

**To:** David Creery, Chief Administrative Officer

**From:** Sunayana Katikapalli, Manager of Legislative Services/Deputy City Clerk

**Re:** Alternative Forms of Voting Methods for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election

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### **AIM**

To provide City Council with an overview of the alternative forms of voting methods available for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election and to obtain Council's direction on which voting method to implement.

### **BACKGROUND**

The next Municipal and School Board Election is scheduled to take place on Monday October 26, 2026.

Prior to each municipal election, Section 42(1) of the Municipal Elections Act states:

*"42 (1) The council of a local municipality may pass by-laws,*

*(a) authorizing the use of voting and vote-counting equipment such as voting machines, voting recorders or optical scanning vote tabulators;*

*(b) authorizing electors to use an alternative voting method, such as voting by mail or by telephone, that does not require electors to attend at a voting place in order to vote. 1996, c. 32, Sched., s. 42 (1)."*

### Elections in Ontario

The AMCTO post 2022 Election Survey and AMO 2022 Election Summary provided the following key findings from the 2022 Ontario Municipal and School Board Elections:

- Voter turnout for most municipalities declined more than 4% between 2018 and 2022. The average voter turnout in 2022 was 36.30%.
- Overall, many municipalities had challenges recruiting staff to work in the election. Of the municipalities in Ontario with populations between 10,000 – 50,000, 13% of them experienced challenges recruiting election staff.
- The percentage of respondent municipalities using vote tabulators increased by 8% between the 2018 and 2022 elections. Municipalities offering online voting in some form increased from 175 in 2018 to 217 in 2022.
- Satisfaction with internet voting increased between 2018 and 2022 with 15% more municipalities that used internet reporting that they were very satisfied with the method in 2022.

- Overall, 34% of municipalities reported using vote tabulators. Most municipalities with populations over 50,000 reported using vote tabulators as well as more than half of municipalities with between 10,000-50,000.
- Vote tabulators are more common in Zones 3, 4, and least common in Zones 5, 7, and 9. The City of Woodstock falls within Zone 3.
- Overall, 57% of respondent municipalities used internet voting. Internet voting use was highest in Zone 2, 5, and 6, and lowest in Zones 7 and 8.

The academic findings discussed below are largely guided by the work of Dr. Nicole Goodman, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Brock University and Director of the Centre for e-Democracy. Her most recent co-publication, *Voting Online: Technology and Democracy in Municipal Elections*, uses surveys of voters, non-voters, and candidates in twenty Ontario cities, and a survey of administrators across the province of Ontario to provide a holistic view of electronic elections. The City of Woodstock participated in completing a survey for this research. This literature also offers the most current research as it captures information from the 2022 municipal and school board elections across the province.

### *Data & Research Findings*

The research considered three groups specifically: candidates, election administrators, and voters. While the findings within each of these groups are important, the broader research points to three general findings.

Firstly, attitudes about internet voting vary in significant ways within groups of electors and also between different actors across time. The acceptance of voting methods is not universal, even in municipalities where it is widely embraced. Also observed are variations in the attitudes towards internet voting of the different groups. Administrators in municipalities with online voting in place are more supportive of its use than both electors and candidates in those same settings. Ontarians are becoming increasingly accepting of internet voting over time, and administrators in municipalities both with and without online voting feel that their residents have become more supportive of online voting between 2018 and 2022.

Secondly, attitudes toward online voting are context-specific. Findings suggest that attitudes are dependent on the environment and change in that environment.

Thirdly, data suggests that making changes to voting methods has significant effects on things beyond voter turnout. Changes to voting methods can impact satisfaction with democracy and support for online voting. Further, there are findings that show that online voting affects the way in which many candidates campaign. There is a shift towards greater online campaigning (i.e., website or social media). Also worth noting is that many candidates have taken to sharing information on how to navigate the technical minutiae of voting online.

## *Lessons Learned*

The research conducted supports the following conclusions:

Firstly, online voting has been expected to address the issue of low voter turnout. While it is fair to state that online voting offers some potential benefits, it does not increase voter turnout. This conclusion has been drawn many times through online voting research in Ontario. This skepticism is consistent with the reality that nearly half the municipalities in Ontario, which represent a sizable majority of Ontarians, have not implemented online voting.

Secondly, there may be a relationship between overly permissive or lax legislation regarding online voting and the absence of regulation and adoption. A lack of municipal oversight through the absence of legislative and regulatory details may have contributed to easy and early adoption, as municipalities experienced the freedom to experiment. However, municipalities that continue to lag behind may be waiting for standards or further legislative direction before adopting online voting.

Thirdly, claims of 'tech-solutionism', the belief that problems can and should be solved with technology, are overstated. Online voting undoubtedly offers some meaningful benefits, but it is not the singular solution to the lack of participation in the democratic process that is widely experienced.

