

The X-factors: Exploring the reception of the cross (X) in Get Out the Vote campaign materials

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Abstract

This paper asks to ground the scholarly knowledge about the role and reception of the X (or cross) as a visual cue for elections in Canadian political visual culture. While the character X (or the symbol of a cross as it is often referred to) is one of the most prominent visual cues used in visual voting encouragement materials in Canadian visual culture, little, if at all, is known about its reception by audiences. This paper asks to contribute to the understanding of the symbol and its reception by citizens. The paper is divided into three sections: 1) establishing the status of the character X as a symbol of elections in Canada, 2) examining ideal uses and occasional misuses of the X, 3) exploring the possibility of replacing the X with an alternative - the checkmark (✓). In conclusion, this work suggests that there is a growing need to reconsider the use of the X in Get Out the Vote posters, and it offers alternatives to it.

Keywords

Visual Culture, Political Culture, Get Out the Vote Campaigns, Audience Studies, Reception Studies, Human-Centric Design Research.

HistoryX – The History of Using X for Elections Purposes and Elections Materials in Canada

The character X (or the cross) is one of the most prominent visual cues of voting in English speaking countries. It was first used in Australia in 1856 and is therefore known as the 'Australian/secret Ballot' (Newman, 2003). The secret ballot system, including the use of the X as a marker for one's choice candidate, became very popular globally soon after its inception, first in English speaking countries (the UK in 1872, Canada in 1874, the US in 1884) and soon after in various other countries (Newman, 2003; Elections Canada, 2007).

The association of the X with ballots made it a readily available symbol of voting and the frequency of using it rose in campaign materials, elections agencies' logos, and media coverage (Elections Canada, 2007). While being such a prominent element of voting encouragement graphics, globally and in Canadian political visual culture, little is known about the reception of the X by voters-audiences. Graphic designers and political marketers assume that, because of the symbol's reputation as a marker of elections, it is a useful and sensible choice. However, hand-me-down wisdom and passed-down-knowledge aside, it is high time some empirical effort is taken to ground these anecdotal thoughts in concrete research work.

Holtz-Bacha & Johansson (2017) distinguish between three different categories of election campaigns:

- Vote for Me / Attack Ads,
- Informational / Public Announcements, and
- Get Out the Vote / Non-Partisan Encouragement.

While the first category is inherently partisan in nature, the other two are usually non-partisan and relatively neutral. As such, the two latter categories offer better opportunities to conduct studies of specific contested topics without risking biasing the reliability of the responses by partisan leanings.

Informational Ads

Elections informational materials started appearing in the late 19th century in the form of election proclamation announcements, as the voting procedure

changed from open ballot voting to private ballot casting. Historically, these were mostly textual. However, with time and technological advancements, select graphic elements (color schemes, logos, and the like) were added to them. Informational ads are often dry, factual in rhetoric, and dull in design because these characteristics are attributed to elevate information retention and to ease resistance to the message (Environics Research Group, 2008). While being produced for various media – from printed forms to radio, television, and digital media – Canadian informational materials remain predominantly textual and are therefore of lesser fit for the purpose of conducting a visual culture study.

Get Out the Vote Ads

Get Out the Vote ads are the last type of campaign to appear on the cultural stage. The first attempts to campaign explicitly for non-partisan voting encouragement purposes are not well documented. However, the thought of, and use of, non-partisan Get Out the Vote campaigns, mostly in the form of posters, are often attributed to the American Women's Suffrage Movement and appeared in or around 1850 with demands to grant that right to women (Cooney Jr. & Project, 2005). The movement was also the first to use posters to call women, after receiving the right to vote, to exercise their right to vote. Multiple such posters appeared not long after the 19th amendment was passed in 1920 in the USA. The Canadian Women's Suffrage Movement, like its American counterpart, made frequent use of printed materials, including posters, to promote its struggle (Burant, 2009).

