

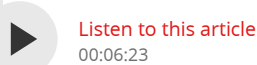
Rob Shaw: Elections BC's blunders demand multi-party path forward

[Rob Shaw](#)

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Jill Lawrance of Elections BC demonstrates loading a ballot into an electronic tabulator that counts paper ballots in Victoria, B.C. September 25, 2024. | Darren Stone / Times Colonist



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One day after revealing hundreds of votes in the B.C. election had been misplaced or miscounted, the province's chief electoral officer held an online webinar to explain — but not apologize for — all the problems chipping away at public confidence in the electoral system.

"These mistakes were a result of human error," said Anton Boegman, who blamed a variety of factors, including workload and weather.

"Our elections rely on the work of over 17,000 election officials from communities across the province. Election officials were working 14 hours or more on voting days and on final voting day in particular faced extremely challenging weather conditions in many parts of the province.

"These conditions likely contributed to these mistakes."

Boegman showed little contrition in outlining how Elections BC missed an entire box of 861 ballots in Prince George-Mackenzie, and racked up tabulation errors affecting 779 additional votes in 69 of B.C.'s 93 ridings.

Pretty big mistakes by the election agency and its officials. In the case of the missing ballot box, unprecedented. But Boegman tried to suggest government changes made to allow electronic tabulators, laptop voting lists and vote-in-any-district provisions also played a role in the problems.

"It was also the first provincial election that was administered following the significant changes to the electoral legislation that were made in 2019," said Boegman.

"And while this process was fully tested in simulations and in four provincial by elections, there are aspects like the out-of-district voting and counting that could only be administered in a full provincial election."

Voters might be forgiven for thinking that Elections BC was up to the task. After all, the independent agency asked for the legislative changes and endorsed them publicly as major improvements to voting efficiency. Boegman, who is paid by taxpayers \$393,538 a year, said he could administer the election properly under the new rules.

The worst part about the mistakes is the shadow they have cast over the provincial government.

The BC NDP flipped Surrey-Guildford during recounts to win by 27 votes, securing a bare majority of 47 seats in the legislature. But there were actually 28 votes uncounted, Elections BC revealed Tuesday.

Once you count those missing ballots, the NDP still won Surrey-Guildford by 21 votes, according to Elections BC. A judicial recount will further review those votes starting Thursday.

But the optics of more votes being mishandled than the entire margin of victory for the NDP government's majority is simply awful. It could give rise to conspiracy theories.

Leaders within the BC Conservative movement, to their credit, have been going out of their way to defend Elections BC.

Leader John Rustad, party president Aisha Estey and campaign director Angelo Isidorou have publicly and privately pushed back against supporters seeking to use the mistakes to undermine faith in our entire electoral system. That, despite some additional eyebrow-raising moves by Elections BC, such as allowing some ballot boxes to go home with elections officials, and around 4,000 people voting by telephone.

In return, the Conservatives called for an independent investigation to get to the bottom of the problems and prevent repeat mistakes in future elections. It seemed reasonable. But not to the BC NDP.

At first, the NDP took the position that the simple discovery of errors was proof the system worked.

"It's good safeguards are in place to make sure every vote is counted and everyone's vote counts," the party said in a statement Monday. "And that they are working. Double-checking everything is especially important in a close election like this one."

But, as is often the case with this current iteration of the NDP, the party misread the public mood. By Tuesday, Premier David Eby pivoted to move closer to the Conservative position. He proposed a review by an all-party legislative committee instead.

"I remain confident in the outcome of the election," said Eby. "At the same time, it's clear we need to review the processes, technologies and systems used to tally votes accurately and support public confidence."

The BC Greens backed the NDP.

Rustad said he thinks the review should be arms-length, to keep politics away from the important democratic function of voting.

"The challenge I have with an all-party committee is you end up with the situation of politics being at play," he told me.

"Which is why I think it needs to be independent and done, by a judge, maybe a lawyer, somebody with expertise in terms of elections and constitutionality, just to look at the whole process, everything from legislation right through to make sure that confidence can be restored in Elections BC and in our electoral processes in British Columbia."

It's not an unreasonable ask. It's why public inquiries are done by retired judges, and not committees of squabbling politicians.

But it's unlikely the NDP will accede, if for no other reason than because it was a Conservative idea.

In the meantime, Boegman said he's confident there are no more missing ballots.

"I have confidence that we have found any anomalies that have been there, and that we are going to enable these votes to be counted and reported," he said.

Public confidence, though, is less unwavering. Elections BC doesn't appear up to the task of holding it. Eby and Rustad should get together, and chart a united path towards a review. The integrity of our free and fair election process is bigger than both of them.

Rob Shaw has spent more than 16 years covering B.C. politics, now reporting for CHEK News and writing for Glacier Media. He is the co-author of the national bestselling book A Matter of Confidence, host of the weekly podcast Political Capital, and a regular guest on CBC Radio.

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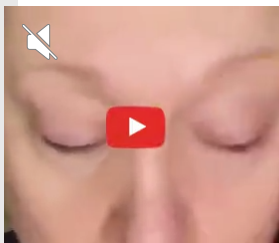
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