

elections and engage with many constituents throughout a campaign. These

interactions could prove to be the perfect place for educating potential voters to use the

new internet voting system.

To summarize, this article and its importance in the grander scheme of electronic

voting literature acts to categorize the different ways in which governments here in

Canada and internationally develop consultation strategies for e-voting. More

specifically it demonstrated that consultation with local communities requires some

case-by-case analysis of their demographics to adequately reach out to the populace.

Adoption of New Technology

The last article I intend to discuss is by Lemuria Carter and Ronald L. Cambell's.

The piece is titled *Internet voting usefulness an empirical analysis of trust, convenience

and accessibility*. The purpose of the study is to test a hypothesis regarding the

perceived usefulness of internet voting in a survey given to 372 citizens. The context of

this analysis is slightly different than those previously discussed as it is an analysis of

American internet voters, but it nonetheless functions as an effective tool to gauge voter

engagement and satisfaction with internet voting.

Beginning their analysis, the authors review pre-existing literature regarding technology adoption. This sort of analysis as they describe focuses on the factors that lead to citizens adopting new technologies (Carter and Cambell, 2012). From a review of the prevailing literature, they can determine that the most impactful factors for adoption are "perceived usefulness as one of the most salient predictors of intention to use an emerging system" (Carter and Cambell, 2012. This represents an important point in understanding my research question. What motivates individuals is convenience and if technological advancements lead to significant improvement in individuals' everyday lives, they will likely be continuously used.

Examples of these conveniences in the context of voting are mail-in ballots and early voting. It is important to note that the solution to declining voter turnout cannot be worse than the problem it seeks to fix. This is where Carter and Cambell make a particularly important contention by stating that voting from home is the best way to increase this convenience (Carter and Cambell, 2012). Convenience is not the only important step in the adoption of internet voting. As has also been discussed by Goodman, Carter and Cambell assert that accessibility is a key motivator in online voting. It enables those who have been previously restricted by geographic location to easily access voting booths.

Literature Summary

To summarize, this article analyzes similar themes in the voting process, which Godman and other writers have also acknowledged. Increasing convenience for online voters could be one of its most important benefits. Accessibility and ease of use however will be entirely reliant on how well these e-voting systems are designed. This

is an important point to consider when studying what other outreach or accessibility factors may maximize online voting. Administrators can only do so much with regards to outreach and training. If the system design is not recognized by the public as being effective, then online voting may not be used to its fullest potential.

To bring all these readings together, some things become consistent. There appear to be three key themes that come out of this literature review, with which all authors agree. The first is related to ease of access to the electoral process. This is something that is discussed by both Goodman as well as Carter and Cambell. Goodman terms this as reducing the cost of voting. While not using the same phrasing, both Carter and Cambell acknowledge that this is an important consideration by discussing increasing voter convenience. Both articles agree administrators should make it easier to access voting. I also see agreement from the Canadian and American authors with regards to how user interfaces within internet voting systems can impact user adoption. Clunky, unintuitive e-voting systems are bound to fail, as they don't increase convenience for those using them. Therefore, if implemented correctly online voting can provide a significant impact to voter turnout.

The second is understanding demographics. When attempting to increase voter turnout a critical consideration is to comprehend how the population is made up. Is it dominated by urban residents, young voters, farmers, or a community of retirees? These questions, although not exhaustive, illustrate some of the discussions brought forth by Goodman and Pammett in their review of Canadian electronic voting systems. It is clear that some towns such as Turo Nova Scotia, require different approaches to electronic voting implementation in comparison to larger communities such as Halifax.

Carter and Cambell acknowledge this same point, by discussing that geographic location can be a barrier to voting (Carter and Cambell, 2012). With this in mind, it's clear through looking at Goodman's articles that no one city has used the same method for reaching out to their population about this service.

The third and final point is that online voting does increase voter turnout. Conclusively, all authors agree that internet voting, even if it is by a small margin, will result in higher electoral participation. The strategies used to achieve this however are less clear. The gap that exists in identifying what common strategies can be used to implement an effective internet voting system serves as justification for my research question. With these three themes in mind, I will be able to better situate my analysis of what accessibility and outreach issues may maximize voter turnout from online voting.

Research Design

The research design will consider the administration of elections within a select few Ontario municipalities and the outreach and accessibility factors that have increased or limited voter participation in its online elections. A total of six municipalities ranging in size and geographic location across Ontario will be analyzed and the study will be longitudinal over multiple case studies. I will first review 2014 election data and compare it to 2018 municipal election data to be able to understand any changes that may have occurred. In studying these six municipalities I will be using most similar system comparison and small N research to assess which outreach strategies and accessibility tools are used to encourage the use of the new voting system. The locations I intend to study will be Thunder Bay, Pickering, Bradford West Gwillimbury,

Kawartha Lakes, St. Thomas, Sarnia. These municipalities have implemented online voting for the first time in 2018 (Electronic Elections Project, retrieved 2020).

In discussing my research design, it is important to also bring up the limitations of the study. Because I am only looking into a few municipalities it will not be possible to say with absolute surety that the results of my analysis can be uniformly applied. Without using a large-scale survey, it is difficult to identify broad trends that may influence electoral participation when using online elections. Nonetheless, inferences can be drawn as to the correlation between percentage turnout and strategies implemented. As a result, this study will not create a definitive list of which factors were of most use to municipalities, rather it will investigate which outreach and accessibility policies best engaged with voters. Strategies that empowered and informed individuals will be important to understand as they may lead to conclusions regarding other jurisdictions.

To understand why changes may have occurred in voter turnout, I will analyze the strategies employed in the municipalities before the 2018 election. I have obtained the 2018 election strategy guides and relevant council reports from the respective municipalities. These will provide an overview of the steps these cities took to inform citizens of the elections. In analyzing these strategies and cross-referencing them with the percentage increase in voter turnout compared to 2014, I will attempt to see if there were strategies that worked better than others.

