

VICE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AD HOC COMMITTEE

Report 2

SRA 15F- September 13th, 2015

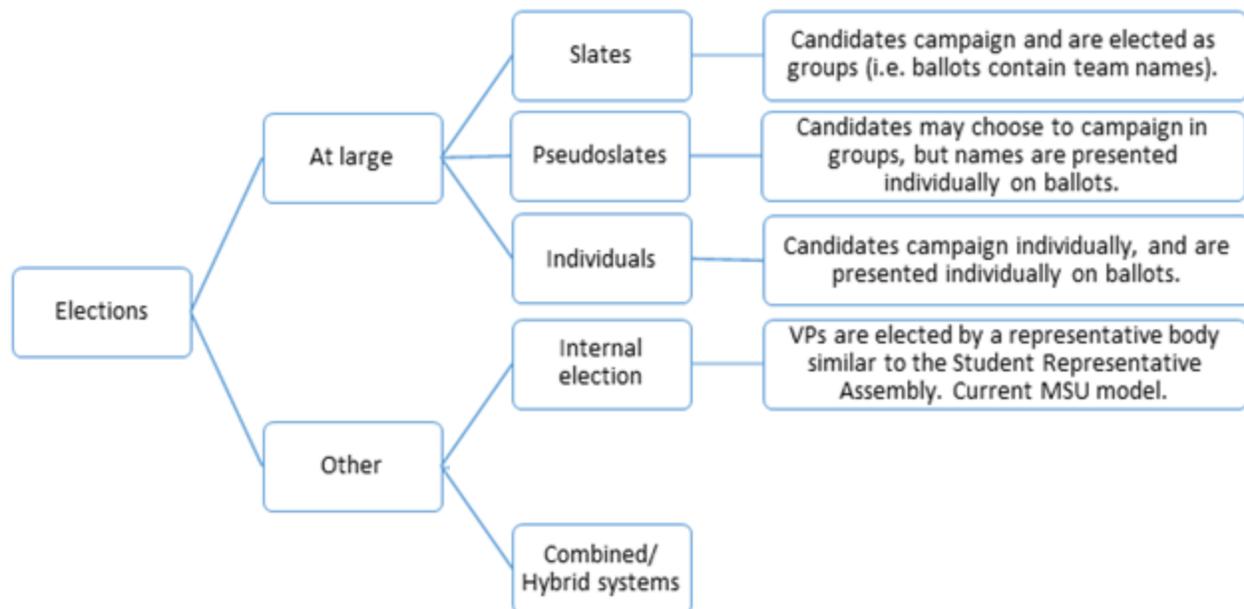


Dear Members of the Assembly,

Over the course of the past month, the Ad Hoc Committee to investigate Vice Presidential Elections has been further exploring the different potential electoral systems presented in the previous progress report.

In the beginning of this report, you will find an investigation of the factors that affect voter turnout. This investigation was carried out in order to potentially assess the metric's validity when making recommendations, and to use these findings to determine ways to increase MSU voter turnout in the future.

The following systems, along with their pros and cons, are investigated in depth in this report.



Just as in the previous progress report, the committee presents herein a series of findings that are largely based on information that may be up to interpretation. This is especially true for the parts involving an evaluation of pros and cons, as these occasionally involve the use of personal opinion.

Finally, the last portion of the report includes an overview of the group's investigation into SRA elections. The portions of this report are presented as standalone sections.

Regards,

Vice Presidential Elections Ad Hoc Committee

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Factors Affecting Voter Turnout:

Investigations into a phenomenon known as choice fatigue provide us with some very interesting information. Choice fatigue refers to the potential for decision quality to deteriorate after a long session of decision making. As the average number of contests and candidates on a ballot increases, so does the opportunity for choice fatigue. With multiple elections on the same ballot, the likelihood of voters to either abstain or click at random increases. This is especially likely for items on the ballot that are placed lower, as voters may assume lower-placement on the ballot equates to that particular election being less important. To try to diminish this effect, many countries including Canada choose to hold national, provincial, and local elections on separate dates (Selb 2008). Voter fatigue is a factor that should be kept in mind when considering options like having the presidential election at the same time as vice presidential election, in an at large system.

