

No consensus and no public interest in electoral reform

Libdemo Movement brief, submitted in September 2016
to the **Special Committee on Electoral Reform**, House of Commons, Ottawa

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SUMMARY

When the Minister of Democratic Institutions, the Hon. Maryam Monsef, appeared before your committee, she said the government needed the broad support of Canadians to implement major changes to the voting system.

However, in recent months, Canadians have shown little interest in the electoral reform process. In addition, the experts who have appeared before your committee are far from reaching a consensus on the changes required. Rather, they have identified the difficulties and complexities associated with making such a change, which has never been achieved successfully at the provincial level, despite multiple attempts.

Therefore, we are recommending to the Committee that other mechanisms be selected to increase citizens' democratic involvement, among young people in particular, and to improve relationships between parliamentarians.

1 --- The Libdemo Movement

Founded in 2013, the Libdemo Movement is comprised primarily of young francophones from Quebec. With an interest in federal politics and ecology, our think tank believes that a single progressive Canadian party, with a strong majority in Ottawa, would be able to effectively tackle climate change.

In the years the Harper government was in power, from 2006 to 2015, we were very disappointed by the lack of interest in taking action to reduce greenhouse gases, even though they are threatening our very existence on this planet (due to higher temperatures).

Therefore, we launched a low-profile, but not secret, movement that proposed the unification of the Liberal, NDP and Green parties.

In 2013 and 2014, Mr. Trudeau and Ms. May politely wrote to us to say that they would prefer to decline our proposal to unite the three progressive parties. Mr. Mulcair has yet to respond.

The results of the October 2015 election were a surprise. Several weeks before, polls and political experts were unable to predict what would happen on voting day. We were reassured by the results, although disappointed in the Conservative success and the collapse of the NDP. However, experts were in agreement on the place of the Green Party (1 out of 338 seats).

2 --- Advantages of the current system

In recent years, we have read most of the available literature from Canadian experts regarding electoral reform.

While most progressives are in favour of proportional representation, many experts believe the current system works well. In their opinion, it tends to produce stable majority governments that voters can choose to replace every four years. They are concerned that a proportional voting system will lead to unstable minority governments that have difficulty governing out of fear of being overturned.

The current first-past-the-post (FPTP) system requires any party that wishes to gain power to become a large Canada-wide coalition with centrist views. Once the party comes to power, even if it forms a large majority government, it will not become an irresponsible dictatorship, because it is made up of activists, members and ministers from a variety of backgrounds who will all share their points of view internally. In addition, it will act in such a way as to get re-elected by Canadians in the next election.

A majority government is of course also closely monitored by a number of advocacy groups, as well as journalists, who are on the lookout for mistakes. At the federal level, there is also the Senate to advise it. In serious cases, the Governor General, the official Head of State, can intervene.

3 --- Lack of public interest

A major change to the voting system must receive real public support. However, the general population is not very interested in politics. In fact, most people barely know that the current prime minister is Trudeau, that he is young and that he has cute children. People also know he is in favour of marijuana, various religions, and LGBT rights.

While we do not have any studies to show it, we believe that less than 1% of Canadians could name what constituency they live in and who their federal and provincial representatives are.

When several members of our organization visited the Governor General's residence in July 2013, the tour guides told us that more than 90% of Canadians who visit Rideau Hall do not know who the current Governor General is! (The Right Honourable David Johnston.)

Regarding electoral reform specifically, an Ipsos survey in August 2016 revealed that only 3% of the Canadian population was actually interested in this topic.

This 3% figure is almost surely overvalued, because the Ipsos sample population came from its online panel, which is comprised of alert, curious people who know how to read and write at least one of the two official languages.

In addition, we note that only political experts have appeared before the Committee or have submitted briefs. As of September 7, only five organizations have taken the time to formally provide their opinion in writing.

While they would be indirectly affected by a reformed voting system, no provincial governments or provincial political parties have submitted briefs.

4 --- Abacus Data survey

Very few public surveys on voting systems have been carried out recently.

In May 2016, acclaimed political columnist Chantal Hébert wrote the following in the *Toronto Star*:

“As central as the shape of Canada’s voting system is to those whose careers are on the line in every election, polls consistently show that it is peripheral to the priorities of most Canadians. When Elections Canada sounded out Canadians on FPTP after the 2000 election, it found that voters and non-voters alike were overwhelmingly satisfied with the system . . . even as they were also open to a more proportional approach. But the premise that anything would be better than the status quo is not as mainstream as reform advocates would like to believe.”

