

Factors Influencing VBM Turnout in Hamilton



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What is The Research About?

The adoption of Vote-by-Mail (VbM) systems is crucial for electoral accessibility and participation, especially in Ontario's municipal and federal elections. This study focuses on assessing VbM's impact on voter turnout and democratic accessibility. Administrative ease plays a significant role in encouraging voter engagement. States with automatic VbM kit distribution witnessed increased electoral participation, contrasting with Hamilton's lower turnout due to an online application requirement. Comparative analysis across municipalities like Toronto, Hamilton, and Guelph reveals varied implementation trajectories, emphasizing tailored strategies aligned with local needs. For instance, Leamington's automatic VbM kit distribution led to a higher voter turnout. VbM's societal implications intersect with discussions on democratic accessibility and inclusion. Its potential to enhance democratic engagement underscores the need for nuanced implementation and impact assessment. Synthesizing insights highlights the tension between administrative efficiency and accessibility. While administrative ease

correlates with increased turnout, balancing security and accessibility remains a challenge.

How It Was Done:

Hamilton employed VbM similar to 77 other Ontario municipalities yet had a low voter turnout. Based on other municipalities it is clear that Hamilton can increase VbM participation but how? Connections are seen between administrative ease and VbM turnout with the 77 Municipalities displaying these traits. Factors affecting turnout were looked at including the effect of the number of voting methods offered, administration of VbM, and a comparison of federal and municipal levels of VbM distribution and collection. Analysis began with criteria to select municipalities in 3 sets of steps to find the municipalities most closely related to Hamilton. Step (I) saw municipalities with two or more voting methods and mayoral candidates. Step (II) found which used VbM for the first time in 2022. Step (III) looked at the Federal Electoral Districts and saw if overlap with Wards were present. In the end, Guelph, Hamilton and Toronto remained.

The Results:

Using the research design and comparing the 3 cities along with other municipalities in Ontario, the study found that differences in the administration of VbM played a role in Hamilton's low VbM of 1.7%. Although there were some differences in the actual structural administration of VbM such as Toronto offering braille VbM ballots, the main factors contributing to Hamilton's low VbM turnout appear to be related to operational challenges and deficiencies in the VbM process rather than structural differences. Delays in ballot delivery, unclear instructions, and a privacy breach eroded trust and confidence in Hamilton's VbM system,

likely dissuading voters from utilizing this method. Furthermore, the research found that there is a correlation between rural cities that have a low population density and a higher VbM turnout. The study hypothesizes that this is due to barriers to voting in person that are more prevalent in rural areas than urban areas such as lack of public transportation. Finally, when comparing federal and municipal VbM turnout, the research indicated that federal VbM turnout is much higher across Hamilton, Guelph and Toronto due to a higher budget. This gap in financial means allows Elections Canada to invest more money and resources toward marketing and other logistical operations. Moreover, the federal elections have been offering VbM as an alternative voting method for 29 years ahead of the three municipalities. This headstart means that voter familiarity and trust in the federal VbM system is likely higher compared to municipal VbM systems, contributing to the higher turnout rates observed in federal elections.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations can be proposed to improve VbM turnout rates in Hamilton:

1. **Extend VbM Registration Period:** Consider extending from 23 to at least 40 days to mitigate late ballot delivery risks and allow for better promotion and citizen navigation.
2. **Consider Universal VbM Distribution:** Evaluate sending VbM ballots to all citizens, potentially increasing turnout based on studies showing up to an 8% increase in VbM turnout.
3. **Revise VbM Kit for Clarity:** Ensure all materials are easy to comprehend,

create a separate VbM ballot, and use focus groups to test for usability.

4. **Implement Email Marketing Software for Privacy:** Follow the auditor general's recommendation to protect voter privacy with data encryption and tracking tools for communication efficacy.
5. **Engage in VbM campaigns:** Conduct outreach activities to educate voters about VbM benefits, engage local leaders, community organizations, and media, and provide incentives such as free postal stamps for VbM sign-ups.