Another important factor concerning the voting process is the period of time with which voters are able to submit their ballots. Danziger et al. (2011) showed that providing voters with the option of taking breaks in between decisions allows voters' minds to "refresh", improving overall decision quality. Elections that allow for decisions to occur over longer periods of time (e.g. over multiple days compared to just one day), and that have the option of taking breaks (e.g. the ability to logout and login to one's ballot throughout the voting period) may reduce decision quality deterioration.

In addition, there has been much research that displays that appearing as the first-listed candidate(s) on a ballot has a statistically significant impact on the vote-share of said candidate(s). (Miller and Krosnick 1998; Koppell and Steen 2004). This effect tends to increase for each subsequent contest listed on a ballot, another consequence of choice fatigue. As a means of reducing this bias, a few states in the U.S. have begun to randomize the order of candidates rather than listing alphabetically by surname (Augenblick and Nicholson 2015).

Through discussions with the Chief Returning Officer and Deputy Returning officer it has become evident that relevance of platforms to students and the promotion of the election both have the effect of increasing voter turnout in an MSU specific context. This is likely because both factors increase the discussion of elections within the larger student body. Peer influence is well documented to be a significant factor in voter turnout rates (Klofstad 2007; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; McClurg 2003, 2004; Mutz 2002). The more discussion there is surrounding an election, the more aware students are of any issues at hand. There is also a more significant social pressure to vote as it becomes a more discussed activity. While silhouette articles provide similar information, interactions with peers are of higher benefit because they allow for targeted information to be obtained and more engaging (Klofstad 2007). Analysis of a variety of Get-Out-The-Vote campaigns in the U.S. has shown that personal contact (e.g. live phone calls, door-to-door visits) is quite effective at increasing one's likelihood to vote, far more so than a simple general citizen appeal. These in-person interactions have little impact on affecting voters' attitudes towards public issues but the social interaction itself seems to be the catalyst for voting (Network Scholars 2014).

An anecdotal example of the potential affects of peer influence on the MSU is the 2014-2015 academic year's Presidential and SRA General Elections (Figures 1-6). During this year there were many ongoing discussions about the accessibility of the MSU, its effectiveness in catering to the larger student body, and whether it reflected the diversity of the student body. In addition, there was a referendum in which the Health and Dental Plan was also being advocated for across social media. All of these discussions helped create a student body that felt informed

on many of these issues and a community of discussion. We suggest that these discussions may have led to the higher levels of voter turnout in 2015 than in the previous two years. In addition, more candidates ran for SRA in 2015 than any year since 1973. This was the second highest number of candidates running in MSU history. More candidates mean more communities were linked to the election and discussion would have correspondingly increased.

Finally, the effect of habitual voting was examined. Voter turnout should increase with time as individuals are more likely to vote the following year if they voted the preceding year. However this was not necessarily seen in the data from presidentials and SRA generals, suggesting other factors were at play or a large proportion of the voting population in these data sets were graduating students. Theoretically, increasing first year participation in elections would have longer positive impacts on voter turnout. (Plutzer 2002).

