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How to Prepare for the Approaching General Election

The next municipal elections in Québec are just around the corner, but many people who are preparing to step into the role of returning officer do not fully understand it.

The returning officer plays a key role in ensuring municipal elections go smoothly. To that end, they take on numerous responsibilities before, during, and after polling. Their work guarantees not only that the law is followed, but also that the electoral process is run efficiently and transparently.

Background and designation of the returning officer

By default, the clerk or clerk-treasurer is designated as the returning officer. If they refuse or are unable to fulfill this role, the Commission municipale du Québec (CMQ) may designate another returning officer. This person does not need to be a municipal employee; they can also be an external party, like a lawyer. This provides the administrative continuity that is so essential to ensuring the electoral process runs smoothly.

Upon request, the CMQ grants permission for the clerk not to hold the position of returning officer in the municipality.

Ahead of the election

Before the process officially begins, the returning officer needs to anticipate the logistical and financial requirements. They are also entrusted with a series of tasks and responsibilities, which are listed by Québec's Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) and in the *Act respecting elections and referendums in municipalities* (AERM). The latter lists the main responsibilities associated with this role and gives a detailed overview of the most important tasks, their scope, and their impact on the smooth running of municipal electoral processes.

Before the election, the returning officer draws up a budget to be approved by the municipal council. The municipality must have set up a reserve fund into which funds are deposited each year based on the cost of previous elections.

The returning officer is also required to check the thoroughfares and electoral districts, if applicable, to ensure that all electors have been accounted for properly. Furthermore, they must prepare and publish the election calendar and, by September 1 of the year of the general election, send notices to non-domiciled property owners inviting them to register on the list of electors. Finally, by the 44th day, they must publish a public notice of the election that lists the open positions and states the procedures for nomination and voting. This notice must be sent to the CEO.

Appointment and management of election staff

Once the process has begun, the returning officer appoints, swears in, and trains the election officers.

More specifically, they must appoint an election clerk and may appoint an assistant to whom they will delegate certain duties. They also appoint deputy returning officers and poll clerks for each polling station. Where there is only one polling station, the returning officer may also act as deputy returning officer. In large municipalities (over 100,000 inhabitants), certain positions are awarded on the recommendation of political parties.

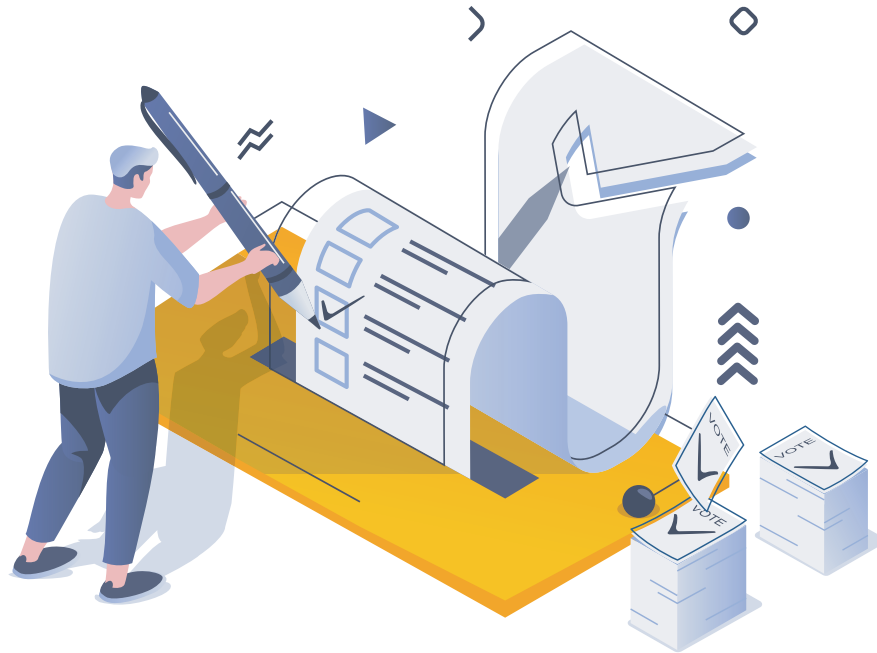
Where they deem it necessary, the returning officer may appoint an officer in charge of information and order for each polling station. They also provide clear guidelines and coordinate the work of the teams to ensure that every stage of the polling process is well supervised.

Candidate management

The returning officer is responsible for informing potential candidates of the conditions they need to meet in order to run. They receive and validate the nomination papers to ensure they contain the elements required by law, provide explanatory documents to candidates, and grant official recognition to tickets in certain municipalities. They also authorize independent candidates in municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants, in accordance with the rules on the financing and control of election expenses. In municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, they must officially recognize tickets.

Compilation and revision of the list of electors

The returning officer also plays an important role in preparing the list of electors. They ask the CEO for the list of domiciled electors and add those who have applied and are entitled to be registered (such as owners and occupants). They then work with dedicated boards of revisors to oversee the revision of the list and publish a public notice announcing the revision. They also ensure that the changes are sent to the Chief Electoral Officer within the prescribed deadlines, i.e., no later than the 30th day after the revision process has ended or been interrupted.



Organization of polling

The returning officer is responsible for planning and managing polling stations, both for advance polls and on polling day. They choose the polling locations, supervise their preparation, and ensure that order is maintained. If necessary, they organize a mobile polling station. In addition, they ensure that all voters can cast their ballots in complete confidentiality, and take steps to facilitate voting for people with special constraints, such as the inability to uncover their face for health reasons.

Post-election management

Once the ballot is closed, the returning officer oversees the counting of the votes and declares elected the candidates who have obtained the greatest number of votes, following the procedure established by law. They communicate the official results to the candidates, the municipal council, and the relevant authorities (RCM, CEO). They may also prepare a report on the election in order to document the process and suggest possible improvements.

Conclusion

In short, the returning officer plays a multidimensional role that goes far beyond simply supervising polling. They plan, organize, and coordinate all stages of the electoral process, while ensuring compliance with legal standards and the transparency of the vote. Through their rigorous work, they reinforce citizens' confidence in the local democratic process and ensure that each election takes place under the best possible conditions.

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