

5 Local Candidates and Issues

OBJECTIVE

Students will learn about their electoral division, the candidates and local issues.

KEY WORDS

electoral division, riding, electoral system, candidate, independent, incumbent, issue, constituent, Single-Member Plurality, First-Past-The-Post

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE DURING THIS LESSON

- What is an electoral division?
- What is an electoral system?
- Which electoral system is used in Alberta?
- What is the name of my electoral division and who are the candidates running?
- What are the most important issues in my electoral division?
- How can I learn about my local candidates?

SUPPLEMENTARY TOOLS

- PowerPoint 5: Electoral Divisions and Local Candidates
- Worksheet 5.1: Election Candidate Profile
- Handout 5.2: A Framework for Planning an All-Candidates Meeting

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Hook: 10-15 min

1. Find your school's electoral division on the provincial electoral division map. Ask students if they notice any differences between their electoral division and others across the province (e.g., size, shape). Ask them to consider why there are differences and what those differences might be (e.g., population, geography, landmarks).
2. Show students an individual map of the school's electoral division (found at www.elections.ab.ca under MAPS). Answer the following questions:
 - What are the boundaries of the electoral division?
 - What major landmarks or attractions are included in the electoral division?
 - What makes the electoral division unique?
3. Following the electoral division analysis, ask students to consider and discuss the following questions:
 - What issues do you expect people in our electoral division to be talking about?

- What promises or commitments do you expect the local candidates will be making?

Instruction: 15 min

1. An electoral division (also known as known as an electoral district, riding or constituency) is a geographical area represented by an elected official. The size of each electoral division is determined by factors such as population and geography. Urban ridings are often smaller and more populous, while rural ridings are larger with less dense populations.
 - At the provincial level in Alberta, the elected official is called a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA).
 - Alberta will elect 87 MLAs in the coming election.
 - Each MLA represents approximately 50,000 people.
2. An electoral system is the way citizens' choices, expressed as votes, are translated into legislative seats in the parliament or legislature.
 - Different types of electoral systems are used around the world and they differ by the number of representatives elected per division/district, the type of ballots used and the formulas used for declaring winning candidates.
3. Alberta uses a system called Single-Member Plurality or First-Past-The-Post (also used across Canada).
 - One representative is elected per electoral division (single-member districts).
 - Voters are only allowed to choose one candidate/party on the ballot (categorical or exclusive ballot).
 - The candidate with the most votes wins. The successful candidate does not need more than 50 per cent of the vote; they only must receive at least one more vote than any of the other candidates (plurality).

Teacher Note: It would be helpful to demonstrate FPTP with a sample ballot and voting results for your electoral division in the last election.

Discussion: 10 min

How should you evaluate candidates? What qualities and qualifications do you expect from an MLA? Why are these qualities necessary for this job?

Activity: 30 min or more

- List all of the candidates (and their party association if applicable) running for election in your school's electoral division. Show students where they can find this information (www.electionsalberta.ab.ca).
- Ask students to create profiles by examining candidate websites, social media platforms, newspapers and other campaign literature. For each candidate, students should focus on the following questions to narrow their research:
 - What experience, skills and qualifications does the candidate possess?
 - Why does the candidate want to be elected? What are their priorities? What goals do they want to achieve?
 - What do you like or dislike about the candidate?
 - Would you feel proud if this candidate represented your electoral division at the Alberta Legislature? Why?

Teacher Note: This activity can be completed independently or by jigsaw method using Worksheet 5.1. Ensure that all candidates in your electoral division are researched. Have students share their findings with the class.

- Have students prepare questions for each of the candidates to help evaluate their priorities and their capacity to take on the role of MLA. Before students prepare their questions, ask them to consider the following:
 - Which issues facing the province do you feel need to be addressed?
 - Which jurisdictional issues facing your community do you feel need to be addressed?
 - Which issues impact you, your family and friends?
 - What can you ask a candidate in order to evaluate their abilities to become an effective MLA?
- As a class or in groups, email each candidate with three or four well-written questions.

Teacher Note: Alternatively, consider inviting each candidate for a class visit, conducting a phone or Skype interview, or holding an all-candidates meeting at your school (refer to Handout 5.2).

Debrief: 5-10 min

Review each candidate's profile and their responses to the questions. Alternatively, ask students to write a reflection for their election scrapbook.

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate?
- Who is best suited for the job of MLA? Who do you feel will most effectively serve the community?