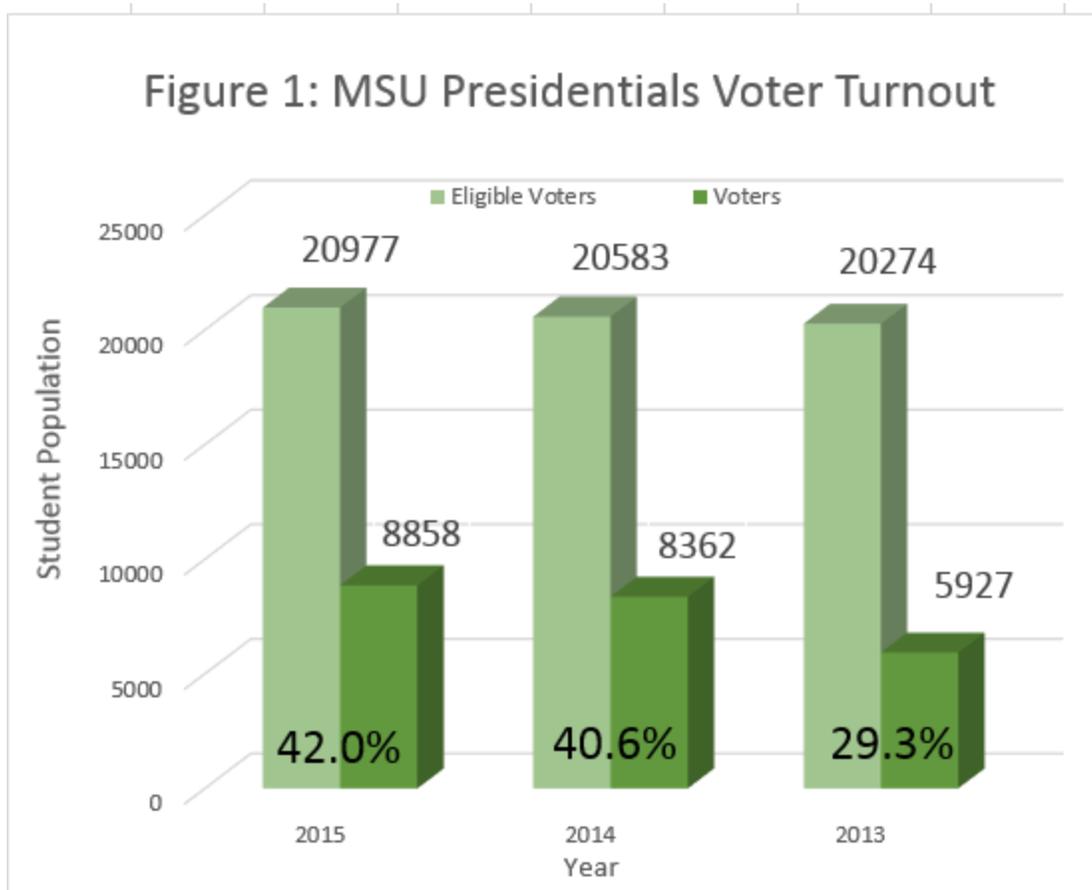


Figure 2: MSU SRA Business Voter Turnout

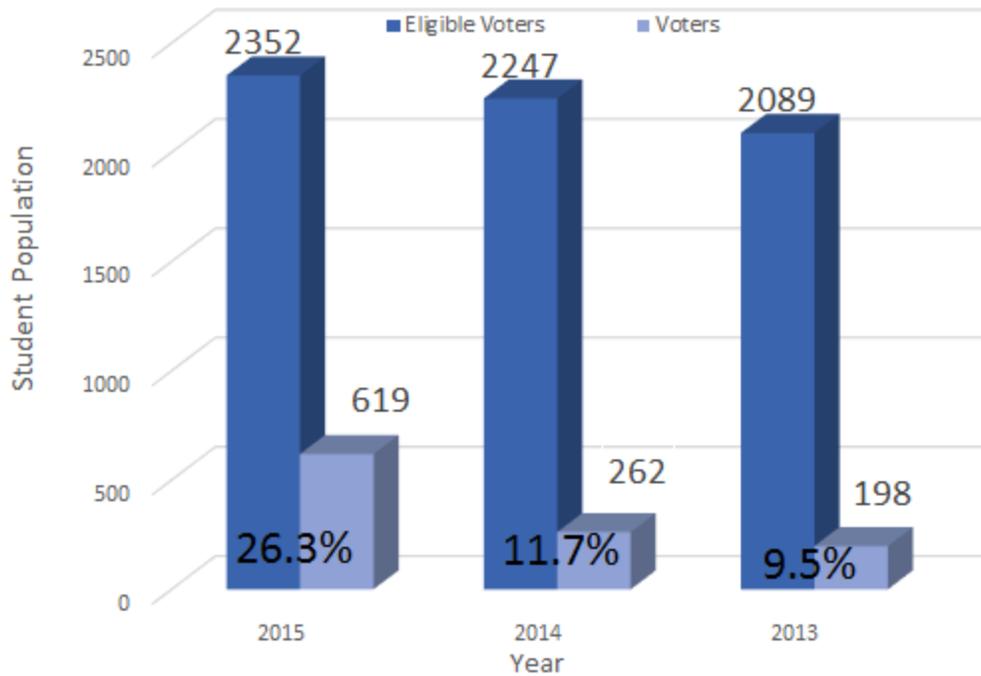