The history of Get Out the Vote campaigns in Canada is not well documented and is seldom mentioned by either Elections Canada through its publications (i.e. *A History of the Vote in Canada*, (2007) or the various issues of its *Electoral Insights* magazine), or by scholars who study voter turnout history. Perhaps Elections Canada's official stance on voting encouragement, which states that the agency considers executing informational ads within its purview while excluding Get Out the Vote campaigns from that mandate (Fekete, 2015), contributed to that oversight. While so, a search for past examples of Get Out the Vote campaigns in Canada reveals that their frequency and ingenuity increased drastically since the mid-20th century and into the 21st century, as voter turnout rates continued to decline and academic and government attention to it rose.

Despite that, non-partisan voting encouragement campaigns are a highly under-studied topic in both political communication literature and visual communication literature. The field is so understudied that in a review of 195 publications that dealt with the intersection of visual and political communication topics from 1956 to 2011, Barnhurst and Quinn (2012) did not find any work that studied the subject.

Method and Research Design

The purpose of this work is to study the use of the character X as an element in voting materials design, and to challenge current hand-me-down knowledge about it. To that end, the last category of non-partisan Get Out the Vote campaigns was selected as the preferred content type upon which this study relied. Printed posters were chosen as the choice media product for this research because they were easier to handle logistically, while on the road, they do not demand consideration of analyzing moving-image or audiovisual elements and were easy to locate and harvest from readily available public sources. A corpus of 21 Get Out the Vote ads that were used in Canada between 2000 and 2015 was gathered. Items in this corpus were produced by governmental agencies, NGOs, and art-school students in social service classes.

In addition, a decision was made to pursue an audience reception study via in-depth interviews and photo elicitation, rather than a personal analysis by a single researcher using semiotic approaches, in order to ensure that the work represents the public's knowledge accurately. Interviews were conducted in the summer and early fall of 2015 with 44 Albertans using an adaptable photo-elicitation model – a method that uses visual imagery to elicit responses from participants in ways that limit social desirability bias, selection bias, and visual perception bias (Berenstein, 2019, pp. 85-93). Responses were thematically analysed at face value, and no semiotic methods were used to assess responses, to ensure that the original intentions of the interviewees, and their original sense-making approaches, were kept.

Research population¹

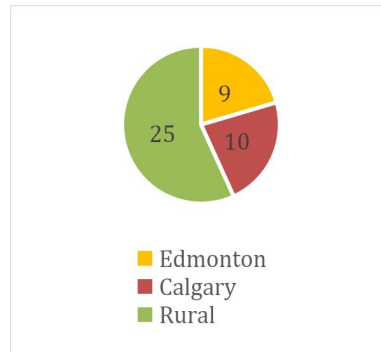


Fig.1 - Number of interviewees born and raised in rural areas

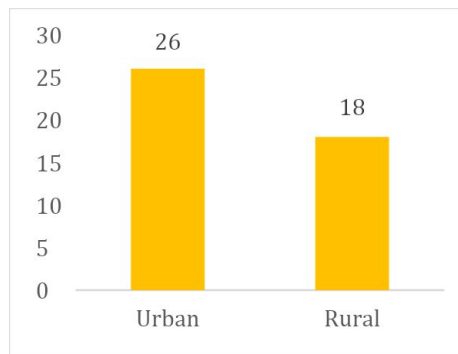


Fig.2 - Number of interviewees currently residing in rural and urban areas

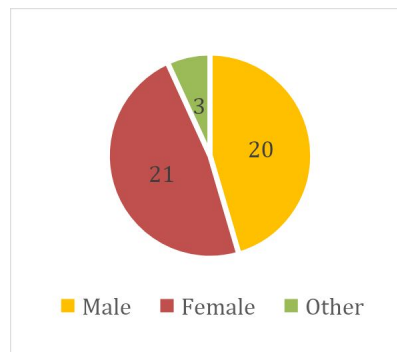


Fig.3 - Count of interviewees' self-identified gender

¹ Based on self-reporting by interviewees. However, this data is consistent with elections Canada and previous research findings relating to prevalence of voting behaviour among Canadian citizens. For more information see Howe, P. (2010). *Citizens Adrift - The democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

