

Election Readiness Update

Report of the Chief Electoral Officer

October 9, 2024



Message from the Chief Electoral Officer

In 2022, ENS adopted the tagline “***Elections that work for you***”. The purpose of this update is to provide an update on Elections Nova Scotia’s (ENS) election readiness planning for the 42nd Provincial general Election (PGE).

In June, the Premier stated to the media that the fixed date may not be adhered to, and that an election may be called before July 15, 2025. In response, ENS has accelerated its preparations to be ready for an early election.

ENS’s mandate is to prepare for and deliver fair and inclusive elections, impartially and professionally. My team and I are preparing for the possibility of the 42nd PGE being called earlier than the legislated fixed election date and have adjusted our plans and financial forecast accordingly. This report provides a summary of our election readiness planning cycle and a status update, key planning considerations, and an overview of what voters can expect in the next PGE.

What is most important to me at this time is to ensure that we can deliver a safe, fair, inclusive and transparent election. I am very pleased that in recent years, the registered parties have been integral at every stage as we have made improvements and worked to update the legislative framework for enhanced delivery systems for voters in Nova Scotia. Elections Nova Scotia is a leader in the options available to electors who may vote anywhere and on many days during the writ period. The e-ballot system that was introduced in the two by-elections in 2023 and 2024 has been well received by voters, and the integrity of the system has been proven during these electoral events.

I understand the importance of ENS being a trusted source of electoral information so that voters can have confidence in the integrity of the electoral process. That is why we share a vision to be trusted by all Nova Scotians to excel in the delivery of fair and inclusive elections. As the province’s independent election management body, we are guided by our core values of trust, integrity, accessibility, transparency, innovation and accountability. We infuse these values in everything we do as we fulfil our mandate to serve democracy as we deliver provincial elections professionally and impartially.

Background

ENS’ provincial general election cycle is made up of three phases as outlined below.

Phases one and two take from 12 and 18 months to complete.

Election Planning Phases:

Phase One - Planning and Preparation – staff prepare election readiness plans for implementation. These plans would account for any new revised procedural or legislative changes.

Phase Two - Implementation – with plans approved, staff begin to implement. This typically involves enhancements to our election management systems software, hiring and training core returning office election staff, procuring and preparing election equipment, technology and materials, as well as identifying and inspecting returning offices and voting locations (inspections validate accessibility and fit for use).

Phase One was concluded at the end of fiscal 2023/2024 and Phase Two began in April of this year. Our original implementation plans would have seen us conclude Phase Two in May of 2025, however with the prospect of an early election call our implementation plans were expedited in June of this year. Some of the major implementation plans we expedited are as follows:

Initiative	Planned Completion	Actual Completion
Core staff hiring	December 2024	September 2024
Election materials production and assembly	December 2024	September 2024
Imaging, testing and packaging of all field technical equipment	March 2025	September 2024
Field pre-event and event training	May 2025	October 2024*

**NOTE: Due to the uncertainty of an election call, training is being held virtually, otherwise it will be delivered in person if the election is called after May 2025.*

Our Location Inspection Assignment was also completed over this past summer and concluded as per our original planned completion date. This assignment required returning officers in every district to contact landlords and facility managers, and to inspect locations for possible lease as returning offices, early voting and election day locations. To date approximately 800 locations across the province have been inspected, including locations such as church halls, community centres, schools, and privately owned places of business.

Phase Three - Execution – As soon as the writs of election are issued, staff execute all election activities

Planning Considerations

Costs – Budget for the 2024 – 2025 Fiscal Year

The approved budget allocation for ENS in the 2024-2025 fiscal year was \$400,000 lower than the estimates recommended by the Special Committee of the House of Assembly. The final budget includes funding to meeting our June 1, 2025 election readiness gate.

Costs to prepare for an early election call may increase as additional staff is required for packing of election materials, training and communications. The additional cost pressures are currently estimated at \$400k.