Plan for Analyzing Data

My plan for systematically analyzing the data will be as follows. First, I will categorize the voter turnout results from 2014 to 2018. This will serve as a baseline to begin my analysis. Through visualizing the percentage change that municipalities have experienced I will be able to see which locations were more successful after implementing e-voting. Having initially reviewed this quantitative data, I can begin comparing the qualitative data. This process will analyze each case separately and will summarize what strategies they used to implement e-voting.

Ultimately, this will be the most difficult process for assessing the data, as the council reports and strategic plans are quite lengthy. It is important to condense the information into easily digestible material that highlights only the most significant factors of the implementation. I will highlight those that may have had a direct impact on voter turnout. To effectively visualize what each municipality has experienced and provide a summary of the accessibility and outreach factors used I have created a table which encapsulates the most important strategies used by each municipality. This chart, titled, **Summary of Municipalities**, presents a high-level picture of the steps each municipality took to market internet voting to their electorate. Thus, I can compare the municipalities and reach a conclusion on what strategies, if any, were more effective/ may have maximized voter turnout.

An important point to note when studying these municipalities is that they have used some similar but also many different means of engaging the public. Most have emphasized physical accessibility issues at onsite voting locations. The bare minimum that some municipalities have used has been to publish information on their website

concerning the switch to online voting. Herein lies the major differences between the cities. Some see online voting as the only necessary tool to increase their voter turnout. This may have a marginal impact (Goodman and Stokes, 2018), but there have been further steps taken by other municipalities that show a more involved approach to implementing online voting.

This includes conducting town halls where staff who are knowledgeable about the online voting process can come and answer the public's questions. Other differences seem to be in the emphasis placed on engaging seniors. There are those municipalities that went directly to long term-care homes to discuss with the residents their options regarding voting and to educate them on the new process. As well, there seem to be further differences in the degree to which staff and councillors were trained on the new voting system. Certain election plans had a greater focus on educating staff and political candidates who could then in turn educate the public.

Many placed a heavy focus on advertising voter convenience and highlighting how this would improve people's ability to access the democratic process. This was done through social media, bus advertisements and others created city logos to further drive the point home. With regards to accessibility issues, not all municipalities explicitly stated within their election plans whether the online voting system was AODA compliant. Others specified that it would be compatible with the technology that people already use on their smart devices.

In sum, my method for systematically analyzing data will be three-fold. The first obtain the relevant information regarding voter turnout and obtain all necessary municipal election strategic plans from the respective towns/cities. The second will be

to summarize all qualitative data into two categories, accessibility, and outreach factors. The third, will present this information for each municipality and highlight which factors were most effective in their rollout of online voting. Having completed an initial review of the strategic plans for a few of the municipalities I have selected it has become clear that there are significant differences in how online voting was implemented. This includes how it was advertised, and what strategies were used to help those with accessibility issues take full advantage of the new voting software.

Analysis of Municipalities

For each of the six municipalities, I will highlight what change they experienced because of their respective internet voting implementation. I will describe how these implementations differed across their respective clerk's departments and highlight which factors are of most importance. Moreover, I will discuss certain demographic factors of each municipality. These factors are determinants of voter engagement and help to isolate the potential impact internet voting may have had on their populations. The factors discussed will be median total income, education level, and rural vs. urban divide. Stats Canada defines the difference between urban and rural as follows "A population centre (POPCTR) has a population of at least 1,000 and a population density of 400 persons or more per square kilometre, based on population counts from the current Census of Population. All areas outside population centres are classified as rural areas." (Population Centre and Rural Area Classification 2016, 2021). They further divided the urban centre into population centres which are divided into three categories each with a specific population range. This includes small population centres, with a population of between 1,000 and 29,999; medium population centres,

with a population of between 30,000 and 99,999 and large urban population centres,

consisting of a population of 100,000 and over (Population Centre and Rural Area

Classification 2016, 2021).

As well, in this analysis, it will be important to assess how these municipalities

not only advertised their new voting solutions, but also adhered to the Municipal

Elections Act, 1996 (MEA). The accessibility provisions outlined in the act mandate that

Clerk departments ensure voting places are accessible to those with disabilities

(Municipal Elections Act, 1996). As well, they stipulate that all barriers to accessing the

election for those with disabilities must be addressed (Municipal Elections Act, 1996).

This is an important consideration as each municipality placed great emphasis on

ensuring their internet voting solutions would be accessible to those with disabilities.

Moreover, each municipality needed to ensure that the internet voting software used

complied with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), specifically

the Information and Communication Standard.

Engagement Typology

To properly categorize the municipalities that will be analyzed in this section I

have developed three distinct forms of voter engagement. This typology reflects the

level of engagement and the nature of communication methods used to reach out to

electors. They are as follows:

1. Laissez – Faire
2. Broadcast Communication
3. Targeted

The first category, Laissez-Faire, refers to municipalities that implemented internet voting with little to no other substantive outreach plan. Municipalities within this category believe that the use of internet voting is in and of itself sufficient to increase voter turnout. This category also reflects those municipalities that may not have the resources needed to properly communicate their new voting method to the community. In their use of online voting, these municipalities use a reactive approach to communicating with the public, providing information to voters once it is asked of them.

The second category, Broadcast Communication, refers to municipalities that engaged in some form of proactive outreach to their populace. This includes using social media, traditional print media advertisements, or notices on the municipal website. While not exhaustive, these examples represent some of the step's municipalities in this category used to reach out to their electorate. Broadcast Communication reflects governments, that made substantial efforts to notify the public of the new voting type and used a variety of different outreach and accessibility strategies to do so. However, municipalities within this category do not engage in any assessment of the demographics of their population. In this sense there is an abundance of communication of the new voting method, with little consideration made as to what members of its population are being reached.

The third category, Targeted, is the most effective of the three. Those within this category engaged in specific outreach and accessibility campaigns designed to reach out to a pre-defined portion of the population. In these case studies, those that accomplish a Targeted approach understand their communities' demographics and market internet voting based on these groups. Thus, voting strategies are developed

with thought and used to communicate to a specific portion of that community. As will

be made clear in the subsequent analysis, accomplishing this is not easy and requires a

concerted effort the part of government administrators. However, this method could

also yield the most results for those seeking to maximize voter participation.

