

Submission to the House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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Citizen of Canada

Dear Honourable Members of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform,

My name is Joe Lioce. I am a 19 year old Public Policy student entering my second year at Carleton University. Having always been interested in politics from an early age, the quality of our nation's democratic institutions is of paramount importance to me and other young people across the country. It is the freedom offered to Canadians by these institutions that make our country truly great, and today we have the opportunity to expand these freedoms exponentially.

My proposals are twofold and are complimentary. First, inspired by a project by the Behavioural Insights Team in the United Kingdom, I would suggest that the government use "Nudge" tactics to dramatically increase voter turnout. Second, I would suggest that Canada follow in the footsteps of British Columbia, over twenty US states and, Switzerland by providing for Initiative Referendums to be held in Canada.

I do not believe that the committee's time is best used considering replacing FPTP with another electoral system. I believe this because ultimately, regardless of what method of voting we use, the opinions Canadians have regarding how the country is governed only really matter one day every four years, election day. By focusing the committee's energies on these two proposals, the committee can effectively increase voter participation (via Nudge tactics) and increase the say every Canadian citizen has over how their country is governed (via initiative).

Whereas:

This Committee's mandate has five objectives;

- 1) Increase Public confidence that their democratic will is being respected;
- 2) Increase voter participation;
- 3) Avoid further complicating the voting process;

- 4) Ensure that any proposals can be implemented while safeguarding public trust in the electoral process, and;
- 5) Ensure that Regional representation is respected and Members of Parliament facilitate resolution of their constituents concerns.

The first proposal, the adoption of Nudge tactics is to use social norms (in this case, text messaging) to increase voter participation. The effectiveness of Nudging was demonstrated in the UK when the Behavioural Insights Team prompted those owing the UK Courts Services fines by texting them ten days before their fines were due. This doubled payments without further need for intervention. The UK Courts Service saved £30 million a year by "sending people owing fines personalized text messages to persuade them to pay promptly."

There are two methods that SMS could be used to increase voter participation in Canada.

The first and boldest method would be to arrange for the government to send out a mass text to eligible voters. Effectively, this would allow Canadians to text their ballot in. The potential in this is truly massive. For the first time in history, government would be coming to citizens with their ballots, rather than citizens coming to a polling station. As well as increasing voter turnout, this has the potential to dramatically simplify the voting process. This could also help increase confidence in the electoral process by sending them a confirmation text after the citizen sends their first text, avoiding mistakes being made. In addition, the time saved counting physical ballots as well as ballots that did not need to be printed could save the government large sums of money, as well as making the whole process greener.

The most serious objection to this proposal is that telecoms companies would potentially have access to the people's voting records. However, with sufficient legal protection on this information I believe many Canadians would feel comfortable doing this.

The second, far safer option is to send personalized text messages to Canadians reminding them to vote. Perhaps one to ten days before the election and another on the day. Although far less ambitious, it still has the potential to increase voter turnout.

In order to acquire the phone numbers of eligible voters, the federal government would need to compel telecoms companies to provide them. If possessing these phone numbers became an issue for Elections Canada, one could ensure that Elections Canada is the only government institution to have access to them via an amendment to section 5 of the Security of Canada Information Sharing Act. It would be necessary to add another subsection stating that information gathered by Elections Canada cannot be shared among other federal institutions.

This concludes my first proposal. Personally, I believe it is time for Canada to move fully into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and embrace the first option. Armed with modern technology, we have the potential to make history and totally reverse the downward trend of voter turnout. Will the committee shy away from the chance to make a real difference, preferring stagnation and ultimately decay in our democracy or boldly look fortune in the eye and press ever onwards?

The second proposal is to provide for Initiative referenda Federally in Canada. As things stand today, unlike the honourable members of this committee, who are free to vote on and propose legislation, I only have say in the governance of our nation once every four years, government referenda notwithstanding. Providing for Initiatives would give Canadian citizens an unprecedented share in Canadian democracy, and would doubtless inspire steadfast confidence in our democracy for generations to come.

An Initiative Referendum is the process by which any registered voter can propose legislation. The proposed bill must be clear and unambiguous in a matter of federal jurisdiction. Initiatives begin as a petition, and the voter must collect a certain amount of

signatures before the government is compelled to have a referendum. In British Columbia, where it is applied provincially, this requirement is set to at least 10% of all registered voters in every riding. Considering the vast size of Canada geographically, this should be tweaked to fit the federal scene better by changing the requirement from 10% of all voters in each riding to 10% of voters in each province/territory.

In Switzerland, which is also a federal constitutional democracy, Initiatives exist at every level of government. Federally in Switzerland, 192 federal initiatives have been called since their inception in 1893. Of these, 22 were successful. However, it is important for members to note that after the year 2000, 10 Initiatives have so far been successful. One can reasonably assume that as we become more connected and informed, the easier it is for direct democracy to flourish. IT is important to note another 73 were withdrawn, mostly in favour of government counter-proposals. If Canada were to adopt initiatives as part of our democracy, I recommend that the government also make provisions for counter proposals of this kind. This way, both the democratic will of the people and the authority of Members of Parliament to make our laws is respected.

In several briefs given to this committee, members have been told not to hold a referendum on whatever proposals are accepted. The primary reason cited is that they are divisive, and members are reminded to "think Brexit." I urge the honourable members to distinguish between following through with this proposal for initiatives and holding a referendum on electoral reform specifically. Initiatives by nature require a substantial amount of base level support across the country to even be held. Indeed, as one particular case in Oklahoma demonstrates, Initiatives can provide a means for issues to transcend the traditional partisan divide and allow cooperation on issues of common interest to all citizens.

According the article "Oh, Oklahoma" in the Economist, teachers in the Sooner State are having a hard time getting a raise. Despite 90% public approval for an increase to their wages, the issue has been lost in the partisan divide. In response, former democratic governor, David Boren, and several members of his former cabinet backed a ballot

initiative to raise the sales tax and use the new revenues to increase teachers pay. I recommend that the honourable members read the article in question. The referendum is listed on ballotpedia as "Oklahoma One Percent Sales Tax, State Question 779 (2016)" if the honourable members look at the supporters and opponents to the Initiative, one would find a conspicuous lack of republican opponents.

If this Initiative in Oklahoma is successful in November, the result would be an increase in public confidence in their democracy. It would remind Oklahomans that despite living in one of the most politically polarised times in their nations history, it is still possible for people to set aside their differences and cooperate on issues that their politicians have forgotten or neglected. True, Canada is not in that state of polarisation. But, if it were, and we were denied that chance, that would only serve to fuel the cynicism and resentment Canadians feel towards their politicians. Instead of thinking Brexit, I urge the committee to think Oklahoma and to imagine the untold possibilities that Initiative stands ready to provide.

These are my recommendations. It is my heartfelt belief that if the committee were to implement them in Canada, we would doubtless enter into a new golden age of Canadian democracy. Already, the world envies our democratic intuitions and the freedom of our citizens. But today, you twelve honourable men and women have the power to do more for democracy than even the wildest fantasies of our nation's founding fathers. Democracy does not stop at the method of voting for our representatives. Democracy is a culture. For that culture to flourish to its fullest extent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it needs to be given the tools it needs to touch the lives of every citizen. Today that can be easily be achieved thanks to advancements in technology. As well, citizens need to be free to interact with the legislative process. As things stand today, citizens are only free once every four years. But, it doesn't need to be that way.

Think big. Think outside the box. We have the chance to make history, or if that frightens you, we can let this once in a generation opportunity slip through our fingers. Would the

honourable members be timid in the face of such responsibility, or bravely march into the future, come what may?