The most recent key survey on this topic was carried out in the fall of 2015 by Abacus Data on behalf of the Broadbent Institute. This institute has close ties to the NDP, and is strongly in favour of a proportional voting system because it would benefit that party, led by Ed Broadbent from 1975 to 1989. It is normal for polling firms to ask leading questions in order to obtain answers that support their clients.

However, despite the leading questions of the Abacus Data survey, the “SMP [single member plurality] – Current system” was preferred by 43% of the 2,986 respondents, followed by “Mixed member proportional” (27%), “Pure PR [proportional representation]” (17%), and “Ranked/Preferential Ballot” (only 14%).

Regarding the most important goals of a voting system, respondents preferred the characteristics of the current system, saying “The ballot is simple and easy to understand” (55%); “The system produces stable and strong governments” (51%); and “The system allows you to directly elect MPs who represent your community” (46%).

Fewer respondents identified with statements about the other voting systems, such as “The system produces minority or coalition governments” (12%); and “The system encourages political parties to reach beyond their most loyal supporters and appeal to other party’s voters” (20%).

5 --- Referendum on the voting system

Instead of discussing the voting system itself, a number of specialized journalists and politicians have turned to discussing a referendum about it. According to the Ipsos survey in August 2016, 55% of the population would like to have a referendum. The Conservatives believe that, if a reform is proposed, it will have to be approved (or rejected) by referendum.

However, this does not identify what the question would be on the referendum. We find it hard to believe that the Committee will be able to come up with a clear question that you all agree on, as many of you share differing opinions.

Without a clear question that all federal political parties can agree on, we believe that a referendum would be ill-advised.

6 --- More women in Parliament

Among those who are in favour of a proportional voting system, many have said that it would increase the number of women sitting in the House of Commons. This would mean that women would have to be on the compensatory list of the opposition parties.

In Canada, a good number of provincial premiers are or have been women, especially in the four provinces with the highest population. At the federal level, Mr. Trudeau has introduced a gender-balanced cabinet.

We believe that the most important factor is for women to feel welcome in politics and for them to be encouraged to run in an election.

Changing the voting system would not necessarily draw more women to politics; greater harmony between parties and politicians would.

Our proposal is to have a large, unified political party that would form strong majority governments, thereby drawing more women to politics, since more understanding and respect would reign in the House of Commons. The reduced opposition would be less belligerent. In addition, the Members in the governing party would have more time to ask friendly, constructive questions.

7 --- Unrepresented groups

We believe that there is not a significant difference between men and women who make more than \$165,000 a year, most of whom have a university degree. Both the men and the women in this group have similar education levels, backgrounds and personal relationships.

The people who are not well represented among the political elite are those with low incomes and low education levels. As progressives, we are critical of the fact that this large group of Canadians is not being taken into consideration. For example, the Trudeau government has not stopped catering to the “middle class” and lending them a hand, thereby overlooking those with low incomes.

8 --- Compulsory voting

We do not support the idea of making voting mandatory. If people do not want to vote, that is their right. It is a way of expressing their legitimate lack of interest in politics.

In 2015, 68% of electors voted, with a strong showing of young people.

The Chief Electoral Officer, political parties and social movements are all advocating to increase voter turnout. These efforts must be encouraged and continued.

9 --- Online voting

We are opposed to online voting, primarily because this would open the door to vote buying. Malicious activists could guide voters' choices, either in their homes or in a political location, in secret.

We agree that going to the polls requires a certain amount of organization and some physical effort. It requires willpower and seriousness. If seniors over the age of 50 are able to go vote, why would young people be unable to leave their computer and cell phone for a few minutes to participate in our democracy?

10 --- Voting at 16 years old

We strongly support lowering the voting age to 16. Our organization was established when we were teenagers, excited about what we were learning in our high school history classes. If young people could vote at the age of 16, high schools would have more motivation to teach students about how democracy works in our societies, giving them the tools they need to participate in our democracy.

In addition, politicians would have to be more interested in issues that are important to teenagers, who are so often misunderstood. Unlike women, people with disabilities or homosexuals, for example, teenagers do not have the time, money or experience to organize themselves into lobby groups. Adolescence lasts barely five years, and even the most aware teenagers must turn 18 before being able to defend the interests of their peers.