Sarnia

Sarnia	Total Number of Electors	Number of Electors who Voted	Turnout	Percentage Change
2018	51,581	25,207	48.90%	11.80%
2014	54,464	20,207	37.10%	

Sarnia is a sizable municipality with a population of 71, 594 people. It sits in

southwestern Ontario and borders the state of Michigan. With a median age of 43.9,

(Census Profile, 2016 Census - Sarnia, City [Census Subdivision], Ontario and Canada

[Country], 2016) Sarnia is slightly older than the national average. It has a median total

income of $32,302.00 which is lower than the national median (Census Profile, 2016

Census - Sarnia, City [Census Subdivision], Ontario and Canada [Country], 2016). The

percentage of people aged 25 to 64 with a postsecondary degree is marginally lower

than the national average at 63.28% (Census Profile, 2016 Census - Sarnia, City

[Census Subdivision], Ontario and Canada [Country], 2016). Furthermore, as per the

Stats Can definition, Sarnia is an urban medium population centre with density of 434.3

KM2 (Census Profile, 2016 Census - Sarnia, City [Census Subdivision], Ontario and

Canada [Country], 2016). Sarnia experienced a slight decrease in the number of total

electors within their municipality from the 2014 to 2018 municipal election (Government

of Ontario, 2018). Despite this, they achieved a significant increase in their voter

turnout increasing from 37% to 48% (Government of Ontario, 2018).

Sarnia's municipal election was done entirely online with the option to cast a

ballot through a telephone as well. Their accessibility and outreach plan focused

heavily on empowering and informing voters. They paid great care to consult with

Intelivote (their online voter software provider), on all accessibility-related matters.

Officials from the City of Sarnia ensured that the new voting system complied with the

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) (Report to Sarnia City Council,

2018). In their Municipal Election Accessibility report, the City emphasized adherence

to the Information and Communication standard within AODA (Report to Sarnia City

Council, 2018). This allowed people with disabilities to utilize assistive technologies

such as text to speech for individuals who were seeing impaired (Report to Sarnia City

Council, 2018).

Moreover, Sarnia understood that not every one of their constituents, despite the

many accessibility considerations they made would be able to vote online. Because of

this, the City made available voting locations from October 11th to October 22nd

(Report to Sarnia City Council, 2018). As such voting stations were set up in long-term

care homes and hospitals in the City (Report to Sarnia City Council, 2018).

Furthermore, information was given to several other relevant groups of concern,

including seniors' groups, service clubs, and local accessibility advisory committees

(Report to Sarnia City Council, 2018). To properly convey these messages 75 election

workers were hired, all of which received AODA customer service training (Report to

Sarnia City Council, 2018).

Reaching out to those with disabilities was just one step the City of Sarnia took to ensure maximum participation within their municipal election. They went to great lengths to promote and educate voters about the new voting system. One of these methods was to hold public information sessions. In total, four sessions were held in the months leading up to the election. Starting in July, and each month following until October (City Clerk's Department, 2018). These public information sessions were unique among other similar events published by other municipalities. Here, the City of Sarnia focused exclusively on internet voting. During the presentation staff clearly stated the various methods of voting, either from a computer, laptop, tablet, or smartphone (City of Sarnia, 2018). They showed the dates that voting would be accessible to the public. As well, went into detail about the process of how residents could go about using online voting. This also included slides, specifically targeted at senior citizens living in either retirement or long-care homes (City of Sarnia, 2018). Lastly, the presentation spent time reviewing the security of internet voting and reassuring residents of the process (City of Sarnia, 2018).

The clerk's department also implemented more traditional forms of advertising using print media in local newspapers (A. B. personal Communication, November 6, 2020). As well, radio and bus advertisements were purchased to market and inform the public about the shift to internet voting (A. B. personal Communication, November 6, 2020). The City also gave presentations to members of the local Kiwanis Club and had trained staff to attend events geared towards seniors (A. B. personal Communication, November 6, 2020). It appears that the City of Sarnia was targeting one demographic through its outreach and accessibility campaigns. They were focused on senior citizens

who are less likely to understand the shift in voting format. To properly convey these messages, the City comprehensively engaged in training sessions for their elections staff. Making them educators for the new program and having these staff members act as ambassadors.

While the City did allow for some cases of in-person voting the rest of the election would be held online with 22,573 web votes being cast. Of the 25, 207 votes that were cast nearly 90% were done online (Official Election Results 2018 Municipal and School Board Election, 2018). During the lead-up to election day, there were 11 full days in which voters were allowed to place ballots online. The voting software required no pre-registration. In a video provided by the municipality, they outline that eligible voters would receive a voter identification card at their primary address (Sarnia, 2018). This card would contain instructions for how to cast a ballot online and over the phone. There would be an individualized pin for each voter which would then need to be filled in online. This is a one-step authentication method that would mimic in-person registration. Although simple in its registration it should be noted that the software required multiple clicks to navigate to a desired ballot and required voters to fill out separate ballots for Mayoral and Councillors candidates.

In sum, the City of Sarnia had a successful implementation of internet voting increasing their overall participation from the previous 2014 election. They placed great emphasis on accessibility concerns and consulted heavily with members of the community to ensure the new voting system was sufficient to meet their needs. The outreach strategy used focused mainly on senior citizens and sought to engage with them in a variety of ways. The City went to where these citizens were, specifically in

long-term care homes, local clubs and, town hall meetings. The messages conveyed were done so by trained staff who all received in-depth training on accessibility concerns faced by many in their community.