Figure 3: MSU SRA Health Science Voter Turnout

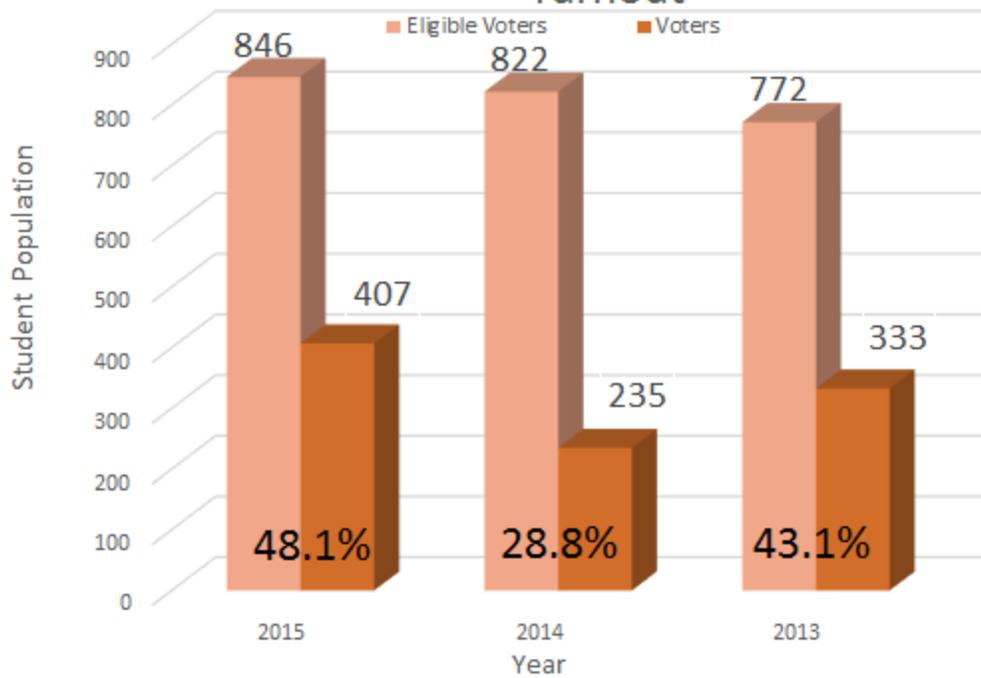


Figure 4: MSU SRA Humanities Voter Turnout

