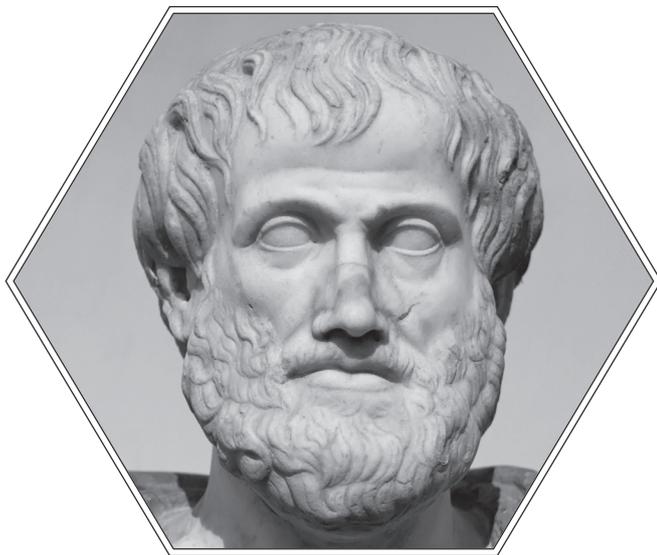


WHAT'S IN A VOTE?

WHEN IT COMES TO DETERMINING PEO COUNCIL, HAVING A SAY MEANS MORE THAN YOU MIGHT REALIZE.

BY SHARON ASCHAIK



Throughout history, democracy has been called many things—some flattering, and some not so flattering. “Democracy is when the indigent, and not the men of property, are the rulers,” said the Greek philosopher Aristotle. “Democracy is a device that ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve,” was the perspective of playwright George Bernard Shaw. And, of course, there is this famous statement from former British prime minister Sir Winston Churchill: “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried.”

Whatever your views on this 2500-year-old political system, and despite its flaws in theory or in practice, it's safe to say democracy still offers the best shot at governance that is for, by and of the people. Or, to put it more eloquently, here's a final quote from one of its most vocal champions, Burmese political reformer and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi: “I've always tried to explain democracy is not perfect. But it gives you a chance to shape your own destiny.”

The same argument can be made for the role of democracy in guiding the practice of engineering in Ontario. As engineering is a self-regulated profession, it depends on its elected representatives within PEO to use their wisdom and abilities to establish policies that steer the profession in the right direction, in service and protection of the public. With PEO's annual council elections fast approaching, the responsibility to help choose the next leaders to advance the engineering profession falls to Ontario's almost 80,000 P.Engs.

“As in any democracy, your vote is your voice, so whenever a licence holder likes or dislikes a policy by PEO, the licence holder has power through their vote of their elected representative,” says Annette Bergeron, P.Eng., FEC, past president of PEO.

Currently serving on PEO's Central Election and Search Committee (CESC), Bergeron says voting in the PEO council elections is critical to ensure not only that members have a say in how the profession is run, but also that the diverse interests of PEO's licence holders are considered.

“There are many different disciplines, different cultural aspects to engineering, and gender diversity within the profession. We want to make sure that everybody's represented at the council table,” says Bergeron, a management consultant for Queen's School of Business and a board member of Engineers Canada.

Better reflecting the full range of members' perspectives and priorities in PEO's activities is a particularly high priority for PEO this year. For several years, voter turnout in council elections has been extremely low, which has raised concerns about how engaged engineers feel as members of PEO. The association is attempting to counter this apathy by more effectively engaging licence holders in the election.

It's a move that's endorsed by Danny Young, P.Eng., president and chair of the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers. He acknowledges that poor participation in council elections is driven by many factors. For one thing, he says, in his view, the profession is very well run in Ontario, so there aren't any serious issues compelling members to vote.

Also, he says, while it's important to better reflect PEO's mix of practitioners from different engineering disciplines, this segmentation itself makes it difficult to secure their collective participation in the election. For example, he says, if there is a professional issue that affects only electrical engineers, other types of engineers may not see the point of voting.

But he says this complacency makes it more difficult to elect council leaders who can optimally serve the needs and interests of all members.

“There’s no point in being apathetic about this whole thing and saying, ‘You know what? It is what it is. It will happen without my vote.’ Too often, that’s the case with a lot of people. They just don’t seem to think that their vote matters,” says Young, a consulting engineer at Spriet Associates. “But it’s important. It does matter. They need to carefully go over the platforms of the candidates and [decide] what’s best for the association to make sure the right candidates get elected.”

“THE MEMBERSHIP SHOULDN'T HAVE ONLY THE ELECTION DOCUMENTS TO READ. THEY SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO READ MINUTES AND AGENDAS OF [COUNCIL] MEETINGS AS THEY HAPPEN.” Denis Dixon, P.Eng., FEC, chair, Central Election and Search Committee

Young’s views are echoed by Liam Morrow, president of the Engineering Student Societies’ Council of Ontario, who says voting enables licence holders to understand better the objectives and intentions of those seeking to lead the profession. But he adds that voting should be one part of a bigger process by members to familiarize themselves more with the priorities and activities of PEO, which he says is important to ensure engineers are current on matters affecting their profession.

“Voting will help make a difference to...members of the profession understanding where their regulating body stands, what those limits are, and what new ideas can be implemented to improve the profession for everyone in Ontario. I believe it’s less of a question of voting, and more of a question of being informed,” says Morrow, who is completing a B.Eng. in electrical engineering at McMaster University.

CESC Chair Denis Dixon, P.Eng., FEC, admits it can be challenging for members to stay informed of PEO’s activities, and that’s partly to do with how council operates.

“The membership shouldn’t have only the election documents to read. They should be encouraged to read minutes and agendas of [council] meetings

as they happen,” Dixon says. “If they don’t know what council is doing, they don’t care who goes to council.” [Ed note: council meeting information, including agendas and minutes, may be found at www.peo.on.ca/index.php/ci_id/2177/la_id/1.htm]

He says low voter turnout in council elections might indicate PEO is not adequately addressing the needs of all its members, but he maintains that “getting involved is the important thing.”

Howard Brown, president of Brown & Cohen Communications & Public Affairs Inc., which provides government relations services to PEO, says when members become more involved in choosing council leaders, it attracts higher-calibre engineers to run as candidates, and helps hold elected representatives more accountable. He adds that it also increases the sense of pride in the profession among engineers and among members of the general public, because council feels more empowered to advance the profession and promote its achievements.

“I think just the perception, both internally and in the public, is improved by someone having a truly significant mandate,” Brown says. “It’s about the profession showing its innovators and that they’re thinking out of the box. It’s about the profession showing leadership in regulating the profession, and in serving the public interest. And it’s about enhancing the public perception of the profession.”

For Diane Freeman, P.Eng., FEC, a past president of PEO and a current City of Waterloo councillor, voting in the council elections is like voting in government elections, asserting that in both cases, our institutions run more effectively and serve us better when voters are more engaged. But she says the responsibility goes both ways: as a publicly elected official, she makes the effort to knock on doors and connect with her constituents; similarly, she would like to see PEO become better able to interact with its members.

Ultimately, Freeman says, strengthening the tradition of democracy that shapes how the profession is governed will enhance the profession’s prospects and better reflect its contributions to society.

“Council is the face of the profession more broadly to organizations such as the provincial and federal government, so there needs to be leadership that best represents the profession,” Freeman says. “I perceive the profession as being forward-thinking, innovative, relevant and important in the lives of Canadians, so I think it’s important to vote in leadership that reflects those values.” Σ