Pickering	Total Number of Electors	Number of Electors who Voted	Turnout	Percentage Change
2018	67,748	19,777	29.19%	-5.18%
2014	66,564	22,877	34.37%	██████

The City of Pickering is the next municipality I will discuss in this analysis. Pickering is a part of Durham region and lies due east of Toronto. The City has a population of 91,771 people (Census Profile, 2016 Census - Pickering, City [Census Subdivision], Ontario and Durham, Regional Municipality [Census Division], Ontario, 2016). Although it has a large population it is defined as a rural area with a population density of 396.3 KM2 (Census Profile, 2016 Census - Pickering, City [Census Subdivision], Ontario and Durham, Regional Municipality [Census Division], Ontario, 2016). Its median income and age sit slightly higher than the national average, the former is $38,466.00 while the latter is 41.60 (Census Profile, 2016 Census - Pickering, City [Census Subdivision], Ontario and Durham, Regional Municipality [Census Division], Ontario, 2016). Their rate of education is 4% higher than the Canadian national rate and reflects 68% of the population between 25 to 64 having some form of post-secondary degree (Census Profile, 2016 Census - Pickering, City [Census Subdivision], Ontario and Durham, Regional Municipality [Census Division], Ontario, 2016). Despite having slightly higher education and income levels the City's overall

voter turnout rate is surprisingly low. The 2018 municipal election resulted in a 29% turnout rate, which was down 5% from the previous election cycle (Official Results Report, 2018).

Pickering's communication plan was geared towards promoting the benefits of Internet/Telephone voting. This was done through their use of the City's external website and social media campaigns designed to inform voters (Report to Council CLK 04–18, 2018). The emphasis here was placed on the ease, convenience, and security of the new method of voting. It framed internet voting as a solution that allowed for more voter agency. Reducing barriers for those working abroad or studying outside of the City to still be able to participate (Report to Council CLK 04–18, 2018). Pickering wanted to ensure its citizens understood that this method of voting would decrease the amount of time taken out of their day to cast a ballot.

Detailed voter information pamphlets were sent out to voters in August before the election with key frequently asked questions. These pamphlets also provided contact information for further clarification on the process (Report to Council CLK 04–18, 2018). As well, six voter assistance centres were set up during the voting period to inform and aid electors with the process (Report to Council CLK 04–18, 2018). The advertising started in January of 2018 with City staff working on a strategy to communicate the new election format. The process was divided into three key areas of outreach. The first was the City website, the second was social media marketing, and the third was community outreach strategies (Report to Council CLK 04–18, 2018). With regards to the City website, Pickering coordinated with the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation to add a voter look-up link to their website which allowed voters to confirm

their address and change information as needed. In September of 2018, they provided

notice to electors which reminded them to check if they had received their voter

information letter (Report to Council CLK 04–18, 2018). The last was to advertise the

election period itself which took place in October. Equally important Pickering staff

conducted several social media communications to get the word out for the election.

Utilizing Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to advertise information sessions (Report to

Council CLK 04–18, 2018). Although, according to their 2018 election review document

their social media campaign only touched on the new voting method in September.

They linked a video to the Dominion voting website and further promoted the new voting

method in the election month of October. The last identified method of promotion was

done through community outreach. In the summer of 2018 City of Pickering staff went

to Farmer's Markets to promote and educate citizens on internet and telephone voting

as well as respond to any queries they had.

Regarding accessibility, the issue of Internet/Telephone voting was framed as

increasing people with disabilities' independence (Accessible Election Procedures 2018

Municipal Election, 2018). The process allowed individuals to use their own assistive

devices to access the voting software. The City recognized that not all of its citizens

had the means to access voting via telephone or internet and as such used the voter

assistance centres as a place for people to use in-person telephone or internet voting

opportunities. The City also made use of other strategies to encourage an accessible

election. They confirmed with the internet/telephone voting system provider that the

technology was fully accessible. As well, candidates were provided with training and

other information to ensure they could properly assess the system (Accessible Election Procedures 2018 Municipal Election, 2018).

However, in their post-election summary officials received reports from citizens who claimed their promotion of the new voting method was lacking. Specifically, this applied to how internet voting was promoted in senior residences. Given they are the types of individuals who would most struggle with the new implementation it stands to reason that a lack of engagement with them could have lead to confusion (Report to Council CLK 04–18, 2018).

To summarize, the City of Pickering experienced a decline in its voter turnout after implementing internet voting. Nevertheless, the City of Pickering utilized a multi-faceted promotion and accessibility campaign that focused not on one specific community, but rather the City as a whole. Their outreach entailed posts on the City's social media and an external website. They advertised the new method of voting online and through traditional print media. With regards to accessibility, City staff ensured that the new voting solution was compliant with the requisite provincial accessibility legislation. Moving forward, City staff received feedback suggesting more outreach needed to be done to properly engage with senior citizens.

Bradford west Gwillimbury

BWG	Total Number of Electors	Number of Electors who Voted	Turnout	Percentage Change
2018	23,808	8,219	34.52%	-6.36%
2014	21,638	8,846	40.88%	

Bradford west Gwillimbury (BWG) is a town located approximately one hour north of Toronto in the County of Simcoe. It is home to 35,325 residents with a median population age significantly lower than the national average (Census Profile, 2016 Census - Bradford West Gwillimbury, 2016). BWG is also classified as being a rural municipality. With a population of 175.7 KM2 (Census Profile, 2016 Census - Bradford West Gwillimbury, 2016). As well, at 37.10 it is the youngest of the six municipalities being studied in this review (Census Profile, 2016 Census - Bradford West Gwillimbury, 2016). However, its median income sits second highest amongst the six at $36,504 per year (Census Profile, 2016 Census - Bradford West Gwillimbury, 2016). Interestingly it is a less-educated area in comparison to the Canadian average and the other towns studied thus far. With 56.81% of the population aged 25 to 64 possessing some form of postsecondary education (Census Profile, 2016 Census - Bradford West Gwillimbury, 2016).

During its implementation of internet voting, BWG experienced a drop of 6.36% to their voter turn rate (Government of Ontario, 2018). This was the greatest decrease amongst the six municipalities studied. This was through no lack of trying on the part of the town, who went to great lengths to market and inform the public about the new

voting options. Staff at BWG believed that the education of its constituents started with effectively training municipal employees on matters related to internet voting (2018 Elections Accessibility Plan, 2018). As such, staff were trained on how to deliver messages about e-voting to electors, emphasizing independence, dignity, integration, and equal opportunity. However, the training described in the 2018 Elections Accessibility Plan focuses primarily on addressing accessibility concerns of in-person voters (2018 Elections Accessibility Plan, 2018). This is likely the case because internet and telephone voting were perceived by the Town as solving any accessibility problems outright through its implementation.

