

**BRIEF TO THE
HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMITTEE
ON ELECTORAL REFORM**

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As it relates to the Committee's mandate, my submission discusses only the voting system. I will take an empirical approach to examine this issue, based on the first-past-the-post system currently in use.

This discussion is structured around three objectives. The first is to ensure that the electorate is encouraged to come together, rather than to become endlessly divided. The second is to preserve as much as possible the link between the vote and subsequent government policy. The third objective is to also preserve, as much as possible, the connection that binds the elected official to the community of a particular territorial division. In my view, these objectives help build a worthwhile Canadian democracy, in keeping with the Committee's mandate.

There are in fact two main criticisms of the current electoral system, namely that it creates distortions and it encourages a two-party system.

1. Distorted outcomes

Concerning the first criticism, namely that the system leads to distorted outcomes, it is indeed true that having third parties in the running means that more often than not members are elected without garnering a majority of votes. Consequently, the party that forms government, or the Government itself, often does not represent the preference of the majority of voters. It could even be possible, in extreme but rare situations, for a party to form government with fewer votes than another party.

In my opinion, introducing a second round of voting would be an appropriate way to address this criticism. In all ridings where no candidate is able to secure 50% of the vote, there should be, in the following days, a runoff vote between the two candidates with the most votes in the first round. This would ensure that every member would be elected by an absolute majority of voters and that the Government would most likely represent the preference of a majority of Canadians. This change would also encourage voters to show solidarity and come together on the second round rather than remaining endlessly divided. I would therefore suggest that the current electoral system be modified to include the second ballot as an institutional practice.

2. Two-party bias

Our current first-past-the-post system does in fact encourage a two-party system, which is not necessarily a bad thing. In any case, this effect is only relative: it does not preclude, as has been evident for many years, the presence of third parties in the House of Commons or the occasional need for negotiations between the parties to reach some form of coalition.

In contrast, proportional representation promotes a multi-party system, which is not necessarily a good thing. It certainly allows for a broad political spectrum in

the House of Commons. On the surface, this seems to be consistent with greater democracy. However, if introducing a proportional system ends up broadening political diversity to the point of hindering the emergence of a political majority, any democratic gains would most likely be illusory. Under those conditions, government decisions would be based on ad hoc negotiations and backroom deals between the parties, and would have little connection with the choices made by the people during elections. The selection of decision makers and policy choices would then shift from the electorate to a political class of rather entrenched professional politicians. Government coalitions would be the creation of the parties and not the voters.

In my opinion, voter choice is democratically superior to the considerations of an opaque partitocracy. I think that the democratic principle implies the idea of effective governance based on an agenda that is chosen, and can be rejected, by the people during an election. In short, it is a democracy of deeds rather than a democracy of words, a democracy that does not unduly hinder the State and where alternation is a truly viable option. Otherwise any value or interest in voting can only diminish.

The proportional voting system works on the basis of lists drawn by the political parties. It is effectively the power afforded to the parties that makes elected members nearly impossible to remove. But more importantly, it is essential that these lists, should there be any, be only applicable to territorially bound divisions, to ensure that each and every MP in the House of Commons takes on the responsibility of representing the community of a particular area. Therefore, there should be no “super MPs” free from any such responsibilities. In any case, the idea of pan-Canadian lists, for example, should be completely abandoned. Representation in the House of Commons should continue to be decided by the juxtaposition of election results in territorially bound electoral districts. A member of Parliament should remain an elected representative and not just the party’s choice.

Conclusion

We should modify the current first-past-the-post system by introducing the institutional practice of the second ballot. This would reduce the likelihood of distorted outcomes and force voters to come together rather than become endlessly divided during elections to form the House of Commons.

The proportional representation system should be set aside. If it were to be introduced, alongside the current system, its implementation should be minimal, to preserve the link between the vote and governance, government effectiveness and the practice of political alternation, and, ultimately, the connection between elected representatives and territorially bound districts.

These recommendations are entirely consistent with the items outlined in paragraphs 1), 2), 3) and 5) of the Committee's mandate.

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This brief is largely based on the compendium I published in 2013: *Les institutions démocratiques du Québec et du Canada*. Wilson & Lafleur, Montreal, 2013, p. 74, par. 7 to 9.