11 --- Increased respect and role for the Senate

We believe that Justin Trudeau's Liberal government will not succeed in changing the current electoral system, because there is no consensus between the federal political parties and there is no strong support from the general public.

However, two recent changes to how the Senate functions can be attributed to Mr. Trudeau. By ejecting the Liberal senators from his caucus and changing how senators are selected, the Prime Minister increased the credibility of the Upper Chamber. In general, Senators will be more qualified and will be able to work without partisanship getting in the way. These are momentous, history-making improvements that took courage to implement.

We do not at all support the idea that senators should be elected by the general public. They have a better availability and greater freedom to consider not only the legislation being studied, but also the direction our nation is headed, especially over the long term.

In addition, voters already have many opportunities to go vote, at the municipal, provincial and federal levels. Adding a fourth type of election would not be appreciated by Canadians, and it would be very expensive.

12 --- To ensure that each vote counts

We do not share the opinion of other organizations that the votes for defeated candidates are wasted. Even if their preferred candidate did not win, those voters did not lose their vote. They did their civic duty and democratically expressed their choice. It was just that another candidate was chosen.

The vast majority of defeated candidates do not believe they wasted their time by running, and they usually work very hard on their campaigns. If these defeated candidates are satisfied with their efforts, why would a mere voter feel like their vote is lost?

Our suggestion to ensure that each vote is important is to reinstate stable government funding for political parties based on how many votes they receive. For example, if taxpayers knew that their vote would result in \$40 being given to their preferred political party (over four years), they would be more likely to go vote.

Unlike what many people think, and even political journalists are guilty of this, federal parties have very low revenues. Their annual budgets are very small compared with those of major companies or unions. Sadly, political parties are forced to hassle their loyal members, and even their occasional supporters, for donations.

13 --- Discouraging cynical or racist parties

If political parties are funded based on the number of votes, there is the possibility that populist or full-out racist parties will be established.

These types of parties would receive support from disillusioned or disgruntled citizens who find fault with the larger reasonable parties.

This concern also applies with regard to electoral reform for proportional representation. If a new system compensates small parties that have only 3% or 5% of the vote, for example, it would encourage the formation of political parties that would divide the population.

There could be a party for women, a party for young people, a party for seniors, a party for the Atlantic region, a party for immigrants, a party for Christians, a party for unions (even more so than the NDP), etc. To attract supporters and votes, these parties would capitalize on rivalries between citizens or regions of the country instead of promoting understanding and compromise.

14 --- Preferential method

The mandate of your committee seems to imply that the current voting method must absolutely be changed. If FPTP is not an option, we would choose the preferential method, because it promotes majority governments for centrist parties, and does not require changing either the electoral map or the number of MPs.

According to polling expert Éric Grenier of CBC and the website threehundredeight.com, based on surveys carried out in August 2016, the Liberals would receive 273 of 338 seats (81%) if an election were to take place now using the preferential method. See below for his projections on the number of ridings.

Parties	%	FPTP	Proportional	Preferential
Liberal	48.0	250	173	273
Conservative	29.5	83	97	58
NDP	13.0	4	42	6
Green	4.5	1	15	0
Bloc québécois	4.0	0	11	1

Since we are in favour of a strong government that can fight climate change effectively, preferential voting seems to be the most appropriate choice.

However, realistically, this voting method does not have the support of all political parties, so it should not be imposed on Canadians.

15 --- Climate change

We believe that political parties and the Government of Canada should be doing more to reduce greenhouse gases instead of trying to change a voting system that works fairly well.

It is unfortunate that even the Green Party is putting a hypothetical change to the voting system ahead the survival of the human race on Earth.

Canada could and should play a leadership role on the international stage as regards climate change, instead of fading into the background. To date, in almost a year, the Government of Canada has not launched any major ad campaigns about climate change, or increased its gas tax by even one cent per litre. It seems to be leaning toward exporting oil from the oil sands. Its true intentions are still unknown.

16 – Conclusion

We note that, despite their efforts, Canada’s three main political parties—the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party and the NDP—do not agree on what changes should be made to the voting system.

Therefore, we hope that democratic life in Canada will be modernized through simpler means than a complicated major electoral reform that clearly does not have popular support.

Increasing public funding for political parties, lowering the voting age to 16, increasing respect for the role of senators and improving relationships between elected members and parties would be more realistic objectives that would garner appreciation.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Libdemo Movement (www.libdemo.ca)