The Town had other relevant outreach strategies for its new voting system. One demonstrated below shows the municipality making use of banner advertisements on their website advertising the ways to cast a ballot. The figure below demonstrates three ways of participating in the voting process: by phone, smart device, and laptop. Moreover, postcards with election information were mailed to all BWG addresses. Public transit was used to advertise the new voting method and all Town electronic signs advertised internet voting. The Town also made use of a direct election telephone extension as well as a live chat function for citizens to get information in real time. Lastly, newspaper advertising and open houses were used to drive the message home about the new initiative. Unfortunately, specifics of these strategies are unavailable, as Town staff stated that information related to the election was removed from their website (L. M. personal Communication, May 18, 2021).
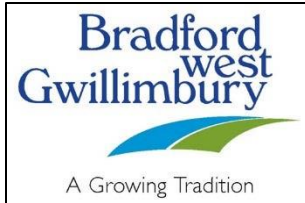
(2018 Elections Accessibility Plan, 2018)

Accessibility was another significant consideration made by the Clerks department at BWG. The Town confirmed that the internet voting menu options would be clear and easy to follow (2018 Elections Accessibility Plan, 2018). They acknowledged that the font size could be easily changed and that a personal screen reader could be used by electors accessing the system. As well, the voting software featured the ability to use a teletypewriter with clear language and prompts. If the system failed in some capacity, or residents required more assistance electors could visit one of three Voter Help Centres between the dates of October 13th and October 22nd (2018 Elections Accessibility Plan, 2018). These help centres would also house voting kiosks that had touch screen computers for internet voting use. These plans were developed alongside the Town's Accessibility Advisory Committee. They helped create a framework that would guide election officials. This included developing accessibility training for staff conducting the elections and providing information to the public about internet voting in an accessible manner.

In sum, BWG experienced a significant drop in electoral participation in their 2018 municipal election. The Town used several tools to engage with the community, these included both outreach and accessibility factors. Utilizing various types of media to deliver the message of internet voting and ensuring citizens were adequately informed of its presence. This included logos on the Town website, print media

advertisements and, postcards. The Town worked in tandem with accessibility groups

within the community to help develop a framework for conveying information about

internet voting to those with disabilities. Primarily, the Town relied on the internet voting

solution to handle the brunt of accessibility concerns. Despite the many outreach

strategies, it was clear that no specific targeted advertising campaign took place. There

was little consideration provided as to how the Town would reach out to its specific

demographics and ensure their participation in the process.

Thunder Bay

Thunder Bay	Total Number of Electors	Number of Electors who Voted	Turnout	Percentage Change
2018	81,135	41,361	50.98%	4.93%
2014	81,109	37,354	46.05%	

The City of Thunder Bay was the largest municipality studied in terms of

population. The 110,172 residents comprised a population distribution of 328.6 km2

(Census Profile, 2016 Census - Thunder Bay, City [Census Subdivision], Ontario and

Thunder Bay, District [Census Division], Ontario, 2016). The City is also geographically

the most remote in terms of its proximity to the Greater Toronto Area and other large

population centres. In terms of other relevant demographic information, the City has a

median total annual income of $35,788 placing it in the middle of the other

municipalities in the study (Census Profile, 2016 Census - Thunder Bay, City [Census

Subdivision], Ontario and Thunder Bay, District [Census Division], Ontario, 2016). With

62.92% of the population between the ages of 25 and 64 having some kind of post-

secondary degree it is among the most educated municipalities analyzed (Census

Profile, 2016 Census - Thunder Bay, City [Census Subdivision], Ontario and Thunder

Bay, District [Census Division], Ontario, 2016). Their median population age is also in

between the other six cities studied, as Thunder Bay's median age is 44.50 (Census

Profile, 2016 Census - Thunder Bay, City [Census Subdivision], Ontario and Thunder

Bay, District [Census Division], Ontario, 2016). Interestingly the City experienced an

increase of 4.93% in their switch to internet voting (Government of Ontario, 2018). It is

also notable to highlight that like Sarnia, Thunder Bay has a high voter turnout rate

compared to most other municipalities in the province. Given that this turnout was also

above 45% in the 2014 election (Government of Ontario, 2014), the City has facilitated

municipal elections with a high degree of voter participation even before the introduction

of online voting. To better understand the City's 2018 election results, and how

strategies they implemented maximized their voter participation I will first analyze

Thunder Bay's comprehensive accessibility plan concerning online voting.

The City used the Intelivote system, which was "created to meet the Web

Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG-2 Level AA), so that persons with disabilities

can perceive, understand, navigate and interact with the online voting system" (City of

Thunder Bay Accessibility Plan, 2018). As well, the City made available election

officials to assist any who required aid in casting a ballot online. Moreover, the 2018

Election Administration team from the City, launched a fully accessible website to gain

access to key election information and dates, check the Voter's List, review candidate

profiles, and seek employment opportunities for the Election (City of Thunder Bay

Accessibility Plan, 2018). The creation of a separate website for all information related

to the election is a unique idea. It would certainly create ease of use for citizens to access all election-related information and compile a one-stop shop for services related to it. This could be a compelling strategy for other municipalities to use in the future as it enables a host of information to be made available for residents without having to navigate several clicks into the municipality's external site.

Moreover, elections staff stated "in conjunction with the website, the communication plan also included a very aggressive social media campaign. Information on the Election was posted regularly on the City's Facebook page and YouTube channel" (Corporate Report - Municipal & School Board Elections - Accessibility Review, 2019). Two of the videos the City posted relating to voting received a significant amount of viewership online. The first video published was a more generic video interviewing residents about the importance of voting. Here, both young and old citizens of the City were able to discuss why they thought it was important to participate in the upcoming municipal election. This video received over 15,000 views on Youtube (City of Thunder Bay, 2018a). As well, Thunder Bay published a video directly from Intelivote on their Youtube account. This was an informational video detailing exactly how residents could use the new online system to cast a ballot. This involved visual cues and animation to show exactly how the voting system worked. Over 10,000 people viewed this video on the City's Youtube channel (City Thunder Bay, 2018b). While it is not possible to attribute correlation from the high number of views as having affected voter participation, it is clear that these videos were widely watched by individuals in the community. Unfortunately, further information regarding the City's communication plan was unavailable as staff only provided the

accessibility report. Despite this, what's clear from their web-based approach, the City understood its demographics. They knew from the get-go that they had a population that was comfortable with technology. Setting up an entire website for the election and publishing widely viewed Youtube videos would have likely played a significant role in advertising the new system.