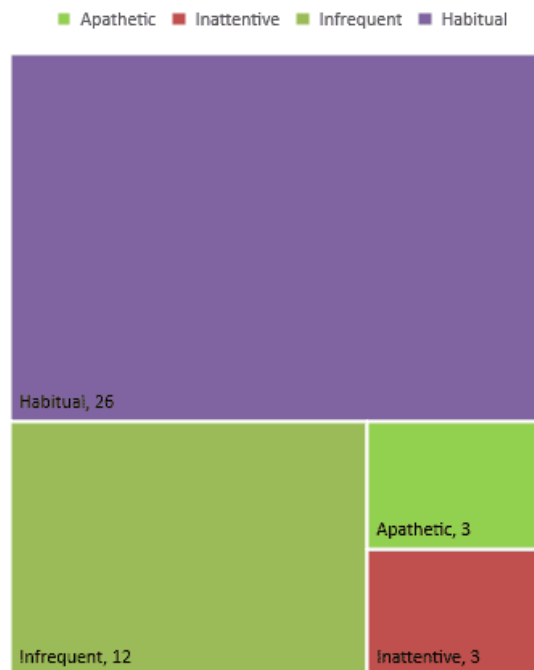


Fig.4 - Participants' self-reported civic engagement habits

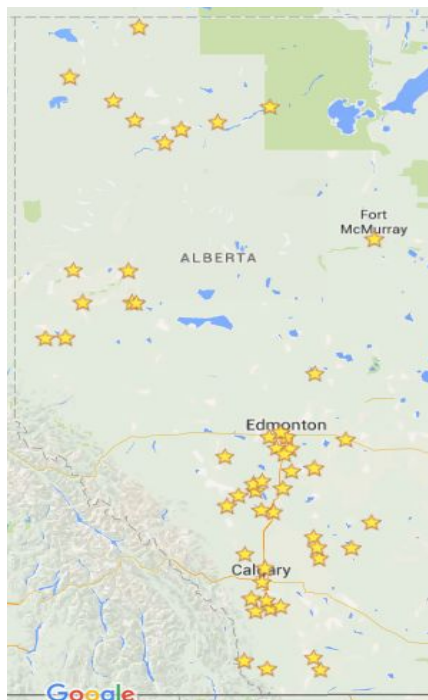


Fig.5 - Locations of interviewing in Alberta

What Does X Mark? Assessing the Practical Aspects of Using X for Communicating Elections

The character X has been identified, by all the interviewees without exception, as a distinct visual element that oriented them to consider a poster in the context of elections. This determination was noted both towards an X as a visual element in the design of the posters – such as in AIGA's Big X (Fig. 6) – and as the logo of election agencies, such as Elections Manitoba's logo (Fig. 7).

The identification of X as related to elections cuts across various demographics with little relation to class, gender, religiosity, education, or profession. Safia, a 20-year-old first-generation Canadian undergraduate student from urban south-central Alberta, commented: "I would probably pay attention to it just because I have an interest in politics, so if I saw an X or the Elections Manitoba [logo] that would probably catch my eye." Alison, a 46-year-old northern Albertan high-school graduate, said: "[It's elections-related] because there is an X that marks the spot". Ann, a 69-year-old, high school graduate and retired farmer from rural eastern-central Alberta, agreed, saying: "Oh yeah because you always put an X to where you're going to choose- to whoever you are going to choose to vote for."



Fig.6 - *Design for Democracy* campaign - Big X / Designed by Kelsey Allen, AIGA, 2014



Fig.7 - *You Count* campaign - Senior Citizen / Produced for Elections Manitoba

When asked to tell how interviewees learned about the elections-related context of the character X, they suggested either: 1) the instructions on the ballot form, 2) school, or 3) explanations by their parents. The explanations interviewees provided as to the origin of their understanding are both in line with and reasonable in light of political socialization literature (Jennings, 2007).

Amy, a 28-year-old daughter of a government worker from urban southern Alberta was a graduate research student at the time of interview. Amy believes she learned about the meaning of the character X in the context of elections from the instructions on the ballot itself: “You put an X on a ballot. ...I have voted before. ...They’re very clear on their instructions.”

