

Municipal Legislation Review Recommendation from the Canadian Federation of Students- NL

The Canadian Federation of Students of Newfoundland and Labrador represents every post-secondary student in the province with a membership of over 27, 000. As the largest body advocating for high quality and accessible post-secondary education in the province, we recognize the importance of municipal involvement to our members and the communities where they live.

We wanted to first take this opportunity to thank Engage NL for encouraging transparent consultation with various interest groups and citizens, regarding the upcoming municipal legislation review. We appreciate that the government of Newfoundland and Labrador recognizes our mutual goal to engage more students in municipal politics.

Participation in municipal politics is an integral part of developing strong, accessible, engaging, and equitable communities for all citizens. Students are essential members of our communities; however, student voter turnout is among the lowest in Canada, as is representation on municipal governing bodies. At the time of the Municipal Election in Newfoundland and Labrador, less than four percent of municipal council seats are occupied by individuals' aged 18-35. Despite the gains of the last election with a record number of cis-gendered women running and winning their seats in our largest municipality, outside of the City of St. John's, progress was minimal. Furthermore, municipal governance in the province lacks diversity with minimal representation from minority communities.

Newfoundland and Labrador needs a strategy to facilitate student engagement and robust participation from all our citizens. If we are able to engage voters at an early age, research shows they are more likely to remain engaged throughout their lives, not just turning up to vote, but getting involved in their community, and running for political office. The following recommendations are aimed to address the lack of accessibility in the current municipal electoral system. Legislative change is necessary to ensure all eligible students in the province are casting their votes and putting their names forward to serve on municipal councils around the province.

RECOMMENDATION ONE

Change the voting date to ensure students who have recently relocated to pursue their studies can vote

As it currently states in *Section 22 of the Municipal Act in Newfoundland and Labrador*, a person must have lived in a municipality 30-days prior to Election Day in order to be a registered voter. Considering the last day to cast your ballot of the 2017 election was the 26th of September, the existing timeline precludes many students from voting as they would not yet meet the 30-day minimum after returning for their studies. If the Election Day were moved two weeks later, to the beginning of October, it would ensure students who have relocated to pursue their post-secondary education are not disenfranchised by the 30-day requirement. Adjusting the Election Day to ensure as many students as possible can participate also allows for more time to arrange campus activities for candidates, again, increasing student engagement in civic politics.

RECOMMENDATION TWO

Institute accessible polling stations on campuses

Currently, Election Day is early in the first semester, which is an exceptionally busy time for students. In order to ensure as many students as possible can vote; it would be advisable to have an all-ward polling station located on the St. John's

campus and Grenfell Campuses. For example, the more advanced and accessible polling station in St. John's would allow for the over 20,000 staff, students, and faculty who live throughout the city, but are on campus during the day, to vote while on campus. Finally, this polling station would be located on public space that has parking, can be reached from many transit routes, and is wheelchair accessible. Removing barriers to accessing municipal voting will increase voting turnout and by extension, community engagement.

RECOMMENDATION THREE

Accept a wider variety of documentation as proof of residency

It is common for post-secondary students to relocate to a different municipality or move within a municipality, especially during the fall months of the year. Therefore, having updated proof of residency can be difficult. Due to the reality that many students rent or live on campus, they are often not listed on utility bills. In terms of a driver's license or identification card, students that have relocated for their studies from other parts of the province are likely to have their home addresses listed not their most current residence. If photo identification could be used in combination with other documentation to verify the voter's current residence, this would increase accessibility for students. For example, verification could be made via a driver's license in conjunction with a letter from an employer or landlord, a copy of a lease agreement, or a confirmation of enrolment letter from a post-secondary institution.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

Include resident non-citizens in the voting process

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador has committed to welcoming more newcomers from all over the world to the province through increased immigration. In *The Way Forward* vision document released by the government, the intention is to have 1,700 newcomers immigrate to the province annually by 2022. In order to encourage these newcomers to become involved in the province, there must be measures taken to enfranchise all residents to vote in

municipal elections. International students live, work, and pay taxes in this province and within various municipalities but are unable to participate in the civic process without being Canadian citizens. As we attempt to move forward together a province who welcomes people from beyond Canada's borders, we too must create a place where participation in the most intimate level of governance is inclusive, robust, and similarly welcoming. Therefore, all residents who have lived in a municipality for at least 30 days, should be empowered to vote in municipal elections, regardless of citizenship.

CONCLUSION

Meeting students where they are during elections is essential in fostering a greater level of engagement in municipal politics. In particular, the city of St. John's is a hub of post-secondary education where students live, pay taxes, volunteer, work, and study. Yet oftentimes, despite their contributions to the economic, social, and political well-being of the city they do not have a seat at the table to discuss the decisions that directly affect their lives. It is our hope that you will take these recommendations into consideration for this election and in preparation for the next. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this process and look forward to working with all municipalities to involve the students of our province in municipal politics.

Submitted by:

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