St. Thomas

St. Thomas	Total Number of Electors	Number of Electors who Voted	Turnout	Percentage Change
2018	28,423	10,259	36.09%	0.27%
2014	28,104	10,066	35.82%	

The City of St. Thomas is a densely populated municipality located just south of London. With a population of 38,909, it is one of the smaller cities being analyzed in this report (Census Profile, 2016 Census - St. Thomas, Town [Census Division], Ontario, 2016). However, it has the densest population with 1092.1 people per square KM. St. Thomas is classified as a medium population centre as a result (Census Profile, 2016 Census - St. Thomas, Town [Census Division], Ontario, 2016).   Moreover, St. Thomas has a lower than average median income sitting at $32,402 (Census Profile, 2016 Census - St. Thomas, Town [Census Division], Ontario, 2016). The median age was 42.90 and reflects a trend in that region of an aging population (Census Profile, 2016 Census - St. Thomas, Town [Census Division], Ontario, 2016). The municipality is also one of the least educated amongst the six studied with 56.22% of residents between the ages of 25 to 64 possessing a post-secondary degree (Census Profile, 2016 Census - St. Thomas, Town [Census Division], Ontario, 2016). In the 2018

municipal election, the City implemented a hybrid model and as a result experienced a moderate increase of 0.27%, (Government of Ontario, 2018) offering both in-person and electronic voting capabilities. This method is easier to market to municipal councils but results in increased administration costs. According to the information present in both communications with the town clerk and public documentation, the City emphasized accessibility factors. Along with several considerations made for in-person voting the City implemented a number of initiatives for internet and telephone voting as well. These included 11 days of advance voting, available 24 hours a day. Providing citizens with an increased opportunity to access the electronic system. Moreover, as the municipalities Accessibility Plan describes there was a:

third party voting website being used for the advance voting period is compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and adheres to WCAG-2 at Level AA. This allows the internet voting solution to work with common assistive technology software including screen readers, screen magnification software, voice dictation software, and onscreen keyboards (2018 Municipal Election Accessibility Plan City of St. Thomas, 2018)

In their view, the option to use internet voting was in and of itself a form of accessibility which as the report details, would allow access anywhere electors had an internet connection (2018 Municipal Election Accessibility Plan City of St. Thomas, 2018). Like other municipalities having been studied thus far, St. Thomas also had staff familiar with the voting software system field questions from the public on an ongoing basis before the election (2018 Municipal Election Accessibility Plan City of St. Thomas, 2018). However, due to this being a hybrid election most accessibility concerns focused

on in-person voting. The municipality also engaged in several marketing strategies to help promote the vote to the public. This included reminders in council meetings and publications in print media. There was a great deal of information provided at City Hall with several advertisements placed on televisions around the building.

Moreover, information was provided to the local MP and MPP offices to help inform constituents (M. K. personal communication, May 19, 2021). Temporary staff was also hired to help field general questions from constituents. Accessibility was of the greatest concern to St. Thomas and given legislative requirements rightfully so (M. K. personal communication, May 19, 2021). However, their outreach strategies appear to be reactive in how they engaged the community. They do not seem to have targeted any specific demographic group while promoting the new voting method. Ultimately, where the City of St. Thomas lacked was in their capacity to proactively communicate with residents, about the new voting method.

Not only were communication plans lacking but the City's decision to not use internet or telephone voting on election day itself is problematic. It is beneficial that 11 days of advance voting were made available, but not allowing a crucial voting method to be available on election day would have impacted the effectiveness of the solution. In sum, the City of St. Thomas placed great care to ensure an accessible election. Ensuring that the internet voting solution offered could be accessed by those with disabilities. The City also framed the addition of internet voting as itself being something that would increase citizen accessibility. Allowing individuals to access the election from wherever they could. However, the lack of a targeted communication plan

and not making the solution available on election day, likely hindered the effectiveness

of this solution.

Kawartha Lakes

Kawartha Lakes	Total Number of Electors	Number of Electors who Voted	Turnout	Percentage change
2018	66,441	25,280	38.05%	-3.44%
2014	67,607	28,047	41.49%	

The municipality of Kawartha Lakes is a uniquely designed municipality located

Northeast of Durham Region. Despite its significant size encompassing nearly 3084.38

Km2, the City operates as a single-tier municipality. With a population density of 24.5

KM2, it is by far the most sparsely populated area analyzed thus far (Census Profile,

2016 Census -Kawartha Lakes, City [Census Division], Ontario. (2016), 2016).

Administering elections in this region will thus have its own set of challenges. Although

it has a surprisingly sparse population density, the City has a relatively large population

with approximately 75,423 living in the area (Census Profile, 2016 Census -Kawartha

Lakes, City [Census Division], Ontario. (2016), 2016). However, this population is by far

the oldest of the six municipalities studied. With a median population age of 51.20, it is

an aging demographic cohort (Census Profile, 2016 Census -Kawartha Lakes, City

[Census Division], Ontario. (2016), 2016). Although the population is significantly older

than the average, their income level is conversely the lowest among the other six with a

median annual income of $32,302 (Census Profile, 2016 Census -Kawartha Lakes, City

[Census Division], Ontario. (2016), 2016). Kawartha lakes has the lowest percentage of

people aged 25 to 64 with a post-secondary degree with 54.97% (Census Profile, 2016

Census -Kawartha Lakes, City [Census Division], Ontario. (2016), 2016). These factors

are important to consider when analyzing the impacts of internet voting, and how best

the municipality could have maximized turnout as a result. The City experienced a

decrease in voter turnout of 3.44% percent during the change to internet voting.