Outreach

ENS has planned a program of increase outreach to NS electors through our IDEAS (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility) committee. Temporary staff are working on the implementation of enhanced outreach to underserved communities for the July 2025 fixed election date. If an election is called before that time, these activities will be impacted, and the benefits of this initiative will be reduced.

Internet Voting

The Government of Nova Scotia made amendments to the *Elections Act* in 2021 to permit the use of internet voting, initially by Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members deployed outside the province during an election event. In February 2023 Elections Nova Scotia (ENS) awarded a contract through

the Nova Scotia tender process to ScytI Canada Inc. to develop software services, IT infrastructure and hosting services, as well as training, support, and the full management of a highly secure internet voting solution. ENS had a master service agreement with ScytI Canada Inc. to develop an internet voting solution to enable CAF members deployed outside the province to vote online during the 42nd Provincial General Election (PGE). The development and testing of ENS's internet voting solution was completed prior to April of 2024. In April of 2024 both ScytI Canada and its parent company ScytI Election Technologies from Barcelona, Spain declared bankruptcy. In August ENS was informed that ScytI Election Technologies had been purchased by COMITIA MSA in July 2024. Currently, ENS does not have a service agreement for internet voting so it will not be implemented for the 42nd PGE. CAF members will vote as they have in previous elections using Write in Ballots.

[Elections Deliver During an Emergency](#)

If an emergency were to happen in Nova Scotia, the *Elections Act* is limited with respect to what the CEO could or could not do. While the Act provides the CEO some discretionary powers under Sections 5(q) and 351, it also expressly forbids the CEO to extend voting beyond midnight on election day under Section 4(3)(a)(1). Section 33 does permit the Governor in Council to rescind a writ, specify a new date for a writ and election day if the CEO certifies it is impossible to hold an election on the date specified. This provides an escape route to effectively deal with an emergency in one or more districts. The extensive early voting opportunities in Nova Scotia offer some mitigation for voters who may be impacted by an emergency.

[Issues Management](#)

During all elections, issues are brought forward to ENS regarding such topics as voting, candidates and party advertising. It has been the practice of ENS to address concerns raised by voters and other stakeholders in an efficient and fair manner. To that end, ENS has enhanced its Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on the website and issued interpretation circulars regarding election advertising that will provide guidance to stakeholders and the ENS team who field questions and complaints. External resources including legal counsel and election management experts are also used to determine the best responses when addressing issues.

What Voters Can Expect for the 42nd Provincial General Election

This section highlights the most significant changes that will be included for the 42nd PGE and differ from the 41st PGE held in 2021. These changes will impact voters, election officials and political stakeholders.

Shift in Focus for Voting Opportunities

Based on the changes in voter preferences observed in recent elections, ENS plans to encourage early voting options across the province. In 2021, 44% of voters chose to vote before election day. By providing information about voting options and emphasizing how to vote safely, we anticipate that voters will take advantage of vote-by-mail and early voting opportunities in much greater numbers. The early voting opportunities were used by more voters in the two by-elections held in 2023 and 2024. (49.8% and 45.3% respectively)

Voting in Person

The most significant changes to voting experiences will be at early voting locations (advance polls, community polls, and returning office polls) where we will be offering e-ballots after nominations close. Voting on Election Day will offer paper ballots only. A communication strategy has been developed to provide all voters with the information needed on what to expect at each voting opportunity across the province. It is important to note that the e-ballot system was offered at all early voting locations in the by-elections held in 2023 and 2024, and voter feedback was very positive.

Election Night Results

One of the most significant improvements to the results reporting system was the introduction of the e-ballot system for early voting. The e-ballot process, including the digital count process, reduces the time required to deliver the election results for all early voting polls. Votes cast on election day, votes by mail and WIB cast will be hand counted and reported in the same manner as in previous elections.

Conclusion

As we now look ahead to the next PGE, I will continue to assess and mitigate risks associated with our election plans and commit to report to our stakeholders any significant change to our preparations.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dorothy Rice".

Dorothy Rice

Chief Electoral Officer