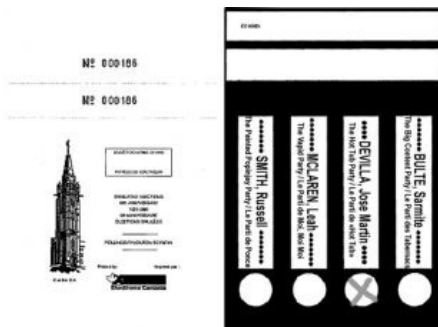


Holding advance polls on Good Friday a sign of disrespect



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Before the devout among us further vilify Elections Canada for having advance voting days for the May 2 federal election on Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Monday, several things should be made clear.

Elections Canada doesn't pick the date of the election or set the dates for advance polling. Under the Canada Elections Act, the Prime Minister of Canada sets the election date when he visits the Governor General to seek dissolution of Parliament. Once the election date is picked, everything falls into place by statute.

The Canada Elections Act requires the advance polls to be held the tenth, ninth and seventh day before polling. Therefore the dates April 22, 23 and 25 for advance voting are set by law.

The fact advance voting will take place over solemn holy days at Easter is unfortunate and could have easily been avoided by having the election on Monday, May 9. Mr. Harper obviously wanted to have the vote on the earliest day possible, as each day the campaign lingers past the absolute minimum is another opportunity for something to hurt the governing Conservative Party. Many Canadians, already upset at yet another federal election, are probably grateful to face only the minimum number of days in this campaign.

Perhaps Mr. Harper didn't realize at the time the significance of selecting May 2. But he and his staff should have taken Easter into consideration. The only stipulation in the Canada Elections Act is the electoral period be a minimum of 36 days. There is no maximum.

When Mr. Harper visited the Governor General on March 26, the earliest date available was May 2. He had ample time to ponder all options. Budget day was set for weeks beforehand and the possible defeat of the government had to be considered by his inner circle. Easter apparently didn't register on his radar screen.

A May 9 vote might have allowed the PM time to attend the royal wedding at the end of April and come home with endless photo ops to display across the nation. It's a wonder he didn't opt for that opportunity. Very few things this prime minister does occur by chance or accident. Control is his personal mantra so it appears that Good Friday was sacrificed on his altar of political expediency.

P.E.I. churches, and indeed most churches across Canada, are unhappy with advance polls on Easter weekend. Especially by the fact that some advance poll sites are in church halls, such as St. John's United Church in Mount Stewart. While the congregation is holding Good Friday services in the same building, voting will be taking place mere metres away. It brings up unpleasant metaphoric visions of tax collectors turning a house of worship into a den of, well, whatever.

Elections Canada foresaw this pending firestorm and says it has sought the assistance of the Canadian Council of Churches and the Canadian Jewish Congress to pass on some alternatives that remain open to electors. For example, electors can vote by special ballot that can be done anytime during the election.

It's somewhat simplistic to say that if voters don't like voting on Good Friday, then stay home. But the fact remains deputy returning officers, poll workers and party officials all have to work on Good Friday to handle the advance poll. They have to be there no matter how few voters show up. And with the declining numbers of Canadians even bothering to vote, it was just over 60 per cent in the last election, we shouldn't squander too many options for voters.

No matter what the date for any election, there are always going to be those inconvenienced or unhappy. But this decision to have people voting over Easter holidays is unheard of in Canada. Many Canadians rue the inexorable march of putting religion into the background at the expense of all else. The recent year-round acceptance of Sunday shopping is one example. Now the most solemn day on the Christian calendar is subjected to political interference. While we're lucky to live in a democratic country with a fair electoral system that tries to suit everyone, this decision shows a lack of respect for churches and their members.

But if you can play hockey, shop, and do any number of things on Good Friday, why should voting be any different? It's just another day in the neighbourhood. And that is a very sad commentary.