

Experiences of Official Language Minority Communities Following the 44th General Election

Final Report

Prepared for Elections Canada

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Experiences of Official Language Minority Communities Following the 44th General Election

Draft Report

Prepared for Elections Canada by Sage Research Corporation

February 2022

Elections Canada commissioned Sage Research Corporation to conduct qualitative public opinion research with Canadian electors following the 44th federal general election. The focus of this research was on electors who live in official language minority communities (OLMCs) and whose official language of choice is not the majority language in their province.

Forty-four individual online synchronous interviews were conducted between October 13 and November 29, 2021, with electors from across Canada. The overall objective of the research was to explore the experiences of electors in the 44th federal general election, including any difficulties or barriers electors might have faced related to being served in their official language of choice.

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Executive Summary

Background and Objectives

As part of the 2020–2028 Elections Canada Strategic Plan, Elections Canada is committing to consult on whether its programs and services meet the specific needs and interests of groups that face barriers to electoral participation. This is part of a broader commitment to better understand who the Agency serves and to ensure its programs and services address their needs, wants and abilities.

The 44th federal general election was held on September 20, 2021.

The focus of this qualitative research is on electors who live in official language minority communities (OLMCs). OLMCs are groups of people whose maternal or chosen official language is not the majority language in their province or territory. For the purposes of this project, OLMCs are:

- Anglophones living in Quebec
- Francophones living outside Quebec

The purpose of the research was to explore the experiences of electors in OLMCs associated with voting in the 44th federal general election. This included:

- An overall assessment of how well the elector was served in their preferred official language, including the various types of information received from Elections Canada prior to voting day or advance polls and services offered at polling places.
- An exploration of each component of their voting process—e.g. signage, reception, registration, voting and any other interactions with Elections Canada at the polling place.
- Identification of any difficulties or barriers they might have faced, particularly those related to being served in their preferred official language.

Intended Use of the Research

The results of the research will be used to inform Elections Canada's programs and services as they relate to electors who belong to official language minority communities.

Methodology

Forty-four one-on-one interviews with individuals who voted in-person in the 44th federal general election were conducted using online synchronous platforms: 39 interviews on the itracks Telephone IDI platform and five interviews on Zoom. The interviews were conducted between October 13 and November 29, 2021.

Of the 44 interviews, 30 were with voters living outside of Quebec in French OLMCs, including eight participants who were **completely satisfied** with the official language in which they were served in the 44th federal general election and 22 participants who were **less than completely satisfied** with the language in which they were served. Fourteen interviews were conducted with voters living in English OLMCs in Quebec, including six interviews with participants who were completely satisfied with the language in which they were served and eight with voters who were less than completely satisfied with the language in which they were served.

This research was qualitative in nature, not quantitative. As such, the results provide an indication of participants' views about the topics explored, but cannot be statistically generalized to represent

the full population of OLMC voters in the 44th federal general election. Qualitative research does, however, produce a richness and depth of response not readily available through other methods of research. The insight and direction provided by qualitative research makes it an appropriate tool for exploring participants' experiences and opinions with respect to the service they received in their preferred official language.

Overview of the Findings

Awareness of the Right to Vote in Preferred Official Language of Choice

With the exception of the English OLMC participants who were less than completely satisfied with the language in which they were served in the 44th general election, the large majority of participants were aware that they had the right to be served in their official language of choice.

Among the less than completely satisfied English OLMC participants, half of the participants said they were aware of this right, while the other half either were not aware of this right or were uncertain whether or not this right applied in Quebec, because of the province's language laws.

Importance of Being Served in Preferred Official Language

An important point about the participants in this research is that most of them were bilingual, in the sense that they said they speak both official languages well enough to have a conversation in either one. In practical terms, this meant that many could "get by" in their non-preferred official language when at a poll, if need be. Note that this does **not** mean these participants considered themselves equally fluent in both languages when considering both oral and written communication.

A large majority of the participants said they would prefer to receive election-related services in the minority language—that is, French OLMC participants would prefer to receive service in French, and English OLMC participants would prefer to receive service in English. This was true both among those completely satisfied with the language(s) in which they were served when voting and those who were less than completely satisfied. When asked for a rating of importance, most said this was at least somewhat important. A small minority in each OLMC said either language was acceptable.

Print Communications from Elections Canada Related to Voting

In advance of the 44th general election, Elections Canada mailed out a Voter Information Card (VIC) to all registered voters and a *Guide to the Federal Election* booklet to all households in Canada. All participants recalled receiving the VIC. A large majority said they did not recall receiving the Guide.

