

To: Special Committee on Electoral Reform  
From: Russil Wvong, Vancouver  
Date: 2016-08-10  
Subject: Submission on electoral reform: challenges and possible reforms

I don't have any special expertise; I'm just an individual who's very interested in Canadian politics. The submission below reflects some discussion that took place on the Reddit internet forum, on /r/CanadianPolitics.

## 1. Challenges

What are some of the problems with the current system?

- **Declining voter turnout.** This is especially the case among people who are younger and poorer, which gives more weight to the views and interests of those who are older and more affluent. This is reinforced by the fact that *donors* also tend to be older and more affluent. The overall decline reduces the legitimacy of the government. Moreover, a government supported primarily by older voters may be tempted to make it harder to vote, increasing its electoral advantage.
- You can win a **majority of seats with less than 50% of voters.** (In 2011, Harper won with 39.6%; in 2015, Trudeau won with 39.5%. In BC in 1996, the NDP won a majority despite receiving fewer votes than the BC Liberals!) This has its advantages (it's easier for a majority government to make decisions), but it's hard to understand and to justify. It also means that a government may pursue polarizing policies that are opposed by more than 50% of the population. Harper was able to push through the Fair Elections Act because he had a majority in the House; if he had won the 2015 election by a narrow margin, this would have had a significant negative impact on the legitimacy of the entire system. Even if no prime minister before Harper had abused his power in this way, the precedent seems dangerous enough to justify switching to a system where it's much harder to hold a majority in the House.
- **Lack of representation of minority opinion.** For example, the Liberals have all of the seats in Atlantic Canada, with 55% of the vote; there's no Conservative or NDP MPs from the region, despite their getting 45% of the vote. Similarly, the Conservatives typically get all or nearly all of the seats in Alberta with 60% of the vote.
- **Vote-splitting.** When your preferred candidate has no chance of winning, and it's obviously a two-way race otherwise, you can use strategic voting (which of the top two contenders do you prefer?). This reduces the perceived support of smaller parties. Moreover, strategic voting is impossible in a three-way race: there's a significant risk that if you write off your preferred candidate and move your vote to what looks like a stronger candidate, you'll be unpleasantly surprised to find out that your new candidate was in fact *weaker* than your preferred candidate, and you should have just left your vote where it was.
- **Election campaigning is becoming more and more all-consuming**, at the expense of governing. We can see this happening in the US, and of course US campaign tactics have a significant impact on Canadian campaigns. This is a collective action problem: parties need to raise more and more funds to avoid falling behind.

## 2. Reforms

What changes would improve the system?

- **Make it easier to vote.** Move voting to Saturday (as in Australia). Extend early-voting opportunities. Consider mandatory voting (as in Australia). I would strongly recommend *not* introducing online voting--it's too easy to attack.
- **MMP** (as in New Zealand; recommended by the Law Commission of Canada in 2004). Voting is still pretty simple: you get two votes on your ballot, one for your local candidate and one for the party you support.
- **Instant runoff** (as in Australia), using ranked ballots, so that you can vote for your preferred candidate without fear of vote-splitting. You can still just vote for a single candidate, as you do today.
- **Consider eliminating fixed election dates**, to avoid the perpetual-campaign problem.
- **Party financing.** Consider eliminating the political donation tax credit: this would be painful, but it'd be equally painful for all parties. Also consider reintroducing the per-vote subsidy.

Is a referendum a good idea? I would argue that the answer is no.

- It's a lot of work for voters to figure out. Ipsos Reid did a survey one week before the 2005 referendum in BC. 65% of people said that they knew "very little" or "nothing" about the proposed STV system. And that was a referendum where 58% of people voted in favour!
- The referendum threshold would need to be set high (60% or so), to avoid undermining the Clarity Act.
- Brexit shows the disadvantage of making decisions by referendum, instead of in Parliament. If Parliament makes the wrong decision, they can be voted out at the next election. There's no corresponding way to reverse a referendum decision.

Links:

Declining voter turnout: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/content/lop/researchpublications/2010-19-e.htm>

Who donates to political parties, by Frances Woolley:

[http://worthwhile.typepad.com/worthwhile\\_canadian\\_initi/2015/04/funding-the-gerontocracy-.html](http://worthwhile.typepad.com/worthwhile_canadian_initi/2015/04/funding-the-gerontocracy-.html)

The forever campaign, by Joseph Heath: <http://induecourse.ca/the-forever-campaign/MMP> proposal from the Law Commission of Canada:<http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/J31-61-2004E.pdf>

Proposal for instant runoff and mandatory voting, from Robert Asselin:

[http://canada2020.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014\\_Canada2020\\_DemReform\\_PaperSeries\\_EN\\_Issue-03\\_FINAL.pdf](http://canada2020.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014_Canada2020_DemReform_PaperSeries_EN_Issue-03_FINAL.pdf)

Attacks on DC's online election: <http://www.metafilter.com/113977/Attacking-the-DC-Internet-Voting-System>

The 2005 Ipsos Reid survey: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/wherry-electoral-reform-referendum-1.3630702>