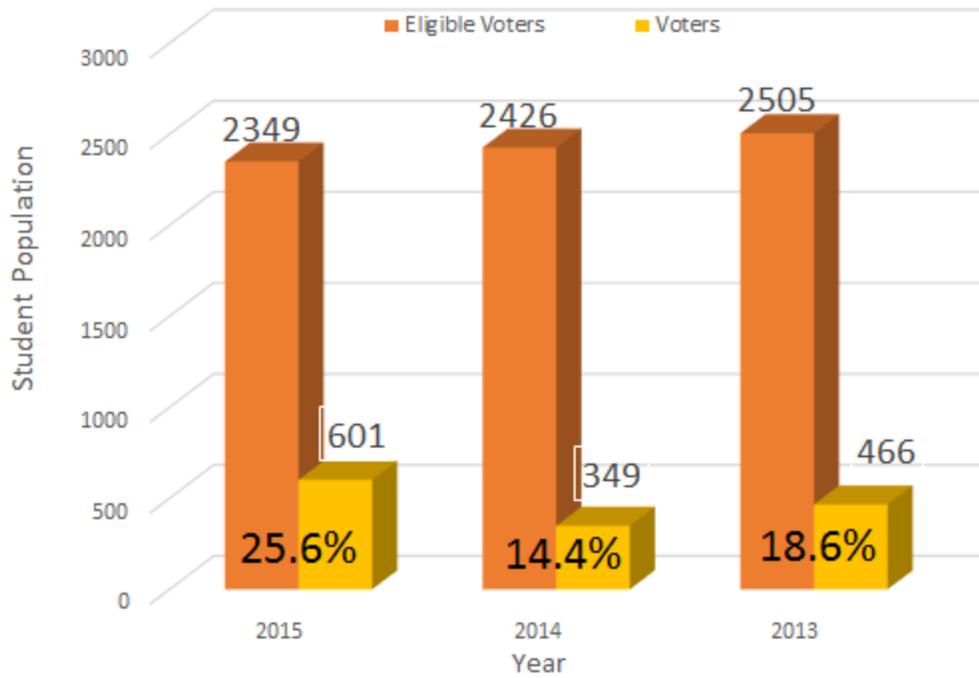
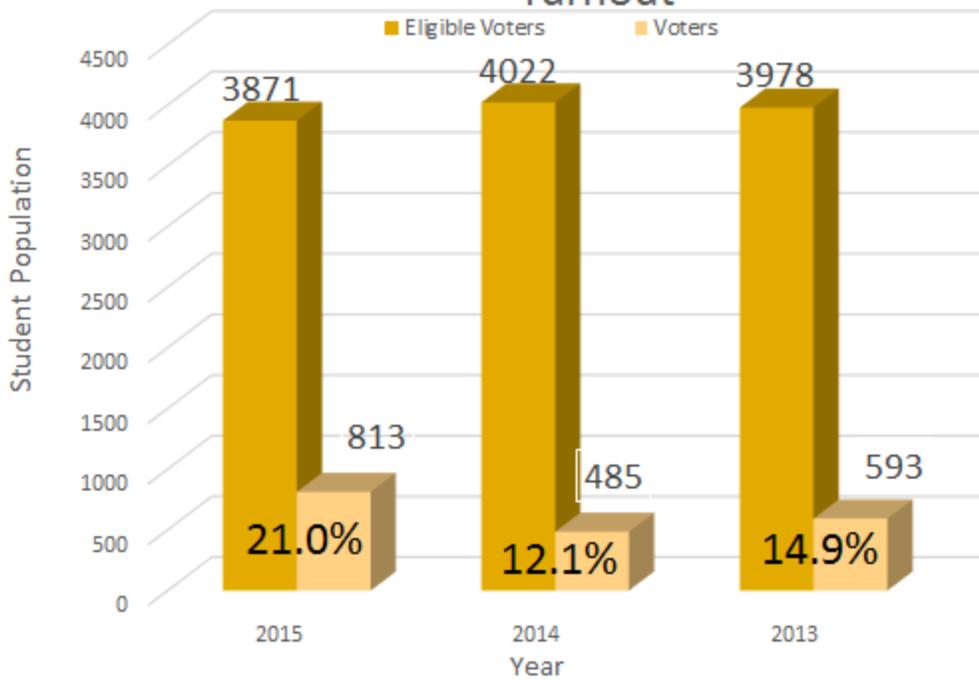
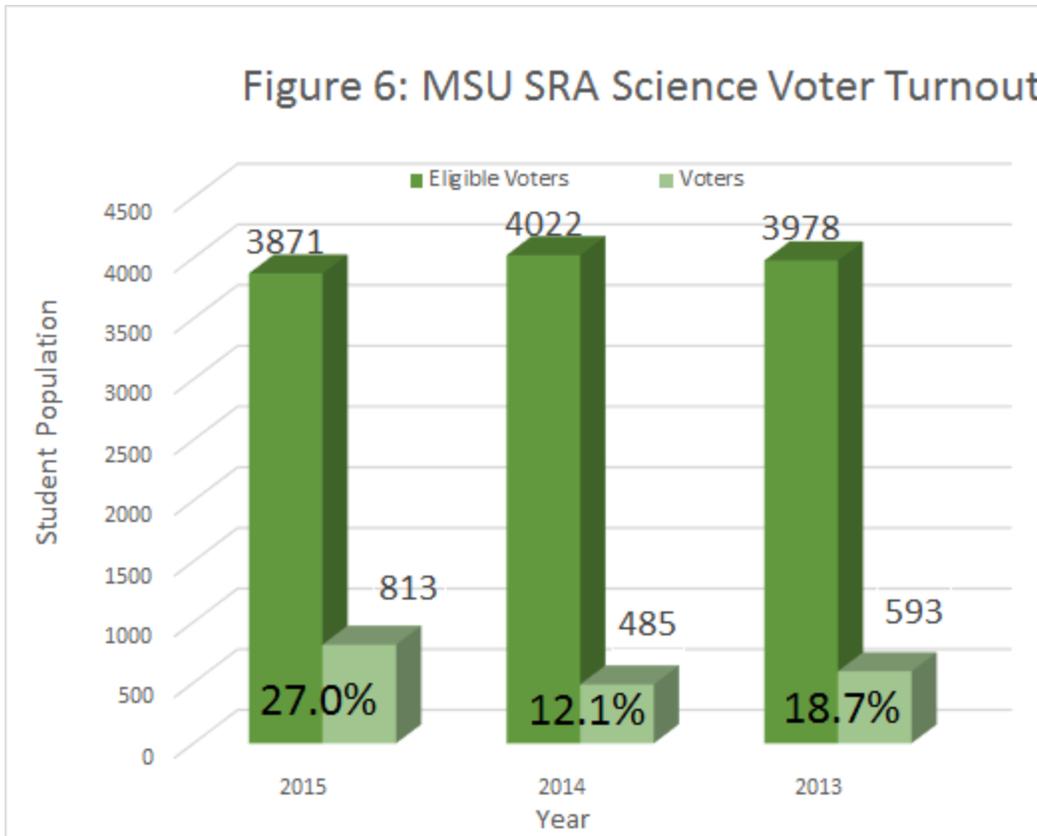