Accessible Customer Service training was an important step administration at

Kawartha Lakes took to meet their legislative requirements of facilitating an accessible

election. The legislative staff were specifically trained in how to communicate to those

with various types of disability and were trained in how to clearly explain internet and

telephone voting (2018 Municipal Election Accessibility Plan, 2018c). Moreover, they

were instructed on what to do if individuals had difficulties accessing election

information or services online. As well, voting areas would have devices made

available for those to cast ballots online (2018 Municipal Election Accessibility Plan,

2018c). City libraries and other City service centres had public internet made available

during regular operating hours, and trained staff was present to help those during the

designated voting period (2018 Municipal Election Accessibility Plan, 2018c).

Principally, internet voting was described by the municipality as another way to meet the

accessibility concerns of its constituents. The voting software allowed electors to use

built-in accessibility features. This included enlarging font size, adjusting colour

contrast, and having security text read aloud. The software solution was also compliant

with WCAG 2.0 Level A guidelines and allowed for personal assistive technologies to be

used with the system (2018 Municipal Election Accessibility Plan, 2018c).

The City also made use of several communication and outreach methods to

promote the new forms of voting. These included traditional print (newspaper and local

magazines), highway signage, promoted posts on social media, transit advertising, signage, banners and, maps for municipal facilities and City Election Website promotion (Watts, 2020). The City had a particularly creative slogan to market the ease of voting and the number of ways people could access the election. In their voter information brochure, the City explained that residents had 10 days and 2 ways (Voter Education Session 2018 Municipal Election, 2018). Indicating that residents had 10 days to vote up to the last official day of voting and 2 ways of casting ballots, either online or by phone (Watts, 2020). They offered access to voter registration online and made use of help centres with touch screen kiosks at several sites throughout the municipality (Watts, 2020). These brochures were sent to residents as a part of their utility billing. The advertisements on the bus were used in public transit in Lindsay, the most densely populated area of the community (Watts, 2020).

The City also held voter information sessions open to the general public. Here City staff went through several administrative topics including ward boundary maps and voting assistance locations. However, staff only dedicated one slide to internet and telephone voting during these presentations (Voter Education Session 2018 Municipal Election, 2018). Unfortunately, despite all the work put in by staff in marketing the election, the information sessions were not well attended (W. J, personnel communication, May 31, 2021). Thus, much of the information they had, from Dominion voting was not presented, although it was made available to the public at a later date.

In sum, the City of Kawartha Lakes had several innovative strategies to encourage resident participation in the new voting method. They ensured staff were trained on accessibility-related concerns to e-voting and made accessing the elections in their municipal help centres easy to use. Public wi-fi was offered to all residents in widely accessible community areas. As well, interesting, and creative advertisements were marketed in a wide array of forums for the public to see. While the City was proactive in its approach to promoting the electronic election, residents were unfortunately unmoved by the initiatives. Ultimately, what was lacking was a targeted campaign towards specific demographic groups within the community.

Policy Recommendations

Part of what makes it difficult to identify key policy recommendations is that internet voting is used as a solution to many different problems. For example, some of the municipalities studied claim that internet voting was implemented because of its ability to assist those with accessibility concerns. While others focused on increasing electoral participation. Both are valid, however, the results one receives from a

municipal election may be interpreted differently depending on how this problem was initially defined. A slight decrease in voter turnout may be inconsequential if the initial problem attempting to be solved was accessibility. Whereas strictly looking at election turnout may neglect to identify what groups were disenfranchised because of this new voting method. This study sought to assess whether there were accessibility or outreach strategies that had some correlation to maximizing internet voting turnout.

Because this is a qualitative study it is difficult to make sweeping judgements based on just a few cases studied. However, there are a few examples of outreach and accessibility strategies that appear to stand out, which help to maximize internet voting. With regards to accessibility, voting software plays a significant role in making voting available to those with disabilities. The built-in solutions provided by voting software companies are relied upon heavily to meet the needs of municipalities' respective electorates. However, more needs to be done to ensure voter participation is maximized. What is clear is that all municipalities have had to still run-in-person voting booths to accommodate those that do not have access to the internet. To effectively convey these messages election officials, need to adequately engage with accessibility groups within their municipalities to properly assess the needs of its electorate.

As such, it appears as though, those municipalities who experienced the full benefits of online voting created a meaningful engagement plan with regards to their outreach strategies. In the case study above six municipalities were analyzed. Of these six they can be categorized into three distinct levels of voter engagement. The first is a laissez-faire approach to implementing internet voting. Of the six studied only, St. Thomas fits into this category. This category reflects municipalities that implement

internet voting with little to no other significant outreach strategies. It appears just implementing the solution, with no other substantial communication plan will result in little to no change at all in the voter turnout. The second, titled broadcast engagement, comprises BWG, Kawartha Lakes, and Pickering. These groups of municipalities represent those who had active and substantive communication plans to promote internet voting. However, their plans were not targeted at anyone specific demographic group among their population.

A generic communication plan was used to reach out to the public and promote internet voting. Unfortunately, this type of outreach strategy appears to decrease voter turnout, as was the case in the three municipalities mentioned above. The last category is titled targeted, which references the communication plans used by the clerks' departments. They reflect the key demographic make-up of the cities they are used in. This is crucial because it recognizes the uniqueness of the community and creates a plan to accommodate this. Sarnia and Thunder Bay both accomplished this in the 2018 election. Sarnia focused on reaching out to senior citizens and emphasized their education on the new voting process. Thunder bay on other hand, with a well-educated and relatively young population, understood the best way to communicate with its citizens was online. Creating a one-stop-shop election website and publishing widely viewed election materials on Youtube.