### Elections in Woodstock

In May 2021, Council considered a staff report regarding the possible introduction of alternative forms of voting for the 2022 Municipal and School Board Election. Staff presented information on a status quo election using paper ballots, while also providing options for online voting. City Council opted at that time to continue to administer a paper ballot election coupled with vote tabulation machines for counting ballots, a method which has been used in Woodstock since 1997.

### *Woodstock Voter Turnout Rates Over Time*

Election Year	Eligible Voters	Ballots Cast	Voter Turnout Rate
2022	34,039	9,442	27.7%
2018	29,669	9,316	31.40%
2014	28,404	8,817	31.04%
2010	26,433	8,965	33.92%
2006	26,970	9,451	35.04%

## **COMMENTS**

Multiple options for election administration in 2026 are presented below for Council's consideration. If Council wishes to pursue alternative forms of voting, a comprehensive report, including financial figures, will be prepared.

### **Option 1 – Paper Ballot Election (Status-Quo)**

Traditional in-person voting offers eligible voters a secure location to cast their vote with vote tabulators used to scan and count ballots. This method of voting involves voters attending a poll and making a physical mark on a printed ballot, then feeding it through a tabulator. It is considered the simplest and most familiar method of voting and remains the desired voting method for many communities. According to the AMCTO 2022 post-election survey, 30% of the respondent municipalities used paper ballots and vote tabulators.

Should City Council choose Option 1, Staff will proceed with procuring equipment and services for this method. Staff will then begin to develop the 2026 Municipal Election Work Plan and report back to Council with respect to advance polling days, a communications strategy, and Accessibility Plan.

### **Additional Voting Methods Options**

There are alternative voting methods available which could be added to the Status Quo election to allow additional flexibility for individuals who are looking for alternative options to voting in person.

If Council is interested in any of the following alternative forms of voting, Staff will return with a comprehensive report including a full description of the alternative form of voting along with a proposed budget.

### **Option 1a – Status Quo with Curbside Voting on Demand**

One option for Council to consider as a complement to the status quo election would be curbside voting upon request. Curbside voting could be used by voters who have difficulty attending a poll in person. Under this option, the traditional generalized voter's card would be sent to all residents with the location of polls. It would also include information on how to register to curbside vote. At a pre-arranged time, a ballot would be delivered to the voter's residence, allowing them to vote remotely. Staff would bring a ballot box to the residence in addition to the ballot so that the voter could cast their vote in person. The ballot box would be opened by Staff on Election Day and the ballots would be fed through a dedicated tabulator.

### **Option 1b – Status Quo with Vote By Mail on Demand**

Vote by mail is convenient and has similar advantages to online voting. This method would be made available to voters who do not want to attend a physical polling location.

In this scenario, the traditional generalized voter's card would be issued to all households listing the poll locations and providing information on how to request a ballot by mail. The voters who register would then be mailed a ballot, which would need to be

returned through the mail or dropped in a mail slot at City Hall by a certain date. On Election Day, sequestered Staff would open the mailed-in ballots and feed them through a dedicated tabulator. Those voters who do not register in advance would proceed to a polling location to vote in person.

### **Option 2 – Online Election**

Internet voting has many advantages: it offers increased flexibility for electors to vote from anywhere at their convenience, it meets all accessibility requirements, and it engages a wide range of age demographics. This form of voting provides assurance that a safe and transparent election can be planned and carried out with as little disruption as possible. According to the AMCTO 2022 post-election survey, 57% of the respondent municipalities used internet voting.

With this option, one physical polling location with laptops/touchscreens would be set up for advance polls as well as Election Day polls to offer the social component of voting and to accommodate those without internet access, or those requiring assistance. Electors could also vote off-site from anywhere with an internet connection. Telephone voting could also be offered to help with the transition for those who are nervous or hesitant about computers and would also serve as a backup to internet voting.

### **Option 3 – Hybrid Election (Paper Ballot and Online Voting)**

With this option, all electors on the voters' list would be mailed a voter information package. The package would include general information on where to vote in person along with the information required to vote online. The voter would then log on to the voting website and vote any time from the opening of advanced polls to the close of polls on Election Day.

This option could be modified to include online voting by demand or to restrict the time that the online voting was offered (i.e. only during the advanced period). However, Staff do not recommend proceeding in this direction as there is no ability for the City to pay a reduced amount based on limited use. Therefore, the City would have to pay the cost of running the entire election online, even if it were only offered in a reduced or by-demand capacity.

As previously mentioned, if Council would like to pursue Option 1 – Status Quo at this time, Staff will move forward with developing the Election Plan and procuring the necessary equipment.

If Council is interested in pursuing any of the other alternative forms of voting presented, Staff will report back to Council with a comprehensive report, including a full description of the alternative form of voting along with a proposed budget.

**RECOMMENDATION**

That Woodstock City Council support Option 1 as the vote casting method for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election;

And further that the by-law authorizing the use of optical scanning vote tabulators for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election be prepared.

OR

That Woodstock City Council support Option \_\_\_\_ as the vote casting method for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election;

And further that Staff be directed to prepare a report outlining the proposed election details and budget.

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