

YUKON NEWS

Get the plebiscite vote 101 from Elections Yukon's chief electoral officer



[Dana Hatherly](#)

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Chief electoral officer Maxwell Harvey of Elections Yukon holds a technical briefing for press on the plebiscite vote on July 17, 2025. (Dana Hatherly/Yukon News)



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Yukoners can expect to be faced with two ballots when they go to the polls for territorial elections in 2025. One of those ballots will generally ask electors whether the territory should keep the current

voting system or change the way it elects members of the Yukon Legislative Assembly, or MLAs, to a ranked vote. The other ballot will indicate their pick for their respective MLA.

As such, chief electoral officer Maxwell Harvey of Elections Yukon is trying to ramp up the public's interest and knowledge on the plebiscite vote on electoral reform before Yukoners hit the polls later in 2025. Harvey cautioned Yukoners to be aware of biased information and be wary of misinformation around the plebiscite vote.

He provided a technical briefing for reporters at the Jim Smith Building media room on July 17.

Harvey said the two ballots will be clearly distinguishable from each other. Both ballots will be folded and dropped into the same ballot box. After polls close, the boxes will be emptied and the ballots separated. The ballots for the territorial elections will be counted by poll and reported first, then the plebiscite counting will begin.

Harvey explained that some of the regulations for the plebiscite vote are being ironed out.

In part, Yukoners still don't know exactly what question they will be answering when they go to make the plebiscite vote later this year. While it will certainly be a "yes" or "no" question on electoral reform, Harvey said the exact wording of the question that will be on the plebiscite ballot has yet to be determined. Neither has the threshold been set for this measure to be considered successful.

The Executive Council Office, or ECO, is an office of the Yukon government that is headed by the premier and responsible for drafting the plebiscite-related regulations, including the question and the threshold, based on the recommendations of the chief electoral officer. Elections Yukon is a small, independent, non-partisan office of the Yukon Legislative Assembly. Newly installed Premier Mike Pemberton is ultimately responsible for making changes to the *Elections Act*, Harvey confirmed.

On June 6, 2025, a regulation passed that allows the territory to hold a plebiscite at the same time as a general election, according to Zachary Burke, who works in communications for ECO.

Burke said the change in leadership didn't affect the timeline of drafting the question.

"This process takes time," he said, adding that it's moving as quickly as possible.

Burke noted the Government of Yukon intends to remain neutral on the plebiscite vote.

When asked by a reporter if he was concerned about the drafting of the plebiscite ballot question by partisan office, Harvey expressed his level of confidence in the current set up.

"I'm comfortable with it," Harvey said, from an administrative point of view, plus he has been given the chance to offer input. He added that ECO has been taking guidance from special committees and the Yukon citizens' assembly on electoral reform, which ultimately recommended the plebiscite vote.

"I don't see this as a partisan kind of adventure," Harvey said.

Harvey hasn't been advocating for any particular question or threshold, although he did provide advice, for example, on potential thresholds used elsewhere in the world, if there was a threshold at all.

Elections Yukon is working under a short timeline, with a small team, operational impact and electoral risk, Harvey said. He explained that electoral risk involves election readiness and integrity around keeping the ballot secret and ensuring only those who are intended to get a ballot get one.

"Is it a risk to our mandate? Is it a risk to our integrity? Is it a risk to the security? Is it a risk to the legitimacy of results? Is it a risk to our readiness? Because if we aren't ready, then obviously there could be a compromised election," Harvey said. "That could question the legitimacy of the results and potentially the credibility of the elected government. So, we take very seriously our readiness and the time it takes and the process it takes to do it."

What is a plebiscite vote?

As opposed to referendums, plebiscite votes are non-binding, Harvey said.

That means it will be up to the next elected government to decide whether to listen to the electorate or not around the outcome of the plebiscite vote.

What are the two voting systems that Yukoners will be choosing between?

First past the post, which is the status quo, sees the candidate with the most votes get elected as MLA.

A ranked vote sees the most preferred candidate winning the election through a majority of the votes. The path to get elected using a ranked vote happens through the count, per Harvey.