With regard to the VIC, some participants only read their preferred language, while some others read both to check that the same information was given in both languages or out of habit. There were no reported problems with understanding the language in either the VIC or the Guide. It should be noted, though, that feedback on the Guide was limited because of the relatively small number who recalled receiving it, and of those who did, most said they either did not read any of the information in the Guide or just skimmed it.

Visiting a Local Elections Canada Office to Ask Questions

None of the participants had gone to their local Elections Canada office to ask questions before they went to vote, primarily because most of them did not have any questions. The few who had questions were able to resolve them using the Elections Canada website.

Voting in Person at an Advance Poll or at a Poll on Election Day

Participants were asked a series of questions about their experiences particularly related to the language(s) in which they were served when they went to vote in person.

Some participants could not recall details about the signage outside the polling place. Of those who could, the majority said it was bilingual (or at least partly bilingual), and a minority said it was unilingual. That said, none of the participants reported difficulty finding where to vote, and overall this did not appear to be a significant driver of dissatisfaction with the language they were served in at the poll.

The large majority of participants felt welcome at the polling place upon arrival. Among the minority who did not feel welcome, most mentioned reasons unrelated to language; only one participant specifically cited language as the reason for feeling unwelcome—a French OLMC participant who was greeted in English only.

Among participants less than completely satisfied with their voting experience, the cause was being spoken to in their non-preferred official language at some point while at the poll.

The detailed report gives the results of participants' experiences at polling places as a function of both type of OLMC and satisfaction with the language in which services were received. Overall, most of the participants said they were bilingual, at least for purposes of spoken conversation. With only a few exceptions, they were or would be able to understand and converse in their non-preferred language in the poll setting. In this context, being spoken to in the non-preferred language did not always lead to dissatisfaction. It depended on the person; that is, even though the large majority of participants said it was at least "somewhat important" to be served in their preferred language at the poll, some nonetheless did not mind being spoken to only in their non-preferred language. For example, there were some completely satisfied participants who had unilingual interactions in their non-preferred language. That said, participants who were less than completely satisfied tended to react more negatively to such interactions.

Participants' Comparisons to Previous Election Experiences

Some participants commented on the pandemic-related changes to voting, but aside from this, the completely satisfied participants were more likely than those less than completely satisfied to say the services received in this election were in line with their expectations, and that their experience with being served in their preferred language was similar to their experience in previous elections. Some of those who were less than completely satisfied commented that they felt service in their preferred language was less available in the current election than in previous elections.

Reaction to Other Services Elections Canada Provides if it Is Not Possible to Have a Bilingual Person at a Polling Place

Some less than completely satisfied participants were asked for their reaction to two options that Elections Canada provides to voters in the event that there is no bilingual person at a polling place, namely a telephone interpretation service and bilingual information cards.

None of the participants were offered either of these services and none seemed to be aware of them. Note that among participants not served in their preferred language, few explicitly requested service in their preferred language, for reasons noted earlier. Also note that according to Elections Canada procedures, these options should be offered proactively by poll workers when they identify that an elector wants to be served in the minority official language, or at the request of the elector. The lack of awareness of these options suggests that perhaps how they are offered or publicized should be reviewed.

There were some positive reactions to these as options to make available in certain circumstances, although personal interest in using them was low because most participants were bilingual and could get by in their non-preferred language.

Perceived Ease or Difficulty for Elections Canada to Provide Service in Preferred Language in Community

Participants in each type of OLMC were asked how difficult or easy they thought it would be for Elections Canada to provide services in the minority language. Overall, about two-thirds of participants believed that it should be easy for Elections Canada to provide service in their preferred language in their community. However, there were variations by subgroup:

- **Completely satisfied French OLMCs:** All felt it should be easy for Elections Canada to provide services in French in their community.
- **Less than completely satisfied French OLMCs:** These participants were split on this question: About half said it should be easy and the other half felt it would be difficult.
- **English OLMCs:** Regardless of their satisfaction level with the language services provided by Elections Canada, about two-thirds of participants believed it should be easy for Elections Canada to provide services in English in their communities.

Future Preference for Method of Voting

At the end of the interview, participants were asked, based on their experience voting in this federal election, if they will use the same method in the next federal election, whenever that election may be. The large majority said they will use the same method. Among the minority who would use a different method, most gave reasons unrelated to language. Only two participants, both less than completely satisfied, cited language as a factor, saying they would shift to voting by mail in order to be able to use their preferred language.

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Political Neutrality Statement

I hereby certify as Senior Officer of Sage Research Corporation that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the *Communications Policy* of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, and standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

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