Figure 5: MSU SRA Social Science Voter Turnout





It should be noted that the Engineering, Arts and Science, Kinesiology, and Nursing Academic Divisions did not have sufficient data to complete an analysis because of acclaimed seats.

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Slates

The slates electoral system is used in a variety of universities across the country, including Western University, Algoma University, and Carleton University.

Pros

Proponents of the Slate system argue that slates may permit a more cohesive vision among the Student Union Board of Directors or student government executive [1] [2]. However, some opponents of slates deny that this benefit does not exist in practice [3]. Additionally, slates may engage students in the democratic process by creating a group identity that is more recognizable than any individual candidate. [2]

Slates may reduce voter fatigue by reducing the number of ballots or the number of boxes on each ballot. [2] Some critics of slates claim that this benefit can only be achieved at the cost of reducing the amount of information presented to voters. [3] This concept is investigated more in depth in the “Factors affecting voter turnout” section.

Cons

Some concerns with the Slate System are that slates may reduce the diversity of the field by requiring candidates to be well-connected. [3] However, bans of slates may not solve this problem, as the campus political process may in practice be strongly biased in favour of well-connected candidates in any model, and individual candidacy may simply hide these connections from voters. [2] Other concerns are that Slates may reduce accountability by allowing mediocre candidates to be elected as part of an otherwise strong slate. [1]

Slates may reduce the diversity of the elected executive’s viewpoints and visions if each slate is more ideologically homogeneous than the overall field of candidates. This point is speculative, raised at an Ad Hoc committee meeting [4]. While a unified vision may be advantageous, diversity of vision and experience can also be an asset. Finally, slates may create an excessively partisan environment in student government. [2]

Anecdotal evidence and case discussions

Canadian universities

The opinions of Canadian students toward slates seem to be varied. There appears to be no connection between voter turnout and presence of slate elections [5], but no systematic analysis has been done [6].

- Western University (formerly the University of Western Ontario): Western switched to a slate model from an individual candidacy model after the 2012-13 election season and there is now strong feeling in their students’ union that the change has been detrimental [3][7][8][9]
- Queen’s University: The current Queen’s executive was acclaimed, as no other slate contested the election [10]
- University of British Columbia: UBC banned slates and slate-like behaviour--what this report refers to as Pseudoslates--eight years ago, and feelings are mixed [2][6]

American universities

In general, slates seem to be widespread among American universities [11][12][13][14], but there is limited availability of information. There does not seem to be a great deal of discussion on the topic of slates in American student governments, which may suggest that where the slate system is prevalent, it is also deeply entrenched and rarely challenged. Interpretation of silence, however, is problematic. The American Student Government Association (ASGA) declined to share information on their experiences with slates, which they refer to as tickets.

Outside Student Government

McMillan, a Canadian law firm, reports that slate models of board-of-director elections in the corporate world have declined in popularity in recent years due to the inability of shareholders to express approval or disapproval of individual directors. [1]

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Pseudoslates

Pseudoslate-based elections are a widespread system used in Ontario with at least 6 Student Associations implementing them (Report 1). Student Representative Assembly Candidates are also elected using this system currently at McMaster.