Several interviewees credited school as the source of their knowledge about the relationship between X and elections. Evan, a 30-year-old university graduate student from an urban central Albertan background, testified that “In Grade 1 class elections the teacher’s told us to put an X- ...put an X on the ballot...” Parents were also credited with teaching some interviewees about the linkage, as part of their decision to take their children to experience elections, while the parents themselves went to vote. Jeremy, a 39-year-old tradesperson from urban southern Alberta told of one such time:

I guess in terms of my first like ever seeing an X put in a ...in Alberta, we use a circle... my parents took me in the voting booth when I was a little kid. But that’s just an X with a pencil or a pen...But in terms of the broad stroke X, I mean that’s ingrained through um popular

culture imagery of voting. So, just over time I probably maybe became more aware or made that connection at some point during high school that that broad stroke X, that's the voting. If it was just a thin pencil line.

Jeremy, in this testimony, remembered being aware, to some degree, of the cultural significance of marking an X on a ballot. However, he distinguished between recognition of a symbol as a narrowly framed technical process of voting and deeper socio-political understanding of the meaning of elections and the way the X stands to represent the entire process of elections.

To conclude the point, as demonstrated in the responses, the X has an irrefutable connection to elections in the minds of the interviewees. The recognition of the X as the means by which one states their preferences when filling a ballot is shared by people of various demographic backgrounds and from different walks of life. It is grounded in Canadian political and visual cultures as a historical marker of elections, and therefore it frequently appears in elections related materials.

X-Rated: Assessing the visual perception of the cross

This section addresses three phenomena that govern the visual perception of the X, and testifies to the technical aspects of using the X as in the context of elections:

- The location of an X in the box (or in the square as some called it),
- Conditions for a political understanding of the X (or the limits of the X), and
- Alternative ways of marking ballots (the X vs. ✓ category).

X in the box

X in the box refers to comments that interviewees made about the nature of filling ballots by marking an X in a specially designated space – either a square or a circle (Fig. 8). When seeing Elections Manitoba's Your Power to Choose poster (Fig. 9), Hockley, a 46-year-old software engineer from a central Albertan urban background, said: "Well the Elections Manitoba is a bit of a giveaway, but the big X in the box is definitely speaking to a vote and largely to a political ballot."



Fig.8 - Polling station entrance signage / Elections Alberta



Fig.9 - *Your Power to Choose* / Produced for Elections Manitoba

According to Hockley and other interviewees, the box or circle in which the X is marked gives the combination of elements the elections-related meaning.

The limits of the X

The limits of the X category collects instances in which the X did not get associated with voting or elections. Comments that fit this category appeared when:

- The space in which the X was found was not a clear-cut square,
- When interviewees did not find another verbal element (such as a slogan or elections agency's name and logo) that directed them to think about the poster in a political manner, and
- When the X was not found in a recognized space.

Evan commented about the shape of the space in which the X was located in Elections Manitoba's Your Power to Choose poster when the agency logo was omitted (Fig. 10):

I don't think that's the message they're trying to send [that this poster is about elections]... Because the ballot box, the X in the square it's not just a square it's like a speech bubble as if it's this person's talking.



Fig.10 - *Your Power to Choose* / Produced for Elections Manitoba

Evan differentiated between the simple square that could be found on a ballot and the square shaped like a speech bubble found in the poster, that he considered to be a speech balloon and thus a different symbol than an X in the box.

The specificity in which he saw the two shapes is furthered by the lack of another cultural reference (such as the name or logo of the agency) in the poster when the bottom part is not visible. However, when the name of the agency and its logo were present, Evan agreed that there are hardly any other plausible alternative readings to this poster.

Several interviewees referenced the difference in reception of that same Elections Manitoba poster with and without the agency's logo at the bottom (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10). For example, Ann, a 69-year-old retired farmer from rural eastern-central Alberta, said that "without that [the Elections Manitoba logo], you don't know what they are asking you to vote for." Ann compiled her understanding of the poster based on two elements: The X in the box and the agency's name. The slogan, in this case, seemed to have a lesser impact on her because of its ambiguity.

Such responses stress the importance of multiple cultural anchors, both visual and verbal in posters' design.

The last kind of response regarding the limits of the X relates to the presence of an X without a designated marking space, or at the center of an ambiguous shape. Interviewees who were faced with such imagery found it hard to arrive at a politically oriented reading of the posters.