- Do you share the same opinions or values expressed by any of the candidates? Explain.
- Which candidate would you support and why?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

A. Ask students to engage family and friends in a conversation about the election and the local candidates. Students could create a short take-home poll, or simply record the views of their family and friends based on a few specific questions. Have a follow-up discussion the next day. Do students share the same opinion as their parents? What are the reasons for shared or differing opinions?

B. Have a class discussion about geographical differences in an election campaign. Questions to consider: Does an MLA from Calgary-West have the same priorities as an MLA from Vermilion-Lloydminster or Drumheller-Stettler? What geographical, cultural or socio-economic differences might there be between the people of these different electoral divisions? How might these differences affect the interactions between MLAs in the Alberta Legislature?

C. Have students organize and engage in a mock debate to gain a better understanding of the job of a candidate in a local campaign. In small groups, select one student to take on the role of each local candidate (and persona, if possible); the rest of the group will be that candidate's campaign team. Using existing arguments taken from media coverage, candidate websites and campaign literature, have each group prepare for the debate.

D. Examine different electoral systems used around the world (e.g., proportional representation, two-round/run-off voting system, mixed member proportional). Research and debate the strengths and weaknesses of each system. Do you think Alberta should investigate electoral reform? Why or why not?

E. Have students attend an all-candidates' debate organized by the community or a local organization. Students should record their impressions of each candidate and their overall experience at the debate. Encourage students to ask one of their own questions, or select a representative to ask a question on behalf of the class.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

What is an electoral division?

An electoral division is a geographical area with defined boundaries represented by an elected official. An electoral division is also known as an electoral district, constituency or riding.

In Alberta, the provincial elected official is called a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). Each electoral division has one MLA who represents the local needs and interests of his or her constituents

(people living in the electoral division) in the provincial legislature. The MLA also addresses issues at the local level.

The number of electoral divisions changes over time and is established by a formula. Electoral division boundary adjustments reflect changes and movements in population. Currently Alberta has 87 electoral divisions, each represented by one MLA.

What is an electoral system?

An electoral system is the way citizens' choices, expressed as votes, are translated into legislative seats. All electoral systems have three basic elements:

- District magnitude: The number of members elected per division/district.
- Ballot type: The way in which choices are presented and voters express their preference(s).
- Electoral formula: The method for determining which candidate gets elected (or wins).

How does First-Past-The-Post/Single-Member Plurality work?

First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) is the electoral system used in Alberta (and across Canada). Another name for FPTP is Single-Member Plurality.

- The district magnitude is single-member districts. Citizens elect one representative per electoral division.
- The ballot type is categorical or exclusive ballot. Voters are allowed to choose one candidate/party on their ballot.
- The electoral formula is plurality. The successful candidate must receive at least one more vote than any of the other candidates (or the most votes).

Example of FPTP: In an electoral district with 100 ballots cast.

VOTE TOTALS BY CANDIDATE

Lisa (Banana Party)	40
Josh (Pear Party)	15
Nancy (Apple Party)	11
Norman (Independent)	34

In this case, Lisa becomes the elected representative because she has the most votes. Note: Lisa wins even though 60 per cent of the voters chose other candidates. Under FPTP, it is not necessary to win more than 50 per cent of the votes — the candidate simply needs to win the most votes.

How does one find out which electoral division they are in?

You can visit the Elections Alberta website and search using your postal code or location/address to find out your electoral division. During a provincial election campaign, Elections Alberta also posts a list of candidates running for election in each division. The final list is posted after nominations close (14 days

before polling day) and once all candidacies have been confirmed.

What are the most important issues facing my electoral division?

An individual's political views are personal and highly subjective. They are unique and shaped by their experiences and feelings. Therefore, each person is responsible for forming his or her own opinions. Sometimes those opinions can be formed by listening to other people whose opinions you respect, researching information through media, and sometimes it simply takes a period of reflection to come to your own conclusions.

No one can tell you how to vote, although this is the primary objective of all candidates and political parties. It is up to you, the voter, to decide what is most important, who you should listen to and, ultimately, who you will support.

How can I learn about my candidates and the issues they support?

There are many ways to gather information about your local candidates. Community groups hold town hall meetings where constituents are invited to listen to candidates speak on issues they and their parties support. Information can also be found on radio and television, and in newspapers and magazines. Individuals may also visit local campaign offices, attend campaign events or have a chance to talk to the candidates when they visit homes during door-to-door canvassing, or campaign in public settings. Information is easily found online through party websites, media websites and social media platforms.

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Provincial electoral division maps — www.electionsalberta.ab.ca (Under MAPS)
- Candidate information/literature (candidate websites, campaign flyers)
- Electoral Systems — www.parl.gc.ca