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# Voting in civic elections matters 18

**Ballot box: Mayoral races get all of the attention, but council members still call the shots**

If there is one positive thing to be learned from the whole Rob Ford debacle in Toronto, it is that a bad mayor can ruin a city's reputation but can't impair its smooth operation for long without the support of the council.



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**A voter arrives at the Emily Carr elementary polling station in Vancouver in the last municipal election, where turnout was light.**

This is not to disparage those who have filed nomination papers for British Columbia's Nov. 15 election or those hoping to win in the Oct. 27 vote in Ontario.

Rather, it's a reminder that all of us need to look beyond the One Big Horse Race.

Councillors, school trustees and — in Vancouver — the park board members aren't just seat- warmers. They can and often do play a big role in deciding how municipalities evolve and how children learn.

In B. C., the Community Charter describes the mayor's role as the chief executive officer, providing leadership by recommending bylaws and policies, communicating information to council, establishing standing committees, providing general direction to the staff as well as suspending employees if needed. That's powerful stuff. But it's only powerful if the mayor has the majority support. Without it, the mayor's job is reduced to chairing meetings, cutting ribbons and carrying messages between staff.

Because, as the Charter says, the mayor must reflect the will of council — even if it runs contrary to everything she or he believes in.

Most larger municipalities have parties — albeit parties that are often loath to describe themselves that way and parties that have none of the usual characteristics including members.

In the two largest — Surrey and Vancouver — there is the possibility that for the first time in a while, the mayors and councils may not share that party affiliation.

It hasn't happened in Surrey since retiring Mayor Dianne Watts was first elected as an Independent in 2005.

She had trounced incumbent Doug McCallum from the Surrey Electors Team, but six SET councillors sat opposite her in the chamber.

But Watts is an astute coalition builder. By 2007, she had swung the majority to her side and forged Surrey First, a coalition that has no party members, only insiders.

Since then, Surrey has been transformed from suburban to urban with startlingly high growth of nearly 1,000 people a month, a new city centre anchored by Simon Fraser University, as well as a stunning new city hall and library.

But Surrey's rapid growth has exacerbated its longstanding problems of crime and transportation.

Critics charge that too much of the city's business is decided before the public hears about it and that too many decisions are made without debate.

Watts' hand-picked mayoralty successor, Linda Hepner, faces two strong challengers — Barinder Rasode, who defected from Surrey First last spring and is running as an independent, and McCallum, the former mayor who is running along with a slate of four council candidates under the name Safe Surrey.

But as interesting as that race promises to be, it may prove almost meaningless if the council isn't supportive.

There are three open seats, since council incumbents Rasode and Hepner are fighting for the mayor's job and Marvin Hunt is now the MLA for Surrey- Panorama.

Here's one scenario: The five Surrey First incumbents are re-elected, but Hepner loses. So, regardless of who the mayor is, the Surrey First agenda will be the one that is carried out.

Vancouver's situation is more complicated, with four known parties trying to gain control of council, school and park board.

Currently, Vision Vancouver has an absolute majority on all three. As in Surrey, Vision has been accused of being autocratic, secretive and unresponsive to neighbourhoods on issues like bike lanes, traffic congestion and housing affordability.

So, there's potentially an "anti- Vision vote." Environmentally minded voters might split off and vote for the Green party, which isn't running full slates for any of the three bodies.

The more socially conscious might go to the Coalition of Progressive Electors.

If that happens, there's the potential for the more conservative Non- Partisan Association to be the biggest beneficiary.

But here's the disturbing thing. Sea change can happen in civic elections when only a few thousand people shift their votes.

Vision gained control of the city and a powerful voice on the Metro Vancouver board and committees with the support of only about one in seven eligible voters. Only one in three potential electors bothered to show up.

That's not all that bad when you consider that nobody showed up in 12 municipalities, including Belcarra and Lytton.

Their mayors and councillors were acclaimed.

Langford had the worst turnout: 13 per cent.

It all puts lie to the excuse used by many who don't vote because they say a single vote doesn't matter. It matters so much in civic elections that a single vote has disproportionate influence over who governs.

The other excuse is that it's so complicated compared to federal and provincial elections, where you have to pick only one from a short list.

It could be simpler if the B. C. government allowed a ward system or even a mail- in ballot so voters had more time to go through the names and even find out something about the candidates.

Failing that, in an attempt to bolster "democracy" we might get stuck with gimmicks like in Norway where casting a ballot enters voters in a lottery for prizes, including travel.



But worse, we may also get stuck with somebody else's government — a government chosen by a few whose special interests have nothing to do with what we care about or want.

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