Consider, for example, the following response by Amanda, a 31 year old female high school graduate from a religious rural southern Albertan background, to Student Vote's Learn. Discuss. Vote. poster (Fig. 11):

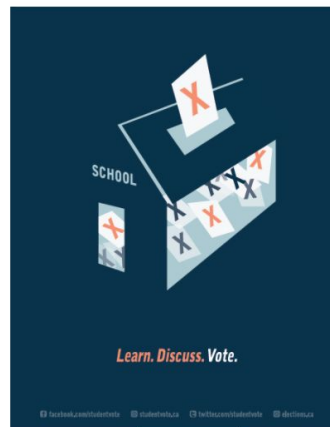


Fig.11 - *Learn, Discuss, Vote* / Produced by Student Vote

Amanda faced uncertainty when the X was not positioned in any discernible square or a circle. Instead, the X was positioned inside an awkward, white-out, obtuse trapezoid space to depict what may be associated with ballots. Furthermore, the white-outed shapes do not have an outline. Finally, to complicate the reading of this poster even more, the shape of the school-house/ballot box is only partially hinted at and confused interviewees' ability to arrive at the intended meaning.

Rose, a 36 year old French-Albertan woman with a post-graduate degree and of an urban central Albertan background, provided another example of a difficulty to decode a poster when there was no concrete X in a box when she was presented with the Elections Canada Your Vote Is Your Say poster (Fig. 12):

This is going to sound totally off the wall, but the first thing I see when I see this hand ... this feels like an apartheid protest poster. ...I think it's terrible because it says your vote is your say but then the hand is reaching up which has nothing to do with saying anything and the X is clearly applied afterwards [points to the upper section of the shape near the index finger], so then it's like, what is it reaching for? It's just a bunch of mixed up junk on a page.



Fig.12 - *Your Vote is Your Say* / Produced for Elections Canada

Rose identified the X quickly and recognized the ideographic and textual value of the word "vote" in the slogan. However, as she pointed out, the X did not fit the standard visual conventions of the symbol in political contexts, and the rest of the imagery did not provide enough anchoring to associate the imagery with an elections-related message.

Indeed, the X in this poster is drawn in an unevenly fractured line; the edges of the line have sharp edges that do not match either the physiology or the color scheme of the hand. Therefore, instead of arriving at the intended meaning, Rose opted for an alternative meaning of the poster altogether.

In conclusion, interviewees demonstrated a strong tendency to associate the character X with election-related messages when the symbol appeared in manners that followed grounded cultural conventions:

- X has to be presented in a clear square/circle.
- X has to be presented in an outlined space.

- X has to be accompanied by other cues that prompt to its elections/political context.

Divergence from these resulted in difficulty to arrive at the intended message. That difficulty, in turn, often led to a negative response to the posters.

Affect reactions had an important role in the reception of the posters altogether. Negative responses skewed the reception of some posters' message and contributed to the development of resistive opinions towards the voter turnout encouragement effort. Therefore, even though the two X-factors detailed herein did not reflect directly on the perception of democracy or elections, they indirectly contributed to the matter.

X vs. ✓

The third phenomenon relating to the reception of the X references the use of ✓ (or checkmark) as alternative to the X. Several interviewees made specific comments about their dissatisfaction with the X and preference for the ✓. References to the ✓ in this category reflect uses of both right-pointed and left-pointed checkmarks, by both left hand dominant and right hand dominant interviewees, as dominant hand had no influence in the matter.

Charles, a 55 year old businessman from northern Alberta, may have been the most extreme in his opinion against using X to communicate personal preferences in written form. In response to the first poster he saw, in which an X appeared (Elections Manitoba's Your Power to Choose/ Fig. 9), Charles stated:

Personally, I have never put an X in the box anyways - I put a checkmark in the box. [Why?] Well [because] X is 'NO' [stressed tone], and checkmark is 'YES' [stressed tone], right? Why would I want to mark 'no' in a box? ... I never put an X in those boxes.

