

UVSS Elections Office

Electoral Report

Referendum, Fall 2012

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1.0 Preamble

The Elections Office team was able to build on the successes of past elections in order to organize and conduct an unbiased and fair referendum. The positive foundations for this success are derived from the extensive efforts of previous Electoral Officers, the guiding document of the Electoral Policy Manual (EPM), and the support of the University of Victoria Students' Society (UVSS) Board of Directors and staff. This report will begin with a summary of the practical considerations of the referendum, including an explanation of the results. Next, it will detail the more specific successes of this semester's Elections Office, including the goals of the Electoral Officers, and the effective use of social media, polling stations, and poll-sitters.

Last, this report will explain which points, going forward, have room for improvement, and in what ways. The electoral process on campus is constantly evolving; as the socio-political setting changes, so too do the policies and practices of the Elections Office. Each and every referendum and election are going to face unique challenges. It is the responsibility of each outgoing Elections team to clearly articulate the challenges they faced in order to provide lessons, warnings, and best practices for subsequent teams. These lessons will allow for democratic processes on campus to expand or contract as needed, in order to benefit present and future students, staff, and faculty.

2.0 Summary of Events

2.1 Referendum Question

“Do you support establishing a dedicated fee for the purpose of renovating Felicita’s Campus Pub and the Student Union Building in the amount of \$5.00 per full-time student per semester and \$2.50 per part-time student per semester, beginning in May 2013 and ending April 2018?”

2.2 The Nomination Period

Following the precedent established last year, all of the necessary documentation was not provided in paper form, but rather, advertised as being available online. These forms included: the EPM, the Constitution and Bylaws (C&B) report, the third-party endorsement form, and separate nomination forms (for the proponent and opponent sides respectively). Based on the current policies, the timeline for the nomination periods for proponents and opponents are different. As such, the Elections Office was unaware if a question would be supported or contested until the nomination deadlines for proponents and opponents had passed. However, this did not seriously impact the operations of the Elections Office. In the end, one individual, Ariel Tseng, submitted a proponent form. No one submitted an opponent form.

The Elections Office advised potential proponents and opponents of the appropriate documentation that they would need to successfully advance a side in four ways: I) one half-page advertisement in the October 25th issue of the *Martlet*, II) postings online on the UVSS Elections website and Facebook page, III) an email to all current UVSS members, and IV) posters in all academic buildings on campus. After the call for nominations was published in the *Martlet*, the UVSS Board of Directors amended the wording of the question. As such, the Elections Office published a second half-page advertisement in the *Martlet* to satisfy the Notice of Referendum bylaws.

2.3 Polling

Polling was conducted using the University’s Webvote system for a period of 24-hours, commencing at 9:00am PST on Thursday, November 29th and ending at 9:00am PST on November 30th. This is the third time the WebVote system has been used, and again it worked without issue. Although eligible voters can vote from any internet-accessible device, polling stations were set up in sixteen buildings on campus, as mandated by the EPM. Polling station locations and times were determined by the Senior Deputy Electoral Officer (SDEO) and the Deputy Electoral Officers (DEOs), based on the busiest times and locations of classes.

2.4 Results

The referendum passed with 52.035% of votes in favour. Out of 3521 total ballots cast, 1832 were in favour, 1688 were opposed, 1 was spoiled, and 1 was blank. Out of 16,681 eligible voters, 3522 voted, resulting in a turnout rate of 21.11%. The referendum results were posted on webvote.uvic.ca, on the UVSS Elections website, on the Elections Office's social media platforms, and in six buildings on campus, as mandated by the EPM.

See Appendix A for the detailed results.

3.0 Successes

There were zero formal complaints registered for the duration of the referendum period. Where expressed, concerns and questions by students were alleviated and answered via email, through social media channels, and in person to the CEO, SDEO, and DEOs. The smooth execution of the referendum may be attributed to the solid foundation established by the previous Elections team, the elections experience of the CEO, and the assistance of all parties involved, including the UVSS Board and its affiliated employees.

The Elections Office was pleased at the turnout rate, though we will build on our past experiences in order to facilitate an even higher turnout rate during the next voting period. The SDEO and both DEOs actively worked to create an environment conducive to representative democracy, including the facilitation of voting in a non-partisan setting. In addition to the support of external individuals, three measures actively taken by the Elections Office contributed to the referendum's successful execution. These include, but are not limited to: the mandate of the Elections Office itself, the presence of social media, and the extensive efforts put into advertising. These measures are discussed in-depth below.

3.1 The Mandate of the Elections Office

Early on in the process, the Elections Office decided on three main goals for the referendum period. These included: a desire for high turnout, effective publicity and advertising, and an undisputedly impartial and unbiased organization and implementation process. The first factor (high turnout) is a hallmark of any successful election, as it ensures the representativeness of the polling sample.