What this seems to show is that administering a half-hazard communication plan without a targeted approach related to the constituency may in fact decrease turnout as a result. Thus, to experience the full benefits of online voting, meaningful, and well-thought-out engagement needs to be created. Otherwise, municipalities could

negatively impact turnout. Internet voting can still result in several benefits for municipalities implementing them. In the case of Kawartha lakes, the City was able to administer a much more cost-effective election and contend with the extremely difficult challenge of conducting an election in a large rural setting. Internet voting centralizes the functions of elections and allows for a more manageable election. As such, it is important to recognize that not all cities wanted to achieve an increase in voter turnout. As stated above, there are several policy challenges that internet voting seeks to resolve. However, if maximizing voter turnout is one that cities are striving for then it will take some serious and concerted effort on their part to achieve these results. More importantly, as a classification tool for future analysis, these categories can act as a guide to help organize data obtained by other researchers.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research aimed to identify what outreach and accessibility factors can maximize the impact of internet voting in municipal elections. In reviewing the relevant literature it's clear that online voting does increase voter turnout and will result in increased user convenience (Goodman and Stokes, 2018). Turnout appears to be contingent on the effectiveness of the public outreach strategies imposed by municipalities.

In developing a robust review of 2018 municipal election plans from various clerks' departments, I have been able to determine that there seem to be some communication strategies more effective at increasing internet voting than others. These strategies could prove very important for upcoming elections that will undoubtedly face unique implementation challenges due to the ongoing pandemic. As

well, in an area of government that has consistently faced challenges attracting voters,

maximizing a voting solution will be essential. In understanding what strategies work

best, administrators may be able to utilize these ideas to improve democratic

participation.

Voter Engagement Typology – Chart
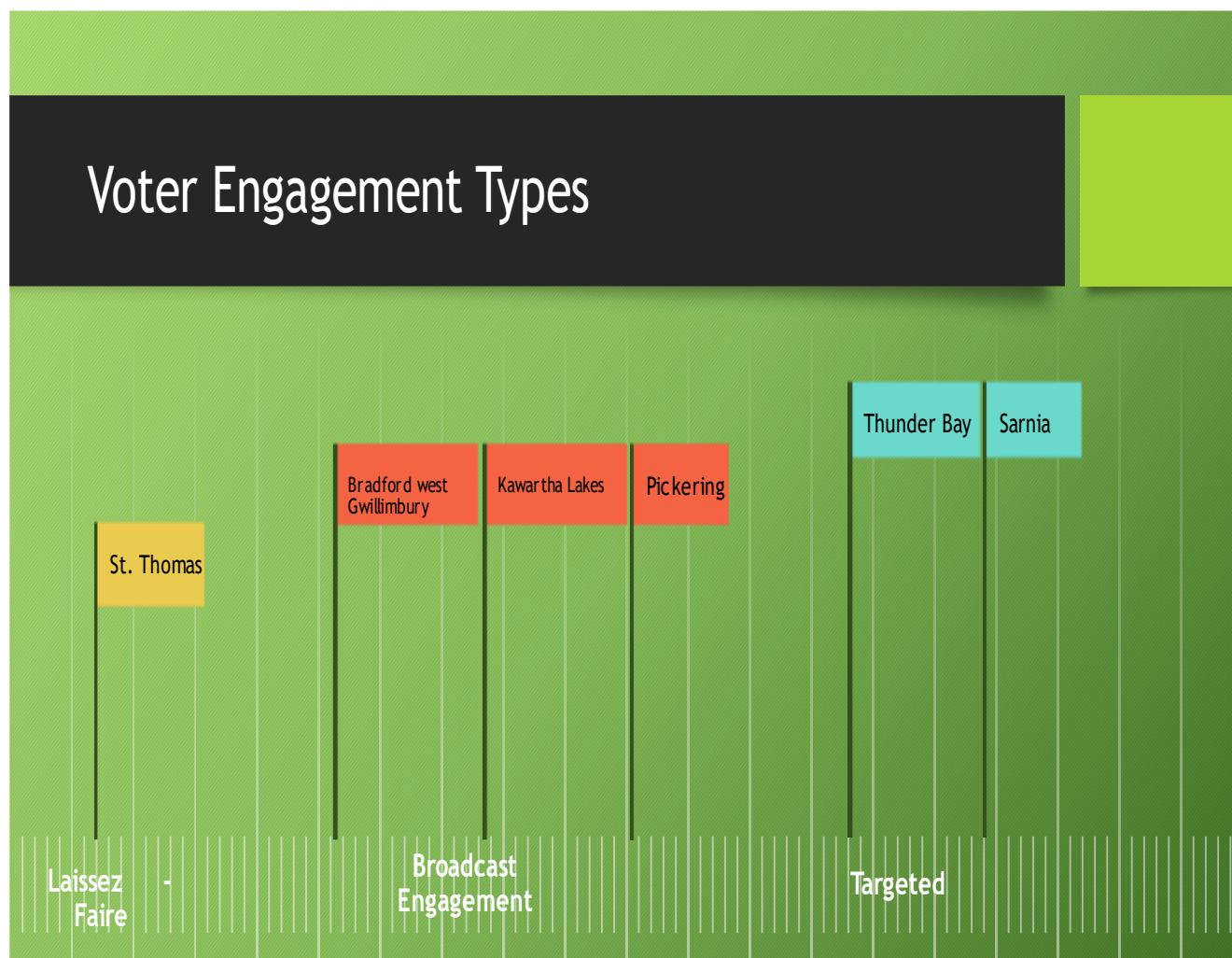
Summary of Municipalities – Table

Municipality	Strategies	Typology
St. Thomas	• Provided information to MP's/MPP's • Set up chat line for staff to respond to inquiries • Messaging in council meetings promoting the new voting method	Laissez - Faire
Bradford west Gwillimbury	• Various media advertisement (post cards, bus adverts, social media, live chat, newspaper ads) • Open houses	Broadcast
Pickering	• Social Media, City website advert • Information advert sent to residents	Broadcast
Kawartha Lakes	• Social media, radio advertisements, mail inserts and newspapers • Election information sessions	Broadcast
Thunder Bay	• Widely viewed Youtube videos • One-stop-shop election website	Targeted
Sarnia	• Outreach at long-term care homes • Public information sessions focused on internet voting	Targeted

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