

Re-setting the electoral treadmill

Written by BROCK WEIR

The joy of picking up that pencil, pen, or Sharpie and marking a piece of paper might seem like a pretty mundane task, but for me, when it's an election ballot, it's a process that has never quite lost its lustre.

When I was a kid, I was lucky enough to have parents who were comfortable flouting the rules and allowing me into the voting booth to watch the ritual take place.

Although I don't recall ever being allowed to mark the ballot myself, they would usually tell me ahead of time who they were voting for, why they were voting for them, and why making the effort to go out and discharge their civic duty was important not only to them, not only to me and the future of my then-young generation, but also why it was important to the country, province, or town.

It engaged me in the political process and every now and then they would ask my opinion before the final X was drawn ? sometimes my opinion was taken to heart, sometimes it was not, but it made my young self feel like I was making a real difference. Even though I wasn't marking the ballot myself, it instilled the idea that my voice was heard by the powers-that-be.

This feeling became ingrained in me to the extent that not exercising my civic duty is, unless in the most extreme of circumstances, basically unthinkable. And yet, for whatever reason, casting my ballot online or through the mail personally just doesn't hold the same appeal.

Don't get me wrong, I am all in favour of making sure the vote is as accessible as possible through any means deemed safe enough to ensure every ballot is properly counted, but there is a singular excitement for me in receiving a voter card in the mail, seeing where I need to go, making the effort to get there, and experiencing democracy in action while standing shoulder-to-shoulder with fellow voters as much as ?post? pandemic common sense allows.

Whether the ballot is folded for you to pop it into an official-looking cardboard box or whether it's taken from you and gobbled up by an electronic tabulator is really immaterial; it's the energy in the room that excites.

Or, at least it did.

With my voter card in hand, I made my way to my polling place just before noon on Thursday. Having done my research on the various party platforms and, with the good fortune this job affords, talking personally to each of the candidates vying for my vote, I made my final decision little under a week before E-Day for the platform that best reflected my vision for the province as well as the candidate I felt best suited to get the job done.

Those two criteria don't always dovetail, mind you, but this time was a happy coincidence.

Greeted by election workers who were their usual friendly, energetic and enthusiastic selves, I handed over my voter card and ID and was directed to a random poll, entered the room? and saw not more than four other voters. The fizz of in-person voting seemed decidedly flat.

This was my normal polling station and at this time of day is ordinarily a hive of activity, so it was hard not to feel it would be an ill omen for election turnout. Ultimately, as we know, this proved to be the case.

Much has been written since last Friday morning about the election that was and the level in which voters were engaged ? or not.

Some pundits have chalked it up to ? at best? ? a dissatisfaction with the men and woman who were hoping to be Ontario's Premier

for the next four to five years or a simple feeling there was little choice to be had. Others have floated the idea that low voter turnout could be attributed to the lack of big election issues ? as if healthcare, education, and the environment didn't offer voters enough food for thought. Worse is the theory that voters just weren't interested or, worst of all, of the opinion that their vote simply didn't matter.

But I would like to put another option on the table: election fatigue.

On the face of it, we aren't subjected to elections all that often. Sure, we had a Federal election in the dying days of last summer, we just put a Provincial election to bed, and we have a municipal election coming up this fall, but that's not a lot in the grand scheme of things.

What does make it feel like a lot, and even too much, is we're living in a day and age where it the next election always seems on the immediate horizon, even when it is not.

We're told that each and every trip to the polling station or the mailbox is the "most important" one in this or any other generation.

Our neighbours to the south, for instance, have been stuck in a never-ending election campaign since 2016. Each and every decision is looked at through the lens of how it will affect Democrats and Republicans alike whenever voters have their next turn at bat ? and with their mid-term system, that turn is always right around the corner.

As such, very little of substance is able to get done for the greater good; it's all for short-term gain even in the face of potentially long-term pain.

The stakes, for better or worse, don't necessarily seem as artificially high at our municipal, provincial or federal levels, but we're hardly immune to it. We don't have to look very far to see border creep when it comes to our civic engagement, including just about every decision, however mundane, being transformed into a public policy pinata just to score political points here and there.

Here too we see all too often big decisions being looked through the lens of how will it impact the fortunes of a government, a party, or even its leader in a three-, four-, five-year window, rather for the broadly-painted greater good.

And this is not even considering the ongoing Federal Conservative leadership campaign or the upcoming quests to lead the Ontario NDPs and Liberals following last week's departures of Andrea Horwath and Steven Del Duca.

Here in Ontario, there was a welcome break from electioneering at the start of the global pandemic where, despite the trials and tribulations we were all experiencing, there was a glorious but brief time in our public discourse when political fortunes took a back seat to accomplishing what was necessary, regardless of how it played to the so-called base.

In my view, if we were afforded a politicking cool-off period between each ballot, the personal bandwidth of voters, and engagement in the process, just might be reinvigorated.