There was a clear and concise desire that the Elections Office be viewed publically as operating separately from the UVSS. This separation is designed to ensure the Elections Office was seen, in the eyes of students, as an entity without a vested interest in the results of the referendum. As such, there was an expectation that students would feel comfortable approaching the Office for information about the logistics and practicalities of voting without apprehension. The same rings true for the Elections Office's presence on the Internet, through social media, and via email. Indeed, the three primary goals operated in symbiosis – each effort assisted the other, so that, for example, our mandate was exemplified by the presence of the Elections Office on social media, which was in turn supported by advertising done by poll-sitters and Electoral Officers.

3.2 Social Media

At the request of one of the DEOs, Facebook and Twitter pages were set up for the Elections Office. We list our phone number, email, and website, and field questions on our wall, as well as through comments on our posts and pictures. We posted how and where students could vote, as well as reminders in the weeks leading up to voting day, as well as the results once voting was closed. We also uploaded the Electoral Policy Manual, posted a copy of the *Martlet* supplement, and created an event for voting day, to encourage Facebook users to get involved.

The goal was to reach out to students and to encourage their engagement with electoral processes on campus, in order to support our mandate of promoting democracy on campus. These social media accounts were also intended to create an online presence for the Elections Office to reflect contemporary trends of social media involvement. We strongly support the effectiveness of this method of outreach, and believe it should be continued in the future. Because the Elections Office provided information and results in an impartial and unbiased fashion, students were able to stay informed without having to rely on one source for information, the UVSS, which in this case, the UVSS Board of Directors voted to support the proponent side, rendering their information biased.

3.3 Advertising

To fulfill our mandate of encouraging voter turnout, the Elections Office engaged in extensive advertising to let students know about the upcoming referendum and voting day. In addition to our social media and website presence, we did this in two ways: distributing handbills, and classroom speaking. The handbills contained Quick Read (QR) codes, and information about the Elections Office was included on one side, with links to the various media through which we could be contacted. The other side included the referendum question and information about voting.

Four of our poll-sitters performed classroom-speaking duties in the weeks preceding polling, in order to advertise the referendum, and to encourage students to vote. Our classroom speakers distributed the first set in the weeks preceding voting day, and the second set, which included a "Vote Now!" blurb as well as a link to WebVote, on voting day. Above all, we emphasized to poll-sitters the vitality of maintaining neutrality and impartiality in their interactions with students.

3.4 Polling Stations and Poll-Sitters

Thirteen poll-sitters were hired for the referendum period to maintain polling stations, which were set up, as per EPM requirements, in sixteen buildings on campus. The polling station schedule was determined by analyzing class times, and setting up stations according to building traffic at peak times throughout the day. This was done to ensure that the Elections Office engaged with the maximum amount of students possible, during that building's busiest times. Three buildings had polling stations open all day: Clearihue, the McPherson Library, and the SUB.

4.0 Recommendations

4.1 Third-Party Endorsements by the UVSS Board of Directors

The UVSS Board and affiliated employees took an active role in this semester's referendum campaign. On November 15th, the Elections Office received a third-party endorsement form, endorsing the proponent side of the referendum, and signed by members of the UVSS Board of Directors.

Due to this third-party endorsement, the lines between the rights of the proponent and the abilities of the third party, the UVSS, became blurry. In addition to the overarching issue of independence, this impacted the Elections Office in two main ways. First, there was a last-minute editing process that the DEOs had to walk through with Graffix regarding the *Martlet* supplement that traditionally accompanies their publication in the week preceding voting day. Second, the issue of "branding" for the Elections Office, which is something that will become increasingly important as publicity and social media increases in scope. This is detailed in section 4.2.

The first concern, as expressed by the CEO, was that since the images that were going to be used in the *Martlet* supplement were chosen from a selection of proposed renovations and architects' mock-ups which *were also used by the Yes side*, the supplement could be misread as putting forward that vision, since it mirrored the Yes side's campaign. This was compounded by the fact that there was no opponent, and thus the supplement would contain neutral information written by the Elections Office, and a 400-word blurb from the proponent, without anything expressing a contrary opinion. Because the supplement was written by and paid for by the Elections Office, an attempt was made to ensure that the supplement did not appear to be partial to the proponent or opponent side, as this would violate the necessity to remain impartial and non-partisan. As a result, we worked with the Graffix Office to select neutral imagery.

Furthermore, questions and concerns were raised informally by students, regarding the UVSS Board of Directors' endorsement of the proponent side. The belief was that since the Board of Directors is supposed to be representing the views of all students, they should not be taking an active position on a question that is put forth via referendum. The ethics and decision of the Board of Directors to endorse one side of a referendum question is beyond the role and scope of the Elections Office. Nonetheless, the Board of Directors should make an effort to differentiate the endorsement as coming from the Board of Directors as opposed to the UVSS membership.

Recommendation: We recommend that there needs to be active differentiation between the Board, as the third-party endorsing the Yes side, and the UVSS, which represents all students. This clarification must be extended to all promotional materials so that it is clear, in the eyes of students, where the support for one side over another is originating.