Ian, a 40 year old high school graduate and government worker from rural central Alberta, was also very clear in his rejection of X as a written marker of one's approval in the context of filling the ballot:

The X is negative because when you get a test back or something, ... There's a red X [to mark a mistake]... on tests. So... the only time I

have used this is for provincial or federal elections. And I honestly can't think if I do. I just yeah, I think I put checkmarks. If I had to guess, it would be a checkmark.

The X, according to Ian, had a stronger association with educational contexts, of correct or incorrect answers in exams and quizzes, than it had with elections. The negative feelings that one has when they see an X as a mark of failing to answer correctly in an exam surpasses the otherwise neutral association with going to vote.

The association of X as a symbol of mistake or failing, in an educational context, was as prevalent in other interviewees' minds as it was in the minds of Charles and Ian. In fact, about ten interviewees (roughly a quarter of all) mentioned their strong association of X with failing in a test, as with voting. Furthermore, several of these interviewees noted they would have preferred a ✓ over an X and did not use the ✓ because they were not familiar with the legislative change that took effect in 2000 and allowed to mark ballots with signs other than an X (House of Commons, 2000). Potentially, now that these interviewees know that marking a ✓ on a ballot is allowed, they will start using it and will abandon the X.

Following the responses related to the practice of using ✓, instead of X, for marking ballots, there are strong reasons to surmise that, at least for some people, the association of X and negative affect is so strong that they try to refrain from using it at nearly all costs. Having stated such strong negative emotions towards a sign, since early childhood, leads one to wonder whether the association may translate into unintended readings or reception of official election-related communication as well. These could be either negative readings, or, in some cases, even subversive readings (as demonstrated earlier in the limits of the X section).

Another mention of using the ✓ was related to interviewees' wishes to replace the X (or other symbols) with a ✓ as means of changing the appeal of posters to a more positive one. The most common of these references were made with regards to AIGA's Big X (Fig. 6).

Ian, who, as mentioned earlier, is a staunch supporter of using a ✓ over an X, said:

?Why an X, why isn't it a checkmark, but I think it's an X because it's negative than a checkmark, and that ties into the negativity that I feel

about this poster. I get this idea, but it almost feels like the people have to rise up against this negative background...

Ian, in this quote, referred to the X in the box convention as both a visual convention inherently associated with voting, and when combined with other design elements, as a design ploy intended to make viewers feel uncomfortable on purpose.

The intended result, in his opinion, is one in which people are swayed to action by feeling guilty. In other words, had the designers used a ✓, Ian would have been more content, but the message would have been diluted. Furthermore, and indirectly, Ian voiced criticism not against the poster, but rather against the cultural perception of elections (and, by extension, politics in general) as having a negative appeal that creates hostility among people and demands an aggressive action.

Gwen, a 69 year old former federal government worker with a graduate degree from rural central Alberta, reported similar preferences in the use of X in Student Vote's Learn. Discuss. Vote. poster (Fig. 11): "A checkmark to me, like when you're in school, you get a checkmark, you get an X if it's wrong. ...the whole concept- an X is wrong, a checkmark is right."

Gwen was not amongst the interviewees who had a strong aversion against using an X on ballots. However, when presented with the dual visual meaning of the X, across the educational and political domains, Gwen felt the tension between the two. Yet, unlike interviewees who preferred ✓ over X, Gwen saw the negative subtext of the situation only because it was explicit that the poster attempted to allude to both a ballot box and a school building. It is unclear if she would have had a similar reaction should the word 'school' be omitted from this poster.

On the other hand, Jeremy, who was another staunch supporter of using a ✓ over the X, saw the positive potential power of the ✓ as means of breaking apathy even in posters devoid of both symbols altogether. In response to the visual logic behind Apathy is Boring's Tic Tac Toe poster (Fig. 13), he commented:

Checkmarks are very well associated with voting. I'm kind of confused almost [laughs] 'cause there's no Xes and Oes. ...? Maybe if it was checkmarks and Xes, there might be something.

Indeed, the visual logic of the Tic Tac Toe poster (Fig. 13) was not clear to many interviewees. However, in an attempt to make sense of the reasoning behind the use of a tic-tac-toe grid, Jeremy suggested to include the X vs. ✓ convention in it, instead of the maple leaf silhouettes, thus negating the poster's nationalistic sentimental appeal and refocusing it on elections.