Pros

Arguments for the implementation of the pseudoslate system include the ability to run in groups. This allows for centralized platforms which could provide a clearer vision of what the Board of Directors would accomplish as a whole. In addition, the ability to run as an individual is left intact, which enables those who do not wish or are unable to assemble a slate to run for the position they are best suited for. Names appearing separate on the ballot may discourage someone from benefiting from the popularity of others as they could in a slate. Voters have the ability to “mix and match” who they think is best for the job and do not have to stick to a slate. The ability to run in a slate may encourage more/new individuals to run who otherwise would not have run. Slates may also give an opportunity for individuals with similar concerns or views on issues to unite and run together.

Cons

Depending on how funding is distributed in a pseudoslate system, advantages may be available to those choosing to run either in a slate or as an individual. This could lead to unequal opportunities for different candidates. Additionally, unless the slate name appears with the person’s name on the ballot, it may be difficult for voters to recall group affiliations and candidate preferences.

In general, such an election would be another at large election, which comes with logistical challenges (taking up space in the student centre for long periods of time, disrupting classes frequently, another election that needs to be coordinated through MSU Elections, etc.)

Individual Candidacy Pros and Cons

The individual candidacy model reflects current electoral processes on a municipal level, where candidates represent themselves and run individually, with a team supporting them.

Pros

Within an individual system, candidates ideally run solely on their own merit and the ideas that they bring forward. This prevents candidates from being aided or hindered by any of their running mates, in terms of both campaigning strategy and merit in the public eye. Individual candidates are also less likely to lead to large scale campaigning. This effect is more significant for at-large elections but is still relevant in the current VP elections system.

An individual candidacy model also potentially prevents elections from becoming repetitive and monotonous, as candidates can explore the same points from slightly different perspectives. This election process is standard throughout most small-scale democratic organizations, including Canada’s municipalities and school boards [citation], proving that it is effective in certain circumstances.

Cons

Although this system presumably minimizes advantages in elections based on social networks, this may not always be the case. Even in situations where pseudoslates are not permitted,

candidates for different VP positions may potentially team up and develop their platforms together, although they run separately.

Additionally, at large elections with many individual candidates can become unwieldy and it can be difficult for the student body to differentiate between candidates.

With all VP candidates running at large individually, if the election were to resemble the MSU's current presidential elections, each candidate will likely form campaign teams. When a large number of candidates for the different VP positions all have campaign teams, there will likely be a large amount of students heavily involved in the election. This can potentially lead to a situation where the candidate with the largest amount of students involved in a particular facet of the MSU (e.g. services, education) on their team appears to have the most credibility, reinforcing an exclusive nature in MSU elections.

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Internal election

When investigating the current system, as its pros and cons have already been examined in progress report 1, the committee focused on potential modifications to the system.

Time Lines:

When should we have the elections/when should VP's have their term?

Option 1: March elections for VPs with term ending in April

Benefits: Holding Vice Presidential elections in March would reduce exam conflicts for students, SRA members and candidates. In addition, having increased overlap between outgoing and incoming BoD would create the opportunity for longer transitions and more continuity between years.

Concerns: March elections would lead to a greater likelihood of coursework conflict. There could potentially be less time for meaningful promotional build-up and for SRA members to think about their decision. Fewer applicants might also be interested in running. The overlap between outgoing and incoming BoD could be a cause of tension.

Option 2: April Elections (status quo)

Benefits: Holding Vice Presidential Elections in April avoids conflicts that would arise from having elections when summative assessments are due. In addition, this system provides a potentially longer timeline for promotion to individuals who are considering candidacy as well as a potentially longer timeline to engage students at large.

Concerns: There is a much greater likelihood for exam conflicts for students, SRA, and candidates. In addition, there is a very limited transition time between the outgoing and incoming Boards of Directors and Speakers. During this period, students are stressed and many are at home, depending on the timing of their exams.

It would also be possible to hold elections in April with extended VP terms ending in May. Such a system would incur the benefits and difficulties related to the extended term, described in Option 1, as well as those related to April elections, described in Option 2.

How would elections be spaced?

Option 1: One Meeting (status quo)

Benefits: All Vice Presidents are elected with the same amount of campaign time and cannot modify their platforms to better align with elected candidates earlier.

Concerns: The meeting could run very long, to the point where it not only is inaccessible but can also negatively impact the judgement of the SRA.