4.2 Elections Office Branding

In a meeting with Ben Johnson and Lucia Orser (Director of External Relations for the UVSS), we were informed that the prior establishment of the Facebook and Twitter pages for the Elections Office did not reflect the branding of the UVSS, and UVic more generally, and thus needed a distinctive look before they were ready for public consumption. Working with Graffix, the Elections Office received new cover and profile photos for the Facebook page that were distinct from, but approved by the UVSS.

This raises similar concerns to those expressed by previous Elections teams, but with a social media spin: Does the UVSS have the right to dictate the appearance of Elections Office materials, considering the Office is autonomous and distinct from the UVSS? We understand the need for cohesion of public image, especially during UVic's 50th anniversary year, however, we are apprehensive at the Elections Office being answerable to the UVSS regarding the image that is projected to the student body and broader community. Reflecting the established objective of the Elections Office to remain impartial and unbiased, if the UVSS does indeed have the right to dictate the terms of the Office's affairs, then the independence of the Office is at risk.

The referendum was executed without issue, meaning that the matter of branding did not end up affecting the integrity of the overall process, however, this is something that should be addressed. We recommend that the Elections Office be represented to all invested parties, and the student body, as a distinct entity. These changes could be practically implemented in the following ways: a separate website for the Elections Office, independent to the UVSS one; our own branding, including the separation of the UVSS logo from the Elections Office logo; and a separate colour scheme. To maintain the autonomy of the Elections Office, we request the ability to choose our own branding and modes of media representation.

Recommendation: The Elections Office retains rights over branding and promotional materials, and media representation must reflect this independence. While we remain accountable to the Electoral Committee, we request that our image is portrayed as being independent of both the UVSS and the Board of Directors.

4.3 Polling Station Usage

Poll-sitters track the number of students who vote at their specific station using a tally sheet. The majority of polling stations are vastly underused, and sometimes not used by students at all. The Elections Office understands that the impetus for this policy is to allow poll-sitters to engage with a large number and diversity of students for a long period of time; however, this is a very inefficient and cost-ineffective way of publicizing voting. Most students who vote do so using their cell phones or personal computers, and as such, energy could be better directed towards publicity and advertising voting.

Some poll-sitters suggested that they felt that their presence in certain buildings was not useful due to the lack of student-interaction. They felt frustrated by the long stretches of zero interaction for some parts of their shift. Poll-sitters were encouraged to engage with as many people as they could, to make every interaction count, and to distribute QR codes to students who did not wish to vote at that particular polling station, however, in some cases this

was impossible because there simply weren't any students to talk to. The Elections Office acknowledged early on the need to engage students who may not typically be involved with UVSS affairs or related events such as referenda. These may include students who use the Fine Arts Building and Fraser Law Building (both located outside of Ring Road), ECS, and ELW. As such, careful consideration was given to the location of polling stations in those buildings.

Our classroom speakers reported the high efficacy of publicizing the referendum in this way, which confirms the Elections Office's belief that the most effective role for poll-sitters is engaging with and educating students. Most students were unaware that a referendum was even taking place on campus, and it is the role of the Elections Office to ensure that effective information is available in order to encourage student involvement. In our opinion, classroom speaking and publicity in general represent the best use of our time and resources, and are the most efficient modes of student engagement.

As a result, we recommend modifying the EPM policy requiring a fixed number of polling stations in physical locations on campus, and request that this number be reduced to fewer physical polling stations so that resources may be devoted to classroom speaking and engaging with students. We recommend that polling stations in the SUB, Clearihue, and McPherson be the only ones in operation – they are able to remain open for the longest period of time on voting day, they report the highest concentration of student usage, and they are some of the busiest buildings on campus. Other buildings may be selected to reach a diverse collection of students, but the overall number of polling stations should be streamlined in order to best utilize resources.

Recommendation: That the EPM be amended to reduce the mandatory polling station locations from sixteen buildings to three building: the SUB, Clearihue, and McPherson library. This may be supplemented by other building locations, and we suggest that resources be devoted to engaging with students, publicizing the role of the Elections Office, and "getting out the vote."

5.0 Conclusion

The Elections Office is extremely pleased with the organization and implementation of the Fall 2012 referendum. Thanks to the efforts of all those involved, particularly members of the UVSS Board of Directors, Ben Johnson, and Dale Robertson, the General Manager of the UVSS, and the electoral committee, the Elections Office felt confident in its mandate to execute a free and fair referendum. Many thanks also to Shawn Slavin, whose unfaltering leadership and past experiences proved invaluable resources to this year's SDEO and DEOs. We congratulate the proponent, Ariel Tseng, on a clean campaign, and invite anyone with further questions or concerns to please contact us via email, Facebook, Twitter, or in person. Thank you to everyone involved for your tireless efforts on behalf of the University of Victoria student body.

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