Fig.13 - *Politics made easy* campaign - *Tic Tac Toe* / Produced for Apathy is Boring

That said, there is hardly enough evidence to suggest interviewees appreciated the positive affect of the ✓ as much as they appreciated the negative affect of the X. George, for example, was indifferent to the use of the ✓ in AIGA's You don't VOTE. They win. (Fig. 14). When asked a concluding question about this poster she dryly replied: "You got a checkmark there instead of an X ...[but] it doesn't matter to me."



Fig.14 - *Design for Democracy campaign - You don't VOTE. They win.* /
Designed by Ben Rush, AIGA, 2012

Several other interviewees commented about the use of a ✓ instead of X in this poster, especially in light of the negative appeal the background and rhetoric of the poster communicated in their opinion. However, they, too, did not ascribe a concrete positive affect to the ✓ in specific, nor did they suggest the use of the ✓ contributed to the poster's reception became more positive.

Elections Ontario's Voting Rules (Fig. 15) was the only poster in the corpus that used both X and ✓. Various interviewees supplied ample opinions and responses in reaction to the poster, including elaborated analysis of the different social subtexts it communicated about multiculturalism and racial affairs, in their opinion. However, only one interviewee (Lucille, a 51-year-old French-Canadian northern Albertan Metis) saw fit to comment about that dual use of symbols when she stated: "...and obviously that is the X for ballot. I'm assuming. And it's also a ✓, So they've got a lot of mileage out of that [element]."

The lack of comments about the dual use of X/✓ in this poster from most interviewees could be attributed to various reasons. It might have been overshadowed by attention to the multicultural social commentary or the artistic looks, from visually triggered interviewees, or by the tongue-in-cheek wording of the slogan from textually triggered interviewees. These aspects received the majority of interviewees' attention, and mostly in a cynically critical manner. However, that does not change the main point in this case, which is that

interviewees paid much less attention to the positive effect of the ✓ than they did to the negative effect of the X.



Fig. 15 - *Voting Rules* / Produced for Elections Ontario

From analyzing the subtext of the responses above, a strong message arises regarding the reception of X in X vs. ✓ cases, by at least some of the interviewees. In the mind of such interviewees who commented about the issue, politics might not be a pleasant and beautiful thing, and using negatively associated symbols such as the X only helps to intensify these opinions more. In that regard, and similar to the other two phenomena recorded earlier, the X vs. ✓ category strengthens the conclusion that affect response, in addition to concepts of democracy, plays a vital role in the reception of the posters.

On a practical level, the X vs. ✓ phenomenon demonstrates an additional understanding that is of importance for communication specialists. Through the analysis, this section documented a process of cultural change in perception of visual cues; where, traditionally, the established cultural norm was of using X as an agreed sign of voting and elections, newly emerging norms prefer the ✓ for these functions.

Summary

The X (the cross) is perhaps the single most identifiable pictogram cue of elections in Canadian political visual culture. The extent to which the

election-related association of the X is solidified in the minds of Canadians is deeply rooted in socialization from their early childhood experiences to their early adulthood exposure to voting regulation. Yet, while the X, as a pictogram in and on its own, is so entrenched in citizens' minds as a symbol of elections, there are concrete and immediate limits to a successful reception of its context and relevance for elections purposes. The X must be presented in a very specific visual convention, either in a square or a circle. The X must have clear outlines and preferably be accompanied by other logical anchors – such as the word vote, or elections agency's logo – to ensure its effective reception.

However, and more importantly, the study found that the cultural status of the X is under threat and deteriorating. Other potential meanings of the X, mostly in education-related life-spheres, muddle the meaning of the pictogram and at times, lead people to develop negative affective reactions to it. Such people highlight the power of the checkmark (✓) as a culturally ingrained viable alternative to the X and prompt them to conclude that it is favored. This later finding bears importance for political marketing purposes, both partisan and non-partisan alike, as the last thing wanted by practitioners is to encourage citizens to develop negative reactions to election campaigns.

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