Option 2: Two meetings

Benefits: SRA would be less likely to suffer from voter fatigue, candidates would not be exhausted, and there would be less pressure to rush the process. In addition, promotions for each meeting could be targeted to the specific portfolios that would be discussed at that meeting, giving a greater potential to engage students. This change could interact well with other changes, such as modifications to Robert's Rules.

Concerns: Under a two-meeting system, different positions would have different campaign terms. A significant concern is that two long meetings could end up being longer in total than the single meeting of the current system, which is especially a concern for commuting SRA

members and others impacted by long meetings. This system also does not address potential inefficiencies in the current system.

Election Process Itself

Timeline

Option 1: Fixed timeline based on number of candidates

Benefits: With this system, students could plan their schedules around the event and be sure when specific elections are happening. This system would address a number of problems and barriers associated with long meetings. Supplementary question periods could be added to ensure all questions can be asked.

Concerns: There is a potentially limited opportunity to ask important questions, and a delay early in the proceedings could delay the rest of the events significantly.

Option 2: Status Quo

Benefits: There is an unlimited opportunity to ask questions.

Concerns: The problems with duration remain.

Should we alter Robert's Rules?

Benefits: Election process would not follow the normal question period process and would be established beforehand. A change could be made where SRA members could not amend the elections parameters. A change in procedure may allow for more effective and efficient discussion. Proceedings would also be more accessible to the general student body.

Concerns: This system may become disorganized or difficult for the speaker to mediate. SRA members may not feel comfortable with a new system (balancing between Robert's rules for SRA meetings and new procedures for VP elections). Establishing election parameters in advance may not be able to account for extenuating circumstances.

Should debates replace individual and group questions?

Benefits: Debates avoid the possibility of planted questions as the speaker and the elections department would be able to impartially prepare debate questions. This could also increase the efficiency of proceedings.

Concerns: This process may become more cut-throat, making potential candidates uncomfortable about the process. In addition, the proceedings would be less transparent to the general student body, as the questions are determined at a time prior to the actual meeting.

Combined/Hybrid Systems:

Having the SRA Vet VP Candidates for a Later At-Large Election

While this option was entertained by the committee, many flaws were identified and led to it being cast aside. From a pragmatic perspective, having an individual go through a two-stage process for a job that pays less than \$40,000 is rather rigorous and a serious reason why competitive candidates may not run for these positions. Second, the committee discussed the fairness of such a situation, because an individual would likely have an entire campaign and platform already created while they are presenting to the SRA. Thus, the SRA vote will either be depriving a serious candidate from running in the at-large portion or it may simply be a bureaucratic formality. As well, it was highlighted that the at large ballot would simply provide the illusion of choice. Lastly, the large amount of changes necessary to create and implement this idea must be considered. For example, a body to appeal the SRA's vetting may be needed, as well as a method of planning out when the vetting process occurs to allow enough time for an entire election. Overall, there were many reasons as to why this process would be complicated, inaccessible and inconvenient.

SRA Elections

The committee believed changes to SRA elections are more suited to take place through the Elections Department, and, if needed, the Bylaws & Procedures Committee. Some things highlighted as needing a review were:

1. *The current system of pseudoslates:* Currently, if individuals decide to run on a pseudoslate, they are confined to only spending the maximum amount a single person can spend. Some members of the the committee wondered this process was fair and ideal.
2. *Advertising for SRA elections:* New methods of making MSU members aware of the opportunity to be a part of the SRA should be considered. The committee commended recent initiatives such as class talks and Elections 101 and believed expansion of this programming, as well as novel programming, could aid in tackling this.
3. *Clarification of reimbursements:* Although the concern was raised that it was unclear this past year, discussion with the Elections Department showed that they had already begun working on this with the Bylaws Commissioner and no further action was needed.
4. *Improving SRA Candidate Visibility/Information:* There was a belief that MSU members were not aware enough of the names on their respective SRA ballots. This was augmented by a large number of candidates. Similar to what is done during presidentials, the committee believed that the Elections Department should look to help voters sort through the candidates in some way, possibly through a large scale event for MSU members to meet the candidates. As well even more MSU members should be encouraged to run through improved promotions and nomination protocols.
5. The committee recommended that the timing of SRA elections be analyzed based on the decision made with VP elections to see if the current timing is ideal.