Both first-past-the-post and ranked vote systems belong to what Harvey described as a majoritarian or plurality voting system. Both are used worldwide; both involve no changes to the number or configuration of electoral districts; both involve one MLA per district and each system is just as likely to form a majority or minority government.

Neither are proportional representation systems.

How does the count work?

Under first past the post, voters get one ballot and one vote. When polls close, the box is emptied and votes are tallied for each candidate. The candidate with the most votes wins.

With a ranked vote, voters use one ballot to rank their candidates by preference using numbers or a table. There could be a majority in round one, but if none of the candidates on the ballot hit 50 per cent plus one, then the candidate with the fewest votes gets eliminated from the ballot. The second choice on that ballot gets distributed, then a second round of counting is done. At the end of round two, the

candidate with the least votes again will be dropped. This process goes on until a candidate reaches 50 per cent plus one.

Harvey said the public reporting of the results on Election Day using ranked ballot has yet to be determined. In the end, results would be publicly reported round by round.

When will the upcoming territorial elections occur?

Nov. 3 is the fixed polling day for the upcoming territorial general elections, which will be run under the current first-past-the-post system.

The election writ must be issued no later than Oct. 3 to meet the 31-day requirement, Harvey said. That's when the minority Yukon Liberal Party government will go into caretaker mode as the elections campaign officially gets underway.

It's the premier's prerogative as to when he deems the appropriate time for elections to be held, Harvey said. Harvey added that Pemberton hasn't indicated what date he will call for elections to occur.

Pemberton has indicated that a summer snap election is off the table.

What's the context that the upcoming elections will be held in?

Elections Yukon is preparing for Yukoners to go to the polls in the context of a minority Yukon Liberal Party government kept in power through a confidence-and-supply agreement with the Yukon NDP. That means, compared to under a majority government, Elections Yukon has been in a "higher readiness state" in terms of how ready the independent office must be to fulfill its mandate, Harvey said.

Not only has the office — currently made up of three staff, up from two — had to prep for the territorial elections, they are also juggling electoral boundary changes, with two new ridings bringing the total number of electoral districts up to 21 in the Yukon. That required considerable alterations to realign mapping and assign electors to the proper district, so they get the right information and services, Harvey said.

The office is also administering the plebiscite vote alongside the territorial elections. They are responsible for awareness and education so electors can make an informed choice and understand how the plebiscite vote will be carried out.

Additionally, two school board elections for the French and First Nations school boards will be overlapping the territorial elections and the plebiscite vote this fall.

How would future elections run under each system?

Harvey told reporters the electoral administration would differ from first past the post compared to if the Yukon changed to ranked vote.

He said first past the post is straight forward with baseline costs and known processes.

Implementing a ranked vote would require a one-time transition cost related to legislation, processes and training, in addition to incremental costs around technology, staff, training and tabulators. If the territory doesn't shift from counting by hand to using dedicated tabulators, then the votes will take longer to count. Some details still need to be clarified around ties between most-preferred or least-preferred candidates. Harvey didn't know what the potential future costs might be.

What are the rules for third-party advertising?

Elections Yukon has no rules for third parties advertising around campaigning for or against or neutral to the plebiscite question.

There's no need for third parties to register, no contribution limits and no offences related to elections rules, per Harvey.

How will Yukoners know what's happening?

Elections Yukon is planning to issue voter guides and pamphlets to electors about the plebiscite vote. That's in addition to its work on a steering committee and with an advisory group of academics and networking with local community leaders who can reach out and inform their members and citizens.

Harvey suggested Yukoners track Elections Yukon's website and social media platforms to stay in the know.

Elections Yukon also depends on political parties, candidates, third parties, the media and more to get the word out, Harvey said.

Editor's note: *This story has been updated to clarify that Elections Yukon is an office of the Yukon Legislative Assembly and that the drafting of the question and the threshold by the Executive Council Office will be based on recommendations from the chief electoral officer. The word "partisan" has been removed from the description of the Executive Council Office that was misattributed to chief electoral officer Maxwell Harvey. The News regrets the error.*

Contact Dana Hatherly at dana.hatherly@yukon-news.com